Canadian Social Work
Travail social canadien

Volume 16 (1)
Autumn/Automne 2014

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"I love my job, but . . ."

A Portrait of Canadian Social Workers' Occupational Conditions

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ABSTRACT

Cet article fait fond sur des données empiriques provenant de neuf enquêtes provinciales menées auprès de travailleurs sociaux inscrits (TSI) dans l'ensemble du Canada ($n=5\ 389$) dans le but de décrire leurs conditions de travail et d'explorer la complexité de la pratique du travail social. Environ un tiers des participants étaient de l'Alberta (33 %), suivi de l'Ontario (20 %), de la Nouvelle-Écosse (10 %), de la Colombie-Britannique (8 %), du Québec (8 %), du Nouveau-Brunswick (8 %), de Terre-Neuve-et-Labrador (7 %), de la Saskatchewan (3 %) et du Manitoba (2 %). Puisant en partie d'une source de recherche scientifique établissant un lien entre les facteurs organisationnels en tant que déterminants de la satisfaction en emploi, cette étude compare les apports des TSI dans leur rôle de travailleurs sociaux (niveau d'instruction, titres de compétence) et les résultats liés à leur rôle particulier en emploi (statut, salaires, avantages et conditions d'emploi au sein de l'organisation), puis met ces données en parallèle avec les niveaux de satisfaction professionnelle. Les analyses ont démontré que les TSI ont une relation amour-haine avec leur emploi. Les TSI canadiens sont des professionnels hautement qualifiés, possédant des antécédents universitaires poussés et une expérience de travail substantielle; toutefois, au chapitre du revenu, ils se retrouvent souvent en situation de sous-emploi ou occupant des emplois précaires. Paradoxalement, en dépit de charges de travail accrues, d'horaires trépidants et de leur réticence à recommander le travail social comme carrière à des amis proches ou des membres de leur famille, dans l'ensemble, les TSI semblent satisfaits de leurs carrières.

INTRODUCTION

Guided by profession-specific commitments of serving the marginalized and disenfranchised individuals within our societies (Bisman, 2004), social workers (SWs) bring a holistic perspective to their praxis, as they integrate a full range of psychological, social, emotional and systematic factors in their daily work (Rachman, 1995). The majority of SWs work in direct practice (Herod & Lymbery, 2008), providing a continuum of client care coordination and support (Keefe, Geron,

& Enguidanos, 2009). Described as effective facilitators, negotiators, team players and system thinkers by fellow colleagues (National Association of Social Workers, 1996), SWs employ advanced skills in conducting psycho-social assessments, utilizing problem solving strategies and applying a thorough knowledge of community resources in their daily work (Geron, Andrews, & Kuhn, 2005; Scharlach, Simon, & Dal Santo, 2002).

> DESPITE A HISTORY OF PRACTICE WISDOM LINKING INTERVENTIONS WITH SUCCESSFUL OUTCOMES... AND DOCUMENTING SKILLS OF RELATIONSHIP BUILDING, EMPATHY, PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE AND ADVOCACY... SWs HABITUALLY LABOUR UNDER PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS...

Despite a history of practice wisdom linking interventions with successful outcomes (Macdonald, Sheldon, & Gillespie, 1992; Rosen & Zeira, 2000) and documenting skills of relationship building, empathy, practical assistance and advocacy (Craig & Muskat, 2013; Gibbons & Plath, 2009), SWs habitually labour under precarious employment conditions: high incidence of client-related stress factors (Collings & Murray, 1996), job burnout (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007), elevated rates of emotional exhaustion (Evans, Huxley, Gatly, Webber, Mears, & Pajak, 2006), increased workloads and high volumes of administrative paperwork (Collings & Murray, 1996), as well as lack of supervision and weak organizational commitment (Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006).

While previous research has documented the impact of organizational conditions on SWs' quality of life, it has primarily focused on singular circumstances, without portraying a comprehensive picture of their work-related conditions, particularly in the Canadian context (Laimute, 2012; Siebert, 2006). For this reason, the current study aims to address such gaps and to create a baseline understanding of country-wide occupational conditions of Canadian SWs, by juxtaposing them to the construct of career satisfaction.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing from a thread of scholarship linking organizational factors as determinants of job satisfaction (Gleason-Wynn & Mindel, 1999), this study utilizes a bottom-up psychological approach to juxtapose work-specific inputs and outputs (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000) for assessing SWs' levels of career satisfaction. Such an approach relates job satisfaction to the combination of work role inputs (workers' levels of education, credentials) and respectively outputs (work status, wages, benefits and organizational working conditions) (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000). Work role inputs are defined as individual attributes acquired by SWs through field-related work and educational experience, necessary to obtain professional regulated status in each Canadian province. Work role outputs have been found to be strong predictors of job satisfaction (Acker, 2004) and occupational

contentment (Cole, Panchanadeswaran, & Daining, 2004). Benefit-informed motivational typologies divide outputs by economic, extrinsic, relational and process interrelated aspects (Borzaga & Tortia, 2006).

