

Battle Fatigue

Identifying Stressors that Affect Counsellors in Women's Shelters

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Une association de maisons d'hébergement a fait appel à des chercheurs en ergonomie pour évaluer la détresse chez ses conseillères. Elles ont découvert certaines causes à cette détresse: le travail auprès des femmes malheureuses, en situation difficiles, les risques de violence, le manque de reconnaissance, le ressac anti-féministe, les difficultés à entraîner et à garder les nouvelles recrues.

In 2000, the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) Community Outreach Service (*Service aux collectivités*) was contacted by the Regroupement des maisons d'hébergement et de transition pour les femmes victimes de violence conjugale (hereafter the Regroupement), an association of women's shelters, who requested a study of stress among their employees. The Regroupement had been hearing from its member shelters that counsellors were suffering from severe stress. The UQAM service referred the association to ergonomics researchers from the CINBIOSE research centre. This paper describes the exploratory study done by the researchers in the summer and fall of 2001, in collaboration with the Regroupement.

Methods

The methods used were based on

those developed by French ergonomists (Guérin, Laville, Daniellou, Duraffourg and Kerguelen), adapted to the study of women's work in a participatory context (Messing and Seifert). These methods integrate observation of work activity, interviews with workers and key informants, examination of key documents and other sources in order to create a portrait of the working conditions. The accent is on identifying and supporting strategies used by workers to cope with the constraints and demands of their work. The purpose of the intervention is to respond to a problem and find solutions, but the method also generates knowledge about working conditions. We think it is particularly well suited to revealing unsuspected aspects of women's work (Teiger et Bernier; Vezina, Tierney and Messing; Messing, Seifert and Escalona).

In this study, we used three data sources. First, we attempted to get a rough idea of the degree of distress felt by the shelter workers, by means of a questionnaire administered to 242 workers. This questionnaire contained questions about the age and seniority of the worker, the management model used by the shelter (cooperative, director, coordinator, etc.), a standard ergonomics body map (Corlett and Bishop) and the 14-item Ilfeld

Psychological Distress Inventory, a prepathological measure of anxiety and depression that had been translated into French and adapted for use in the Québec Health Surveys of 1987, 1992 and 1998 (Ilfeld; Bourbonnais, Brisson, Moisan and Vezina). The questionnaires were administered during the semi-annual general meeting of the Regroupement and thereafter by distribution to the shelters. It should be noted that all respondents were women since only women are employed as counsellors.

Second, we observed the work of 17 counsellors in eight shelters for a total time of 50 hours. Most of the observations were done in two shelters, chosen for their different locations and management type. Shelter A, in an urban center, was managed collectively and Shelter B, in a semi-rural setting, had a director. The observations included four team meetings.

Third, we did semi-directed interviews with 28 counsellors from eight shelters, distributed geographically across the province. The interviews touched on: characteristics of the interviewees (age, seniority, etc.); job assignment (schedule, coordinator, child specialist, etc.); views on the work (workload, satisfaction); views on the abilities required to be a counsellor; health and well-being.

Results

Overall, participants in the study had an average age of 39 years and averaged seven years' seniority. Those interviewed and observed ranged from 22 to 61 years old and their seniority ranged from one month to 20 years.

A total of 242 questionnaires were filled out, including the 95

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filled out during a general meeting in 2001. The response rate is unknown since the shelters photocopied the questionnaire to give to as many workers as possible. The minimum possible response rate would be 51 per cent if all shelter workers had received a questionnaire. It is likely that on-call and casual workers were under-represented among respondents.

The level of distress of respondents averaged well over the score of 26.1, a level considered by the Québec Health Survey to be "in distress". This level corresponds to that of the top 22.8 per cent of most distressed Québec women workers of comparable age in 1998, the most recent date available (Bourbonnais, Larocque, Brisson, Vezina and Laliberté). Among respondents, 59.5 per cent reported levels of distress higher than 26.1. Distress levels appeared to be higher in those shelters reporting collective management (as opposed to more traditional, hierarchical management), although many other fac-

tors could explain these results.

