Transactional Analysis Approaches within Social Work Management

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Abstract

Management in the human services field traditionally draws on an entirely different skillset for social work practitioners than the clinical skills involved in their training. This paper explores the paradigm shift that is required for social workers undertaking people management roles from traditional practitioner roles. This perspective is analysed from an ethical and practice framework lens to provide practice-based recommendations. One of the key findings is that traditional psychoanalytic theories such as Transactional Analysis, can be a useful framework addition for social work practitioners to incorporate ethical and evidence-based management practices within their teams.

Keywords: transactional analysis, transactional analysis in management, child protection management approaches, social work management

1. Introduction

Social workers stepping into management roles involve a paradigm shift away from traditional social work values and towards corporate values which encourage relationships with an imbalance of power (Fisher, 2009). It is not yet understood how transactional analysis can be used to examine the power relationships between social workers as managers and employees within social services and how this affects practice and outcomes for clients. This paper aims to understand the challenges of social workers as managers specifically within the child protection practice context, define transactional analysis theory and propose a method of examination of practice against transactional analysis principles.

2. Management in Human Services

Human services, like other industries within Australia, operate within a managerial hierarchy

(Gibbs, 2001; Fisher, 2009). Management is defined as a person or group of people who are responsible for ensuring the objectives of the organisation are met and adhered to by staff who report to them (Patti, 2009). This involves supporting employees, providing training, reporting on objectives, and performance management processes (Patti, 2009). Traditional theories of managing staff rely on the person managing to maintain a power dynamic with their subordinates in order to ensure accountability from those who have less power within this relationship where historically, an authoritarian style of management was promoted (Patti, 2009; Kwok, 2014). The authoritarian style juxtaposes a practitioner's approach within the working relationship, where social work practitioners hold values of shared and equal power, however are required to manage under a framework which reinforces power discrepancies (Healy, 2002; Goddard & Hunt, 2011). Fundamentally, a social worker transitioning to a manager requires a paradigm shift away from critical theories which endorse shared power into theories from corporate management which reinforce power structures within management relationships, even within progressive contexts (Healy, 2002; Fisher, 2009). Further, the nature of vicarious trauma as a result of the social work context means that power-based theories of management are not appropriate nor in line with trauma practice (Kalliath, Hughes, & Newcombe, 2012). Modern management theory includes contingency, systems and qualitative theory which emerged as a combined theory enforcing the idea that employees and organisations are complex and have had multiple reasons for why they want to work (Patti, 2009). This theory was generated as a direct response to Classical management theory which speaks to employees' motivation towards their work being financial only (Kwok, 2014; Patti, 2009). If social workers as managers are required to support social worker employees and align with their professional values of shared power, the application of a structurally informed theory would be most appropriate to move away from power disbalances (Wison & Tilse, 2006). These challenges of management within human services span across every sector including the child protection sector.

3. Child Protection Context

Child protection is a division of human services where the primary goal of service is to protect children and families within the community (Laird, 2013). As a result, staff working with these children are frequently exposed to instances of significant abuse and trauma which can manifest in professionals as vicarious trauma (Laird, 2013; Wilson & Tilse, 2006). Vicarious trauma is when individuals who work with traumatised people become traumatised due to the emotional residue of traumatic experiences being shared with the practitioner (Ali & Milne-Horne, 2012). This occurs regularly within the child protection context experience vicarious trauma and often these staff are relatively new to the industry and struggle with the corporate style of support and management when working in these contexts (Fischer, 2009). Child protection industries see a burnout rate much higher than other industries within the human services and one of the top cited reasons for burnout are vicarious trauma and management approaches (Ali & Milne-Home, 2012). In contexts where staff feel unsupported or are unfamiliar with seeking support from managers, a phenomenon known as trauma bonding can occur, where employees on the same level may form relational connection based on the shared experiences of trauma (Ali & Milne-Home, 2012). This then may translate into

trauma-responses from managers as, usually, staff who are long serving in the industry often move into management or higher strategic roles.

