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ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE AND CHILD PROTECTION SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews the current state of child protection social work in the United Kingdom (UK) and looks at the various solutions that have been advanced. It asks whether the concept of "organisational justice" may be applied as a new means of understanding and challenging an old problem, that of social worker satisfaction with the job. This article will suggest a strategy to address the gap between hard facts and soft feelings and perceptions. The concept of organisational justice is not new but has been refined and is guiding contemporary thinking, primarily in the private sector. The focus of organisational justice is the role of fairness as a consideration in the workplace and, in particular, the employee's perception of fairness. This article will outline the subsections of organisational justice. These are content (perceptions of distributive justice within the agency), process (procedural justice), and interactions (interpersonal and informational justice) (Greenberg, 1990). A review of the literature so far available on the link between organisational justice and social work plus a small-scale research project will help to reveal the relevance of organisational justice to the problem of social worker satisfaction. A discussion of how local authorities can address each of the components of organisational justice is provided at the end.

INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom, the development of social work began during the Protestant Reformation as the role of the church was reduced in society and

charitable organisations emerged (Rogowski, 2010). As the involvement of the state increased over time, the role of social work became increasingly defined, and it is now an important profession aiming to ensure that positive outcomes for children and vulnerable populations are sought. The profession of social work now crosses international borders and its practitioners can be found in a variety of settings such as schools, hospitals, community centres, and local government offices.

In many areas, frontline social workers are responsible for engaging families with services and interventions that may be required to enable better outcomes for family members. Specifically, those frontline social workers who work within a child protection remit will make decisions as to whether a child is removed from parental care, what types of services are provided, whether a child is reunited with his/her family or an adoption process needs to occur (Augsberger et al., 2012). These decisions, combined with managing large caseloads and dealing with media scrutiny, are often the cause of the stress that many child protection social workers face on a day-to-day basis (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Social workers also face stress as a result of the ethical problems that accompany the decisions that need to be made. Ethics-related stress can manifest itself in frustration, interpersonal conflict, and possible abandonment of the profession (Ulrich et al., 2007).

As recently as 2011, surveys conducted by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) found an unfortunately large number (68%) of social workers who reported that their job has caused them emotional or mental instability, 70% who reported feeling that they are not able to protect a child because of the constraints of their job, and 95% who reported feeling that there is too much paperwork and not enough time with families. As well, only 40% of registered managers feel appreciated and are stressed, due to lack of recognition and issues including poor representation of social work (Samuel, 2012).

The nature of child protection social workers' responsibilities, such as the behavioural and emotional context, the demands of legal and medical personnel, and other external pressures, make the work stressful and complex (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Glisson & Durick, 1988). These components all contribute to role conflict, burnout, emotional exhaustion, lack of job satisfaction, and unhealthy coping mechanisms (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Knudsen, Ducharme, & Roman, 2006; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005; Tham, 2007; Thompson, Murphy, & Stradling, 1994). If we combine these components with ethics-related stress, which could contribute to or be the result of a poor work environment, then it is no surprise that a significant challenge facing the child welfare system is the recruitment and retention of staff (Augsberger et al., 2012; Ulrich et al., 2007).

This article explores some of the contributory factors involved in the condition of child protection social work today, arguing that there is a need for a "culture shift" in organisations to support continuing professional development, performance appraisals, and evidence-based practice (Social Work Task Force, 2009). By bringing in the framework of organisational justice, I offer an alternative

analysis of the condition of child protection, one that appears not to have been utilized before.

Increasingly, the importance of non-management structures in social work organisations is being recognised as a vital component in enhancing best practice and outcomes for children, families, and adults (Agbenyiga, 2009; Gibbs, 2009; Glisson, 2002; Glisson, Dukes, & Green, 2006; Laming, 2009; Meyerson, 1991; Munro, 2011; Zlotnik, Strand, & Anderson, 2009). Glisson (2002) found that organisational climate and culture affect service quality and outcomes, independently of the training and experience of the particular worker. Understanding the aspects of the work and the organisational culture that are associated with turnover intention is critical if the issues of turnover, retention, and overall employee well-being are to be addressed (Augsberger et al., 2012; Graham & Shier, 2010; Knudsen et al., 2006). Graham and Shier (2010) believe that there is a gap in the literature with regard to the level of impact that environmental and systemic organisational factors have on the subjective well-being of social workers, and this is the starting point for this research in the hope of minimising that gap. As organisational culture is a large, broad concept that is beyond the scope of this article, the more focused framework of organisational justice will be suggested as an effective way to assess the perceptions of child and family social workers in the UK (Colquitt, 2001).

