

Organizational Identification: Perspectives of Dispersed Social Workers

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Abstract: *Human service organizations are often challenged to become more efficient while maintaining the quality of their services. As a result, more organizations have restructured, adopting the practice of dispersed work, which allows employees more freedom and flexibility to meet organizational goals outside of the traditional workplace. While dispersed work allows social workers to engage in work activities beyond the traditional office environment, it may also impact their sense of belonging to the organization. Eleven dispersed social workers were interviewed to understand how interaction via new communication technology impacts organizational identification. Overall themes gleaned from this study suggest that although dispersed social workers perceive themselves as having more autonomy and flexibility, they also can feel socially isolated and disconnected from their peers and supervisors, which may negatively impact organizational identification. Despite the enhanced efficiency that technology can bring, human service organizations must strive to understand the unintended consequences of a dispersed workforce.*

Keywords: *Dispersed social work; organizational identification; new communication technology*

The manner in which social work is executed is changing. In an effort to maintain a competitive edge, many human service organizations have adopted the concept of dispersed work, ultimately changing traditional coworker dynamics. Dispersed work allows for social workers to not only engage in social work activities but meet organizational objectives outside of the traditional office environment through the use of new communication technology (Allen & Vakalahi, 2013; Pearce, Yoo, & Alavi, 2004). Subsequently, with dispersed work, there is a decrease in face-to-face presence, opportunities for socialization, peer interaction, consultation with supervisors, or simply water cooler conversations (Kurland & Egan, 1999). For the dispersed social worker, interaction with coworkers and supervisors is reduced to communication via the use of email, text, video conferencing, and cell phone. Additionally, dispersed work may have some bearing on employees' attitudinal states (Allen, Lambert, Pasupileti, Cluse, & Ventura, 2004), such as a sense of belonging to an organization or the manner in which employees relationally link themselves to an organization (i.e., organizational identification).

Given the dearth of studies in the social work literature pertaining to organizational identification in the case of the dispersed worker, we analyzed the emerging literature on organizational identification, including the advantages, disadvantages, and importance of organizational identification to dispersed workers. This study focused on dispersed social

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workers' experiences with interaction via new communication technology and its impact on organizational identification.

Literature Review

Dispersed Work

Definition. Dispersed work is synonymous with telework, telecommuting, virtual work, and remote work. The *dispersed worker* could be a part of a department or organization yet be working at a host site, away from the centralized office, engaging, for some or all of his or her work schedule, in job tasks that would normally be done in a traditional work environment by using new communication technology to interact with others inside and outside of the organization (Bailey & Kurland, 2002; Baruch, 2001; Gajendran & Harrison, 2007).

Since its genesis in the 1970s, there has been a significant increase in the practice of dispersed work. Currently, at least 50% of US employers allow telecommuting as a benefit to their employees (Lister, 2016). Dispersed work arose as a way for organizations to decrease real estate expenses and address environmental stressors (i.e., traffic, air pollution), federal regulations (i.e., the Telework Enhancement Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the 1990 Amendment to the Clean Air Act), and employees' work-life balance demands (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007; Raghuram, Tuertscher, & Garud, 2010; Siha & Monroe, 2006). In addition to home-based dispersed work, other types of dispersed work consist of satellite offices, host offices, and mobile work (Boell, Campbell, Cecez-Kecmanovic, & Cheng, 2013). New communication technology is the primary means of communication for the dispersed worker; examples include synchronous and asynchronous technology such as cell phones, laptops, internet, intranet, email, texting, video conferencing, and teleconferencing (Allen & Vakalahi, 2013).

Characteristics. Several personal and job traits may influence an employee's motivation and success as it pertains to dispersed work (Henquinet, 2001; Nilles, 1994). Individual traits of valuable dispersed workers that are predominantly cited in the literature include the ability to be diligent, organized, and work autonomously and the possession of basic computer and time management skills (O'Neill, Hambley, Greidanus, MacDonnell, & Kline, 2009). The spatial context of dispersed work impacts social, psychological, and managerial processes and may decrease the desire to engage in dispersed work (Haddon & Brynin, 2005; Hislop & Axtell, 2007; Sullivan, 2003). Bailey and Kurland (2002) reported that the desire to engage in dispersed work is evenly split between men and women.

