Examining Social Work Role Problems in Prisons

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Background

- The lack of access and quality of mental health services in prisons generally reflects a myriad of ethical and practical challenges that may be unique to correctional settings.
- This situation may influence social worker’s practice and roles in prisons.
- Research has documented that social workers, like other professionals, often experience value dilemmas and difficulties in ethical decision-making due to incompatibility between the professional values and ethics and the policies and practices in the correctional settings.
- Often, social workers in host settings face role problems mainly represented by role ambiguity, role conflict, and role incongruity.
- Few studies have examined role problems experienced by social workers in prisons.
Purpose of Study

1. To examine the roles of social workers in prisons when working with inmates with mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

2. To explore the level to which social workers in prisons experience role incongruity between ethical and practice principles defined by the profession and the roles expected by the organization.
Mental Illness and Substance Use Disorders in Corrections

- Symptoms of mental health disorders: state prisons, 49%; federal prisons, 40%; local jails, 61% (Olley et al., 2009).
- Prevalence of mental illness is estimated to reach 90% or more among inmates when substance use disorders are included (Bland et al., 1998; Fries et al., 2013).
- If undetected or untreated in prisons, this situation seriously impacts inmates and staff in the correctional settings and the community (Olley et al., 2009).
- Tremendous difficulties involved in establishing transitional care across system boundaries as inmates move from corrections to community mental health system (Baillargeon et al., 2010).
Social Work Roles in Corrections

- Contributed to the reentry of prisoners into society (Cnaan et al., 2008; Pray, 1949; Rainford, 2010; Studt, 1967).
- Direct practice tasks including intake, engagement, psychosocial assessment, and counseling (Gibelman, 2005).
- Must take on the role of advocate for the growing population of inmates and ex-inmates (Andrews et al., 2011; Cnaan et al., 2008; Kelly et al., 2009).
- Little is known about the broad range of social workers’ roles informed by themselves, especially in working with inmates with mental illness and/or substance use disorders.
Values/Dilemmas

- Traditionally had an uneasy alliance with corrections. (Alexander et al., 2008; Fox, 1983; Handler, 1975; Ivanoff & Smyth, 1997; Reamer, 2004)

- Attributed to differences in values, principles, and philosophies between social work and the correctional system (Ivanoff et al., 1993; Mazza, 2008; Patterson, 2012; Severson, 1994; Young & LoMonaco, 2001).

- Social work values such as dignity of the individual, client self-determination, and social justice have been challenged by a criminal justice system that values order, control, and punishment (Gumz, 2004; Mcneece & Roberts, 2001).

- May face value dilemmas, role conflicts, or difficulties in ethical decision-making due to the philosophical difference between social work and the correctional organization.
Role Problems

- Divergent principles tend to generate conflicts between the professionals and their administrative organization (Blau & Scott, 1962).
- Social work is a highly stressful occupation, with stress deriving in particular from role conflict between client advocacy and meeting agency needs (Lloyd et al., 2002).
- Often experience difficulty functioning in prisons, especially for those who believe that prison organizations are philosophically opposed to social work values (Patterson, 2012; Severson, 1994).
- Increasingly be caught between their roles as clinical staff and as correctional staff and feel incongruity, ambiguity, and conflict between these roles (Johnson, 2008).
Conceptual Framework

Role Theory

• A collection of concepts and hypothetical formulations: predicts how actors will perform in a given role, or under what circumstances certain types of behaviors can be expected (Conway, 1988).

• Congruent with social work’s emphasis on person-environment transactions: seeks to explain the ways in which the behavior of the individual is directly and indirectly influenced by the social environment (Davis, 1996; Thompson & Greene, 2009).

• Suggests that “when the behaviors expected of an individual are inconsistent – he/she will experience stress, become dissatisfied, and perform less effectively than if expectations imposed on him/her did not conflict” (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970).
Conceptual Framework

Role Theory

Basic assumptions:

- Expectations are the major generators of roles.
- Expectations are learned through experience.
- Persons are aware of the expectations they hold.

(Biddle, 1986)
Role Problems

Role incongruity

- Differences between one’s perception of the professional roles one should be performing and the roles expected by the organization.

Role ambiguity

- A condition in which disagreement on role expectations occurs, associated with a lack of clarity in those expectations (Hardy & Conway, 1978; Hardy & Hardy, 1988).

Role conflict

- A condition in which the focal person perceives existing role expectations as being contradictory or mutually exclusive (Hardy & Conway, 1978; Hardy & Hardy, 1988).
Research Questions

1. What are the roles of social workers in prison when working with inmates with mental illness and/or substance use disorders?

