

ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE

On Role conflict and role ambiguity: the case of Social Workers in healthcare teams

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Keywords: healthcare teams, social work in healthcare, role ambiguity, social work, healthcare management

ABSTRACT

Background:

Is there any ongoing role ambiguity in healthcare teams? What is the evolving role of social workers in healthcare? In recent years there has been great international interest in understanding how to improve the integration of different professions in healthcare teams.

Objectives:

The article aims at contributing to the international debate on clarifying the role of social workers in healthcare teams and produce recommendations for policy making and healthcare teams management and the ongoing challenge of role ambiguity and role conflict in health systems.

Methods:

The study undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with 12 social workers working at hospitals. The participants were recruited using purposive sampling. The data collection methods were semi-structured interviews, content analysis and direct observation.

Results:

The study identified an ongoing ambiguity concerning the role of healthcare teams in China as identified in other countries around the World. Their role has been evolving around social case intervention practiced on an individual basis without clear integration in the healthcare team plan or relation with the patient/client.

Main Contribution to Evidence-Based Practice:

The article contributes to the international understanding of role conflict and role ambiguity of social work in healthcare identifying key recommendations for policy-making and health systems development .

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What do we already know about this topic?

There is an ongoing challenge of clarifying roles in healthcare teams and the inclusion of social works in the healthcare process.

What is the main contribution to Evidence-Based Practice from this article?

It is an update on the recent evidence concerning the topic and it clarifies the evolution of the role conflict and role ambiguity in social work. Here, we reported on the recent evidence available to support decision and evidence-based practice by the social work in healthcare in China.

What are your research's implications towards theory, practice, or policy?

The article identified the need for further research on the role conflict of social work healthcare processes.

Authors' Contributions Statement: Li conceptualized and drafted the article

With the development of the society and the changing of the healthcare environment and health system, the topic has become an area in need of intervention. In recent years, healthcare social work has been developing rapidly in China as in many other countries in the World. Social worker's concern in the healthcare field is the improvement of the social functioning of individuals and groups, the problem or condition of health, illness and healthcare. Throughout the years several authors have argued this point (Bartlett, 1958; Lévesque & Negura, 2021; Na Li et al., 2022).

As healthcare social work is a new area in many countries (including China), the role of the intervention of healthcare social works is not well defined. Healthcare social workers are facing increasing pressure. Internationally, social workers have previously been identified as being at risk of experiencing stress and burnout (Acker, 1999; Scanlan & Still, 2019). Social work is strongly client-based, and practitioners are involved in complex social situations. Furthermore, role conflicts in healthcare related social work practice are abundant and healthcare social workers in healthcare teams experience much more conflicts than other social work areas as argued for the past few decades (Pines & Kafry, 1978; Zeng et al., 2020).

With high-pressure working environments at hospitals, healthcare social workers constantly suffer and face the impact of the hospital performance. Professional ambiguity within healthcare teams challenge the unclear role positioning, under a heavy workload and other aspects which bring on high work stress upon healthcare social workers. Hospitals, in particular, are contexts in which social workers' clients are in deep

pain in physiology and psychology dimensions, but the healthcare social workers generally feel they can do very little to help them. Most of them are caught in role conflict and role ambiguous. Emphasis has been placed on how to introduce the social workers skills into healthcare processes and how to develop the profession (Janna & Elaine, 2018). Less emphasis has been placed on understanding unclear role positioning of healthcare social worker (Amanda, 2018).

As a heavy workload and other aspects bring on keeping up higher work stress and job involvement of healthcare social workers. It is necessary to generate an update on the role conflict and role ambiguity of healthcare social workers (Lévesque & Negura, 2021). The purpose of this article is to provide recommendations to address the role dilemma of healthcare social workers. It can also provide a theoretical basis for the development of the practice of healthcare social workers. It has been suggested that role stress which is characterized as high levels of role conflict, role ambiguity are associated with burnout as well as with turnover intention among social workers. If the healthcare social worker continues to suffer from role conflict and role ambiguity, the professionals will experience stress, become dissatisfied, and perform less effectively. Role conflict and role ambiguity can also cause individual dissatisfaction and decreased organizational effectiveness (Zhang et al., 2022)