Economic-related work role outputs, such as workers' current salary, income levels and benefits, are broadly conceptualized under the construct of distributive justice (Tremblay, Sire, & Balkin, 2000). Strong empirical associations have been reported between career satisfaction and workers' salary (Martin & Schinke, 1998) or benefits levels (Heneman & Schwab, 1985). For example, pay satisfaction has been linked to lower levels of emotional exhaustion, higher levels of personal accomplishments (Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007) and job contentment (Smerek & Peterson, 2007).

> **WORK ROLE EXTRINSIC OUTPUTS, INCLUDING JOB STATUS (FULL-TIME, PART-TIME) AND THE OVERALL WORKING ENVIRONMENT (WORKLOAD CHANGES, VOLUME AND COMPLEXITIES OF WORK) HAVE BEEN ASSOCIATED WITH WORKERS' CAREER SATISFACTION.**

Work role extrinsic outputs, including job status (full-time, part-time) and the overall working environment (workload changes, volume and complexities of work) have been associated with workers' career satisfaction. Full-time employees are more satisfied with their work (Thorsteinson, 2003), particularly in comparison with part-time contract workers, who tend to report higher rates of job insecurity (Feather & Rauter, 2004). In turn, job security has been linked to high employee citizenship and reduced conflict at work (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). Having a so-called exhausting job also has negative effects on job satisfaction and contentment (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000). High caseloads and increased administrative duties (paperwork volume) have been found to create additional distress and dissatisfaction among SWs (Parry-Jones, Grant, McGrath, Caldock, Ramcharan, & Robinson, 1998). In fact, due to increased workloads and organizational staff shortages, it is fairly common for SWs to work an excess of six hours over and above their weekly regular contracted time (Evans et al., 2006).

Relational aspects, as in relations with superiors, colleagues and volunteers, have been formerly defined as work role outputs in determining one's level of career satisfaction (Borzaga & Tortia, 2006). Positive perceptions of supervisors (Samantrai, 1992), high quality of supervision—as defined by high supervisory satisfaction (Martin & Schinke, 1998)—perceived supervisory support (Gleason-Wynn & Mindel, 1999), good relations with management (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000) or effective senior management (Smerek & Peterson, 2007) are job satisfaction predictors, particularly amongst SWs (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007; Cole et al., 2004).

Process-related aspects, including professional development and decision making autonomy, are contributing factors to SWs' job retention levels (Tham, 2007). Professional development has been branded as a non-salary retention organizational incentive within the social services field (Henry, 1990). In addition, the association between promotional opportunities and subsequent career satisfaction (Martin & Schinke, 1998), particularly among SWs (Vinokur-Kaplan, Jayaraine, & Chess, 1994), has been documented.

> **CAREER SATISFACTION HAS BEEN LINKED TO LOWER RATES OF STAFF TURNOVER AMONG SWs… AND HIGHER RATES OF JOB-RELATED PERFORMANCE.**

Career satisfaction has been linked to lower rates of staff turnover among SWs (Gleason-Wynn & Mindel, 1999) and higher rates of job-related performance (Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza, 2000). Despite high levels of dissatisfaction with their employers (Evans et al., 2006), SWs tend to be satisfied with their careers (Martin & Schinke, 1998). In most cases, job satisfaction has been mainly related to clients' positive outcomes (Cole et al, 2004; Parry-Jones et al., 1998). Within the presented theoretical framework, this paper compares SWs' incentive-driven work role inputs to specific outputs and subsequently relates them to their levels of career satisfaction.

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This study used secondary analysis based on survey data collected between 2005 and 2008 by nine provincial and territorial social work associations in Alberta, British Columbia, Quebec, Ontario, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, and Saskatchewan.

Measures

The surveys were adaptations of the Quality of Work Life Survey (QWLS)[1] developed by the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) and sent out by each provincial and territorial social work association participating in the study. Findings were amassed in report-type formats, which served as the main units of analysis. Professional associations reported on:

- participant demographic data (age, gender, language proficiency, disability status and racialized status);
- organizational data (geographical distribution, sector, organizational size, field and focus of practice, and professional role);
- self-reported information on work role inputs (education and training, social work experience and professional membership affiliation) and

outputs, specifically economic incentives (gross annual salary, number of jobs, and core and extended benefits);

- extrinsic- related aspects (job status, weekly work hours, workload related changes and feelings of being rushed at work);

- relational-related aspects (access to social work supervision and characteristics of supervisory training); and

- process-related aspects (professional development and career advancement).

The career satisfaction variable was established on a 10-point scale: Respondents were asked to rate their current career satisfaction between 1(very dissatisfied) and 10 (very satisfied).[2]

> **A THEMATIC REVIEW OF ALL REGIONAL REPORTS, CONDUCTED INDEPENDENTLY BY TWO CODERS, SERVED AS THE MAIN DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE AND CONSTITUTED THE BASIS FOR ALL FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTIONS APPENDED WITHIN THE TABLES.**

Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative analyses were undertaken. Descriptive statistics were produced using SPSS 21.0, however, methodological variances within the data collection stage (survey questions slightly altered province by province), recruitment-related inconsistencies (regional sampling differences) and discrepancies in reporting the results, made it unfeasible to disaggregate the data for a comprehensive quantitative analysis. A thematic review of all regional reports, conducted independently by two coders, served as the main data analysis technique and constituted the basis for all frequency distributions appended within the tables.