4. Social Worker Managers

Social work practitioners often find themselves in positions of management, frequently with little support or information on the correct way in which to conduct this aside from organisational direction which is informed by management theories (REFERENCE). Social workers frequently work as practitioners, where they excel in their field before moving through the managerial hierarchy in which they are working, with training specifically tailored at their identity as a social worker, rather than a manager (Lonne, Harries, & Lantz, 2012). Even at a masters level, social work qualifications do not cover the fundamental challenges of managing a team, nor provide insight into how to manage this in line with the Australian Association of Social Worker Ethics and professional practice frameworks (Laird, 2013; Healy, 2015). Many social worker managers find the integration of corporate values and attitudes contradictory to professional social work values and frameworks (Gibbs, 2001). Social workers are trained and work within the social work context, framework and ethics for a number of years before moving into managerial positions and therefore are required to reframe their entire paradigm to meet managerial expectations and frameworks (Fisher, 2009). These integration challenges stem largely from the juxtaposition and significant shift in practice and skills which needs to occur for practitioners (Fisher, 2009; Selden & Sowa, 2011). Arguably, this trend of shifting practice has been attributed to a contribution of poor management and burnout for employees due to the lack of managerial skills social workers may have. Ultimately, this trend can contribute to burnout for social work managers due to the value clashes which exist when operating in management (Gibbs, 2001; Goddard & Hunt, 2011). Furthermore, social worker managers may inadvertently treat employees as clients, as this is their familiar skillset which is unlikely to be helpful for employee growth, empowerment and be responsive to their needs (Goddard & Hunt, 2011). This power dynamic is often characterised through transactional analysis where social worker managers may recreate the dependent relationships with employees which are cemented in power.

5. Transactional Analysis

Transactional analysis theory is based on the assumption that each social interaction and relationship is reliant on a power dynamic (Pittman, 1982). Transactional analysis belongs to a class of theories situated in psychoanalysis, which predates psychodynamic theory influences and as a result is not a theory which has been applied in modern contexts of management, particularly within the human services and specifically within the child protection sector (Wilson & Tilse, 2006). The age of the transactional analysis theory means that it is often discounted as not current, however the simplistic definitions of power arrangements within relationships is a phenomenon which occurs in modern systems and structures (Pittman, 1982). Transactional analysis characterises relationships by three behavioural roles, regardless of the individual's chronological role within the relationship: parent, adult and child (Pittman, 1982). The parent state is characterised by either authoritarian or nurturing approaches, in instances where individuals take on the parent state

they will often approach situations with an expectation of rules and use parenting-like approaches to assist the other person to meet these objectives (Wilson & Tilse, 2006). Comparatively, the child state is the role with less power within the relationship where the individual is likely to revert to their own behaviours from childhood, which can be curious, obedient and trusting or can present as victim-orientated or defiant (Noblet, 2003). Between these two power states, there is a role of an adult, where the power is equally shared; both parties are expected to meet pre-defined expectations and come to agreements (Healy, 2002). When one person adopts the parent or child role, this invites the other to adopt the inverse. Transactional analysis argues that often people who have less power within relationships will approach people who have more power in the child state and display child-like behaviours, inviting the person with power in the relationship, whether that be perceived power or structural power, to become the adult role (Pittman, 1982; Wilson & Tilse, 2006). Power imbalance phenomenon occurs frequently within client and social worker relationships and is encouraged to be consistently reviewed and examined in reflective supervision in practice, however is not always acknowledged in terms of transactional analysis, nor is it understood as the phenomenon which occurs between social worker managers and employees.

6. Transactional Analysis in Practice

Social workers in management require a specific theoretical approach in order to respond to their staff sustainably and effectively and this can be achieved through a transactional analysis application to the industry (Fischer, 2009; Pittman, 1982). In order to create a balance of power which is a prominent value for social workers, a theoretical approach such as transactional analysis can provide clarity and direction around appropriate management of staff and relevant and safe approaches. This is particularly important in industries such as child protection, which employs a large number of recent graduates who may not be emotionally prepared for the level of work which they are undertaking which could trigger child behaviour roles being adopted by these staff members (Harrison & Healy, 2015). In these circumstances, where managers are unable to examine the situation through the lens of transactional analysis they may not be able to understand how their own behaviour, that of adopting the parent role when invited, is contributing to the poor management of the staff member (Healy, 2015). Ideally, individuals would be able to approach one another within the adult behavioural role which would encourage equal shares of power and collaborative decision making which aligns with both corporate expectations and traditional social work values. This approach would alleviate the challenges of transference, inappropriate management practice and burnout in employees which would likely contribute to positive engagement and outcomes from clients.

7. Conclusion

Transactional analysis is a useful and appropriate tool to be embedded within the social work management context. Providing clear guidelines for understanding trauma and difficult interpersonal presentations between clients, coworkers and systems, this approach meets the needs for social worker managers to respond to their team's needs and meets ethical requirements. Due to current research not offering any theoretical advice in relation to

management approaches, the introduction of transactional analysis principles would be a useful next step in determining whether this is a more effective management approach in human services than current business practice. As is evidenced in this literature review, there is substantial evidence connecting the usefulness of this approach within this practice context which could warrant further investigation to quantify practice outcomes.

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