

DIARIES FROM THE FRONT LINE – FORMAL SUPERVISION AND JOB QUALITY AMONG SOCIAL CARE WORKERS DURING AUSTERITY

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INTRODUCTION

This article explores perceptions of job quality among social care workers (CW) in Scottish public, private and voluntary organisations during austerity. Specifically, it highlights the importance of formal supervision practice as an intrinsic element of job quality and how it may mitigate degradation in extrinsic elements as austerity dismantles aspects of the public service HRM offer.

Since the introduction of marketised reforms under New Public Management (NPM), debates have focused on the subsequent HRM offer in public services. Studies highlight how employment conditions have suffered degradation (Bach, 2016). These studies have further brought a greater understanding of the importance of sub-sector contingent factors in bringing variations to these public sector work and employment outcomes (Bach et al., 2007). This study contributes to this literature by focusing on the degradation in public service HRM, and worker perceptions of such change in the context of austerity, whether sub-sector factors are still apparent in shaping these outcomes, and factors that mitigate the impact of such changes.

The study highlights the literature on the degradation of public service HRM in public, private and voluntary social care providers under austerity, but also uses as its empirical focus the innovative method of data-gathering among CWs through cultural probes or diary methods. Diary methods were used to bring insights into the impact of austerity on CW

perceptions of job quality in social care. From these diaries we explore worker perceptions of the value of extrinsic job quality factors. Moreover, in theorising the importance of the management of intrinsic factors in perceptions of job quality, the study explores how far formal supervision practice mitigates any decline in extrinsic factors. Studies have explored the ‘meaningfulness of the job’ as an intrinsic factor (Hebson et al., 2015), but the contribution of how such work is supervised in achieving intrinsic satisfaction among CWs has been identified as worthy of further investigation (Harley et al., 2010). Therefore, the study’s focus on formal supervision processes in care adds to our knowledge in this regard.

There are also policy implications from this study. It has been highlighted that “the social care workforce is not only the major service cost, but also the prime determinant of the service outcomes” (Rubery and Urwin, 2011, p. 122). The sector provides an example of how job quality is important for the care of the vulnerable and national wellbeing, including recognising that failure to understand the causes and consequences of further degradation of care work will exacerbate long-established recruitment and retention problems in the sector, so undermining continuity in care (Devins et al., 2014).

The study reveals potential similarities and differences in CW reflections across public, private and voluntary sectors. The consequences of such differences in expectations ranging from pay to supervisory support imply the need to develop nuanced solutions to repair problems of job quality in these different sub-sectors. Data further reveals how formal supervision practice mitigates some of the degradation of extrinsic components in pay and work effort caused by pressure on HRM in public services under austerity. In particular, formal supervision brings a sense of ‘feeling valued’ among CWs, but it is also fragile. Austerity diminishes opportunities and time for supervision, and undermines the development

of future supervisory capacity through degrading learning opportunities that encourage career development among potential line managers.

The article begins with an overview of debates concerning changes to the HRM offer in public services, and social care in particular under marketised regimes during austerity, highlighting the potential for continued sub-sector differences. The next section explores job quality in social care, and discusses the importance of supervision practice to intrinsic job quality. The article then describes the research method – a qualitative study based on diary cards provided by 74 CWs. The next two sections report on perceptions of extrinsic and intrinsic job quality, culminating in a discussion of support accessed through the care supervision process. The article then offers concluding comments and identifies lessons for policymakers and stakeholders.

PUBLIC SECTOR HRM DURING AUSTERITY – THE CASE OF SOCIAL CARE

Prior to austerity in the UK, successive governments of all political persuasions introduced market-based reforms of public services, including social care, under NPM (Bach, 2016). Despite ambiguity in its definition, NPM reforms included calls for the introduction of cost savings, efficiencies, private sector management techniques and an emphasis on performance (Bach and Kessler, 2012). Central to such reforms was the management of the core workforce. The focus on workforce was important because despite technological advances, the delivery of public services continues to be dependent on face-to-face interaction between employee and service users (Bach, 2016). Another strand of this policy has been the management of what has been called the ‘shadow state’. NPM also involves the outsourcing of services to private and voluntary sector providers leading to thousands of workers

employed by contracted organisations delivering public services (Bach and Kessler, 2012). Therefore, debates around the consequences of NPM are framed around the public service workforce, rather than exclusively within the public sector.