Advantages. According to Boell and colleagues (2013), there are advantages to dispersed work for both the organization and the individual employee. The organization may benefit from increased morale, productivity, and financial gains. Individual advantages may include work-life balance, autonomy, and flexibility, increased job satisfaction and productivity, and a reduction in commuting time. A number of studies indicate that a better balance of home and work life allows dispersed workers to spend less time away from home and more time with family and children (Hilbrecht, Shaw, Johnson, & Andrey, 2008; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Maruyama, Hopkinson, & James, 2009).

Dispersed work also allows for opportunities to be present for domestic crises and home service calls.

According to Mann, Varey, and Button (2000), flexibility is associated with the freedom of managing one's schedule. Freedom and flexibility are also related to the ability to work for multiple employers or the opportunity to gain employment despite a disability. Reduction in workers' commute has the capacity to positively influence cost, time, and stress and is a primary reason people choose to telecommute (Mann et. al, 2000).

Montreuil and Lippel (2003) posited that productivity is higher among dispersed workers than traditional workers because of fewer interruptions, prolonged work hours, and flexibility in planning their work schedule. Individuals who willingly engage in dispersed work tend to be self-motivated, which may also increase productivity (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003).

Disadvantages. One noted disadvantage of dispersed work is social and professional isolation. Studies conducted by Mann and Holdsworth (2003) and Mann et al. (2000) concluded that dispersed work has a considerable emotional impact on employees, related to loneliness and isolation, as compared to their centralized coworkers. A psychological connection, or a sense of belonging to an organization, referred to as organizational identification, has been found to be compromised as a result of social and professional isolation (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 2001). The negative emotional impact of professional and social isolation can threaten the psychological connection between dispersed workers and the organization, possibly impacting job satisfaction, productivity, and quality of work (Golden, Veiga, & Dino, 2008; Wiesenfeld et al., 2001).

As social work organizations expand to include more dispersed work, the impact on employees' organizational identification must be considered. With the heavy reliance on new communication technologies for interaction with centralized coworkers and the accompanying decreased face-to-face interaction and possible feelings of isolation, it may be important to consider ways to increase a sense of connection to the organization.

Organizational Identification

Organizational identification is a "self-definitional process through which individuals relationally link themselves to the organization, coming to understand and influence the organizational logic through discourse, including the integration of organizational and personal goals and values" (Parker & Haridakis, 2008, p. 110). According to Parker and Haridakis (2008), there are three approaches to achieving organizational identification: communication, cognition, and affect.

The communication approach suggests that the process of identification is primarily achieved through interaction with others. Organizational identification is established by and through communicating a shared interest in organizational goals, objectives, and rules (Parker & Haridakis, 2008; Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003).

Cognitively rooted conceptualizations of organizational identity stem from social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory encompasses the evaluation

of others as either in-group or out-group (i.e., us or them). Social identity theory as manifested in the organizational identification context was viewed by Ashforth and Mael (1989) as perceived oneness with or belonging to the organization, where individuals define themselves in terms of the organization. Pratt (1998) suggested that this cognitive or perceptual construct reflects the extent to which the organization is incorporated into one's self-concept.

Whereas the cognitive element of organizational identification focuses on perception, the affective element concentrates on emotions and the feeling of oneness. Emotions of pride, joy, shame, and guilt are often associated with affective aspects of organizational identification (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008).