A qualitative analysis of the provincial reports was employed to identify semantically driven "repeated patterns" (Braun & Clarke, 2006) particularly related to the occupational conditions commonly encountered by Canadian SWs. Each report was thoroughly screened for overlapping themes, common themes and sub-themes. These were shared with an advisory group (representatives from each provincial association), which reviewed the established themes and provided feedback. The ultimate analysis was informed by scholarly derived theoretical conceptualizations of work role inputs and outputs in order to explore the relationship between environmental constructs and SWs' career satisfaction. Using triangulation (Creswell & Miller, 2000), themes were explored by various stakeholders, members of the community working group as well as multiple coders (authors, provincial representatives). This approach helped to manage any potential distortions that could have emerged from synthesizing the data by the authors.

FINDINGS

Respondents' Professional and Organizational Profile

A total of 5,393 social work practitioners responded to the provincial surveys. One third of participants were from Alberta (33%), followed by Ontario (20%), Nova Scotia (10%), British Columbia (8%), Quebec (8%), New Brunswick (8%), Newfoundland and Labrador (7%), Saskatchewan (3%) and Manitoba (2%). Respondents' ages ranged from 20 to over 50 years. Provincial professional bodies did not report the data in age-specific categories; as a result, the mean and subsequent standard deviation could not be calculated. The New Brunswick Association of Social Workers catered its survey exclusively to the specific needs of local SWs; consequently, items from its 425 respondents could not be standardized for inclusion within the data summaries.

> **A TOTAL OF 5,393 SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS RESPONDED TO THE PROVINCIAL SURVEYS.**

In each participating province, over three quarters of respondents were women, reflective of the feminization of the social work profession. Demographic profiles (Table 1) showed that almost all participants were proficient in English as their primary language—as expected, since most surveys were completed in English. Yet participants did have the option of completing their surveys in French, if they indicated their preference as such. Most respondents self-identified as Caucasian,[3] although ethnicity was not consistently reported as a variable by all provinces. Less than one tenth of respondents indicated that they had a disability, representative of current numbers of Canadian working adults with disabilities across a variety of occupational sectors (Ontario Association of Social Workers, 2006). Mobility and mood were most often cited as a disability type, followed by hearing and visual incapacities. Less than 1% of participants in Alberta, less than 5% in Manitoba, less than 2% in Newfoundland and, respectively, 1% in Saskatchewan indicated they required specific supports within their workplace.

Participants' organizational profile was geographically confined to urban areas, within large agencies, usually containing over 100 staff members, as identified by the size of their primary, secondary and tertiary work settings (Table 2). To a certain extent, participants' geographical distribution mirrored the regional characteristics of each province, with the industrialized area of Ontario having 87% of its workforce within large and medium sized urban districts.

Table 1 Participants' Demographic Characteristics by Province

	AB n=1,775	BC n=448	QC n=417	ON n=1,114	MB n=134	NL n=368	NS n=557	SK n=155
Age Group (years)								
50 & over	36%	31%	-	32%	39%	15%	41%	44%
40–49	27%	31%	-	28%	25%	34%	31%	29%
30–39	23%	25%	-	25%	22%	37%	21%	18%
20–29	14%	13%	-	15%	14%	14%	7%	9%
Gender								
Female	86%	84%	83%	83%	80%	87%	81%	88%
Male	14%	16%	17%	17%	20%	13%	19%	12%
Racialized Status								
No	85%	88%	-	-	86%	-	-	89%
Yes	15%	12%	-	-	14%	-	-	11%
Disability Status								
No	94%	90%	-	91%	95%	95%	93%	93%
Yes	6%	10%	-	9%	5%	5%	7%	7%
Language Proficiency								
English	100%	100%	-	99%	96%	100%	90%	92%
Other	14%	13%	-	13%	6%	1%	-	4%
French	7%	5%	-	13%	7%	2%	10%	2%
Aboriginal	2%	-	-	0%	2%	0%	-	1%

The majority of respondents reported the public sector as their primary work setting, followed by the non-profit sector. Very few participants worked within private areas. However, in the provinces of Ontario and Alberta, just over one tenth of respondents reported working within private settings, perhaps reflective of the industrialization of these two provinces and subsequent neoliberal-oriented policy directives openly adopted by their governments' administration.

Social work settings varied, as respondents indicated a number of different fields of practice (Table 3). Health (general medical health, child mental health and adult mental health) and child and family services (child welfare, family mediation, family services provision and childhood sexual abuse) were the most frequently cited fields of practice, followed by social services (income maintenance, employment assistance programs, housing, Aboriginal services, and occupational/industrial, multicultural/settlement and armed forces services), disabilities, criminal justice (domestic violence and correction related services), services to the aged, substance use (alcohol and drug use), and education (social work specific). Social planning, debt counseling, volunteer recruitment and alternate

medical therapy were also identified by respondents. Direct practice was most frequently cited as the primary work focus, with a high percentage of respondents employed in front line positions. Administration and teaching were commonly noted as well. Policy work, research and community development were less frequently reported.

