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The perceptions of occupational social workers about how their service provision has been affected by HIV /AIDS in the workplace since 1995

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LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER 2: Occupational Social Work in South Africa

2. 1 Introduction

Occupational social work and various other professions aim at helping employees to cope with their life tasks. HIV/AIDS is a recent challenge facing employees, employers, practitioners and other relevant stakeholders. There is a relationship between HIV/AIDS in the workplace and occupational social work and this chapter aims at reviewing existing literature in that regard. Specifically, the review includes the following subtopics: occupational social work in South Africa, HIV/AIDS and main themes regarding occupational social work, HIV/AIDS and the workplace. Taking into consideration the HIV/AIDS challenge, the role of occupational social work seems to be even more important in the workplace.

2. 2. Occupational Social Work

2.2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this section is to describe the development of occupational social work in the South African workplace. The following issues will be discussed: the definition of occupational social work (OSW), the definition of employee assistant programmes (EAP), historical overview of occupational social work and its relevance in the workplace, the role played by the workplace in employees' lives, roles and services offered by occupational social workers in the workplace. The evolution of occupational social work carries a strong and interesting history. In order for the perceptions and experiences of occupational social workers to be well understood, the role of occupational social work in the workplace needs to be elaborated.

2.2.2 Occupational Social Work and Employee Assistance Programmes

Occupational social work is "a specialised field of practice addressing the human and social needs of the work community through a variety of interventions, which aim to foster optimal adaptation between individual and environment" (Straussner, 1989: 21). In terms of this definition, occupational social work clearly fits into the context of the workplace. According to Netting et al (1998), occupational social work involves assisting employees, their families and management with challenges that relate to social functioning and human relationships in the workplace.

The challenges emanating from human and social needs have a direct or indirect impact on individual employees, the workplace as an employer and the environment. The occupational social worker is required to develop and facilitate relevant intervention strategies and programmes to assist meeting the service demands identified in the workplace. Occupational social work is therefore systematic and focuses on person in environment as argued by Egan (1994). Employee assistance programmes on the other hand can be regarded as programmes that are aimed at assisting employees with personal problems through linking them to appropriate resources in order to improve job performance (Klarreich et al, 1985).

EAP'S therefore involve helping employees with their personal problems and thus helping management with the improvement of production. According to Klarreich et al (1985) the evolution of EAPS's was based on alcoholism as a major health problem that affected employee's job performance and that was why it was regarded as a medical model. Throughout the years, challenges such as drug abuse, marital problems, financial issues, organisational development and HIV/AIDS were included in services offered by EAP'S.

It seems as if there is only little distinction between employee assistance programmes and occupational social work practice. However, a close link between the two was argued by some writers like Googins (1987). In many articles, the two concepts are used interchangeably. Some authors such as Du Plessis (1994) regard employee assistance programmes as a sub section of occupational work. The writer agrees and was of the view that it is easier for an occupational social worker to practice employee assistance programmes and more difficult for an employee assistance practitioner to practice occupational social work. Both occupational social work and employee assistance practitioners are recognised by most large organisations in South Africa.

2.3 Occupational Social Work in South Africa

2.3.1 Historical overview of Occupational Social Work in South Africa

Occupational social work in South Africa has an interesting developmental history. Various studies contributed to its formalisation by recording this development. Du Plessis (1994), described various studies conducted in South Africa in her PhD research at the University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Social Work.

According to Du Plessis (1994), the first occupational social work post in South Africa was created in 1935. It had the primary objective of offering services to white employees. In 1954, social work services in the workplace expanded. The expansion was illustrated by big companies such as Yskor and SASOL, employing occupational social workers for the first time.

Other studies also described the development of occupational social work. Martice (1966) cited in Du Plessis (1994:10) conducted a study under the auspices of the University of Natal, Department of Social Work. The study made it clear that there was lack of literature on occupational social work and only few occupational social workers were employed at that stage.

In addition, Botha (1968) cited in Du Plessis (1994:11) completed a doctoral thesis under the auspices of the University of Port Elizabeth. For the purpose of her study, six organisations were identified and thirteen social workers interviewed. The overall findings of the study indicated that the social workers were attending to individual problems far more than organisational problems.