Research has explored these concerns through three lines of analysis. The first focused on the dismantling of the traditional ‘model employer’ approach to public service management, based on collective bargaining, job security, and good terms and conditions (Bach and Kessler, 2012). The second focused on changes to work relations from the application of intensified forms of management control, and fears they involved the deskilling of the workforce through cheapening the labour process via alterations to work organisation, rather than forms of empowerment (Bach et al., 2007). Research in the public sector has highlighted how for workers changes are characterised by blended and contradictory outcomes, rather than the dichotomy of empowerment or degradation (Bach et al., 2007). In contrast, in outsourced providers, work intensification, increased bureaucracy and fragmentation of working time have been common (Bach and Kessler, 2012).

A third line of analysis has been the influence of the institutional infrastructure underpinning public service employment relations, including the collective bargaining machinery at central and local government level, or the regulation of training (Bach et al., 2007). This focus on institutional factors has been used to explain sub-sector variations in work relations across occupations. Another example relates to the widening of pay gaps between public sector workers and their private and voluntary sector counterparts. Reasons for these differences included the continued resilience of collective bargaining in the public sector. In contrast, outsourced providers received no, or below inflation, financial uplifts from local authorities,

and had limited trade union presence to protect the terms and conditions of the externalised workforce (Rubery and Urwin, 2011).

The advent of austerity has brought further concerns. Anti-state narratives shifted the blame for the global recession away from the private banking sector to public organisations, their workforces, and unions. Since 2010, many public service employers have experienced pressure to diminish the HR offer to workforces (Bach and Kessler, 2012). In the UK, among the directly employed workforce this has involved downward adjustment of employment conditions and/or work redesign. For example, from 2010 collective bargaining was undermined as the UK government imposed two years of pay freezes and then a 1% cap (Wanrooy et al., 2013). Cost cutting through the introduction of lean management has led to reduced staffing, task fragmentation, and work intensification (Bach and Kessler, 2012).

The UK government has ensured that local authorities (direct providers and funders of outsourced social care services) have particularly suffered during austerity as governments have passed on a significant proportion of cuts to this tier of governance. Scotland (where this study is located) faces specific, considerable cost containment pressures. Scottish local authorities will pass down austerity-driven expenditure cuts to its own social care workforce and those employed by external providers.

In social care, studies have claimed austerity has contributed to the end of the standard employment relationship especially among external providers suffering under harsher contractual relations with local authority funders. Consequently, these employers only provide basic terms such as work scheduling, protections against unjustified complaints, training and paying for night work/unsocial hours work (Rubery and Urwin, 2011).

As austerity continues, there is a need to further scrutinise the outcomes from a diminishing HRM offer in social care, including sub-sector differences. For example, moves towards ensuring the workforce is qualified through National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs, and SVQs in Scotland) have been part of the job offer across social care for some time (Rubery and Urwin, 2011), and will have eroded differences in expectations of learning and skills acquisition among staff across sub-sectors. Greater exposure to cuts among external providers may, however, undermine organisational capacity to provide their staff with the benefits from training compared to the public sector. Meanwhile, since 2010, pay in direct local authority social care will have experienced downward pressure through a series of central and local government enforced cuts, freezes or 1% caps on increases (Bach, 2016). The consequence may be that pay and reward differences across sub-sectors are narrowing.

JOB QUALITY AND CARE WORK DURING AUSTERITY

As previously mentioned the purpose of this article is to explore worker perceptions of job quality in social care in the context of the deterioration in the public service HRM offer under austerity. A well-established literature differentiates the concepts of extrinsic and intrinsic job quality. Extrinsic job quality is defined in terms of objective, job-specific characteristics such as pay, access to training, job and employment security and physical work conditions (Warhurst et al., 2017; Henseke, 2018). While many of these components are rooted in the broader employment relationship, experiences of pay adequacy and perceptions of the safety of the work environment are consistently referenced by workers as key components of individual job quality (Burgess and Connell, 2019), while in the research literature

“comprehensive measures of job quality cover both aspects – work and employment”

(Warhurst et al., 2017, p. 16).

Intrinsic job quality is associated with factors such as task variety, the deployment of skills and initiative (Warhurst et al., 2017), the opportunity to learn through personal reflection, discretion over how to do work, and perceptions of work intensification, as well as positive social relationships in the workplace and access to practical and emotional support from managers and peers (Henseke, 2018; Burgess and Connell, 2019). Crucially, the extent to which workers find their jobs meaningful and fulfilling is a recurrent theme in research on intrinsic job quality (Warhurst et al., 2017).

The influence of extrinsic factors in care

Studies concerning the robustness of job quality have highlighted how low pay has been identified as problematic among even more skilled and experienced CWs. Pay among CWs compares poorly with the lowest paid in public services, and service workers more generally (Hebson et al., 2015). Greater insecurity in working hours has undermined income security and other elements of job quality (Rubery et al., 2016). Low pay causes financial hardship for employees (Clarke, 2015) and widespread problems with morale as recruitment and retention problems are common for all types of employers (Devins et al., 2014).