This article is divided into a number of parts in order to emphasise the gap and suggest a framework from the private sector, that of organisational justice, to further define the various factors at work in child and family social work in the UK. Following the introduction, the first section will provide a description of the state of child and family social work in the UK. The second section will provide information on some of the past responses to concerns raised. In the third section, a description of organisational justice and the framework involved as an analytical tool will be provided. In further sections a link will be made, using a literature review and a small-scale research project, in order to reveal the benefits and possible drawbacks of using the organisational justice framework for child and family social work in the UK.

STATE OF SOCIAL WORK IN THE UK TODAY

Workforce

It is important to understand the statistics on the social work workforce to provide a context for this study. Various surveys have provided information on vacancy rates and how social workers feel around the UK. These surveys are largely conducted within local authorities as these are the primary employers of child protection social workers (Statistics Scotland, 2010).

Within Scotland, for example, Statistics Scotland (2010) has provided data giving an overall picture of staffing levels and details about the staff in filled social

work services posts. As of 2010, there were 40,739 whole time equivalent (WTE) social services staff members employed by Scottish local authorities, roughly 7.9 staff members per 1,000 population. This was a fall of 2.3% compared to the previous year. Within that number, there were 5, 201 WTE qualified social workers, which was a fall of 0.6% compared to 2009. However, although the number of social workers employed has decreased, there has also been a decrease in vacant social work posts, as in October 2010, 4.8% of all social worker posts were vacant as compared with 6.8% in October 2009. Within that 4.8% vacancy rate, only 47% of posts were known to be in the process of being filled at the time of the census.

The 2010 report produced by Statistics Scotland recognises that among the various councils within Scotland, there will be some discrepancies in the way they are organised, which will impact the data. It is important to note that the recording of vacancy information is not managed centrally; therefore not all local authorities may have provided information. Furthermore, local authorities were unable to provide information on starters and leavers in local authority social work services; this limits our knowledge of the turnover rate and the possible reasons for the flows within the staffing situation.

Morale

Ofsted, the regulatory agency for social services in England, has recently been a source of information on the views held by social workers. The first annual survey of social work practitioners across local authorities was conducted in 2010. The report that was produced, *Safeguarding and looked after children: National results for Children's Social Work Practitioners Survey 2010* (Ofsted, 2010), is the result of the gathering of 4,141 social work practitioners' views on their current work environment. Overall, the views that were presented were surprising and relatively positive toward training and levels of line management support. However, many practitioners felt they did not have enough time to work as effectively with children and families as they wanted and that induction programmes did not effectively prepare them for their current role. There were also issues voiced around communication within the local authority, about feeling valued and being listened to when presenting a suggestion for change. Only 41% agreed that their local authority praised examples of good performance, with only 38% stating that their local authority was open to new ideas on how methods of working could be improved.

Another underlying issue influencing staff morale is the growth and prevalence of a managerialist culture within organisations. Managerialism tends to emphasise technical or financial decision making as opposed to social- or morals-based decision making (Rogowski, 2010). With local authorities taking the role of coordinating services and managing care, the distribution of power goes against social work values, and practice is more concentrated on the identification and

treatment of risk rather than on promoting child or family well-being (Healy, 2009; Rogowski, 2010). This also leads to the risk of a deprofessionalisation of social work, as practitioners are forced to restrict their ability to provide change-oriented, relationship-based holistic services. As the social work profession already has a dwindling professional identity due to perceived weak occupational boundaries, the influence of a managerialist agenda can be hard to resist (Healy, 2009).

On a positive note, social work managers are better qualified than before, training has been increased, and so have salaries and some additional benefits. However, most social workers state that the job is still becoming less attractive. Statistics such as 61% feeling that social work is increasingly becoming a less attractive sector to work in, 87% feeling that the demands are greater than ever, 23% saying they do not have time to give full attention to their cases, and 46% citing bureaucracy as the aspect they like least about their jobs, reveal that local authority children and family social work departments are having trouble supporting the profession (Local Government Association, 2009).