Moreover, Marrow (1974) cited in Du Plessis (1994:11) conducted a study at the University of the Witwatersrand, School of Social Work. She was able to identify seven occupational social workers. As a result, three trends were identified: occupational social work as a field of practice was little recognised, the social workers identified were not in touch with each other because practice was carried out in isolation and only two out of seven social workers were aware of valuable literature existing on occupational social work.

Furthermore, Dlamini (1993) cited in Du Plessis (1994:12) undertook a study under the auspecies of the University of the Witwatersrand, School of Social Work. The study revealed that few occupational social workers were employed and assessed if the workplace was suitable for social work students. As a result, the study facilitated the development of placements for social work students in some of the workplaces.

In 1990, the University of the Witwatersrand introduced a course on occupational social work. It seems to have been the only University offering this course in Africa. Other Universities do however offer courses on employee assistance programmes. However, occupational social work is recognised for registration at the South African Council for Social Service Profession as a specialised field and has grown rapidly as a field of study. The increased number of social workers in the workplace later illustrated the development of occupational social work. Du Plessis (1994) study identified more occupational social workers than any other study that the researcher was exposed to. The above-mentioned studies contributed positively to the occupational social work profession and added to the existing occupational social work literature.

2.4 Relevance of Occupational Social Work in the workplace

The workplace and occupational social work play an important role in employees' and employers lives. Various authors such as Carrol (1996) outlined the vital role played by social workers in the workplace. Pincus & Minahan (1983) regarded the role as that of enhancing individuals and organisational effectiveness. McCathy & Steck (1990) argued that the role of occupational social work is to effect change within the organisation in order to impact on performance of the organisation and improve employee's quality of life. Carrol (1996) argues that social work services in the workplace can help to manage change that may be occurring, can be used when risk is anticipated and can help to respond to legal actions taken against employees.

Occupational social work together with other professions deals with employee wellness in the workplace and Straussner (1989) argues that occupational social work aims at addressing needs and fostering adaptation. This supports the argument by Mckendrick (1990) that social work practice links people with resources and helps them cope with their life tasks. "Occupational social workers can be instrumental in helping employees, unions and service delivery agencies to design and implement a variety of programmes" (Straussner, 1989: 59).

South Africa as a country is undergoing massive change as a result of its young democracy with challenges such as global market and competitiveness. The workplace is no exception in the South African context. Citizen's stress levels are likely to be high because of issues such as globalisation, crime, poverty, unemployment, abuse and HIV/AIDS (Weiten, 1995).

As the workplace is embedded in society, the effects of the above mentioned stressors are clearly manifested in the lives of employers, employees and various stakeholders. According to Straussner (1989), in an industrial setting, the social worker works within a functional community that provides easy access to a large population in its natural life space. Occupational social work is a service that supports those in need. It involves

empowering the stressed, hurt, vulnerable and the poor according to (Dubois, 1996 & Egan 1994)**.**

Therefore, there was a great need for occupational social workers to enhance development, problem solving, coping mechanisms, promote systems, linking employees with resources and services, educating and contributing to the development and improvement of social policies and programmes in the workplace (Straussner, 1989). Skidmore et al (1994) argues that most businesses and industries are interested in social work programmes because of humanitarianism and cost effectiveness. Employers wish to treat their employees with respect and dignity while making profit in the process.

2.5 The role played by the workplace in employees' lifes

As mentioned earlier, the workplace is an important environment. It is a meeting point for employers, employees and other relevant stakeholders according to Carrol, (1996). Even though the main and primary purpose of the workplace is to provide work in return for a wage for the time spent or task completed, it affects the workforce in various ways. The parties involved have different goals to pursue. Generally, employees focus on wages while employers focus on production (Van Holdt & Webster, 1994). Generally, the two parties need each other in order to meet their various goals. Systematically, what one party does, affects other stakeholders.

According to Carrol (1996) the workplace can serve various purposes to the employees. In relation to the needs of the employees, the following purposes were particularly relevant. Firstly, the workplace serves as a functional community. Mostly, employees spend their time at work as opposed to their homes. The workplace then becomes their second community and reference group (Ganter & Yeakel, 1980 & Carrol, 1996).

It is likely for employees to develop a sense of belonging, which will have a direct impact on their self worth. For instance, an employee who feels part of the workplace will be free to participate and share ideas. That is why it can be concluded that the workplace plays an important role in the employee's lives. On the other hand, the employees might find it hard to adjust to their second community. At that stage, employees might develop a sense of not belonging and find it hard to identify themselves with the workplace. Employees who do not have a sense of belonging may feel isolated and alienated. For instance, they might not be free to participate actively in the activities taking place in the workplace and performing to their optimal functioning.