Additionally, intensified work demands have been shown to be problematic, impacting on CWs’ wellbeing in some settings, while the demand for personalised care has seen an expansion of CWs’ roles and skillsets as they take on more complex tasks (Rubery et al., 2016). The opportunity to participate in training has also been identified as an element of job quality particularly valued by CWs (Clarke, 2015), but an area where austerity has

undermined investment resulting in uneven access. There is also evidence that CWs value structured career development, but concerns have been raised that the resources available for such support have diminished, and formal progression routes to higher skilled posts are often limited (Devins et al., 2014).

Care supervision as a component of intrinsic job quality

There is a substantial literature on the importance of intrinsic factors that influence CW job quality. Social and emotional support from peers can be a crucial source of resilience for CWs seeking to cope with the demands of their work (Gibbs, 2001). The intrinsic meaningfulness of job content is also important. Research has found that many CWs gain considerable self-worth from the sense that they were making a difference to service users' lives (Eldh et al., 2016). Such altruistic motivations have been used to explain why subjective job satisfaction is high despite poor pay and terms and conditions, suggesting a compensating effect from intrinsic rewards that offsets degradation in extrinsic factors (Hebson et al., 2015).

There is a particular case to be made for exploring access to formal supervision from first line supervisors in detail as a key component of CWs' job quality. The importance of supervision – as a route to personal development and a source of support to cope with the demands of caring – has been acknowledged by some studies of job quality in care (Clarke, 2015). “Through professional supervision, practitioners engage in a relationship with a supervisor enabling both a place and space to refine and develop professional identity, knowledge and skills for reflectively examining the challenges faced in everyday practice” (Karvinen-Niinkoski et al., 2017, p. 53).

Supervision in social care has a role and importance that is arguably quite different to the regular HR and performance management tasks undertaken by first line managers, or even broader informal support offered by supervisors elsewhere in the labour market. Rather, care supervision draws on the practices of clinical supervision in the health professions, where the supervisor offers “supportive rather than judgemental” feedback and “takes responsibility and accountability for the wellbeing and work performance of the person being supervised” (Skills for Care, 2015, p. 2). The shift towards personalisation in care services and self-management in how work is organised have led to changes in practice associated with “increased autonomy, responsibility and independent working, which has negatively affected [other] support mechanisms” (Butterworth et al., 2008, p. 265) meaning that effective supervision is of even greater importance. Thus, while care supervision can be viewed as an area of formal workplace practice, the value that it delivers in terms of job quality is essentially intrinsic. Effective supervision helps CWs to find meaning and value in their work, facilitates personal reflection that can then inform the take-up of opportunities for learning, and is a crucial source of support.

Accordingly, the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), which is responsible for regulating the Scottish social service workforce, sees supervision as beneficial as “it provides support for individual workers, making sure they are not working in isolation but have access to advice and guidance from a manager or experienced colleague” (SSSC, 2016, p. 10). Gibbs (2001, p. 325) notes the value of supervision in coping with the emotional demands of care: “a key process through which workers can be assisted to deal effectively with the emotional impact of the work by enabling them to share their thoughts and feelings about it, as well as the administrative function of ensuring that the job is done”. Accordingly, there is evidence that “effective supervision helps foster resilience and reduce the risk of burnout” (SSSC,

2016, p. 10). Similarly, evidence from nursing supervision suggests that “some of the most important advantages are restorative... [enabling] nurses to cope better, recognise personal feelings and look after their health” (Butterworth et al., 2008, p. 267).

Meanwhile, “ineffective supervision can reduce productivity, increase absenteeism, create or prolong workplace conflict, damage the culture, and for adult social care employers, impact the quality of care delivered” (Skills for Care, 2015, p. 1). Care supervision can also become a procedural performance management exercise, undermining trust and reinforcing risk aversion (SSSC, 2016). Where CWS feel that supervision is unhelpful or designed as a control mechanism they may engage in non-compliant behaviours including refusal to participate and treating it as a token tick-box exercise (Butterworth et al., 2008).

The summary above indicates that formal care supervision, while a focus for the specialist practitioner literature, needs to be acknowledged as a fundamental component of job quality for CWS. The prospects for positive outcomes of job quality to manifest, however, depend on the context within which they are introduced within the care sector. This article is concerned with whether the specific intrinsic social care job quality characteristic of supervision mitigates the impacts of the degradation of extrinsic conditions following from austerity-driven expenditure cuts (Rubery and Urwin, 2011). Finally, we ask to what extent are these outcomes in CW job quality reflective of public, private and voluntary sub-sector contexts?