Table 2 Participants' Organizational Profile by Province

	AB $n=1,775$	BC $n=448$	QC $n=417$	ON $n=1,114$	MB $n=134$	NL $n=368$	NS $n=557$	SK $n=155$
Geographic Distribution								
Urban	80%	70%	94%	87%	80%	63%	56%	64%
Rural	20%	30%	6%	13%	20%	37%	44%	36%
Sector								
Non-Profit	43%	27%	-	30%	31%	9%	-	16%
Public	63%	65%	-	55%	61%	88%	-	58%
Private	13%	8%	-	17%	11%	1%	-	5%
Aboriginal Band	2%	-	-	1%	2%	-	-	-
Organizational Size								
Small (< 25 staff)	38%	32%	-	-	23%	28%	67%	18%
Medium (25–99)	24%	18%	-	-	14%	8%	43%	18%
Large (over 100)	58%	50%	-	-	66%	64%	-	41%

Work Role Inputs

Over one half of participants had more than 10 years of field-related experience, and about one quarter reported greater than 20 years. Most respondents held a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree as a minimum credential, and many others had completed graduate level education, including master's and doctorate programs.[4] Quite stark differences seemed to exist between the educational levels of social work practitioners from province to province. Ontario had the highest percentage of social workers practising with a MSW or PhD,[5] which may be due to the high number of social work schools within the province. Several SWs had additional degrees and diplomas, either from similar disciplines such as education, law, nursing, sociology or women studies, or from completely different fields such as accounting or engineering. In addition, most participants were active members of their local/regional body of professional practice (Table 4). This comes as no surprise, since the surveys were administered by their respective provincial social work associations.

> **QUITE STARK DIFFERENCES SEEMED TO EXIST BETWEEN THE EDUCATIONAL LEVELS OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTITIONERS FROM PROVINCE TO PROVINCE.**

Table 3 Participants' Professional Profile by Province

	AB n=1,775	BC n=448	QC n=417	ON n=1,114	MB n=134	NL n=368	NS n=557	SK n=155
Field of Practice								
Health	45%	57%	-	66%	63%	35%	54%	56%
Child/ Family	57%	40%	-	30%	37%	69%	47%	31%
Social Services	23%	17%	-	8%	17%	13%	13%	13%
Disabilities	14%	14%	-	8%	7%	23%	9%	6%
Criminal Justice	18%	14%	-	3%	5%	11%	8%	5%
Service to Aged	7%	9%	-	6%	10%	9%	4%	9%
Substance Use	12%	11%	-	5%	5%	11%	8%	5%
Education	7%	6%	-	3%	5%	2%	4%	2%
Other	22%	11%	-	5%	8%	7%	19%	5%
Practice Focus								
Direct Practice	87%	79%	-	70%	75%	83%	82%	56%
Community	20%	11%	-	10%	9%	10%	17%	9%
Policy	8%	6%	-	3%	7%	6%	8%	6%
Research	6%	4%	-	7%	5%	4%	4%	5%
Other	43%	12%	-	11%	40%	14%	22%	28%
Organizational Role								
Front Line	81%	71%	81%	66%	66%	80%	70%	49%
Management	26%	21%	11%	16%	19%	13%	28%	21%
Educator	11%	8%	-	13%	10%	2%	-	10%
Consultant	11%	6%	3%	8%	15%	4%	8%	8%
Team Leader	2%	7%	3%	6%	6%	3%	-	3%
Other	6%	5%	2%	7%	5%	2%	-	0%

Note: Some questions offered the choice of multiple answers; as a result, not all percentages round up to 100%.
Moreover, for mutually exclusive categories, not all respondents answered each question; consequentially, percentages might not add up to 100.

Table 4 Work Role Inputs by Province

	AB *n*=1,775	BC *n*=448	QC *n*=417	ON *n*=1,114	MB *n*=134	NL *n*=368	NS *n*=557	SK *n*=155
Education & Training								
Highest Social Work Degree								
Undergraduate (BSW)	49%	56%	82%	28%	58%	76%	42%	57%
Graduate (MSW/PhD)	25%	44%	18%	64%	37%	23%	52%	37%
Diploma/ Certificate	26%	-	0%	-	5%	-	-	6%
Social Work Experience								
0–5 years	22%	31%	28%	23%	25%	26%	13%	22%
6–10 years	21%	21%	19%	14%	15%	20%	16%	15%
11–20 years	32%	26%	29%	33%	21%	32%	36%	31%
Over 20 years	25%	22%	24%	30%	39%	22%	35%	32%
Membership Affiliation								
Provincial Body	99%	61%	-	79%	96%	99%	78%	88%
Other (i.e. Union)	66%	70%	-	45%	25%	76%	63%	20%

Work Role Outputs

Economic Aspects

Economic aspects have been operationalized as gross salary, number of jobs, and core and extended benefits.