Organizational identification is "a psychological linkage between the individual and the organization whereby the individual feels a deep, self-defining affective and cognitive bond with the organization as a social entity" (Edwards, 2005, p. 227). Organizational identification is established by and through communicating shared interest in organizational goals, objectives, and rules (Parker & Haridakis, 2008; Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003) and is created and recreated by employees through the communication of shared interests (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

Advantages. There are advantages of organizational identification for both the organization and the employee. For the organization, organizational identification has the benefits of decreased attrition, improved job satisfaction, and increased cooperation, participation, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Edwards, 2005; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). For employees, organizational identification aids in the maintenance of their consistent self-concept and collective self-esteem (Ashforth et al., 2008; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Additional employee advantages are psychological attachment, emotional links, and a feeling of belonging and oneness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Barker, 1993; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Cheney, 1983; Dutton et al., 1994; Pratt, 2000). Van Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006) reported that increased organizational identification leads to the incorporation of the organization's values, norms, and interests into one's self-concept. Some of the ways increased organizational identification is achieved are through job autonomy and supervisory communication and support (Apker, Ford, & Fox, 2003; Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Stinglhamber et al., 2015).

Disadvantages. One of the noted disadvantages or risks of organizational identification is overidentification. Overidentification involves an individual becoming overly engrossed with the identity of the organization to the point of a negative impact on personal and organizational well-being (Avanzi, van Dick, Fraccaroli, & Sarchielli, 2012; Galvin, Lange, & Ashforth, 2015). Overidentification can lead to distrust and paranoia, as well as extreme dependence and reliance on organizational dictates. Additional disadvantages are lack of organizational flexibility; antisocial and hostile behaviors by leaders and followers; automatic trust in organizational members, leading to a decrease in creativity; and erosion of an independent sense of self-worth (Ashforth et al., 2008; Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998; Mael & Ashforth, 1992).

In summary, organizational identification sets the foundation for understanding the relational nature of connection and influence as well as feelings of inclusion and belongingness to the organization and its members. This construct is critical, as organizational identification allows for communicative, cognitive, and affective links for the dispersed social worker towards an organization. While the positive and negative attributes of dispersed work have been studied in various organizations, few studies have been conducted with social workers. Focusing on this population gives voice to the experiences of dispersed social workers, providing insights for both practitioners and scholars.

Methods

Research Design

To develop a complex, detailed understanding of the essence of dispersed work and organizational identification via the use of new communication technology, it was necessary to speak directly with the participants and allow them to share their experiences, laying aside any personal assumptions (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) recommended a qualitative research approach when the purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the essence of the experience for several individuals. "When researchers conduct qualitative research, they are embracing the idea of multiple realities" (p. 16) with the intent of reporting these multiple realities.

This study employed a qualitative methodology that supported both the constructivist and interpretative paradigms regarding the experiences of organizational identification via the use of new communication technology for dispersed social workers. Data were collected via in-depth interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. A manual process was used to cluster and thematize the invariant constituents. The interview data were reduced to meaningful clusters, and themes emerged. Those themes helped guide a description of each participant's experience, which were captured to help draw conclusions around dispersed workers' views of what contributed to or detracted from organizational identification.

Site and Participant Selection

This study recruited participants from a single site, a human service organization in Maryland. The organization provides substance abuse, mental health, psychiatric, and prevention and educational services to adults, children, and adolescents from various socioeconomic backgrounds. At the time of the study, the site had 51 employees, 48 of whom were dispersed employees working at state and in-school settings.

This study used purposeful homogenous sampling. Selection criteria included being employed by the organization full-time, having at least 6 months of experience as a dispersed licensed social worker, and being engaged in dispersed work full-time. The executive director served as the gatekeeper for the study and provided contact information for the social workers who met the study criteria. A recruitment letter was sent via email to each dispersed social worker who met the study criteria, describing the study and inviting their participation. Following the initial recruitment letter, two additional attempts to

recruit participants were made over the course of five weeks. Once participants were identified, communication with the executive director was discontinued for the purpose of maintaining participants' confidentiality. Out of the 48 dispersed employees, 11 social workers met the study criteria and agreed to participate.