METHODS

The study required frontline CWs to share their experiences over one week using a qualitative ‘cultural probe’ or ‘diary method’. Respondents registered events and made regular hard-copy records of their daily activities and experiences. This required them to complete a daily diary; record the activities they undertook at specified times and/or retrospectively consider how they spent their time using timesheets; and reflect on their work, based on a series of thematic prompts, recording their reflections on diary cards.

Diary cards were designed explicitly to encourage respondents to reflect on both extrinsic and intrinsic elements of job quality, specifically: feeling valued; pay and conditions; opportunities for training and development; peer relationships; and supervision support. Respondents completed a series of diary cards, with responses ranging from a single sentence capturing general reflections on the individual’s working day, to a series of different work activities and how these connected to aspects of job quality. The timesheets gave an overview of the CWs’ weekly working hours, distances travelled, different work activities engaged in at specified time-periods, situations arising at work, the number of service users worked with and CWs’ self-reported feelings, concerns and satisfaction with their work activities and working day.

Such cultural probe methods have been shown to be useful in generating rich data. They are designed to probe personal reflections, “to prompt and elicit information from people about their lives” (Gaver et al., 2004, p. 53-54). Diary card methods have been deployed in a broad range of settings, and have proved particularly useful in gathering contemporaneous rather than retrospective reflections among workers engaged in complex, multi-faceted work

activities. In this context, the technique allowed CWs to reflect and self-report events and experiences in their natural, spontaneous context and provided the opportunity to document their views and insights in a number of crucial areas concerning work and employment with minimal interference from the researchers. Not only did this technique provide CWs with an opportunity to respond at their own convenience and reflect away from the gaze of the researcher, but also allowed them to engage as active data contributors and experts in their own working lives. Using this methodology also reduces the ‘interview effect’ (the impact that the artificial situation of the interview has on the information respondents are prepared to provide mainly using the interviewer’s frame of reference). Diary cards also allowed for the collection of high-quality, qualitative insights from a large sample of respondents over a short time period, proving an efficient method of qualitative data-gathering.

Following an engagement session, initially 120 CWs from different Scottish local authorities and external providers volunteered to participate in the study, of whom 74 submitted their responses via the probe materials. We sought to recruit a purposive sample of respondents, so employee groups were represented in terms of age group; length of tenure/experience; contractual status; and sector of employment. Of the 74 CWs submitting responses, there were 28 participants from both the public and voluntary sectors and 16 from the private sector. Two respondents did not disclose their sector of employment. Approximately four-fifths were female, with an average age of 39.6 years. The majority of respondents were on permanent full-time contracts, with the exception of eight who were on zero hour contracts and a further thirteen who worked part-time. The average length of service was 5.7 years. Except for a few (5), who had academic qualifications, CWs had either NVQ1 or 2 level completed or had experience of healthcare or care work.

The CWs were employed mainly in domiciliary care and residential care/care home settings for the elderly and young people, and held different designations such as personal assistant, support worker, day care worker, community care assistant, supported living assistant, home support carer and residential care worker. Their tasks involved working with physically challenged elderly and people with dementia and mental health issues, people with multiple medical diagnosis requiring complex health care needs, end of life care needs, and people with addictions and other mental and physical disabilities. They provided a range of services including practical, personal, and emotional support.

Detailed scrutiny of dairies revealed a range of responsibilities, such as carrying out repetitive and routine tasks including bathing, house cleaning, shopping, cooking and eating, medication and dressing. Other responsibilities involved building relationships with clients and communities, first aid, health and safety and water temperature checks, and accompanying service users to appointments. CWs also undertook considerable volumes of paperwork such as risk assessments, daily reports, case notes, and filling in logbooks. Additional demands included providing emotional support, and handling unpredictable and challenging behaviours. Such tasks were undertaken during unsociable hours, often involving sleepovers and back-to-back shifts without a break. For those whose work involved travelling between appointments they were paid only for their contact time with the service user.

Analysis was undertaken for the prompt cards (postcard size) and timesheet (A3 size) elements of the 74 submissions. Thematic analysis started with a given coding framework then added to it inductively based on insights from incoming data. We acknowledge that the depth and quantity of data from participants varied (an established limitation of cultural

probes), but overall data offered an in-depth insight into CWS' working lives, experiences and reflections.

FINDINGS I: DEGRADATION IN EXTRINSIC COMPONENTS OF JOB QUALITY

Pay and conditions

Diary cards prompted respondents to offer reflections on pay and other conditions of employment. Just under a third of respondents reported generally positive attitudes towards pay and conditions, and of these, two-thirds worked in the public sector. Others expressed opinions that were more mixed about pay and conditions, and while some pointed toward good levels of sick pay, holidays and sometimes pensions, again, such reflections were much more common among public sector employees: suggesting some continued satisfaction with the sub-sector's traditional offer and possibly union influence.

