

Training Public Assistance Workers in Policy and Interpersonal Helping Skills

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Abstract:

Although social work has traditionally been concerned with economically disadvantaged populations, separation of income maintenance and public social services functions in the 1970s resulted in a decrease in social work influence and involvement in public assistance programs. In an effort to incorporate certain social work principles and practices into the public assistance function, a school of social work and a state agency collaborated to develop a program to train Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) and food stamp eligibility workers in policy and casework skills. The purpose of this article is to present findings of the evaluation of this innovative program. In addition to assessing the efficacy of training, this study also surveyed caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes about the use of certain interpersonal skills within the context of the eligibility determination interview. Data on the extent of policy learning and information on trainees' final course grades was also collected. Results indicate that the programs are effective in teaching both policy and casework skills. Caseworkers and supervisors have positive attitudes about the relevance of casework skills for the public assistance interview. Barriers to the use of casework skills are discussed, along with implications of the findings for future research and training programs.

Article:

The nature of the public assistance worker's job has been a source of controversy since the separation of social services and income maintenance in the 1970s. Once separation was effected, it was generally thought that the new eligibility workers would function as technicians and would no longer need training in casework skills and processes (Hoshino, 1972). In reality, eligibility workers have continued to provide a variety of services such as referral, advocacy, information, and advice giving (Bernard, Butler, & Eisenberg, 1979; Hagen, 1987; Wyers, 1980). With the passage of the Family Assistance Act of 1988, the critical role of the eligibility worker was again highlighted as states are now required to provide a variety of services to Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) recipients. Although there is latitude in how these services are provided, eligibility workers will probably become more involved in assessment and referral and possibly even in the actual provision of some services.

Recognition of the complexity and importance of the eligibility worker's role has prompted questions about the type of training that is appropriate for the job (Morton & Lindsey, 1986). One report noted that eligibility workers need such skills as "selecting and using communication techniques appropriate to the situation" and "handling client responses to situations, i.e., anxiety, fear, hostility, aggression" (Social Security Administration, 1980, p. 19). Hagen (1990) suggests that "workers should be conversant not only with eligibility rules and procedures, but also with human functioning, empathic communication, referrals, and case advocacy" (p. 7).

Training generally available to eligibility workers has focused primarily on policy and procedure and dealt very little with interpersonal or interviewing skills (Lindsey, 1993; Social Security Administration, 1979). One exception is a program designed to teach interpersonal helping skills to eligibility workers (Lindsey, Yarbrough, & Morton, 1987). Although this program resulted in modest improvements in certain nonverbal and verbal

communication, it did not integrate use of interpersonal skills with knowledge of policy and procedure. The purpose of this study was to evaluate AFDC and food stamp training programs that integrated use of interpersonal helping skills training with training on policy and procedure. These programs were developed on the assumption that eligibility workers are not just technicians, but are also helpers who can interact effectively with their clients.

BACKGROUND

The New Eligibility Worker Training Project was initiated in 1987 as a response to the high error rate in the Georgia AFDC and food stamp programs (Lindsey, 1994). The Georgia Division of Family and Children Services (DFCS) contracted with the University of Georgia School of Social Work to conduct Afdc and food stamp policy training for all new eligibility workers and for veteran workers changing from one program to another (e.g., from AFDC to food stamps).

The New Eligibility Worker Training, along with other error reduction strategies implemented by DFCS, was successful in substantially reducing the AFDC and food stamp error rates (Lindsey, 1994). The reduction in error rates, combined with passage of the Family Assistance Act, created interest in the idea of a "family worker" who would help clients maximize self-sufficiency. This new role would require a new type of worker-client relationship, one that administrators hoped would result in more accurate information and more helpful and humane treatment of clients. This reconceptualization of the caseworker's role required changes in the New Eligibility Worker Training. The subsequent revision reflected a move from a virtually singular focus on policy and rules to an incorporation of a relational skills approach to interviewing that emphasized workers' ability to listen and respond to clients during the eligibility determination process.

This program has been described in detail elsewhere (Lindsey, 1993). Briefly, both the AFDC and food stamp training programs included 5 days of casework skills training (CST) and 21 days of policy and procedure training. CST was based on the microtraining approach developed by Ivey and Authier (1978) and includes content and skills practice related to the use of attending behaviors, reflections, questions, summarization, empathy, respect, and genuineness. Skill use was taught in the context of interviewing for AFDC and food stamp eligibility, with illustrative videotapes and practice exercises based on eligibility situations, including how to work with angry clients and manage confrontations effectively. Policy training emphasized financial and nonfinancial eligibility criteria as well as agency procedures for determining eligibility, entering information into the agency's computer system, and managing a caseload. Throughout policy training, knowledge and skills learned in CST were integrated and reinforced so trainees learned to apply policy while interviewing clients effectively. Trainees were given four exams during training and were required to achieve an 80% final grade average to successfully complete the program and assume a caseload.

HYPOTHESES

An advisory committee composed of eligibility supervisors and caseworkers, state office training and policy staff, social work faculty, and AFDC/food stamp trainers guided the present study. There were three major areas of interest: overall effectiveness of training, caseworker and supervisor attitudes toward the casework skills training (CST) component, and caseworker use of the skills on their return to the county office. Possible interactions between perceptions regarding these three areas were also of interest. Because of differences in agency context and worker role in urban and nonurban areas, the possibility of differences in responses between urban and nonurban staff was explored. Other demographic characteristics of interest were race, sex, and length of time with agency.

Effectiveness of Training

For the overall effectiveness of the training program, the following hypotheses were generated.