All participants worked out of a host site, either a state agency or a school, and relied on technology to communicate with their centrally located supervisor, centralized coworkers, and other dispersed workers. Opportunities to engage in face-to-face interaction with their supervisor and other dispersed workers within the agency occurred monthly during department meetings, as well as during semiannual agency activities.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected over a 4-week period through semi-structured, recorded, open-ended interviews that lasted 40 to 60 minutes each. Each participant provided informed consent and was assigned a pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

Data were analyzed according to Saldana's (2012) formal coding process and Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological analysis reduction method. The process of phenomenological reduction was initiated in epoché or bracketing. Epoché required the researcher to set aside prejudgments or preconceptions of the phenomenon being studied so as to be completely open in thinking about the phenomenon and to naively listen to participants describe their experience and understanding of the phenomenon in order to uncover the meaning of being a dispersed worker (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological reduction was used to identify the themes and sub-themes. The goal of this analysis was to describe the experiences of dispersed social workers and to elucidate the impact of those experiences on their organizational identification.

Methods of Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness, this study employed peer review, saturation, and member checks and addressed researcher subjectivity. Creswell (2007) indicated that peer review or debriefing provides an external check of the research process. It keeps the researcher honest; challenges the researcher via inquiry of methods, meanings, and interpretations (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985); and provides the researcher with an advocate to listen to thoughts and feelings that emerge in the process. In this study, two research colleagues served as peer reviewers. Over the course of three sessions, they assisted with coding the data and asking challenging questions.

Seidman (2006) posited that saturation of information refers to a "point in the study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported. He or she is no longer learning anything new" (p. 55). Saturation was achieved during data collection. In addition, 10 of the 11 participants completed member checks by reviewing and verifying their individual textural descriptions, individual structural descriptions, individual textural-structural descriptions, and a composite textural-structural description. Finally, since qualitative researchers are the key instrument in their research studies, the researchers made a conscious effort to be aware of any biases, values, and experiences brought into this study and to make them explicit (Creswell, 2007).

Results

Participant Characteristics

Participants comprised 10 women and one man; two were supervisors. Their length of service with the human service organization ranged from 1 to 10 years. All participants were licensed social workers. Seven were licensed certified social workers-clinical (LCSW-C), and the remaining four were licensed graduate-level social workers (LGSW). Participants had spent 1.5 to 10 years in dispersed work. Seven worked in a public service agency setting, while the remaining four worked in a school setting.

Themes

The dispersed social workers shared a number of factors that positively contributed to organizational identification as well as other factors that diminished organizational identification. Table 1 presents the two main themes with corresponding sub-themes and exemplars derived from the coding and thematic analysis.

Table 1. *Summary of Themes and Connected Elements*

<u>Main theme</u>	<u>Sub-themes</u>	<u>Exemplars</u>
1. Positive organizational identification	a. Autonomy	Non-micromanagement, independence, own boss
	b. Flexibility	Freedom to manage work schedule
	c. Face-to-face meetings	Opportunity to increase connection to organization and staff, receive support and feedback, receive administrative communication, and engage in case reviews
	d. Face-to-face social activities	Fosters connection to organization and staff Increased interaction
	e. Responsiveness from supervisor	Availability, support, quick response, and openness to talk
2. Diminished organizational identification	a. Limited supervision	Limited availability, impersonal, not available by phone, selective responses to questions asked via email
	b. Lack of peer consultation	Inability to consult with social work coworkers in the office or over lunch
	c. Isolation	Feeling isolated, “like on a boat out to sea” or a “step-child”; no place in the organization to work when host site is off on holiday; not integrated into the mothership

Theme 1: Positive Organizational Identification

Participants identified autonomy, flexibility, face-to-face meetings, face-to-face social activities, and responsiveness from supervisors as aspects that contributed positively to organizational identification.

Autonomy. Dispersed workers described the autonomy that stemmed from non-micromanagement as well as independence. Brook (3 years as a dispersed social worker) conveyed the manner in which autonomy was viewed as a benefit of dispersed social work:

The big benefit—and this is a huge one and I'm not going to lie—is that I don't have effectively a boss on a day-to-day basis. This is my practice, I run it; for the most part I work for them under the expectations I'm aware of. You know, I have an extreme amount of flexibility, an extreme amount of autonomy; it's really nice. I get to work in this school and I don't have to answer necessarily to the principal. Even though it's obviously good to keep a good relationship with him, he's not my boss. Virtually no one in this school can tell me what to do. I am my own boss on a day-to-day basis, and that is really cool.