Two-thirds of respondents, mostly from external providers, expressed negative views regarding their pay and conditions. Some felt under-valued given their level of experience, skill and commitment. A number of diary card respondents also expressed the view that poor pay and conditions reflected the reality that policymakers, funders (and society) did not value care work.

A carer's wage isn't great. Society values money more than people... (P35, PvtSec).
and

Recent procurement and retendering has devalued the voluntary/social care provision.
Impact on pay and conditions is always a threat. Feel angry and demotivated, we are an easy target – unfair (P44, VoltSec).

Several respondents noted that their pay levels were no better than supermarket workers, and contrasted these rewards with their level of responsibility. Experienced staff expressed dismay at starting salaries within care work for new entrants, and indicated that they could not survive on similar levels. Respondents who were new to the sector corroborated their views. A number of respondents were clearly struggling to make ends meet as a direct consequence of low pay. Six respondents expressed a desire to leave the sector, with low pay a key push factor. Five respondents expressed concerns that they would not be able continue in this work if they were to start a family because of low pay.

At the moment my salary is not important and does not affect the way I feel about my job. However, it might in the future when I am considering a family (P37, VoltSec).

The differences in views expressed by public sector CWs compared to those working for private and voluntary sector providers reflects how some public funders have turned to outsourcing as a means of cost containment, and how this combined with austerity has contributed to a degradation of pay and conditions for these workers.

Austerity was also weakening other extrinsic supports underpinning job quality such as training. Several respondents reported a decline in organisational support for training, often linked to funding constraints.

We have had some very good training opportunities over the 6 years, but in the last couple of years this has been drastically cut back in order to save money. We are now expected to do much of the essential training online in our own time which I have

mixed feelings about. I do not feel that we are offered enough training on basic personal care – you seem to be expected to pick that up as you go along (P56, PubSec).

Other data revealed how cuts in training were leading some workers in the voluntary and private sectors to increasingly engage in informal, non-workplace learning through networking with other workers, and researching internet sources, newsletters, and (for policies and regulations) government/regulator websites. The outsourcing of care to the private and voluntary sectors as a means of containing costs again appears to have impacted job quality (in terms of access to training) for workers in these organisations in ways that are less familiar in the public sector.

Workload demands and work-life balance

A fifth of diary card responses demonstrated a degree of satisfaction with workload (with one or two public sector employees valuing the flexible shift patterns). The vast majority (four-fifths) worked more hours than what they were contracted for, however, and revealed that these work patterns undermined job quality and work-life balance.

I work too much!! Particularly just now, as I am covering sickness I have lost my social life since starting in the company! Making more of a conscious effort to go out with friends when I am free – but always so tired... (P33, VoltSec).

Care work was often undertaken over long, fragmented and unsocial hours. Respondents reported that there was an expectation that they performed tasks outside normal working

time, or during breaks. Timesheet entries provided evidence of heavy, fragmented and intensified workloads, for example:

Wednesday:

8:00 am to 12:40 pm: Office work – emails, phone calls – swift notes – lots to chase up; Planned review cancelled due to workload; Feeling under pressure.

1:35 PM to 5:40 PM – planning the next two days for meetings and visits; Had to cancel a training session due to workload (Participant Supervisor 65, Sector not disclosed).

Monday- 6 to 8 PM - Home for 2 hours – family time – feeling still agitated and can't relax, watching the clock before I have to go out again (P34, PubSec)

Furthermore, several respondents hinted at a culture that made them feel pressured into working additional hours. Respondents not only reported working extra shifts to provide cover but also regularly working unsocial hours, doing ‘back-to-back shifts’ and night shifts, weekend working or ‘sleepovers’. Another timesheet entry vividly describes the realities of work intensification experienced by some respondents who, in order to earn more money, or fill gaps in care, worked double shifts either side of working a sleepover:

Monday:

7:00 AM to 7:30 AM: Woke up from sleepover – wrote out my notes; Give handover to next staff.

7:30 AM to 8:00 AM: In car – driving to next shift. 8:00 AM to 9:30 AM: Receive handover from nightshift...

9:30 AM to 10:15 AM: J woke up – got him bathed – all personal care carried out...

10:15 AM to 4:00 PM: Got J changed ...handover to J's mum.

9:30 PM to 10:00 PM: In car – driving to next shift.

10:00 PM to 8:00 AM: Back to KM for sleepover – got KM into jammies and into bed... (P57, PvtSec).