Secondly, the workplace can serve as a role player in human development according to Weiten (1995) and Carrol (1996). By development, the writers mean physical, emotional and cognitive growth of employees. The workplace sustains physical and social security, personal and social growth (Carrol, 1996). The researcher is of the view that positively nurtured development might lead to responsibility, accountability, hard work and dedication. In order to perpetuate positive development, incentives like promotion, involvement in decision making and good working conditions need to be taken into consideration. The workplace can then be regarded as a site for the promotion of mental health. On the contrary, the workplace can be a site to negatively affect employee's mental health. The employees who are not well nurtured might be negatively affected and their indirect response can include actions like irresponsibility, absenteeism, coming late to work and sabotage (Van Holdt & Webster, 1994).

Thirdly, the workplace can also serve as a financial institution according to (Carrol, 1996). Large organisations carry a potential of creating more funds that in turn contribute to the economy. The employees seem to regard the workplace as a source of income. That is due to the activity of exchanging labour in return of a wage mostly taking place in the workplace. Even though not all employees are satisfied with their wage or paid equally to the service that they offer, they generate income.

The above mentioned imply that the workplace plays an important role in the lives of employees. It can affect life of employees positively or negatively depending on whether certain needs that are supposed to be met in the workplace are met. For the workplace to play its role and bring about positive change, involvement of employers and employees, stakeholders and service providers is needed. Some of those service providers are occupational social workers.

2.6 The roles and services of Occupational Social Work

2.6.1 Introduction

According to Thompson (1992), roles and services of occupational social worker differ from one setting to the other. It also depends on needs that are identified in the workplace and the target group. The needs can be identified by any party and later referred to the social worker. The roles and services are also influenced by the position that the social worker holds in the organisation.

2.6.2 The roles and services offered by Occupational Social Workers

The roles that the occupational social worker should play at the workplace are defined through various models developed by writers such as: Ozawa (1980), Googins (1987), Frank & Strater (1985) and Du Plessis (1994). However, Du Plessis (1994) developed a South African model that emerged from the study that she conducted among occupational social workers practicing in various organisations.

In addition, Weil & Gamble (1995) discussed the following as the roles that occupational social workers can play in the workplace. They mentioned roles such as: organiser, advocate, mediator, teacher, facilitator, negotiator, planner, developer, writer, analyst, manager, implementer, monitor and evaluator. The roles interrelate and often more than one role can be played at a time. The roles also can be adopted across all social work methods. Lombard (1992) highlighted the key roles of occupational social work as facilitation and mediation.

There are many similarities between the role played by occupational social workers and the services that they offer in the workplace. The services and the roles that social workers are involved in interrelate. Du Plessis (1994) supported Hepworth & Larsen (1994) by identifying the following as major services offered by occupational social workers in the workplace: counseling; administration; education and training; community work; group work; supervision; corporate social involvement and research.

Services offered by occupational social workers are divided into three levels of practice. Various authors such as Du Plessis (1994) and Netting et al (1998) mentioned the following as levels of services: micro, meso and macro. All three practice levels are relevant and of imperative importance to the industrial sector. The three levels were discussed and much focus was on macro practice level.

This was because the writer supports Du Plessis's (1994) argument that there is a need for occupational social work to evolve from micro to macro practice. The importance and relevance of the evolvement was clearly illustrated.

2.6.3 Micro practice

At the micro practice level, the social worker focuses on individuals (employee as a person), couples and families (Googins, 1987). Looking at the person in environment, employees are likely to encounter personal problems that need management and

solutions. Various authors such as Netting et al (1998) and Evian (1991) outlined the following as common key problems experienced in the workplace: chemical dependency, domestic violence, marital problems and HIV/AIDS. In response to these challenges, actions like assessment and crisis intervention (mostly short term) are taken. Intervention will clarify if the identified challenge affects family members of the employee or not. If so, the worker and the employee might consider involving relevant parties in the intervention. In case a need for intervention persists, referral for appropriate assistance at organisations and facilities external to the workplace might be facilitated.