The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) report, conducted in England, brought to light specific examples of how social workers feel on a daily basis. Reports of access to supervision being threatened due to staff shortages, lack of qualified experienced social workers, burnout, problems in access to information, and inconsistent career progression are just some of the issues that were presented (SWTF, 2009). The SWTF (2009) believes that there is a need for a "culture shift" in organisations to support continuing professional development, performance appraisals, and evidence-based practice. This need for a change is to be the driving force of the SWTF's current work plan as it endeavours to put together a detailed programme of reform and continues to have conversations with frontline workers, educational institutions, regulators, and other professionals in order to increase the understanding of what social work needs to enable it to be successful (SWTF, 2009).

RESPONSES

Some significant reports have been produced as a result of the awareness that child protection in the UK is in a stressed state. The most significant of these reports was written by Eileen Munro in 2011.

The 2011 Munro review of child protection follows Munro's previous work on understanding child protection from a "systems theory" base. This theory states that the current child protection processes are made up of a variety of different systems that are interacting with each other and it is important to look at how the systems interrelate in order to create change. Creating change in one system will have a ripple effect, spreading into other connected systems. The strong influence of procedures and recording within the current system should be reduced so that more time can be spent with families (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011). Munro (2011)

states that there needs to be a reduction in prescription and more autonomy for professionals in order for social workers to able to do the job that they were hired to do. There is a recognition that councils' need to give consideration to who is performing the specific roles in relation to children's services, the need for early prevention, the need for a principal child and family social worker in each council area, and the need for a chief social worker post to be created in Government.

Munro's (2011) report continues to break down the concerns about the social work profession on a more detailed level. More attention needs to be paid to the cognitive and emotional requirements of the work that social workers perform, attention that is lacking due to a variety of systemic factors (Munro, 2011). The availability of professional development and access to research in order to help practitioners perform are areas that are seen to be impacting the state of the child protection workforce as well (Munro, 2010, 2011). A dysfunctional workplace makes it difficult for even the most skilled social workers to work at the level they would like, and the subtle influence of the design of assessment tools and organisational messages about priorities are also having an impact on current practice. Many social workers are discouraged by what seem to be quick fixes, increased paperwork, and the lack of opportunity to exercise professional judgement (Laming, 2009; Munro, 2011; Ofsted, 2010).

Munro's earlier report (2010) reported an imbalance between practice and guidance that affects social workers' performance and the level of organisational support that they are receiving (Munro, 2010). It is suggested that this imbalance is also contributing to the overall alienation of the social work profession and is resulting in problems in recruiting and retaining social work staff. Social workers have to increasingly work within more stringent regulations and frameworks, and this makes it difficult for them to prioritise working with children and families over paperwork and technical procedures. Munro (2010) is able to show how compliance with regulations and rules is driving social work practice instead of sound judgement, that the assessment framework and process are inefficient, and that inspection systems such as audits and serious case reviews are not fostering a supportive or learning environment. The extent to which social work has been reformed over recent years is leading to a shift from the role of relationship building, which is central to social work, to a more managerial role, and this is not having the desired outcome.

Munro (2011) recognises the importance of social workers needing to be employed in a supportive and learning-based organisation; however, her recommendations speak only minimally to the actual role that local authorities need to play in order to change the system she is so passionate about. But Munro's (2011) recommendations and writings are central to the larger picture of how the social work profession progresses in England, and will hopefully have a ripple effect on the rest of the UK. There is still a gap in the reports about the specific role that local authorities have in regard to influences on child protection. While there are many tasks that Munro has suggested local authorities take on, she has done so without

specifically looking at the nature of the environment and the culture of the local authority. It could be difficult for some of these tasks to be taken on without first tackling the underlying behaviours, thought processes, and theoretical perspectives that lie within a local authority. Section 4.18 of Munro's review briefly points to this when it states that "while local authorities are, of course, generally in the best position to determine their own management structures in light of their particular local circumstances, the review questions whether such structures would allow sufficient focus and attention to be paid to the most vulnerable children" (Munro, 2011: 58). So again, there seems to be a question as to the power of local authorities to influence the well-being of their child protection social work staff, which will inevitably impact on their ability to protect children.

By now, it must be easy to recognise the complexities that are involved with social work practice, not only in the context of child protection in the UK but with regard to the profession as a whole. Social workers have to deal with professional, personal, and external factors that lead to frequent reports of stress, burnout, negative views on work and work-based relationships, anxiety, depression, lack of job satisfaction, and unhealthy coping mechanisms (Nissly et al., 2005; Tham, 2007; Thompson et al., 1994).

ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE

Organisational justice is a concept that is starting to emerge in the discussion around employee turnover, perceptions of fairness, and overall quality of life within an organisation (Chou, 2009; Shi, Lin, & Wang, 2009; Simpson & Kaminski, 2007). Organisational justice focuses on the role of fairness as a consideration in the workplace, and in particular, the employee's perception of fairness in organisational settings (Greenberg, 1990; Simpson & Kaminski, 2007). It refers to an employee's subjective perception of fairness in the actions and decisions and the allocation of resources, as well as rewards and punishments, within the organisation (Chen et al. 2008; Jordan & Turner, 2008; Kim, Solomon, & Jang, 2012). One of the most important benefits of the organisational justice theory and framework is that they may be used to explain a wide variety of organisational behaviours (Greenberg, 1990), behaviours such as reactions to jobs and participation in an organisation, perceptions of respect and trust, absenteeism, the quality of co-worker relationships, job satisfaction, incident reporting, and workplace aggression (Bakhshi, Kumar, & Rani, 2009; Chou, 2009; Jordan & Turner, 2008; St-Pierre & Holmes, 2010).

Organisational justice has its roots in the psychological literature and, in particular, equity theory (Greenberg, 1987; Nowakowski & Conlon, 2005). Equity theory is based on Adams's (1965) claims that people compare their own perceived work outcomes to their own perceived work inputs. When there is inconsistency between input and output, psychological distress follows and results in adverse behaviours, including intention to leave (Chou, 2009; Greenberg, 1990).

Greenberg (1990) believes that as equity theory uses the language of outputs and inputs in quantifiable, business-related terms, it is a natural progression for the theory to be used to study organisational behaviour. Loi, Hang-yue, and Foley (2006) also discuss organisational justice as having roots in social exchange theory. Social exchange theory is used to look at patterns of mutually contingent exchanges of gratification between two individuals with a belief in reciprocity under a generalised moral norm: in other words, how people go through the motions of exchanging a good or service, believing the act will be reciprocated, in order to maintain a stable social system (Loi et al., 2006). Both of these theories involve investigating the perceptions and acts of individuals, in certain contexts, with the hope of adding to the discussion around human behaviour.

Organisational justice enables researchers and organisations to understand how employees perceive justice and how they react to it (De Cremer, van Dijke, & Bos 2007). One must understand the environmental context of organisational members in order to appreciate the various behaviours that are displayed (Kim et al., 2012). However, the perception of organisational justice will vary greatly depending on an individual's characteristics and particular life settings, which is all the more reason to apply organisational theory to a variety of private and public sector organisations. As the perceptions of organisational justice will vary greatly from one organisation to another, it can be argued that the concept is therefore relevant on an international level as being something that can be experienced by anyone (St-Pierre & Holmes, 2010). It could also mean that the concept of organisational justice will always be evolving, as societies and organisations change as political, economical, and environmental contexts change. However, the core element of organisational justice is that people evaluate using four different types of justice, and each of these judgements is associated with different outcomes (Wingrove, 2009). The four different types of justice can be thought of as divided between those that focus on content (distributive), those that focus on process (procedural) and those that focus on interactions (interpersonal and informational) (Chou, 2009; Greenberg, 1990).

Distributive Justice

Distributive justice is considered to be the component that is most closely related to Adams's (1965) equity theory. The outputs in an organisational setting are items such as pay satisfaction, job satisfaction, recognition, honest feedback, workload, benefits, promotions, and so on (Chou, 2009; Clay-Warner, Reynolds, & Roman, 2005; Lambert et al., 2005; Loi et al., 2006). An individual's perception of distributive justice can be the result of a comparison between his or her own output/input ratio and that of other employees within the same organisation (Chou, 2009). Individuals may vary in how they perceive they should be rewarded, based on individual levels of productivity and the way they define fair allocation outcomes, levels of compensation, and personal circumstances (Simpson &

Kaminski, 2007). Distributive justice is concerned about the fairness of economic exchange relationships between employees and organisations, and employees with high perceptions of distributive justice may as a result have more positive attitudes toward the organisation (Chi & Han, 2008).