Many expressed dissatisfaction with variable work rotas and shift patterns that made it difficult to establish a consistent work-life balance and plan things in advance. Shifts could be altered on a weekly basis by management to fill gaps due to absence and turnover, or changing service user demand.

It can be very difficult to plan anything like outings, night outs, doctor's appointments as our rotas are given to us weekly... in general it's hard to plan anything in advance as you do not know what your shifts will be (P75, VoltSec).

Heavy workloads led to a number of respondents feeling overwhelmed. These workers reported not just disruption to relationships with family and friends, but exhaustion, loss of enjoyment, and stress. Sleep deprivation and fatigue were common.

11:30 PM – To Bed – Realise I haven't had dinner but now too tired to eat and need to be up again at 5 am to do it all again – Hungry, sleepy and wonder why I do it! (P29, PvtSec).

There is evidence that autonomous CWs who are committed to service users and experience increasing work demands can be at risk of burnout (Clarke, 2015), and our findings suggest that the conditions were in place to expose these workers to precisely that risk.

FINDINGS II: MITIGATION AND FRAGILITY IN INTRINSIC COMPONENTS OF JOB QUALITY

Diary respondents identified the ‘meaningfulness of job tasks’, informal peer support, and to a lesser extent high task involvement as positive components of job quality. This leads us to explore how far the other key intrinsic characteristic identified earlier in the article as formal supervision is present, and contributing to mitigating the degradation in extrinsic conditions discussed above.

The role of formal supervision

From our analysis, formal supervision emerged as a consistently important theme. CW diary cards connected with the themes from the aforementioned literature regarding the importance of supervision as a source of emotional coping support, a protection against feelings of isolation, a source of collaborative learning, and a forum for critical reflection on practice.

Nearly half of the CWs participating in our research worked alone for long periods, delivering care at home to elderly or vulnerable people, and supervision was seen as important in combating the sense of isolation that is often a by-product of such work patterns. For those benefiting from supervision, there was an emphasis on the value of being listened to, and their views being respected – in roles where low pay made many of our respondents

feel under-valued, such experiences were a source of meaning and self-esteem, and helped CWs to cope with work demands.

The senior I currently work under though is fantastic. He is very person-centred both with the service users and staff... This is a great opportunity to reflect on my practice as well as seek advice and guidance in relation to any or all work related issues. It also gives me a chance to vent if I need to. In my current job role, I would say I feel very supported which is so important to me as my work environment can often be very physically and mentally draining (P46, PubSec).

And:

Feeling supported when supports are hard, long and exhausting – acknowledgement that it was hard – validation that it's okay to feel burnt out sometimes (P52, VoltSec).

Wednesday:

9 to 11 am - Supervision with line manager – shared how I was feeling – have supervision every three weeks ... said I had no capacity to take another care at the moment (P51, PubSec)

The majority of respondents across sectors characterised supervision that was both regular and constructive in providing a space for reflection. Diary entries described the value of supervisory support sessions in discussing specific cases, reflecting critically on practice and identifying action points for future development or current service delivery.

Tuesday – 3 PM - Reflection discussion with manager regarding work on “rage” with tenant (P74, Private Sector)

Re-affirming and motivating to be able to discuss matters in-depth with my manager – helps me to feel valued, gain a clearer, more balanced perspective... formal supervision allows me to discuss complicated practice issues, concerns about the team, and get a wider perspective about things reaffirms I am doing my job well and offers support in areas where I am having difficulty ... (P63, Vol Sec)

Supervision appeared to be particularly strong where CWS reported recent and/or extensive frontline experience among supervisors. There was a sense that CWS felt that it was important that supervisors had a good feel for what it was like to work ‘in the field’, and were therefore responsive during supervisions to requests for training, development or support.

I feel that the office staff and managers have been ‘out in the field’ providing care, so they can mostly relate to any queries or issues I may have. I am supervised once a month, and it is a very thorough discussion ... I find this a great way to be able to open up about any concerns I may have (P4, PvtSec).

Fragility and degradation in supervision

Despite the above positive statements regarding the impact of supervision, there was evidence that this intrinsic component of job quality was fragile. The positive sentiments regarding supervision appeared in the diary card entries of respondents across all sectors, although they were perhaps somewhat less prominent among private sector CWS. This may reflect the more severe impact of austerity within private sector organisations where

participants (16, 74) complained of infrequent and unscheduled supervision, and a deeper hollowing out of supervisor and team leader roles.

Two-fifths of all respondents reflected on the degradation and general weakness of supervision.

Supervision is a piece of paper i.e. like a question and answer session ... (P71, PvtSec)

In my initial start at service I was looking forward to supervision to put forward my ideas/goals and how I could progress...I felt I could not say what I really wanted to – feeling undervalued... I no longer feel supervision is worthwhile – it is just an exercise to fill in paperwork so the KPI look good at the end of the year (P25, PvtSec).