2. Do social workers perceive, and if they do, at what level, role incongruity between professional roles defined by themselves and the roles expected by the organization?
Research Design

- No readily available list of social workers.
- Contacted each state correctional authority to get permission to access social work staff in state prisons.
- Social work services in the region were provided by variety of correctional systems, the state Department of Corrections, university correctional health care system, private non-profit health care company, and private for-profit health care company, or their combinations.
Participants

Social workers who work in the state correctional facilities in the Northeast

Survey Inclusion Criteria:

1. staff whose job title includes the term “Social Worker” (e.g., Clinical Social Worker, Psychiatric Social Worker) and/or
2. staff who perform social worker’s roles in correctional facilities, regardless of job titles in the facility (e.g., Professional Counselor, SA Therapist, Discharge Planner, Release Coordinator or other Clinicians and Supervisors).
Measures

Role incongruity

- Role incongruity was defined as differences between one’s perception of the professional roles one should be performing and the roles expected by the organization.
- Since there is no standardized measure pertaining to social work roles in prison, the list of potential roles was made by a thorough review of the literature.
- Reviewed by a panel of experts.
- The twenty-two-item instrument was pilot-tested by social workers who practice in correctional facilities or criminal justice settings to ensure content validity.
Measures

Role incongruity

- Respondents were asked to read the list of social workers’ role responsibilities in prisons, then indicated how they think social workers should perform each professional role in prisons.
- Subsequently, the respondents were asked to indicate how they think the organization expect him or her to perform each professional role. Each item was coded on a five-point Likert-type responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).
- Role incongruity scores was calculated by summing the absolute value of differences between the social worker’s self-perception of professional roles and the expectations by the organization.
Protection of Human Subject

- University of Connecticut Institutional Review Board
- Institutional Review Board in each state authority

- Participants were notified via the survey cover letter that their consent will be voluntary and that the completion and return of the survey will signify consent.

- The instrument was self-administered and it did not contain any questions which will identify the respondent.
Data Collection

- Mixed-mode survey design method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009)
  - Mail survey
  - Online survey
  - Conference settings
- Designed to complete the survey within 20 minutes.
- Attention to question ordering, consistency, and visual layout.
- Seventy-five out of 93 participants completed the survey (response rate of 81%).
Survey Findings

• Social workers provide broader and more in-depth activities than what are shown in the literature and what they are expected by the organization.

• Gaps between literature and the actual roles were found especially in:
  - Advocacy
  - Discharge planning
  - Professional skills development
  - Implementation of safety & wellness programs (e.g., suicide prevention)
Survey Findings

- Survey participants reported higher role congruinity in clinical tasks such as developing treatment plans, or screening and assessment.
- Contrary, participants expressed higher role incongruinity in the roles as advocate for treatment and psychological needs of inmates and in working with family members in the reentry process.
- Most studies stress that social workers must take on the role of advocate for the inmates whereas the survey finding indicates that social workers experience the highest role incongruinity in this role.
# Survey Findings

## Role congruity/incongruity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role congruity</th>
<th>Role incongruity</th>
<th>Role incongruity score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Develop treatment plans</td>
<td>1. Advocate for treatment &amp; psychosocial needs</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Document treatment in clinical records</td>
<td>2. Involve family in the reentry process</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Screening &amp; assessment</td>
<td>3. Conduct family therapy</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Note:** Higher score indicates higher role incongruity.
Limitations/Challenges

- To construct the variable of social workers’ roles in prison since there is no existing standardized scale.
- The study findings cannot be generalized beyond correctional social workers in the selected states.
- Causal factors cannot be determined since this is cross-sectional study.
- The self-administered instruments also may contain the possibility of social desirability bias.
Conclusions

• The study findings indicated that social workers assume a broad range of professional roles in prisons when they work with inmates with mental illness and/or substance use disorders.

• Social workers showed greater role incongruity in being advocates for inmates and working with family members.

• Most studies stress that social workers must take on the role of advocate for the inmates whereas the survey finding indicates that social workers think that they may not be expected to advocate for treatment and psychosocial needs of inmates.
Conclusions

- Consequently, social workers may face role problems and difficulties in ethical decision-making due to the philosophical difference between social work and the correctional organization.
- Further examination of the role problems experienced by social workers may improve understanding professional roles that assist inmates with mental illness and/or substance use disorders achieve a successful transition to the community.
Thank you very much!