Procedural Justice

Procedural justice refers to fairness in the means by which decisions or outcome distributions are made, including the inclusion of a system for employee complaints (Clay-Warner et al., 2005; Simpson & Kaminski, 2007). St-Pierre and Holmes (2010) discuss six criteria, developed by Leventhal (1980), that a procedure should meet if it is to be perceived as fair within the organisational justice context. The criteria are that the procedure is consistent across people and time; that it includes bias suppression, with the parties having no personal self-interest in the allocation process; that it involves accuracy with regard to the information collected to be fed into the decision-making process; that it involves correctability, in that mechanisms to correct any flaws are in place; that it includes representativeness, with the opinions of the various parties involved being taken into account; and that it involves ethicality, so that the decision-making process follows fundamental moral and ethical values with respect to both parties. As studies have shown, procedural justice has been found to have a significant positive relationship with organisational commitment, as procedural justice centres on the individual's perceived justice in day-to-day operations (Eskew, 1993; Loi et al., 2006). These perceptions are connected to whether people are treated with courtesy and respect in regard to decision-making processes and represent what the organisation stands for in terms of its degree of legitimacy (Eskew, 1993; Lambert et al. 2005). Greenberg (1990) goes on to explain that judgements of procedural justice are influenced by the interpersonal treatment people receive from decision makers and the adequacy with which formal decision-making procedures are explained. These judgements, however, can also be more closely examined by looking at the interpersonal and informational perceptions of justice.

Interactional Justice

The concepts of interpersonal and informational justice have often been considered jointly as interactional justice. This is the area of justice that involves the human or social aspect of organisational justice and focuses on the quality of treatment and behaviours between those in charge of allocating resources and the recipients (Chou, 2009; Simpson & Kaminski, 2007). Interactional justice is concerned with how information is communicated and whether the individuals affected by a decision are treated in a courteous and civil manner (Randeree & Malik, 2008). Colquitt (2001) suggested that interactional justice be divided into

the two areas that are more commonly used now, those of interpersonal and informational justice.

Interpersonal justice relates to how employees are treated during the enactment of procedures, with a focus on whether supervisors and management treat each other, and their subordinates, with dignity and respect. It also looks at whether the organisation discourages improper or prejudicial statements (Bakhshi et al., 2009; Chou, 2009; Shi et al., 2009). Simons and Roberson (2003) discuss Bies and Moag's (1986) identification of four criteria for fair interpersonal treatment. These criteria are the extent to which decision-making authorities are truthful, respectful, and considerate in communicating decisions, and the extent to which they justify these decisions. Perceived interpersonal justice has been found to be associated with the extent of satisfaction with one's supervisor, the extent of organisational commitment, and intention to leave (Chou, 2009).

Within the broader definition of interactional justice mentioned earlier, informational justice can be taken to refer to the accuracy and quality of explanations about procedures provided to employees within an organisation, the perception of justification, and the perception of the truthfulness of the information provided (Chou, 2009; Shi et al., 2009). It focuses on explanations of why procedures were used in a certain way or why rewards or duties were distributed in a certain way (Bakhshi et al., 2009). Both interpersonal and informational justice are related to interaction between managers and employees and focus on the statements and behaviours of the person in the role of decision maker rather than on the systemic or structural characteristics of procedures and outcomes (Nowakowski & Conlon, 2005; St-Pierre & Holmes, 2010).

LINKING ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE AND CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK

At the present time, only three studies have been found that have made a link between organisational justice and social work. Kim et al. (2012) concentrated on social workers in Korea and the effect of organisational justice on burnout; Lambert et al. (2005) looked at organisational justice and social service worker attitudes in northwest Ohio; and Wingrove (2009) wrote her psychology dissertation on the comparison of two theoretical models of procedural justice in the context of child protection proceedings in Nebraska. All three stated that more research needs to be done in this area and that both social workers and clients will benefit from this research.

Kim et al. (2012) found that social workers' intention to leave was influenced by perceptions of organisational justice and that there is a need to look at this relationship in different societies. Lambert et al. (2005) remind us that although social justice is a primary focus of social work, social service workers are not always treated with fairness and in a just manner. As social workers are expected to be fair in their transactions with their clients, we may assume that they would expect the

same treatment and respect within their agency, as perceptions of respect have also been found to be associated with the intention to leave the current workplace (Augsberger et al., 2012).

Focusing on social exchange theory, which involves how an individual feels about a relationship based on the balance between the individual's efforts in the relationship and the anticipated or actual rewards within an organisation, Travis and Mor Barak (2010) believe that there is a positive correlation between employees' perception of those rewards and their intention to stay in the job. Smith (2005) continues to broaden the knowledge base on retention in social care by utilising the concepts of organisational support and social exchange theory. Both of these concepts can be utilised to explain employees' perceived feelings of value in their workplace. Smith's (2005) study highlighted the importance of extrinsic rewards within an organisation in collaboration with supportive supervision and facilitation towards work-life balance. Smith (2005) has added to the debate about the complexities of staff retention and the various aspects that are at play. While her results state that extrinsic rewards within the workplace as well as organisational-level characteristics affect the likelihood of child welfare staff retention, there is still room to explore the specifics of these.