As much as micro practice can be appropriate, it can also be used negatively. Micro practice can benefit employers instead of employees. Carrol (1996) argues that micro practice can be used as part of organisational politics. For instance, employers can have grounds to dismiss an employee who was not meeting their work requirements after contact with a social worker. Employers can clearly indicate that the employee was given an opportunity to change while necessary support was not provided and conducive environment not created. This kind of an opportunity without necessary support is not an opportunity at all. The researcher supports the argument by Egan (1994) that the change opportunity does not materialise well if the environment is not nurturing, encouraging and conducive for positive change (Egan, 1994).

2.6.4 Meso Practice

At the meso practice level, the social worker focuses on a specific group of people in the organisation (Du Plessis, 1994). According to Netting et al (1998), by focusing on a certain group of people, specific needs are identified and specifically addressed. The

group of employees is mostly reached through running of groups, workshops and seminars. For instance, a workshop can be arranged for employees who are about to be retrenched. Issues such as losing their jobs, budgeting and future plans can be looked at. Meso practice intervention can also apply to management or any other stakeholders in the organisation.

For instance, the same issue of retrenchment can be discussed with management. The discussion can be around the impact of retrenchment on the company, how it could have been done differently and organisational future plans. At this stage, the roles such as mediator, negotiator and advocate as mentioned by Weil & Gamble (1995) and Lombard (1992) are very important.

The researcher is of the view that in highly unionised organisations, meso practice level might extends to union officials or shopstewards. Trade Unions play an important role in the organisation. As workers' representatives, their involvement will mean that management is willing to consult before taking decisions that will directly or indirectly affect the employees.

2.6.5 Macro practice

The third level of occupational social work practice is the macro level. At macro level, the focus is on the organisation as a whole (Du Plessis, 1994 & Netting et al, 1998). The intervention is with the entire organisation and change is likely to affect all members of the organisation. The intervention often results in procedural and policy changes. "The purpose of macro level interventions at the organisational level are to improve the functioning of organisations, improve delivery of existing services and develop new services" (Poulin, 2005: 209).

Macro practice is of vital importance when practicing in the workplace. This is due to macro practice being the practice level that attempts to shape organisational systems to fit the employees. It has more impact than is recognised and appears to be underutilized according to Du Plessis (1994). These policies and procedures affect employees directly and indirectly. If the practice is effective, quality service will be reaching many people at the same time.

Through macro practice, a conducive environment for the involvement and participation of employees in decision-making can be created. That will be through involvement and participation that seem to have implications for the employees. This means that they are respected, treated with dignity and that their views are valued. The researcher believes that happy and satisfied workers will also generally perform their official duties as expected.

At this level, the social worker needs to assess and analyse the organisation. That can be done by examining policies and organisational practices and evaluating its impact on the workforce. For instance, a consultative or workplace forum can be established and the social worker can play a mediation role between the employees and employers. The employees are then able to utilise the services while management consult, negotiate and attend to the grievances of the employees.

2.6.6 The importance for macro practice social work

The workplace is a complex and powerful institution which affects employees emotionally, physically and socially (De Bryn, 2001). The sociological classic theorists like Marx and Weber supports the argument. Individuals have limited capacity and are brought together to act in a coordinated fashion. The complexity is often managed through bureaucratic structures which assist in defining roles, relationships, tasks, setting norms and rules. According to Du Plessis (1994) and Barak (2000) there is a need for occupational social work to move from micro practice to macro practice. “In order to

provide services to the population in need, it might mean that social workers need to redefine its parameters and include all aspects of work regardless of the auspices under which occupational social work is practical" (Barak, 2000: 202). Occupational social workers have potential of offering a holistic service in the workplace.

Developmental social work strives to achieve holistic, integrated services. This principle also informs occupational social workers as there is a need for services at all levels. Occupational social workers are required in macro practice, to examine policies and organisational practices, evaluate how they impact negatively on the workforce and develop strategies to change undesirable policies and practices. Looking at challenges like HIV/AIDS, occupational social work strategies should reach the majority of the workforce on both a personal and policy level. For effective response, social work need to provide holistic and integrated services on a large scale. Developmental social work focuses on the evolvement of social work profession through expansion of services to reach all spheres of life. Macro occupational social work fits well with the developmental paradigm of social work.

This does not mean that micro practice will be completely abandoned. It does mean however that macro practice needs to be acknowledged as equally valuable as the micro practice and meso practice level. The researcher is of the view that occupational social workers cannot only attempt to shape the employees to fit in the organisational system but need to shape the organisational system to fit the employees according to Netting et al (1998).