Observations and Interviews

The Number of Tasks

The counsellors perceive their work as providing support to and empowering women dealing with domestic violence, but they do many other tasks. They accompany women to court and to get their belongings from former homes, procure food, clothing and shelter for them, and help look after their children. They are responsible for maintaining helpful relationships among residents as well as all the tasks associated with daily living (shopping, cleaning, meal preparation, home repair). They spend an increasing amount of time preparing grant applications and asking for donations. Counselling takes place during all these activities, since most residents arrive in a state of crisis. Many tasks are superposed and strong time pressure is experienced.

The tasks reported at highest frequencies are: reading notes or getting information from other counsellors; responding to women with domestic violence problems over the telephone; administration (letters, bills etc.); structured interviews with residents.

An idea of the work can be derived from the excerpted work chronicle (*chronique de quart*) that follows. Adrienne is the worker who is being observed, Bettie, Charlotte and Dorothée are counsellors and Evelyne, Florence and Georgette are residents of Shelter A (names are fictitious).

- 16:50 In the kitchen, Adrienne (observed worker) talks with Bettie about supper preparation and removes leaves from carrots. Evelyne comes into the kitchen and starts to talk with Adrienne about a problem in her case.
- 17:00 The phone rings, answered by Adrienne. "It's for

Charlotte." Adrienne transfers the call to the office.

- 17:01 Adrienne goes back to cutting carrots while consulting with Dorothée.
- 17:05 Adrienne finishes the carrots and cleans her workspace while talking with Évelyne. (observations interrupted).
- 18:00 Adrienne serves supper and talks with Évelyne and Florence. The three eat, and Florence talks about the violence during her marriage.
- 18:22 Adrienne puts her dish in the dishwasher, takes dessert and returns to the table. She continues her talk with Florence but at the same time she is helping Georgette find a phone number.

It can be seen from the above that counselling is intercalated with domestic activities and practical help given to residents. Many interactions with residents are communicated to other counsellors so that they will be abreast of the latest events in the lives of residents. These communications, although they contain information essential for counselling, are sometimes passed on verbally, but are more often put in the residents' files or in the daybook (*journal de bord*). However, there have been problems with the police confiscating the files and daybook so a great deal of information has to be retained in the counsellors' minds and passed on verbally. This last means of communication is not always sufficiently rich or timely and important information may not be available when needed.

Abilities Required by the Job

Interviewees and counsellors observed said a good counsellor is (in no particular order): knowledgeable about violence against women; knowledgeable about community resources; resourceful; feminist; multi-skilled; autonomous; good at teamwork; able to

respond to a crisis; patient; energetic; empathetic; calm; tactful; respectful of others; careful; good at communicating. The abilities required are multiple and complex, since counsellors must work with limited resources and in crisis situations, choosing the best strategy to cope with difficult problems, while protecting their own emotional well-being.

The learning situations for counsellors are most often the group meetings, but not all shelter workers go to these meetings. In particular, part-time, night and on-call workers do not go to meetings in all shelters. Some shelters have employed support staff such as secretaries and cleaners and these do not always go to group meetings.

Counsellors interviewed were unhappy about the fact that information transmitted through the daybook or during meetings was generally limited to facts from the clients' histories rather than counselling strategies. There is a strong collective dimension to capacity development (Chatigny and Montreuil) so workers must have access to the accumulated wisdom of experienced counsellors. A worker may be well acquainted with the feminist values at the basis of counselling about violence against women, but quite unfamiliar with feminist intervention strategies.

Sources of Satisfaction

Despite many problems, all counsellors interviewed liked their jobs and found satisfaction in them. Satisfaction came from working with women and watching them advance. Many felt that they belonged to a movement they strongly identified with that gave their work meaning. Those who worked in shelters with a collective style of management often drew satisfaction from their ability to participate in decision-making and their feelings of solidarity with their colleagues. On the other hand, those who worked with coordinators or

directors often appreciated the fact that these women dealt with a number of management issues and left them free to work to empower the residents.

Sources of Dissatisfaction

Counsellors felt that their work was hindered by the current anti-feminist backlash. They had trouble defending their work to friends and family and those in the semi-rural setting felt they were labelled as man-haters in their community. The shelters suffered from a chronic lack of funds, leading to understaffing, low pay and consequent rapid turnover. There were stresses arising from daily contact with violence and the threat of violence, and from conflicts among the residents who were often in a fragile state.