Gross salary was further divided into five income categories (Lightman, Mitchell, & Wilson, 2008) (Table 5). Very few respondents (10%) reported incomes in the lowest quintile (under $35,000) and about 25% reported incomes between $35,000 and $49,000. Most participants' incomes ranged between $50,000 and $65,000, and approximately 25% reported incomes between $65,000 and $80,000. On average, less than one tenth of participants reported incomes in the top quintile (over $80,000), and this group was mainly comprised of individuals holding management or executive positions. These numbers seem to reflect national standards, as data from the 2011 National Household Survey indicates that almost 10% of Canadians had a total income of more than $80,400 in 2010 (Statistics Canada, 2013). Although SWs' salaries are above formerly reported median incomes of Canadians—$41,401 in 2005 and $47,868 in 2010—they are far below those of all other skilled professionals, such as doctors, engineers and senior managers, whose incomes (well above $191,000) place them in the 1% club (Grant & Curry, 2013). In

relation to the number of jobs, most respondents, particularly from the eastern and Prairie provinces, held one primary job. However, participants from Alberta and Ontario more commonly reported holding two or more jobs.

Table 5 Economic Work Role Outputs by Province

	AB $n=1,775$	BC $n=448$	QC $n=417$	ON $n=1,114$	MB $n=134$	NL $n=368$	NS $n=557$	SK $n=155$
Gross Salary ($)								
Under 35,000	16%	19%	-	10%	6%	3%	7%	10%
35,000–49,999	23%	25%	-	18%	26%	9%	18%	23%
50,000–64,999	25%	41%	-	42%	38%	77%	48%	32%
65,000–79,999	26%	13%	-	25%	24%	8%	23%	24%
80,000 and over	10%	2%	-	5%	6%	3%	4%	11%
Number of Jobs								
1 job	78%	68%	-	72%	78%	87%	86%	81%
2 job	18%	24%	-	21%	13%	11%	12%	13%
3 job	4%	8%	-	7%	9%	2%	2%	6%
Core Benefits								
Suppl. Health Plan	74%	75%	-	69%	72%	68%	84%	75%
Pension Plan	64%	63%	-	68%	82%	93%	84%	73%
Paid Vacation	85%	78%	-	79%	87%	97%	93%	77%
Sick Leave	84%	77%	-	77%	87%	93%	92%	81%
Group RRSP	23%	19%	-	27%	19%	17%	20%	16%
Extended Benefits								
Life Insurance	66%	54%	-	56%	69%	73%	77%	67%
Long Term Disability	72%	63%	-	69%	76%	52%	81%	72%
Paid Educational Leave	32%	55%	-	40%	40%	35%	43%	55%
Uncompensated Leave	24%	-	-	27%	25%	44%	35%	41%
Wellness Programs	37%	37%	-	27%	31%	23%	23%	29%
Employment Assistance	59%	58%	-	64%	77%	75%	79%	70%

Most frequently cited core benefits were sick leave, paid vacation, supplementary health plans and regular pension programs (Table 5). In turn, very few SWs had access to group Registered Retirement Saving Plans (RRSPs) as part of their benefits. The most common extended benefits were life insurance, long-term disability and employment assistance, and compensated or uncompensated educational leave. Participation in wellness programs was rarely reported. Additional benefits included car insurance, parking, cell phone allowance, psychological services, tuition reimbursements or informally institutionalized "Happy Fridays" (every third Friday off in exchange of a 40 minutes addition to each work day).

Overall, respondents have collectively perceived social work as a low paying profession, primarily reflected as such by the qualitative data. As expressed by one participant:

> *The salary is barely enough for me to afford rent, my vehicle, insurance, groceries and set aside a small safety net of savings. At times it feels degrading to think that after six years of schooling, solid experience and a graduate degree, I am earning so little. (SW in Ontario)*

Extrinsic Aspects

The following extrinsic aspects were included: work status, weekly work hours, workload changes, feeling rushed at work and weekly overtime. Across all provinces, most participants were employed full time. However, weekly hours exceeded typical full-time work. Well over two thirds of participants worked overtime, indicating their weekly work hours to top the customary 35 hours per week (Table 6). Indeed, when prompted to identify changes in their workloads over the past number of years, the majority of respondents indicated an increase:

> *I am doing a job that would keep two full-time people busy. . . . my practice is becoming extremely stressful, just due to sheer volume. I am working far too much overtime, and I will not be able to sustain this over a prolonged time. (SW in BC)*

As noted in Table 6, the greatest percentage of SWs who identified workload increases was in British Columbia.