Each professional will play a different role in a team. When one role cannot coordinate with other roles, it will produce a role conflict. Role conflict is defined as the simultaneous occurrence of two or more expectations such that compliance with one would make compliance with the other more difficult (Katz & Kahn, 1964). Role identity can help individuals position themselves in social relationships and achieve better self-worth. Due to the influence of traditional cultures



and the strong professional value orientation of social work, healthcare social workers often face certain role conflict in the process of intervention. This article has put an empirical emphasis on introducing the healthcare social worker skills and how to develop the profession in China. Less emphasis has been placed on understanding unclear role positioning of healthcare social worker.

Under a heavy workload and other aspects bring on keeping up higher and higher the work stress and job involvement of healthcare social workers. It is necessary to make the detailed study of the role conflict and role ambiguity of healthcare social workers. This paper analyzes the role conflicts and ambiguities of healthcare social workers from the perspective of evidence generated by qualitative research perspective, and proposes future interventions. The research case focussed on the Hospices care social work service project and Shenhua healthcare social work practice project(in China) as examples to discuss the role conflict and role ambiguity encountered by healthcare social workers in practice.

Shenhua Medical Social Work Project is a national social work service project jointly funded by the Chinese Central Finance and Shenhua Charity Foundation. The goal of the pilot project is to support the development of healthcare social work. The program aimed to establish healthcare social work departments in some hospitals and promote the practices of healthcare social work in hospitals.

The scope of project implementation included pilot hospitals with practical experience and conditions for the implementation of healthcare social workers in 23 hospitals in 12 provinces and cities including Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong, Henan, Hebei, Heilongjiang, Jiangsu, Jilin, Shanxi, Qinghai, Anhui and Fujian. The pilot project aimed to help the patients and their families to link social resources, provide assistance, pay attention to the mental health of the patients and their families and healthcare staff through healthcare social work services.

Hospice Care Social Work Service Project was founded by China Social Work Education Association and Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2012 to 2015. The program aimed to provide psychosocial support services for patients and their family members with advanced cancer in poverty. After the death of the patient, providing support service for the bereaved family members who are classified as below poverty line.

Assisting the patients with advanced cancers to review their lives. Through the social worker help, the clients produce story books of their lives, short films, and gifts of love, they can better communicate and express their feelings with friends and relatives, and explore the meaning of life. Also, through social community work in hospitals and residential communities, promoting the concept and knowledge of popularization of nursing services and life-and-death education (Antunes, 2022).

Literature review

a) Role theory

Since the 1960s, the role theory has been widely used in the field of social work practice. Since the 1970s, the academic community has begun to re-examine the role theory, especially the basic assumptions about gender roles and family definitions. Role theory is the main content of Merton's middle theory. Social role theory holds that people occupy a certain position in the social structure, and each position is related to a specific role. Social roles are the collection of expectations and behaviors related to a particular location in a social structure. Role theory views human behavior as a pattern of reciprocal relationships, this pattern encompasses a series of attitudes, beliefs, values, and expectations that dictate how people control themselves in specific situations. Through the sharing of a series of common social experiences, people learn appropriate role behaviors through socialization and cultural adaptation (Egley & Wood, 2012).

Robert K. Merton complement of role-relationship in which peoples are involved by virtue of occupying a particular social status (Merton, 1957). The healthcare students (including medical and nursing) entail not only the role of a student vis-a-vis his teachers, but also an array of other roles relating him diversely to other students, physicians, nurses, social workers, medical technicians, and the like (Merton, 1957).