A key factor influencing positive employee experiences of supervision was the regularity of sessions. A number of respondents reported discrepancies in supervision due to staff shortages, absence, and/or turnover taking up supervisor time.

Tuesday

9:00 AM to 9:30 AM - Morning meeting – felt was not listened to – boss seemed distracted and flicked through files as we spoke – disheartened (P62, VoltSec)

I think receiving regular support and supervision is an integral part of being able to do my job well ... I do not receive enough of either (P23, PubSec)

It is always the first thing to be cancelled if anything occurs no matter how minor or easily something else could be to change. It is just as well that line management are so approachable or it could be a serious issue (P44, VoltSec).

Where supervision was cancelled, informal feedback could take place.

The organisation aims to have it every 6-8 weeks however this has not really happened. I do feel however that I am able to have support (informally) if required (for the most part). When I initiate contact (although recently due to supervisor's workloads, a bit less so) (P2, VoltSec).

At the same time, this informality meant that in one third of cases formal supervision, was only taking place once or twice a year, with over-burdened line managers seen as increasingly difficult to contact, and never returning calls "unless they class[ed] it as important" (P29, PvtSec). Where this occurred, experienced workers reported having to step in to support new staff.

Friday: Manager in a meeting all morning – senior off duty – Therefore I am Senior on duty (P7, PubSec)

Moreover, there were concerns that this undermining of supervision affected the quality of care delivered to service users.

I feel very strongly that by reducing it to 1 hour every 2 months it has greatly reduced our opportunity to receive much more support and supervision... I believe this has a knock-on effect on the standard of care we provide (which is good but could be better) (P56, PubSec).

Others reflected that a lack of resources had rendered supervision ‘sporadic’ and ‘ineffectual’ (P6, VoltSec, P9 PubSec, P22, VoltSec) or ‘too often superficial – often over too quickly and sometimes cancelled’ (P48, VoltSec). These findings are troubling. As we have seen above, against the backdrop of degradation of extrinsic factors, supervision is a crucial element of intrinsic job quality for CWs, providing a sense of feeling valued, combating feelings of isolation, providing emotional and coping support and offering space for critical reflection. While these benefits were represented in the reflections of our diarists (reiterating the importance of supervision), there was also evidence that this is another, perhaps crucial, component of job quality that has come under pressure due to austerity. Furthermore, there is again some evidence that these impacts are particularly acute in private and voluntary organisations coming under competitive pressure from funders to deliver services at a lower cost.

In the longer term, workers were also aware that austerity was responsible for flattening organisational structures, and therefore limiting progression opportunities to become first line managers. The implications of this squeeze on career development would be the further intensification of the management role, and, therefore, limits on opportunities to devote time to supervision. There were sector differences, however, with public sector employees most likely to identify a ‘traditional’ approach to career aspirations in their organisations – a

number of these respondents mentioned undertaking training, achieving vocational qualifications, and potentially moving towards senior or management roles. Among private and voluntary sector respondents, there was an awareness that career progression might be more limited. Others pointed to the intense nature of the supervisory/line management role, which secured limited additional monetary reward.

I used to want it as a career. Now I am not sure as there is not much financial reward for so many hours and it's a struggle. (P29, PvtSec)

Overall, our findings indicate that austerity is undermining opportunities and indeed the desirability of career progression to supervisory status among CWs.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Using diary methods, this article explored perceptions of job quality among CWs under austerity. The focus was on the importance of intrinsic elements of supervision practice in mitigating degradation in extrinsic elements at sector and sub-sector level as austerity further dismantled public service HRM. We must be cautious, as the results are drawn from a small group of respondents and therefore difficult to generalise. Further, to capture changes in experiences, future research could utilise the diary method over a longer time period, or request entries before and after supervision.

Nevertheless, our discussion of CWs' reflections on extrinsic factors adds to the literature on the degradation of employment conditions in social care under austerity. Previous studies have found that low pay causes hardship among CWs, and explains recruitment and retention

problems across the sector. Our diarists (especially in the private and voluntary sectors, where a combination of existing, low-cost funding models and austerity have particularly impacted extrinsic job quality) told stories of struggling to cope on low pay, and of the added impacts of having to cover their own travel time and costs (a major issue given the peripatetic nature of care-at-home work). These insights add to the evidence that low pay is a source of frustration for many and hardship for some, and that across all sectors there is a sense that people are being sent a message – that care work is not valued by the state or society.