Also using elements of social exchange theory, Hwang (2007) conducted a similar study by looking at Asian social workers' perceptions of the glass ceiling, organisational fairness, and career prospects. Recognising that minority groups may perceive glass ceilings as an estimation of their likelihood of advancing to higher positions, Hwang (2007) found that fairness perceptions mediate relationships between ethnicity and career ambitions or expectations in an agency. In other words, the expectations of promotion can be based on perceived organisational fairness and, as a result, minority workers may exhibit low levels of ambition (Hwang, 2007).

A key aspect of social work is the centrality of the interaction between worker and service user (Ingram, 2013). It is this relationship that promotes change; that being said, the relationship between worker and employer cannot be ignored either. As previously mentioned, social workers struggle to work within the bureaucratic environment that they currently find themselves in; it is becoming clear that this relationship with the organisation needs exploring. Utilising the framework of organisational justice in the child and family social work profession will provide another analytical tool to be used to explore this relationship and the deeper experience of the child and family social work role. The stress of child and family social work is well known and can have both professional and personal impacts (Goddard & Hunt, 2011), but it is important to look at how this stress is managed and dealt with by the organisation, as well as by the worker within the context of the organisation.

What has been seen as most important in much of the literature is the feeling of not being valued enough, that is, the feeling of not being well taken care of or the feeling that management does not show enough interest in the health and

well-being of the staff. Not feeling valued by the organisation or the public has been associated with the intention to leave (Augsberger et al., 2012). This does not that mean high workloads, time pressure, and difficulty of tasks can continue to go unrecognized and neglected: high levels of stress negatively influence the workplace climate and the quality of the work done, and, in the long run, undermine workers' health and well-being. However, workers' perceptions of organisational fairness, the extent to which personnel are rewarded for a job well done, the extent to which they feel taken care of, the extent to which management is interested in their health and well-being, and the arrangements made to facilitate work-life balance have all been found to be the major influences on how committed to an agency social workers are (Ellet et al., 2007; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Smith, 2005; Tham, 2007; Tham & Meagher, 2009). These findings that social workers have an overall feeling of not being valued by the organisation they work for need to be explored and analysed. This will then add to our knowledge of how best to create positive and healthy outcomes for children and families, as well as for the workers involved.

RESEARCH PROJECT: METHODOLOGY

I organised a small-scale research project to examine the perceptions of organisational justice by child and family social workers. This research was conducted in Scotland involving two local government settings. The initial idea behind involving two local authorities was not to enable a concrete comparison to be made but rather to allow for a wide range of social work experiences to be explored. Non-probability convenience sampling was used due to the need to interview a specialised group, social workers, and not a representative sample of the general population. In total, 17 social workers came forward: 13 respondents came from one local authority while the remaining 4 came from the other. The data were collected solely through structured in-depth interviews.

Creating the interview schedule required the use of justice measures that have been developed and the placement of them in the context of local authority social work in Scotland. The primary measure used was developed by Colquitt (2001) during a review of the key developments in the justice literature and was validated in two separate studies. It was important to use Colquitt's (2001) measurement as Colquitt had reviewed and explored the theoretical dimensions of organisational justice and created a measurement that closely follows the original explanations laid out in the literature.

The participants provided informed consent, and a recording device was used to capture each interview and interaction, together with a note pad for observations, additional notes, and immediate reflections. The interviews were transcribed, and as the method of data collection was structured in-depth interviews, the most beneficial way of analysing the transcripts was a combination of content analysis and the identification of common themes through NVivo.

RESEARCH PROJECT: DISCUSSION

This research project examines the way in which the concept of organisational justice may relate to social workers and especially those that perform child protection functions within a Scottish local authority. During the course of the data collection, the process of interviewing in itself proved to be reflective for the social workers as they shared experiences of perceived fair and unfair treatment within their place of work. Although some of the literature has already touched on this (Local Government Association, 2009), the organisational justice framework highlights a more specific discussion about the actual procedures, information sharing, and ways of communication that evidence the divide between the management and practice of child protection social work. This is partly due to the qualitative nature of this research, which gave the respondents more opportunity to answer the questions and explore the meaning behind the questions and their experiences. It is important to focus on this, as taking an organisational justice standpoint has allowed social workers to specify the nature of the relationship with the organisation and reflect on how they are recognised interpersonally and by the organisation. In future, research involving senior management would also be beneficial in order get a more accurate picture of both sides of the situation.