Social role is a term that denotes an outward expression of internal thoughts and feelings. Role behavior is public in that it is conduct that a person exhibits in a social situation, and it implies taking a part in human endeavors. During the course of a lifetime, everyone enacts a variety of roles. Some roles fit the character structure of a person better than others. Spiegel defines a social role as a goal-directed configuration of transactions patterned within a culture

or subculture for the functions people carry out with respect to each other in a social group or situation. Parsons describes a social role as organized system of participation of an individual in a social system. Role imposed difficulties can be divided into role ambiguity, role conflict, role incapacity, role incongruity, role overload, role strain. We discuss role conflict and role ambiguity in this paper.

b) Role conflict and Role ambiguity about medical social worker

There has been much research into the phenomenon of healthcare social worker's problems they face. Burnout is one of the problems of the medical social workers faced. Jackson, Schuler, and Schwab (1986) and more recently (Gómez-García, 2019; Lévesque & Negura, 2021) further defined the three components of burnout as emotional exhaustion, de-personalization and feelings of low personal accomplishment. Feelings of low personal accomplishment means people in situations where efforts repeatedly fail to produce positive results develop symptoms of stress and depression. Because of the quantitative workload, the healthcare social workers face the challenges presented by their jobs (Coady, C. A., Kent, V. D., & Davis, P. W., 1990; Crowder & Sears, 2017). These problems are role conflict and role ambiguity. Role conflict will lead to emotional exhaustion and will make healthcare social workers feel boredom, low job satisfaction and intent to change job (Lévesque & Negura, 2021). Role ambiguity, bad working conditions unfair promotional policies will also lead the healthcare social workers feel no personal accomplishment and no support (Coady, Kent & Davis, 1990; Yung-Tai & Chen-Hua, 2010)

Methods

The healthcare social workers suffer from role conflict and role ambiguity in their working practice. The circumstance of the hospital is complex and the profession of healthcare social worker in China is a new occupation. The healthcare social worker adjusted their behaviors to meet the expectations of the hospital and the client. The social psychological setting may affect healthcare social workers' ability to interpret and fulfill their role obligations.

Ilgén and Hollenbeck (1991) defined role ambiguity as the level of uncertainty or lack of clarity surrounding expectations about a single role. people are not clear

about the content of the role and how to behavior. Considering the particular situation of China, healthcare social worker is unfamiliar to most people, so the role ambiguity is operated in three ways the predictability of the outcome or responses to one's behavior.

The existence or clarity of behavioral requirements, often in terms of inputs from the environment, which would serve to guide behavior and provide knowledge that the behavior is appropriate. The client know little about the healthcare social work and this leads to the confused role of the social worker. We collect the data through the following questions:

- What do you think when you must do the work you don't expect?
- Do you know how you will be evaluated for a raise or promotion?
- Do you know exactly about your content of your work?
- How do you feel when you do your work?
- Do you think your work will be accepted by your supervisor ?
- Do you have policies and guidelines to help you?
- Do you feel under vague directives or orders?

Role conflict assumes that a person perceives that the expectations of his or her role are incongruent with what the person perceives that the expectations of his or her role incongruent with what the person expects that his or her role should entail (Toffler, 1981; Acker, 2003). Conflict between the person's internal standards or values and the defined role behavior.

Conflict between the time, resources, or capabilities of the person and defined role behavior. Conflict between several roles for the same person which require different or incompatible behaviors, or changes in behavior as a function of the situation. Conflict expectations and organizational demands in the form of incompatible policies; conflict requests from client incompatible standards of evaluation.

We collect the data through the following questions:

- Do you feel certain about how much authority do you have?
- Do you have clear, planned goals and objectives for your jobs?
- Have you ever been corrected or rewarded when you really don't expect it?
- Do you feel you can distribute your time properly?
- Do you know what your responsibilities?

- Do you feel your way in performing your duties?
- Do you know exactly what is expected of you?
- Do you feel certain as to how your job linked?

Research Design

This study was conducted in China. In the study, 12 healthcare social workers (4 males and 8 females) were included in the study. All healthcare social workers had a BSW degree (equivalent to 4 years of university education). The participants were recruited using purposive sampling. All of them feel depression and sad after they talked with the client. Most of them had demonstrated experience working with counseling patients suffering from chronic conditions. The data collection methods were literature critical analysis, semi-structured interview and direct observation.