Similarly, austerity has deepened CWs' experiences of work intensification, with many reporting being overworked. Care work can be physically and emotionally demanding – the normalisation of excessive work demands clearly represents a further problem for employee wellbeing, the quality of care, and staff retention. Our analysis also suggests that informal HR and learning practices are increasingly emerging as part of job characteristics in social care, with outsourced private and voluntary sector providers least likely to be able to maintain formalised provision. Such informality potentially undermines the infrastructure of learning and development that forms a large part of current expectations of the HR offer in social care. Moreover, not only do these diminished opportunities undermine care to vulnerable people, but they threaten to degrade the capacity and expertise of those wishing to aspire to vital supervisory/line management roles.

To some extent, these chronic problems of extrinsic job quality in UK care can be explained with reference to institutional legacies in a liberal employment regime. These regimes being characterised by low levels of regulation and substantial marketisation in public services that have prioritised driving down costs through pay restraint, the degradation of working conditions and the standardisation of work (Bach et al., 2007). The context of post-2008

austerity has reinforced these trends, exacerbating already established problems in outsourced providers. Indeed, although there are also undoubtedly issues of low pay in the public sector, discontent was highest among workers in outsourced providers, possibly reflecting the lack, or weakness, of the institutional infrastructure of collective bargaining in private and voluntary organisations (Bach et al., 2007).

In theorising intrinsic CW job quality, the study identified formal supervision as a key component, and then explored its mitigating effects on the aforementioned degradation in extrinsic factors. Empirically, in the face of the degradation of extrinsic job quality, supervision emerges as an increasingly important foundation for CWs' coping strategies. Specifically, with regard to coping with challenging work, and in a context where low pay means that many CWs feel undervalued, diarists suggested that positive feedback from supervisory sessions contributed to some sense of a reaffirmation of feeling valued in their roles. Moreover, such positive supervisory feedback potentially further assists in sustaining feelings associated with the intrinsic 'meaningfulness of care work' as CWs receive affirmation that they are doing 'a good job' for those they care for. This means that the evidence provided by some respondents, that supervision is itself fragile under austerity, is concerning. Lack of supervision because of defunding can lead to increased isolation and further feelings of being under-valued among CWs.

Another related concern is that career progression in the sector is not incentivised as additional work demanded by supervisory roles, in care work as with other sectors, is rarely matched by substantial increases in financial reward (Devins et al., 2014). The lack of incentives raises difficulties in recruiting the next generation of managers if front line carers do not see any advantage in taking on the role. Overall, given diarists identified those

managers with recent experience on the front line as most effective in providing supervision and support, this lack of skills and aspiration among potential managers adds to the fragility of this crucial aspect of job quality for CWs.

The study confirmed that sub-sector differences were important to understanding job quality in social care. Empirically, this was supported by findings that revealed how expectations regarding poor pay and being under-valued were most acute in outsourced services.

Moreover, the benefits attached to supervision to deal with the pressures of care work varied across sectors, with private sector workers more vulnerable. Private organisations employ just over two-fifths of the Scottish social care workforce (compared to the public sector just under one third and the voluntary sector over a quarter). Further research is needed in regard to these apparent sub-sectoral differences, because if these findings are generalisable, the implication here is that the sub-sector with the biggest proportion of the workforce may be least likely to be able to provide access to intrinsic benefits.

If job quality in social care is to be repaired, as suggested by authors such as Rubery and Urwin (2011), then solutions need to recognise the value of CWs to society, and rebuild the HRM offer to them. For all diarists, greater investment to improve extrinsic rewards such as pay, making the workload of CWs more manageable, and ensuring enough resources are put into training were seen as essential. This study further suggests solutions to repair job quality within the sector may have to be more sensitive to differences across private, public and voluntary sectors. While not diminishing the impact of successive pay freezes on public sector workers, unsurprisingly given pre-austerity cuts, poor rewards seemed a greater priority among workers in outsourced providers in the private and voluntary sectors. Similarly, career aspirations need to be rebuilt within private and voluntary providers by

incentivising the move to line management not just through better pay, but by managing their workload and retaining some aspect of direct care and interaction with service users. Our respondents confirmed the importance of supervision to coping and reflecting on practice, and that the diminution of this component of job content is highly problematic, but again, potentially more so among private sector workers.

The extrinsic components of job quality for CWs have been further diminished in an era of austerity. Intrinsic components such as supervision remain important for CWs, and to some extent mitigate the impacts of the degradation of pay and conditions. Yet, such components are themselves fragile, and resources at sector level need to be committed to ensure they remain an embedded part of job characteristics and expectations of CWs. Policymakers further need to prioritise improvements in both aspects of job quality and tailor such responses to sub-sector differences in order to secure the benefits to service outcomes that arise from ‘good jobs’ in social care.

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