Consequences of understaffing can be seen in the following incident in Shelter A. There was a problem with a resident that was leading to conflict. A meeting was scheduled between Adrienne, Bettie and all the residents. It had to be scheduled according to the availability of a volunteer babysitter who would take care of the residents' children during the meeting. However, time was lost at the beginning of the meeting because Adrienne was on the telephone when the babysitter arrived and Bettie had to start the meeting alone. The telephone (second line) rang almost immediately and Bettie had to leave the meeting to answer it. Counsellors are reluctant not to answer the phone because any call could be an emergency, but the constant interruptions are a chronic problem, exacerbated by space and staff shortages. During one interview with researchers, there were two interruptions by residents, six by a fellow counsellor, and four by another counsellor who came to get things from the office.

Some shelters had difficulties with management or with relations between staff and the board of directors. Collective management

had its own difficulties, especially involving the necessity for all to be in agreement with decisions. The decision-making process could be long and painful. Counsellors found it difficult to work alone on evening and night shifts and many who did felt distant from decision-making processes.

Pain During Work

Interviewees and questionnaire respondents were asked about pain experienced during the most recent workday. Headaches were very common among interviewees (36 per cent) and among questionnaire respondents (31 per cent). Neck and back pain were experienced by a large number: neck pain by a quarter of interviewees and 35 per cent of questionnaire respondents and lower back pain by 29 per cent of interviewees and 31 per cent of questionnaire respondents. Symptoms appeared to be unrelated to the age of the respondents or interviewees. The headaches were associated with stress and tension and the neck and back pain were associated with tension but also with

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poorly arranged, overcrowded office space.

Difficulties and Strategies

Interviewees reported difficulties with all types of management. There were tensions in some shelters between staff and the board of

directors or between staff and the shelter director or coordinator. In collectively managed shelters, some difficulties were experienced in making decisions and meetings were observed to go on for hours without necessarily reaching any decisions. Some shelters dealt with this by minimizing the number of meetings, and others by multiplying the meetings.

budgets leading to poor furniture, equipment, supplies, and office organisation); mental and emotional working conditions (no breaks, constant interruptions, heavy mental and emotional workload, little time for de-briefing after emotionally-charged exchanges with the women); organisational conditions (tensions within some groups, tensions between staff and

style. The fact that some classes of workers have been excluded from group decision-making, even in shelters with collective management, must also be considered. This problem must be examined in the light of the overload associated with the insufficient staffing of the shelters, and the fact that managing resources is more difficult when those resources are scarce. Adding

Shelters' strategies for dealing with the tensions on the job varied. The need for relief is such that some shelters made a rule that no "outside" contact among counsellors was permissible.

Observers noted that workers rarely were able to vent their feelings even after very trying exchanges with residents. For example, one resident described a series of violent incidents with her husband, harrowing enough that the observer was quite upset. The counsellor, however, had no time to discuss the interview before being swept up in a series of minor domestic issues. Shelters' strategies for dealing with the tensions on the job varied, with some centres putting emphasis on total cutoff between work and home and others on frequent supportive activities. The need for relief is such that some shelters made a rule that no "outside" contact among counsellors was permissible.

In summary, there were a number of sources of stress in the work, that could be summarized as: employment conditions (low pay, few possibilities for advancement, casual employment, irregular and unpredictable hours, work that overflows into the home environment); nature/theme of work (working with abused, sad, confused women and children, potential exposure to violent spouses, representing an unpopular group [feminists]) physical working conditions (insufficient

some boards of directors or directors). All these conditions could cause the distress of the counsellors. However, according to many counsellors, these stresses were compensated to some degree by the great satisfaction that came from helping other women and from working against violence.

Discussion

Central to the founding and functioning of the centres are feminist values such as collective decision-making, empowerment of residents, respect for residents' needs, support for fellow workers and sharing of resources and labour. However, some of these values are challenged by the requirements and constraints of work in shelters. Sometimes, the feminist values may appear to come into conflict with workers' quality of life.

Hierarchy vs. Time Associated with Collective Management

Management of the shelters can be collective (associated with feminist values) or hierarchical. The time and energy involved in collective management may be associated with the higher level of distress reported in shelters that adopted this

more permanent, full-time staff and some budgetary relaxation might relax some tensions in shelters of all management styles.