As stated above, professional respect is an intrinsic and fundamental value in the social work profession, primarily in the context of service users (Augsberger et al., 2012). However, more needs to be done to ensure that social workers themselves are also treated with respect, as they have the right to justice and fair treatment within the workplace. Local authority managers and senior practitioners are in a unique position to foster an environment of respect in the workplace for child and family social workers. This can be done in a variety of ways within the context of each element of the organisational justice framework, and this will now be discussed, using the interviewees' responses and their connection with the concepts involved in organisational justice as a basis for my comments.

Looking at *distributive justice*, it may be difficult for local authorities to give pay rises in the current financial situation; however, there are other rewards that could be provided to offset this. More access to appropriate and relevant training not only for newly qualified social workers but also for those in senior positions, as well as better recognition of the specific role and responsibilities of child protection social work, the stress that is involved, and the expertise that is required would be most beneficial. As one participant stated, emphasising the lack of recognition in contrast to the impact of the work on all aspects of life:

> One of our team leaders left after 29 years . . . , a couple of weeks ago, and she got, you know a present, bottle of wine, bunch of flowers, whatever else, and the money was raised from in here, the department in here, and she had a night out and that was it, there was no recognition of service, there was no recognition of, you know, 30 years doing this job, the cost on your social life, emotional life, everything.

Another social worker referenced the difficulty with training and the recognition of stress:

> . . . I suppose in terms of training and events, there is opportunities but I don't get opportunities to take them very much because my workload is so high, that you know, I often have to cancel training, which I think has a knock on effect in terms of stress, because then I become stressed out about whether I have enough to qualify when you register as a social worker, will I have enough training days?

Social workers who deal with child protection concerns are repeatedly faced with stressors, but adequate emotional support could lessen the likelihood of burnout. This involves, for example, looking at the physical environment and assessing whether it is promoting positive employment-based social capital. Employment-based social capital is defined as the "multidimensional resources reflecting the moral fibre of social relations within an organisation", and this relationship building can have a significant impact towards enhancing the success of individuals (Boyas & Wind, 2010). One social worker mentioned that they do not need much more than that informal emotional support:

> I want someone to say, you know thank you for . . . I appreciate how much you've done recently, I appreciate your dedication, that's all I want, you know, ya I mean time off and money for overtime is helpful and you know I think if I didn't have that I would be a bit annoyed, but most of the time I want someone to appreciate that I'm staying on, you know, rather than anything else

Ensuring *procedural justice* will facilitate a more open and transparent organisation, which is vital within the child and family social work context as there are already many procedures in place. Within local authorities, an element of bureaucracy will always be present, but, that being said, social work teams need to be able to know that decisions made in regard to their work will be ethical and that contributions from social workers are going to be valued. Local authorities can ensure that social workers are part of the decision-making process and have an influence in their role. Some participants noted the discrepancy between the policy implemented by the council and the work itself:

> Work wise? Oh don't get me started on lone working [safety policy for working alone outside the office, i.e. home visits], I don't like it, and I don't think many people actually use it as we're supposed to because it doesn't fit, it doesn't fit.

Another social worker referenced how having too many procedures with this type of work can be challenging:

> In terms of say child protection, I think procedures are a framework rather than a join the dots this is how you do it, and um I think, by in large they are, um but I don't think social work can be overly procedural and one of the

> difficulties at the moment is I think there is a tendency to try and make it overly procedural.

In regards to social workers contributing to decisions, one social worker was able to summarise their perceptions by saying:

> I don't think folks set out not to listen to social workers, I just think it gets lost in the process.

If there are going to be departmental changes, social workers should be included in the discussion, and dialogue should be timely and appropriate. This open and honest communication will feed directly into an increased sense of informational justice felt by the child and family social workers.