Relevant literature was consulted throughout the research period, although the main literature sources were reviewed in the early stages of the research. Semi-structured interviews were conducted so that healthcare social workers could feel free to present their concerns and ideas related to the main theses of the study. During the interviews, questions were used that focused on role conflict and feelings in the healthcare social workers' day-to-day practice. The interviews, lasting between 30 and 40 minutes, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Observation was also used by the author when the healthcare social work contacted with the client.

Results

Below we present the results of the study undertaken divided in two sections:

- Problems of Role Ambiguity and Problems of Role Conflict.
- Problems of Role ambiguity

Firstly, it is a finding of this study that patients/clients know little about healthcare social workers and they perceive the healthcare social workers as the same as volunteers. In China, healthcare social workers are not a formal career at hospitals and people know little about their role. Most of the time, it is the volunteers that help the patients/clients in their social needs. It is the volunteers help the clients in their social needs. It is the volunteer that introduce the social workers to the patient/client. In this case, the client may also identify healthcare social workers as volunteers, which may lead to the wrong position of healthcare social workers.

When the healthcare social workers initiate the case work, it is difficult to separate perceptions of the role of the volunteer. Clients perceive the healthcare social work role as only focused on the case and help them to do the housework. This is a difficulty for the social workers to develop professional casework interventions. This also has led to great frustration among social workers and they feel that their value as social workers have not been highlighted. The role of the healthcare social workers cannot be played in the subsequent case interventions, such as improving the relationship between the family and applying the medical insurance for the clients. The healthcare social workers cannot provide the resources for the clients. The role of the healthcare social work is vague and cannot be fulfilled.

Secondly, the effectiveness of the social worker intervention is difficult to evaluated. Professional social work is difficult to be carried out. In the case of the Hospice Care Social Work Service Project, the healthcare social workers and the clients only met regularly at the hospital on a weekly basis. In many cases the clients(informal carers) come to the hospital to take the prescribed medicines. They only have half an hour to meet and must go home quickly to take care of the patient.

Although healthcare social workers work hard to improve the form of the social group work, the group's activities mainly focus on information related cancer care, support resources and family members' mutual support. But most of the clients do not have enough time to attend the social group work. Most of the work of the healthcare social workers do is listening support and emotional support for the clients. It is, therefore, difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of the workers of the social workers.

Lastly, evaluation standards are not applied and the assessment agency simply uses the number of the finished social cases work and social group work. The current social work topic is operating within the project system. The project system refers to a specific form of government operation. These are institutional arrangements for the allocation of resources from top to bottom with special funds according to the intentions of the central government (Zhou Xueguang,2015).

As there are no clear evaluation standard, the commissioning agency cannot implement substantive supervision and can only make a major issue in the

technical governance of the filled forms and procedures. This has led to the proliferation of administrative rules. Within the Shen Hua Program, healthcare social work practice, when we finish a social case work, a dozen of relevant forms needed to be filled and each form must be filled with strict and demanding requirements. If social workers cannot fill them accurately, they cannot get financial support from the project department. However, there was no standard for evaluation as to how the social case work was carried out and whether the social group work was effective

Role conflict

Everyone will play different roles throughout his life. When a role cannot be coordinated with other roles, it will lead to role conflict. The internal conflict of the role refers to the uncoordinated status of the person's own roles. The conflict between the roles refers to the disagreement between different people.

Findings on the external role conflict of healthcare social workers

This study findings suggest that there is a conflict between the expectations of the clients and the role of the professional social work. There is a gap between the expectation of the clients and the role of the social work. There is a gap between the expectation of the client and the role of the social workers. This will directly result in a role conflict and affect the function of the social worker.

The healthcare social workers being in the first year of activity inside the hospitals,

they do not have sufficient knowledge, experiences, abilities and resources to help the clients. When the healthcare social workers suffer frustration, they may deny their values and are trapped in practical difficulties.