SWs feel chronically overworked. Feelings of exhaustion echoed from one corner of the country to another, and shocking accounts of SWs' work conditions emerged:

> *I work three jobs up to 70 hours or more per week. I may leave this field. Salary cannot keep up with rising costs in Calgary. I know staff that go to the food bank and that have become homeless themselves because they are not paid enough. (SW in Alberta)*

Table 6 Extrinsic Work Role Outputs by Province

	AB n=1,775	BC n=448	QC n=417	ON n=1,114	MB n=134	NL n=368	NS n=557	SK n=155
Workload Changes								
Increase	66%	70%	-	63%	59%	65%	67%	56%
Decrease	4%	2%	-	3%	2%	4%	4%	5%
No change	24%	21%	-	28%	33%	23%	24%	34%
Unsure	4%	7%		6%	6%	8%	5%	5%
Feeling Rushed								
Usually	61%	67%	-	33%	60%	64%	59%	58%
Sometimes	33%	30%	-	63%	32%	31%	29%	34%
Rarely	6%	3%	-	4%	8%	2%	12%	8%
Weekly Overtime								
Yes	67%	62%	-	72%	71%	64%	67%	57%
No	33%	38%	-	28%	29%	36%	33%	43%

Caseloads have increased to the point where my two half-time jobs are really two full-time jobs. Not only have numbers increased, but the complexity has increased as well. (SW in Saskatchewan)

Testimonials showed that increasing workloads have taken a toll on Quebec SWs as well:

Nous avons des équipes qui possèdent de belles expertises mais le travail devenant lourd, manquant d'effectifs infirmiers dans certains programmes, des personnes sauvent leur peau et changent de poste pour trouver un peu de répit. Et il faut recommencer. (SW in Quebec)

Some comments were so powerful that one can sense SWs' tiredness expressed in their own words.

This is my greatest stress at work. There is not enough time in the day to do the basics, let alone to offer good quality service. (SW in Newfoundland and Labrador)

In addition to being chronically overworked, Canadian SWs felt rushed at work on a regular basis. Feeling rushed seemed merely the new work norm rather than the exception. Concerns were also expressed regarding the negative impact this might have on their ability to achieve social change or provide adequate service provision, some of the core values guiding the social work profession in itself.

We have no time to do community capacity building, time to affect long-term positive changes in families, rather than just doing short-term stop gap measures. (SW in Nova Scotia)

Relational Aspects

For the most part, with the exception of Quebec, SWs relied on profession-specific supervisory advice (Table 7). Those receiving supervision from professionals within other disciplines identified nurses, psychologists, allied health professionals and business administrative professionals.

Table 7 Relational Aspects by Province

	AB $n=1,775$	BC $n=448$	QC $n=417$	ON $n=1,114$	MB $n=134$	NL $n=368$	NS $n=557$	SK $n=155$
Access to Social Work Supervision								
Yes	70%	66%	40%	68%	65%	75%	72%	60%
No	30%	34%	60%	32%	35%	25%	28%	40%
Non-Social Work Supervisor' Credentials								
Allied Health	10%	4%	6%	13%	4%	4%	12%	19%
Nurse	23%	7%	26%	33%	13%	21%	17%	32%
Psychologist	8%	-	8%	5%	-	5%	8%	3%
Business/ Admin	24%	7%	8%	17%	3%	13%	25%	32%
Unknown	35%	82%	52%	32%	80%	57%	38%	14%

Supportive inter-collegial working relationships were considered a keystone in assisting SWs in current challenging work environments.

I am fortunate to have excellent social work colleagues and support from the multidisciplinary team with whom I work. I look forward to coming to work each day in spite of the sometimes challenging environment. (SW in Nova Scotia)

Process-Related Aspects

Process-related aspects, including access to skills upgrading, professional development and self-perceived opportunities for advancement, were evident. Almost all participants reported access to skills upgrading within their professional careers.

Prompted to select specific professional development prospects, many participants mentioned attendance at workshops, conferences and seminars. Specific agency-based training was also fairly common (Table 8). Fewer participants also mentioned skill-based

certificate programs and courses, along with post-secondary education, such as graduate degrees. Opportunities for advancement were minimal: less than one in ten indicated an availability of advancement; about one quarter identified no advancement prospects; and the majority of participants indicated limited opportunities.

Table 8 Process-Related Aspects by Province

	AB n=1,775	BC n=448	QC n=417	ON n=1,114	MB n=134	NL n=368	NS n=557	SK n=155
Skills Upgrading								
Yes	93%	85%	-	90%	84%	85%	94%	83%
No	7%	15%	-	10%	16%	15%	6%	17%
Professional Development								
Workshops/ Seminars	86%	64%	-	62%	72%	85%	95%	63%
Certificate Courses	35%	24%	-	24%	25%	26%	41%	27%
Post-Secondary Ed.	13%	10%	-	10%	8%	7%	10%	10%
Agency Training	62%	41%	-	45%	40%	64%	69%	43%
Advancement Opportunities								
Many	6%	4%	-	3%	6%	7%	4%	2%
Some	76%	73%	-	73%	75%	82%	76%	73%
None	18%	23%	-	25%	19%	11%	20%	25%

Career Satisfaction

As reflected in Table 9, despite an overall challenging environment, the vast majority of SWs were satisfied with their careers, an attitude shared across all provinces. Paradoxically, very few respondents (less than one quarter) indicated that they would recommend social work as a career choice to family and friends.