Birch (dispersed social worker of 4.5 years) discussed the benefit of independence:

I guess the independence: you don't feel like there's somebody breathing down your neck. There's no micromanagement, so you do get the autonomy and you feel like, I'm trusted to show up at my office and do my job, and I don't have to have someone look over my shoulder. That's nice; I do like that.

Autonomy seemed to evoke positive feelings toward their employing organization. In addition to the experience of independence and not feeling micromanaged, autonomy allowed dispersed workers to feel trusted and embrace being their own bosses.

Flexibility. In addition to autonomy, many of the dispersed social workers felt that flexibility was a positive benefit of dispersed work. Genevieve (dispersed social worker for 9.5 years) expanded on the beneficial aspects of flexibility, particularly as it pertained to shifting her schedule to attend to work-life issues:

I really like [organization]. They're so flexible, and I think that's really helpful too or I wouldn't be here for 9 years unless I liked that. . . This is a good example. So I had a child 3 years ago and I decided that I wanted only to work 2 days a week, and someone else in school basically had a child the same time and only wanted to work 3 days a week, so we basically job-shared. And my supervisor was so cool that she was like: 'Well, which school are you going to go to? Does she want to come to yours, or do you want to go to hers?' And I was like: 'Well, I really want to stay at mine and I have seniority'. And my supervisor was like: 'Well, we'll just hire someone that will go to the two different schools for your other time.' So we both got to stay at our own schools and we just had someone else shuffle between the two schools.

Ms. Jackson (dispersed social worker and supervisor for 6 years) commented:

Flexibility, independence, autonomy, yeah, I would say that's the thing. Yeah, just not having somebody paying attention to what you do, when you do it, and how you do it. As long as your results are appropriate and fitting with our performance measures, then people don't really bug you.

Having the liberty to adjust time or work schedules to accommodate family needs allowed participants to feel appreciated and trusted and seemed to enhance participants' positive feelings toward their organization.

Face-to-face meetings. Though infrequent, face-to-face meetings were an element that appeared to contribute to organizational identification. These meetings were viewed by participants as an opportunity to receive support from other dispersed coworkers and supervisors. Roxy (dispersed social worker for 5 years) shared:

Well, how supportive people are, how often I see them, what we talk about. If it's just work or if it's personal things too, how much support given through supervision or meetings or trainings. It helped me to feel more connected when I was going to [another site where dispersed coworkers were present] because I would have a whole day with a lot of the staff there because a lot of [host site staff] I didn't really know.

Terry (dispersed social worker for 1.5 years) indicated that despite their time constraints of two hours, monthly meetings represented a time to meet with their support system and connect with coworkers:

The only time I feel connected, I would say, is when we meet monthly for our monthly supervision meetings. That's the time we can have an opportunity to engage in having that support system and get that feedback from each other on different things. However, it's only for 2 hours, and a lot of times there is an agenda that we have to go through.

These dispersed workers saw face-to-face meetings as an opportunity to experience connection to the organization through interaction with coworkers and supervisors.

Face-to-face social activities. Social activities were an additional means for participants to foster a connection with the organization, coworkers, and supervisors. Social activities allowed participants to feel a part of the headquarters organization and increase the sense of "buy-in" to the organization according to Terry (dispersed social worker for 1.5 years). These activities also served as a bonding agent, allowing centralized staff and dispersed staff opportunities to experience a sense of "connectedness" according to Barbie (dispersed social worker for 5 years).