However, Akabus & Kurzman (1982) believe that occupational social workers need to sustain their practice base before moving to macro practice. According to them, the core of social work practice is individual counselling (casework) and if social workers excel in individual counseling, they will move to macro practice with a solid foundation. Du Plessis (1994) argued that social workers tend to rely on micro practice too heavily and some challenges need macro level responses.

Macro practice may involve great organisational change. For the change to take place, all the stakeholders in the workplace need to actively participate. The form of practice is a challenge to the worker and employers as they are both challenged to change the way they used to do things and look at doing things differently. That movement depends on the employers understanding of macro practice.

In order to positively influence such challenges, it is the role of the social worker to make employers and employees understand the macro practice and its value. If the roles are not clear, the services will not be effective and efficient. For the roles of occupational social workers to be clear and services offered to be effective, adjustment is needed.

As a result, there might be a change to what Du Plessis (1994) found to be employee ignorance regarding the role of social worker, social workers reluctance to step on other's toes, and their lack of requisite knowledge to change their practice approach. Barak (2000) argues that social workers need to redefine their parameters in order to provide services to people in need. The researcher is of the view that occupational social workers are on a process of redefining their parameters and focus on positively impacting on the system through organisational change. For instance, some social workers are closely looking at formulation, analysis, monitoring and evaluation of organisational policies and procedure (Netting et al, 1998).

According to Carrol (1996) change is mostly not an easy process. It is accompanied by issues such as: disorientation, disruption and time consumption. In order for employees to adapt to new situations, support from social service providers is needed. Occupational social workers can offer support at the micro, meso and macro level. Occupational social workers are equipped to carry out their assignments and effect change in undertaking their role. For effective change to take place, it is important that management creates a conducive environment according to Carrol (1996) and Woods & Maneitja (1996), that might encourage and embrace change.

If macro practice is well understood by employees and employers, they are likely to support the idea. Employers have complete control over the necessary resources that can make macro practice successful. For instance, they need to authorise finances, participate actively and give employees permission to attend necessary meetings. Du Plessis (1994) indicated that lack of management support and authoritarian nature of the occupational setting are some of the challenges facing social work practice in the workplace at macro level.

Occupational social worker needs to explore and assess how both employees and employers will be affected by the proposed change. As most of organisations are working with different stakeholders, it is important for the occupational social workers to be aware of the needs and demands placed on each stakeholder. The stakeholders also need to be aware of each other's needs as Woods & Maneitja (1996) argue. The same applies to different disciplines that are focusing on the wellbeing of employees.

For occupational social workers to clearly understand the workplace and contribute effectively at macro level, understanding of organisational structure is important. Understanding the structure of the organisations they work in will shape the way intervention strategies will be planned, implemented and allows different stakeholders to contribute creatively. It might also assist in comprehension of job activities, responsibilities, decision making, formal authority and communication channels. It is the structure that determines whether the goals of the organisation will be met. "The organisational structure identifies key activities within the enterprise and the way in which these are to be coordinated in order to attain the strategic aims" (De Bryn, 2001: 143). An important part of the implementation of the strategy with a view of achieving goals depends on the manner in which the strategy is structured.

During the process of changing the practice approach and redefining parameters, certain issues need to be taken into consideration. A hidden challenge that literature does not highlight was identified by the researcher namely that there are other service providers who are charged with helping the workforce to cope better.

For instance, there may be an organisational developer or HIV/AIDS coordinator who is not a social worker. It is likely that those service providers might affect the service provided by occupational social worker. It might be hard for employees to differentiate between these service providers and even confuse the role that they play. That can be because service users might be unsure of who is providing the actual service, who to approach when they need assistance and management might be unsure who to refer employees to.

2.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a relationship between occupational social work and employee assistance services. Both occupational social work and employment assistance programmes are fields of study that have developed very well and can presently be regarded as specialties. Looking at occupational social work roles and services, they seem to be very clear. Management, employees, employers and other relevant stakeholders are aware of the importance and relevance of social work in the workplace especially in the context of HIV/AIDS.

Social work is well placed when looking at practitioners dealing with employee's wellness. Employee wellness is important because the workplace plays an important role in the lives of the employees and the surrounding environment. There is a great need for macro practice in the workplace especially when looking for effective tools of responding to new service demands such as HIV/AIDS.