Table 9 Career Satisfaction Levels by Province

	AB n=1,775	BC n=448	QC n=417	ON n=1,114	MB n=134	NL n=368	NS n=557	SK n=155
Career Satisfaction								
Satisfied	75%	68%	69%	78%	77%	82%	82%	78%
Dissatisfied	25%	32%	31%	22%	23%	18%	18%	22%
Recommend the Profession								
Yes	32%	31%	-	33%	34%	31%	37%	32%
No	25%	19%	-	22%	26%	33%	22%	20%
Unsure	43%	50%	-	45%	40%	36%	41%	48%

Qualitative comments suggested that the overall working environment influenced SWs' hesitation to recommend the profession to others.

> *Social workers are drained emotionally and physically. The responsibilities are huge. They cannot keep up with demand and are falling down, quitting or moving out of the province. (SW in New Brunswick)*

> *Sometimes I really wonder why I went into this field and why I am still here. (SW in BC)*

> *I have started another degree to look at doing something other than social work. (SW in Nova Scotia)*

> *The environment is toxic and draining. The overall mindset is fiscal restraint vs. the needs of vulnerable clients. (SW in New Brunswick)*

DISCUSSION

This is a unique study in that it has used national data to widely explore the pulse of social work across Canada. The national profile of SWs provides valuable insight into their working conditions and motivations. A key finding was that Canadian SWs, although highly skilled professionals with strong educational backgrounds and substantial work-related experience, tend to be underemployed, financially undercompensated and working in precarious occupational positions—yet they express high levels of career satisfaction. SWs' elevated work role inputs are not yielding them high returns in terms of organizational specific outputs. Paradoxically, this does not impact their overall level of career satisfaction. Despite adverse conditions of practice, such as increased workloads and hectic schedules, and apart from their reluctance to recommend social work as a career choice to close family members, SWs seem to love their day-to-day work.

This ambiguous finding may be explained by Herzberg's (1974) motivational theory, which conceptualizes job satisfaction on two theoretical dimensions: satisfiers and dissatisifers (House & Wigdor, 1967), based on the premise that job satisfaction and, respectively, dissatisfaction, are produced by totally different factors, whereas the opposite of job satisfaction is no job satisfaction rather than dissatisfaction (Smerek & Peterson, 2007).

Dissatisfiers, also labeled as hygiene factors (Herzberg, 1974), are related to environmental work conditions and the organizational work context rather than the content per se. They include administrative practices, supervision, interpersonal relations, general working conditions, salary, and job status or job (in)security. Satisfiers, broadly defined as motivators, are related to the intrinsic nature of the work and are usually juxtaposed to levels of self-actualization and work satisfaction (i.e. occupational achievement, work in itself,

> **PREVIOUS RESEARCH HAS FOUND THAT "WORK IN ITSELF" IS THE MOST POWERFUL PREDICTOR OF JOB SATISFACTION...**

responsibility to the profession, and the advancement of professional growth). Satisfiers are considered to have added motivational force than dissatisfiers, despite dissatisfying and precarious occupational conditions. Previous research has found that "work in itself" is the most powerful predictor of job satisfaction (Smerek & Peterson, 2007) and therefore, the authors theorize that this work in itself as well as the process- related aspects (opportunities for advancement and professional growth) are the two mechanisms mediating the link to the overall career satisfaction. The association between SWs' inputs and outputs and their levels of career satisfaction is preliminary, but the finding complements previous research that explored spirituality as a guiding construct for Canadian SWs (Graham, Coholic, & Coates, 2006)—which showed that social work is not just a career choice, but it is rather perceived as a calling or a vocation. Yet, due to the nature of the data, no statistical tests could be conducted to confirm such tentative suppositions. Therefore, it is important to state that Herzberg's (1974) motivational theory was brought forward to merely understand the findings and not to purposely explain a pre-determined hypothesis. It provides a descriptive lens to contextualize the concurrence of job conditions and job satisfaction experienced by respondents. It does not lend support to the justificatory practice of SWs' precarious occupational conditions, but rather, it provides a descriptive commentary for this project's main findings. However, it is plausible that precarious occupational conditions are contributing to higher job turnover, despite SWs' career satisfaction. Although high levels of satisfaction may be maintained through motivational factors, hygiene factors are not to be ignored. Coupled with recessionary societal contexts of falling revenues (Hilderbrandt & Wilson, 2010) and shaped by neoliberal forms of government restructuring (Chouinard & Crooks, 2008), the failure to attend to SWs' occupational conditions may not only contribute to, but also perpetuate the professional erosion of a high-quality skilled workforce. As one worker has stated:

> *After 30 years in the field I never imagined I would end my career in such dire circumstances. (SW in Alberta)*

STUDY STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The large sample size is a strength of the study, as it allows the portrayal of a comprehensive, national picture of the Canadian social work force and the main occupational challenges confronting social work professionals. Limitations include the inconsistency among the aggregated data sets that served as units of analyses and the use of self-reported accounts, since results captured participants' perceptions of their occupational conditions. Theoretical limitations may emerge from having considered the constructs of "career satisfaction"' and "job satisfaction" as synonymous. Yet the surveys only required respondents to identify

their level of satisfaction in relation to their overall career, differing from the literature supporting such association merely to job satisfaction. Although this study expanded from theoretical models assessing job satisfaction, only partial models were used. For instance:

- the study has drawn only from Gleason-Wynn & Mindel's (1999) conceptualization of the work environment and not their conceptualization of personal characteristics;
- it has referred to one side of Sousa-Poza & Sousa-Poza's (2000) model: the work role outputs but not work role inputs; and
- it has also referred to only one side of the model developed by Borzaga & Tortia (2006): organizational but not motivational aspects of SW practitioners.