Responsiveness from supervisor. Participants viewed responsiveness from their supervisor as contributing positively to organizational identification. Roxy (dispersed social worker for 5 years) described this responsiveness:

She [supervisor] has more time, I guess, to answer my questions. She's been supportive; she's been responsive quickly and helpful. She doesn't take days to respond to me. She responds pretty quickly, and if she can't, she'll call me and say "I can't" or email me and say "I'm in a meeting. Can I get back with you tomorrow?" or something. She's good about letting me know if she can't talk or she has to change the meeting.

Ms. Jackson (dispersed social worker and supervisor for 6 years) stated,

I have communicated with her [supervisor] at all hours and received communication back at almost all hours. I mean short of 2 or 3 in the morning, I've communicated late because I've been able to, maybe about something for the next day, and I've got response from her as late as 11 at night or as early as 5 in the morning. That's when she gets up to read emails and responds right away. ..I don't have to worry if I'm trying to get through.

The supervisor's responsiveness, availability, support, and openness to talk were aspects that were seen as positive by participants and seemed to enhance workers' sense of organizational identification.

Theme 2: Diminished Organizational Identification

A second theme that emerged from the data analysis was diminished organizational identification. Unfavorable aspects identified by participants that hindered organizational identification included limited supervision, lack of peer consultation, isolation, and working off-site.

Limited supervision. Limited supervision was seen by participants as a negative element related to organizational identification. Limited supervision was connected with feeling isolated and unsupportive, as expressed by Peebles (dispersed social worker for 2.5 years):

No fault on my supervisor, but just because of her schedule and her job role, she wasn't there, and a lot of times we had to do like phone supervision and things like that. And sometimes that was a little bit more challenging because I felt like, just because in my own personal style I like that face-to-face interaction, so sometimes that made it a little bit more—I guess sometimes I felt really like, man, I'm like isolated. I felt like sometimes I was on a boat kinda out to sea. . .It was a little bit challenging in some situations that I had over at [off-site location] where I felt like having a backup or someone with me would've been supportive and helpful.

Limited availability, non-responsiveness by phone, and selective responses via email were also experienced by participants and deemed unsupportive, impersonal, and isolating, which appeared to compromise organizational identification. As Terry (dispersed social worker for 1.5 years) stated:

But far as with [supervisor], sometimes it can be impersonal when you are looking for feedback, support, and supervision because it's mostly through email. I have attempted to call but no answer, so I'll email, and you'll get a quick response on one end but you may not get the information you were seeking. Or, my experience has been I'll ask a couple questions in that email, and I would get one or two questions answered in the reply back. It's kind of frustrating because you're feeling lost. So it's like: What do I do now? So I will email again asking the questions that weren't answered, email coworkers for feedback, or bring it up in monthly supervision. And when we have our monthly meetings, it's not the here-and-now kinda thing where if we were onsite you can go next door and pop in and ask a question to your supervisor. You have to wait for a response.

Lack of peer consultation. The lack of peer consultation was another element that seemed to diminish organizational identification among participants. The inability to access professional peers from agency headquarters prevented participants from discussing aspects of a case (due to professional ethics) for the purpose of getting insight, support, socialization, or feedback. As Birch (dispersed social worker of 4.5 years) explained:

I like to have somebody else's opinion. . . I trust my own judgment, but I always like to have the consult. That's a drawback, and like the camaraderie, just even like if I'm off site I eat my lunch in my room, I don't really talk to anybody. You know, I'll say hi in the halls, but I don't like sit and have a conversation with anybody during the day.

Tracy (dispersed social worker for 3.5 years) stated:

You don't have the, I guess, like the girlfriend, your work girlfriend or your lunch buddy. Sometimes I try. I've made colleagues and I guess friends with some of the staff here, but it's still not [the headquarters office] of [agency] staff member or peer, someone here, so you have to be very careful of what you're sharing and what you're talking about and things of that nature. So say, for instance, a staff member might be frustrated about a student that's one of your clients or just a student in general, and so I'm very conscious and aware of what type of conversations we're having, what type of questions that they may be asking prior for me like: So what's wrong with him? What's this or why did he do this? Did his mom say something to you? So those types of things were even still if I was an agency member, because you're kind of cloaked with the agency title, there's more of the ability to kind of communicate and discuss clients within your agency.