Findings on the conflict between the requirements of the project headquarters, the owner's needs, the actual work of the social worker confirm that there were conflicts among the requirements of the project, the professional requirements of the social work occupation, the requirement of the client and what the social workers actual do. As the clients equated healthcare social workers with volunteers,

It is, therefore, difficult for the social workers to carry out professional interventions. Social workers had to rely on helping clients to do some housework to maintain a good relationship with clients. Social

workers cannot find their own role, nor can they carry out professional activities like the project. This has caused the social workers to suffer a great deal of frustration and failed to perform their roles

Findings on the healthcare social workers self-image, clarify that the unclear self-image of healthcare social workers is mainly reflected upon the lack of professional identity and self-confidence. One social worker said that in the process of providing services to the clients, they did not know how to communicate, they did not have enough confidence to help the clients. Therefore, there were embarrassing situation of they do not know what to say to the clients and kept silent. One healthcare social worker said when he encountered ethical dilemmas in the process of working, he did not take substantive action to solve the ethical dilemma and let it continue.

Findings on the healthcare social worker intra-role conflict suggest that the conflicts between medical social workers individual roles and social roles, could be identified in the process of providing services to the clients. For sick children, they are more like gentle big brothers and older sisters in the Shenhua Medical Social Work Project. As they are familiar with the children, they regard the clients as their little brothers and little sisters. More personal emotions were devoted to the clients. When the work was finished, the phenomenon of counter-empathy was widespread. Even some healthcare social workers would cry over the tragic experience of the clients. They felt that their emotional fatigue was serious. They did not recovery from the story of the clients and could not deal with the relationship between their own roles and social roles.

Concerning the conflict between the service which the social workers offer to the clients and the really needs of the clients, the healthcare social workers can only give emotional support and listening support to clients. But what most clients need is a combination of physiological and psychological support. Most of the patients faced economic pressure from their hospital care costs and they became very poor. What they most needed is financial support. Some of them were serious ill. The cause of advanced cancer patients is particularly serious, namely due to related pain.



Discussion

Over recent years, rapid development has been made in China's healthcare social work system (Niu & Haugen, 2019). Many hospitals in China have a department of social work. This study investigated the role ambiguity and role conflict of healthcare social workers in mainland China within a role framework and in the context of international evidence and trends. Taking the Hospice Care Social work Service Project and Shenhua healthcare social work practice project in China as an example, we tried to explore the role conflict and role ambiguity of healthcare social workers. Eventually, we draw the main conclusion: There is an ongoing ambiguity and conflict concerning the role of medical social workers in China. Therefore, the healthcare social system should give more job autonomy and discretion to medical social workers. The government should also give more policy support for healthcare social workers, as also recently identified, for example, in Canada (Lévesque & Negura, 2021).

Conclusions and Recommendations

From the evidence generated in this study, we can identify the following main concluding ideas :

A relatively high prevalence of role conflict and role ambiguity exists among healthcare social workers in China. As to role ambiguity, Clients knows little about healthcare social workers and they perceive healthcare social workers as volunteers. The effectiveness of the social worker intervention is difficult to be evaluated. Professional and uniform evaluation standards are missing and the assessment agency simply use the

number of the finished social case work and social group work. Hence, the healthcare social workers have a misconceived identify about themselves.

As to role conflict, the healthcare social worker's individual roles and social roles also face conflicts. The conflict between the service which the social workers offer to the clients and the really needs of the clients. Also, job-related stress and burnout among health care social workers are topics that have received considerable attention by the Healthcare social workers ,as has been suggested by other studies literature (Borland,1 981;Yoon et al., 2016). Competing values between managers and social workers has been identified as a source of stress for healthcare social workers (McLean & Andrew, 2000; Zhang et al., 2021). These are also factors associated With healthcare social workers' role. Conflicts and role ambiguity. Healthcare social workers in China is also not very well developed is also another explanation for this problem.

Additionally, the study identified a number of topics for further research. On the one hand, we only used semi-structured interviews and the cause relationship of the phenomenon studied cannot be concluded. More studies should be developed to explore the mechanism of role ambiguity and role conflicts in healthcare social workers. On the other hand, healthcare management strategies for governments and departments at all levels be able to reduce the role ambiguity and role conflict in healthcare social workers need further research and development.

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