Sharing vs. Efficiency

Some shelters hired secretaries to answer the phone and the doors, and cleaners and cooks to deal with household chores, in order to allow counsellors to spend more time with residents. Others chose to share work on a collective model. Each arrangement is associated with different challenges, since those defined as support staff vary in their involvement with the mission of the shelters and in their willingness to attend staff meetings.

Security vs. Accessibility

The shelter must be accessible to women in need but protected from violence. Residents, whose attitudes toward their violent partners oscillate, cannot be relied on to protect the shelters. Codes for doors and telephones create demands on personnel if there is no money to pay a receptionist or if the shelter has a policy of sharing all tasks alike. Personnel have developed various strategies for doors and windows, opening hours, relations with police, and penalties for residents who

breach security. Some strategies result in almost constant disruption to counselling, especially when only one counsellor is present. Again, adding staff, particularly full-time, permanent staff, might allow some staff to concentrate on work directly with residents while guaranteeing that the phone and door can be answered reliably and safely.

Availability vs. Serenity

The shelter personnel must compromise between low budgets, the need for coverage, stable employment for counsellors and acceptable, non-invasive schedules from the point of view of counsellors' family lives. Some centres hire on-call or casual workers for weekend and night shifts, while others share shifts more equally. Some centres ensure availability of experienced staff during off-hours by the use of pagers, but many counsellors find these intolerably invasive.

Being There for the Residents and Each Other vs. Ability to Concentrate

Crises are frequent and time for "de-briefing" and meetings among counsellors are needed but time, space and staffing are not always available. Sharing a single office among three or four staff members allows for frequent, supportive exchanges in case of upsetting experiences but does not create an ideal situation for concentration on grant requests, telephone conversations with distressed women or quick retrieval of important documents.

Lack of Resources vs. Equal Sharing

Counsellors try to ensure stable employment and share resources, but the money is not always predictable. The shelters have found various solutions for the lack of money, ranging from temporary employment for less senior workers to sharing of all resources among all workers. Where temporary or on-call workers are employed, a

division of labour can arise, leading several problems. Often, for example, permanent employees have better access to specialized training than those who work as fill-ins, leading to a feeling that the occasional workers' professional development is unimportant and neglected.

Towards Solutions

Almost all the challenges had a component that resulted directly or indirectly from understaffing and unstable financing. Since this exploratory study was completed, the Regroupement was able to procure supplemental funding from provincial sources, alleviating some of the problems mentioned. We are studying the effects of the increased staffing on current work activity of counsellors. In addition, with other researchers, we are further exploring sources of stress in the work environment and its interface with private life. Our aim, in accordance with the theories of Dejours, is to suggest transformations in the work that will support strategies workers already use to reduce suffering and heighten the pleasure counsellors derive from their work. Such transformations would ideally allow the counsellors to feel that they were doing a better job in helping the residents and in combating violence and thus improve their mental and emotional health.

We doubt that abandoning feminist values and adopting more traditional styles of work organization would improve the occupational health of shelter workers or the quality of their counselling. These values are critical to their self-esteem and to the sense of meaning that counsellors derive from their work. Further study will concentrate on four other areas for job improvement: development of professional abilities; minimizing interruptions; planning spatial aspects of the shelters; exploration of work organization and manage-

ment models. These approaches will be explored in a follow-up study, in collaboration with an expert in feminist organizations (Nancy Guberman), who has worked extensively on the organization of feminist groups (Fournier, Guberman, Beeman and Gervais; Beeman, Guberman, Fournier, Gervais, and Lamoureux).

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MARY BOLAND-DOYLE

A Prayer for Remission

I look around at all these kids and think -
so many here will never drive a car,
or go to prom, or go out for a drink
and talk of clothes and music at a bar.
I cannot say by looking what their chance
of living past leukemia will be.
Their blood will stir to poison not romance,
I pray for them, but I pray more for me.
This sisterhood is one nobody wants -
we live the thing that no one wants to name.
Sororities that no one wants to join -
and bargaining with God to ease their pain.
Just give this all to me, I'm raw with need.
To save my child I'd beg, I'd die, (I plead).

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