Peer consultation afforded social workers the opportunity to process, consult, or discuss cases as well as procedural or ethical situations. Peer consultation also gave social workers a sense of camaraderie and support, especially if the supervisor was unavailable. Therefore, the absence of peer consultation as experienced by these dispersed social workers was seen as a lack of support.

Isolation. Most participants felt that isolation was a drawback to organizational identification. Isolation made participants feel like an “outsider” without “a place in the organization.” Birch (dispersed social worker of 4.5 years) expressed feelings of isolation as follows:

I just feel like an outsider. . . The onsite staff is like the regular children, you know; li they're loved. Everyone's like a little team over there, and then we come in and we're like the outsiders. We're sorta second favorite; we kinda get the leftovers, you know. Like one time somebody brought in some food to the office and some of our staff took the food and it was like we're in the main office, like here I'm sharing my cake with you. And so some of our staff took the piece of cake and then we got in trouble because the cake was for the main office staff and it wasn't for us, you know.

There's no spot for us to work. There's like a conference room, and then they're like: Oh, we have a meeting here. Can you move over there? And oh, there's

something going on there; can you move over here?—which of course there's things going on, but we just sometimes get shuffled here and there. Like there's no place where you can go at the main office to work, so it's just sort of like you feel sort of like moved around. . . . It's sort of like a metaphor, you know, like you don't have a place in the organization.

Ms. Jackson (dispersed social worker for 6 years) expressed that she felt lonely for multiple reasons, including proximity and not working with like-minded individuals:

It can be lonely if you're not a real, if you're not gregarious. I am gregarious and even I can be kind of isolated if I don't get myself out of my door and chat and make friends with [host site] people. So it can be lonely. You can kind of feel isolated, not a part, and the drawback is you're not working with like-minded people. Like in an agency you are, like within our agency, we're all like-minded.

. . . I'm not here on a full-time basis, so I'm not as integrated to the mother ship, as it were, you know. Because of proximity, all of that has changed at least a little bit for me now, but being over here just for like meetings and coming over for certain reasons as opposed to seeing folks on a daily basis.

Not having a connection with headquarters staff and not feeling integrated were connected to the negative experience of isolation. These experiences seemed to diminish organizational identification among participants.

Discussion

This study sought to understand the experiences of dispersed social workers, and in particular, how interaction via new communication technologies impacts organizational identification. The primary objective of this study was to understand the essence of the experience through a phenomenological lens (Moustakas, 1994). The participants' experiences as dispersed social workers had both positive and negative influences on their sense of organizational identification.

Interaction via new communication technologies facilitated a varied sense of organizational identification based on the affective, communicative, and cognitive elements that encompass organizational identification. When participants communicated or socialized with other dispersed workers via technology, those interactions allowed them to feel a sense of oneness or belonging to the organization, as posited by Ashforth and Mael (1989). According to Parker and Haridakis (2008), "organizational identification is visible in the relational nature of connection and mutual influence" (p. 110). Participants experienced a sense of relational connection and mutual influence through the social interaction and communication that occurred primarily through email and secondarily by phone within their respective departments.

Lack of face-to-face interactions with centralized coworkers seemed to diminish cognitive organizational identification. Cognitive organizational identification has a fundamental base in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This theory suggests a three-part mental process (social categorization, social identity, and social comparison) that encompasses the evaluation of others as either in-group or out-group (i.e., us or them).

Frequent socialization and communication among centralized coworkers, along with being located at the headquarters organization, created an in-group perception among participants. Participants felt that they were not fully a part of the organization. They did not necessarily experience being integrated with the organization. The lack of social interaction with some dispersed coworkers, lack of connection and lack of social inclusion among centralized workers, limited availability, limited responsiveness from supervisors via email or phone, and lack of space to work when in the headquarters office caused participants to perceive themselves as “the step-child, unintegrated, separated, an outsider and unwelcomed”—the out-group.

