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ARTICLE

Client's violence toward social workers



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Abstract The aim of this study is to characterize clients' violence toward social workers in terms of its frequency and type, as well as to identify the organizational measures used to reduce and manage work-related violence.

Data collection involved 3 Portuguese organizations within two different stages, which included the use of interviews and questionnaires directed to social workers ($n = 108$) and their managers ($n = 27$).

The results indicate that at least half of the participants were victims of clients' violence and verbal aggression, which is the most common type of violence. The results also revealed a set of measures of primary, secondary and tertiary interventions that are being used by the organizations involved in this study.

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1. Introduction

Nowadays the subject of work violence is being discussed worldwide (Estrada, Nilsson, Jerre, & Wilman, 2010) and has

drawn the attention of employers, employees, governmental organizations, the scientific community and the overall community (Di Martino, Hoel, & Cooper, 2003; Milczarek, 2010; Schat & Kelloway, 2003; Upson, 2004). This interest is mainly linked to the increase in frequency and severity of work violence occurrences (Fletcher, Brakel, & Cavanaugh, 2000), which have a very negative impact on both individuals and organizations (Enosh, Tzafrir, & Gur, 2013) and may

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lead to a set of consequences and costs on the society itself, as well as the governments (Barrios-Casas & Paravic-Klijn, 2011; Graça, 2004; Leather, Brady, Lawrence, Beale, & Cox, 1999).

Therefore the study and implementation of organizational measures designed to prevent and to respond the work violence related occurrences are crucial (Beale, Lawrence, Smewing, & Cox, 1999), even though there is a lack of studies related to this subject (Heiskanen, 2007; Schat & Kelloway, 2005).

Achieving a greater knowledge about the risk of violence associated with a particular work environment is mentioned by authors such as Wilkinson (2001) as a decisive factor in terms of prevention. The aim of this study, which we believe is the first focusing on this organizational issue within social workers in Portugal, is to provide a better understanding about work violence from the clients toward the employees by analyzing its frequency and type, as well as the preventive and reactive organizational measures currently in place.

2. Literature review

2.1. Workplace violence and social workers

In general, the phenomenon of work violence involves work-related events which either in an implicit or explicit way have a negative impact on the individual's professional performance, security, and health, as well as physical and psychological well-being (Di Martino et al., 2003; Fletcher et al., 2000).

According to Eurofound data (Eurofound, 2012), 11% of the employees from the 27 countries included in European Union in 2010 were victims of verbal violence while working, which shows an increase of 2% from 1995. In Portugal the results revealed a correspondent percentage of 5%. On the other hand, physical violence appears to be less frequent in Europe in general and specifically in Portugal, so that only 2% of the employees were referred to as victims of this type of violence in both cases. According to the same data, in most situations involving violence related to work, the perpetrator is a member of the public, which is also confirmed by the authors LeBlanc and Barling (2004).

Probably the most consensual classification of this phenomenon distinguishes 3 types of work violence. It was proposed by the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration (1995/1998) and was referred by several authors (e.g., Leather et al., 1999; LeBlanc & Kelloway, 2002; Mayhew & Chappell, 2001). Type I includes the violence perpetrated by members of the public who are not related to the victim or the workplace. This is mostly linked to the robbery of money or material goods. On the other hand, violence Type II (the focus of this study) is associated with situations when the aggressor is the client or someone to whom the organization and the victim provide service. Violence Type III occurs when the aggressor maintains or used to maintain a professional relationship with the victim. Considering further the violence Type II, according to Leather et al. (1999), a distinction can be made between two main patterns that encompass the vast majority of the incidents in this case. Thus, incidents may occur within

customer service, having as their main motivation dissatisfaction with the service provided (e.g., delay in customer service, the service does not meet the expectations). On the other hand, this kind of violence can represent in turn a protest by the customers in relation to persons with power positions in the organizations concerned.

Some occupational groups tend to be more exposed to work violence due to the characteristics of their work (LeBlanc & Barling, 2005). Individuals who work facing the public have higher chances of becoming victims of work violence (Milczarek, 2010), as well as those who work in the public sector (Enosh et al., 2013). When the performance of functions occurs in isolation, i.e., without the support of other colleagues, the risk of violence also tends to be higher (Chappell & Di Martino, 1998). The same happens in cases where professionals have to work out of the typical service places, as happens with home visits (Mayhew & Chappell, 2001).

Therefore, the services sector tends to be more affected by this organizational issue than the industry, and social workers appear to be on top of the high-risk professions (LeBlanc & Barling, 2005; OSHA, 2004). As such, several studies about violence from customers directed to these professionals have been undertaken in many countries, having confirmed the occurrence of the phenomenon in many of them (Enosh, Tzafrir, & Stolovy, 2014). One study conducted in the United States showed that more than half of the participants reported having been victims of workplace violence especially involving verbal abuse, and there are recorded episodes of physical violence (Ringstad, 2005). Enosh et al. (2014) also note investigations carried out in countries such as Canada (Macdonald & Sirotich, 2005) or Israel (Enosh et al., 2013; Tzafrir, Enosh, & Gur, 2013), the results of which were headed in a similar direction.

The delivery of social services itself is risk related because it is tied to social control, for example, the authority to deny resources, usually because of lack of eligibility, may cause aggression (Newhill, 1995). Second, the clients of social service agencies must often cope with high levels of frustration and many unmet needs (Shields & Kiser, 2003). Third, worker-related characteristics may play a role, for example, young professionals (Jayaratne, Croxton, & Mattison, 2004) and inexperienced ones (Brady & Dickson, 1999) are more prone to client violence.

In general, violence in the workplace can result in the occurrence of any event which, implicitly or explicitly, negatively affects the performance, safety, health or physical or psychological well-being of a person in circumstances related with their work (Di Martino et al., 2003; Fletcher et al., 2000). In this sense, these situations may not occur in the workplace and may involve behaviors as varied as, for example, homicide, physical or verbal abuse or threats (Fletcher et al., 2000; Mayhew & Chappell, 2001). Among the range of behaviors, the physical aggression which results in death is, of course, the most serious form of violence but also the least frequent (Schat & Kelloway, 2005). In turn, the forms of violence that do not involve physical contact, although they occur more frequently, are rarely given attention and are less valued by people (Greenberg & Barling, 1999). After all, the existence of physical as well as psychological violence is clearly recognized (Di Martino et al., 2003).

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