Child protection proceedings are inherently complex; there is a great deal of information that needs to be gathered from a variety of sources, outside of the local authority, and processed. If social workers who perform these functions want a sense of *informational justice*, they need to know that the non-departmental information they receive from the larger organisation is not going to impinge on the more pressing concerns of dealing with the information that has been gathered in order to assess and safeguard children. Local authorities need to be able to demonstrate that they are providing information in a timely and accurate manner, as well as through appropriate avenues. One social worker reflected on the usefulness of the information they received by stating:

> I don't think it's about anything being withheld it's about how that information is imparted to staff and what's useful and what's not useful.

As one social worker explained, their schedules are so incredibly full, with family visits, court dates and other duties, that they find it difficult to handle all of the information "coming down" to them:

> There are quite often lots of notice about things coming down to us that's just too short notice, we can't do that, um, and, you know, requests for interviews or requests for social workers to participate in X, Y, and Z, with a week or two notice; that is impossible, we have crammed diaries because we're so busy doing the work that we've been given to do, so I find that a wee bit frustrating.

Social workers do not always have time to deal with all the email communications from managers and may delete messages without a thorough read through. As one social worker mentions:

> I mean we do get a lot of emails from our business support people saying 'you're all doing it wrong, you do know you're meant to do it this way, and we refer to this section of your work where it tells you exactly what you should be doing' and you kinda go, alright, ok, nobody told me that, but they probably did in one of the emails that you deleted haha.

As this demonstrates, there may need to be a more creative assessment as to how best to transmit information to them. This assessment would of course need to involve the social workers and not be a top-down management decision.

This leads into a look at *interpersonal justice*. If management truly respects and acknowledges the social workers, they are more likely to respect management in turn, a demonstration of the golden rule, so to speak. A safe environment needs to be created in which social workers can debrief and process the emotions that they experience throughout the day.

> Maybe in other professions it's different. . . . I don't know . . . when you've got people screaming in your ear on home visits you know people try to keep an nice atmosphere in the office because it would be unbearable.

They are not always greeted enthusiastically by their clients, and this can take its toll:

> I'm much more used to being treated like crap now, um, I can cope with that when it's a client and when it's professionals I get really angry, I've been humiliated in front of people, I just think, yeah, the department, the council I don't think, um, maybe address it as much as they could, I think.

The importance of positive relationships within the team are also highlighted by one social worker:

> Suppose one of the rewards is the relationships you build and things that happen with your colleagues and I think um there is an emphasis on that in our team um and that's you know an important support and important part in making a job rewarding as well as enjoyable is you know um having that kind of report with your colleagues.

Social workers need to be able to trust that they will be supported in the decisions they have to make, supported, that is, by managers as well as peers. Social relationships can have both a positive and a negative effect in the workplace, and it is imperative that in a role where they are already dealing with heightened emotions and strained relationships, they have positive relationships to return to at the end of the day (Boyas & Wind, 2010).

CONCLUSION

What makes the social work profession interesting to look at in terms of organisational justice is what is at the core of social work: the everyday decision making with regard to the welfare of vulnerable people. The profession deals with ethical and value judgements on a daily basis, which in turn leads to an increased awareness of injustices on a societal level.

Organisations are known for suppressing feelings, and for a profession that focuses on empathy, relationships, and vulnerability to be situated in an environment that minimises those aspects is concerning. What is emerging from the analysis of the fieldwork, falling in line with what Munro (2011) discussed, is that

social workers' ability to deliver service is blunted due to the discrepancies they face between their value judgements and the managerialist culture they inhabit. This conflict eventually takes its toll on individual psyches, manifesting itself in the increased sick days and high turnover that have been reported.

It would be difficult to completely restructure a local authority in order to achieve full organisational justice for child and family social workers. Local authorities employ members of many other professions, and there are many other types of work that would need to be taken into consideration. However, with small changes like the ones mentioned above, the way that child and family social work is managed within the local authority could be restructured in a way that promotes organisational justice and an overall increased sense of emotional and physical well-being for social workers.

There is clearly room to explore the deeper emotions and perceptions that are associated with social workers who perform child protection duties within Scottish and other UK local authorities. The majority of the research that has been done in this area has used quantitative methods and therefore has a tendency to show that there is a relationship between the different forms of justice; however, it does not always investigate the deeper issue of why and in what particular way. Also, organisational theory and literature often discuss the various components of an organisation from a managerial or top-down perspective. In contrast, the majority of the organisational justice literature appears to focus on the employees' perspective of how the workplace is functioning, thus achieving a bottom-up perspective. It is the latter perspective that makes the link between organisational justice and social work potentially so strong, as social work is working on the front line.

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