According to past studies (Apker et al., 2003; Bamber & Iyer, 2002; Stinglhamber et al., 2015), supervisory support and job autonomy are positively related to organizational identification. This practice was supported by this study, as many of the dispersed social workers expressed that their autonomy and their supervisors’ responsiveness and availability via email made them feel trusted and supported, contributing to participants’ positive organizational identification.

While participants enjoyed the autonomy associated with dispersed work, the inability to have immediate access to supervisors and peers to process decisions or client issues and concerns created tension. This tension may be linked to challenges of dispersed work, such as social isolation, loneliness, and lack of support (Mann & Holdsworth, 2003). Additionally, decreased supervision can result in demoralization, decreased motivation, and decreased commitment (Farmer, 2011; Mann & Holdsworth, 2003; Mann et al., 2000). Another reason for tension could be the professional obligation to ensure competent, professional, and ethical practice within the field of social work (Kaiser, 2004; Munson, 2012). Even though supervision and opportunities for peer consultation occurred once a month for some participants, despite their licensure level they preferred additional contact.

Limitations

This study was limited by boundary and scope. The sample of participants came from two departments within one agency. Broadening the boundary and scope to include dispersed social workers from other agencies would have enhanced understanding of the phenomenon. This study concentrated only on social workers who were working in mental health services. Most participants were women. Diversifying participants as well as the area of concentration would have also added to the understanding of the phenomenon. This study did not take into account the perspective of the centralized worker. The level of analysis was limited to the individual level, not accounting for an understanding of the phenomenon at the organizational level. This study was cross-sectional and did not account for possible various stages that dispersed workers may go through in viewing the nature of their work.

Implications for Research

Participants did not choose to be dispersed workers when they were hired. Research on the voluntary vs. involuntary nature of being a dispersed worker is needed.

At the organizational level, future research can explore the change of an organizational paradigm shift from a traditional social work setting to a dispersed social work setting. Organizational linkage theory can provide insight into organizational change on multiple levels. Essentially, the theory posits the conditions under which change of an activity at one level of an organization will ultimately affect the outcomes or activity at yet another level (Fu et al., 2015; Goodman, 2000; Wilson, 2009). Using the framework of organization linkage theory, a quantitative study could explore the relationship between changes in agency policies, organizational culture, and their impact on dispersed social workers' organizational identification.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Supervisors typically serve three functions—administrative, supportive, and educational (Caspi & Reid, 2002; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Schulman, 1993; Tsui, 2005)—and can impact the workplace in numerous ways. As discussed by Landsman (2008) and Smith (2005), satisfaction with supervision enhances retention of frontline workers. In addition to workforce effects, supervision can also impact the quality of practice. As indicated by study participants, factors that seemed to decrease organizational identification were the limited availability of supervisors, being dispersed, and feeling isolated, which did not allow for integration into the “mothership.”

Based on this study, we suggest three ways to increase interdependence as well as foster and facilitate one or multiple aspects of organizational identification (Edwards, 2005; Parker & Haridakis, 2008; Pratt, 1998; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985) for the dispersed social worker. First, organizational identification, or lack thereof, can impact productivity and quality of services. If human service organizations are going to adopt the practice of dispersed work, they need to be aware of not only the advantages but also the drawbacks of dispersed work, with the creation of policies and procedures that support the dispersed worker. Second, these organizations must also be able to communicate to potential employees how the organization is establishing norms to offset the negative impact of dispersed work. Finally, state social work boards should create new policies around supervision that consider the impact of new communication technology.

As human service organizations and social work delivery evolve to encompass dispersed work, concentrated efforts are needed to decrease the challenges of dispersed work and preserve the benefits of organizational identification. A work environment that supports job autonomy, consistent face-to-face meetings and activities, opportunities for peer consultation, and supervisory responsiveness is essential for dispersed workers. Understanding the critical role of the supervisory relationship and creating policies and procedures that speak to the importance of supervisor accessibility, making a supervisory presence known to host organizations, will aid in promoting organizational identification for the dispersed worker.

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