Since the paper did not test a particular theoretical model but, rather, made use of one to better ground and understand the current findings, the authors consider such limitation as tolerable. Lastly, discrepancies between provinces could be related to the sample size: the samples in Alberta and Ontario were larger and more representative than the other seven provinces. Despite such drawbacks, this study provides a glimpse into the working environment of Canadian SWs.

PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Respondents in this study perceived social work as a low paying profession. Economic aspects, such as income level and benefits, have been linked to the sector's workforce crisis, raising implications for employee retention. By extension, this might negatively impact the quality of service provided, since much of SWs' professional ability depends on creating, building and developing relationships with clients. External equity, measured as self-perceived fair treatment, is linked to higher levels of career satisfaction; therefore, increases in salary and income levels will mirror increases in levels of career satisfaction.

EXTRINSIC ASPECTS (JOB SECURITY, WORKLOAD, VOLUME, COMPLEXITIES) POINT TOWARDS TROUBLING OCCUPATIONAL TRENDS WITHIN THE SOCIAL WORK FIELD.

Extrinsic aspects (job security, workload, volume, complexities) point towards troubling occupational trends within the social work field. It is important to consider how these work complexities, in terms of high volume and caseloads, translate into practice, for instance, in relation to SWs ratio to clients across various sectors and areas of practice.

The relational outputs of supervisory and collegial relationships along with the process-related factors in regards to SWs' opportunities for career advancement seem to account for the dichotomous finding of fairly

high levels of career satisfaction despite the poor quality of work life reported. Although this is a positive finding in itself, the continuation of these efforts is important. Team developments support good practice but are also linked with career satisfaction and retention of employees, particularly as they could indicate to highly value this work force.

> **ORGANIZATIONAL IMPROVEMENTS, AS THEY RELATE TO CURRENT SCHEDULES AND UNFAIR SALARIES, ARE NOT ONLY DESIRABLE, BUT NECESSARY.**

Organizational improvements, as they relate to current schedules and unfair salaries, are not only desirable, but necessary. There is an urgent need for social service agencies to overcome the disempowering myth that social work intervention can only happen at the individual level (Graham, Swift, & Delaney, 2009) and to step up to the plate in reducing SWs' caseloads as well as increasing their benefits packages and overall wages. Social work as a discipline may need to clearly articulate some of the challenges posed by the "nouveau gestionnairat" (Boudreau, 2013) of professionalization, and renew its conceptual ideas to better attend to these issues. Such recommendation is not provided as the "one size fits all" solution to all occupational challenges. The battle needs to be carried out on all storefronts. Positive aspects need to be set aside and fostered (relational outputs) while the challenging ones (precarious working conditions) need to be improved. Educators' roles should not be entirely focused on mediating SWs' career satisfaction or dissatisfaction, but rather on preparing them for the reality of these conditions in order to motivate SWs to advocate towards changing them. This may be easier said than done, especially within current neoliberal settings, however, solutions are needed in terms of easing out Canadian SWs' workloads. More with less might not be universally sustainable, if the social work profession cares about the needs of the marginalized populations it serves. SWs are not bound to escape the context, the same way that their clients cannot, and this is perfectly in line with social work's unique person in the environment approach. The ability of SWs to provide high quality services also depends on their occupational conditions (Lindqvist, 2012). Improving their quality of work life will, by extension, contribute to the quality of care provided to their clients (Gleason-Wynn & Mindel, 1999).

ENDNOTES

1. The original survey was developed by OASW. Professional provincial bodies undertaking the study modified the survey instrument (i.e., deleting certain questions, adding new ones, etc.) with the goal of better capturing the occupational context within their jurisdictions.

2. In the current analysis, to create the split of satisfiers and dissatisfiers (House & Wigdor, 1967) the authors used the middle score on a 10-point scale by splitting at the mode: Scores below 5 were classified as "dissatisfiers" and those above 5 as "satisfiers".

3. Respondents were asked to identify whether or not they were part of a visible minority group. Nowadays, the visible minority terminology is not as widely used within the social work community of scholarship. Researchers prefer to use the term "racialized" in order to capture the social construction processes of race. To keep consistent with the field, the authors have used the racialization terminology, although the survey per se inquired about participants' visible minority status.

4. Social service workers (i.e., diploma education) are not usually part of professional social work bodies. While some may have answered the survey, many others may not have done so (variations due to regional outreach efforts). As a result, the sample may be highly skewed towards those with university-level social work education.

5. MSW and PhD degrees were aggregated under one variable indicating graduate education.

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