H_{1a}. Scores on knowledge tests of AFDC/FS policy information will be significantly higher on posttests than on pretests.

H_{1b}. There will be a positive relationship between trainee performance in the program and perceptions of

the adequacy of training, attitudes toward CST, and the extent to which they perceive barriers to using casework skills on the job.

H_{1c}. There will be significant differences in caseworker performance and perceptions of the adequacy of the training program depending on individual and agency demographic characteristics.

H_{1d}. There will be a positive relationship between caseworkers' and their supervisors' perceptions of training adequacy.

H_{1e}. There will be significant differences in supervisor perceptions of the adequacy of the training program depending on individual and agency demographic characteristics.

Attitudes Toward Casework Skills Training

The following hypotheses relating to caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes toward the CST component of training were investigated.

H_{2a}. There will be a positive relationship between caseworkers' and their supervisors' attitudes toward use of casework skills on the job.

H_{2b}. There will be a positive relationship between caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes toward CST and their perceptions of the adequacy of training.

H_{2c}. There will be significant differences in caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes toward CST depending on individual and agency demographic characteristics.

Because this part of the study was somewhat exploratory, research questions were also generated to address the extent to which caseworkers and supervisors actually perceived CST skills as relevant and useful to the caseworker job.

Use of Casework Skills on the Job

The third area of interest was the caseworkers' actual use of casework skills on the job. Due to study limitations, direct observation of eligibility interviews to determine frequency of skill use was not possible. Instead, skill use was assessed indirectly by asking caseworkers and supervisors to respond to a series of questions regarding caseworker skill use on the job. There was also interest in the extent to which time limitations of the eligibility interview would be perceived as constraints on workers' ability to use the skills. Research questions were formulated to explore this issue.

H_{3a}. There will be an inverse relationship between caseworkers' attitudes toward CST and the extent to which they report finding barriers to using the skills on the job.

H_{3b}. There will be a significant difference in caseworkers' use of skills on the job according to individual and agency demographic characteristics.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Data Collection

A pre/post learning gain assessment was developed for each of the two programs, AFDC and food stamps. Each assessment had two parts: (a) identification of eligibility-related terms by matching, and (b) multiple-choice case scenarios that required trainees to apply policy and budgeting procedures. These assessments were administered to all trainees who were in class at the time of data collection. The sample of AFDC trainees was 38, and the sample of food stamp trainees was 41. Final grade averages for all caseworkers included in the survey sample were accessed from the grade rolls for each class taught between January and September 1990.

Caseworker and supervisor perceptions of the training were measured through use of a mail survey. Separate questionnaires were developed for supervisors and caseworkers, using a format suggested by Dillman (1978). Both questionnaires used 6-point Likert-type scales that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The questionnaires primarily related to caseworker and supervisor perceptions of various aspects of training and how knowledge and skills learned in training were used on the job. The questionnaires were pretested with pilot groups of caseworkers and supervisors and were revised.

Caseworker questionnaires were mailed to a random sample of 250 eligibility caseworkers trained between January and September 1990. Questionnaires were sent to supervisors of caseworkers in the sample and to an additional random selection of supervisors to distribute 150 questionnaires. The response rate was 90.4% for caseworkers ($N = 226$) and 94.6% for supervisors ($N = 142$).

Sample

Trainee Sample

Seventy percent of AFDC trainees were White was 70% and 30% were African American; 90% were female; 22% were ages 18-25, 33% were 26-32, 25% were 33-30, 15% were 40-49, and 5% were over 50. Fifty-five percent of food stamp trainees were White and 45% were African American; 84% were female; 26% were ages 18-25, 45% were 26-32, 10% were 33-39, 10% were 40-49, and 8% were over 50.

Survey Sample

The mean age of caseworker respondents was 30.5 years (range from 25 to 60 years). Of the caseworkers sampled, 84% were female; 71% were White, and 29% were African American. There were 107 AFDC respondents and 99 food stamp respondents. The number of respondents who had been eligibility workers for no longer than 18 months was 66%, 28% for 1.5 years to 5 years, and 3% for 6 or more years. Of those sampled, 24% handled AFDC intake, 46% managed AFDC ongoing caseloads, 34% handled food stamp intake, 59% managed food stamp ongoing caseloads, and 21% determined eligibility for Medicaid. Overlap in these categories occurs because some workers perform more than one function. The number of caseworkers who were from nonurban areas was 58%.

The mean age of supervisor respondents was 40 years of age (range from 25 to 64 years); 86% were female; 78% were White, and 22% were African American. The number of supervisor respondents who had been supervisors for less than 1.5 years was 35%; 24% for 3-5 years; and 41% had supervised for more than 6 years. The number of supervisors who were from nonurban counties was 60%.

Data Analysis

The SAS statistical package was used to analyze the data. Each of the two surveys was factor analyzed. A correlation matrix was calculated for each questionnaire to determine the relationship between variables within each factor. The criterion for including items in a factor was a factor loading of .45.

Three factors emerged from the analysis of the 39 items on the caseworker questionnaire: Perceptions of the Adequacy of Training, Attitudes Toward Using Casework Skills on the Job, and Perceptions of the Barriers to Using Casework Skills on the Job. Three factors also emerged from the 28-item supervisor questionnaire: Perceptions of the Adequacy of Training, Attitudes Toward Caseworkers' Use of Casework Skills, and Sense of Responsibility Toward Caseworkers. Further information on these factors is available elsewhere (Carse-McLocklin, Lindsey, & Anderson, 1991).

Selected correlations were run among the factors and between the factors and caseworkers' final grades. T tests were used to determine if significant differences existed among respondents with different demographic characteristics. The paired t test was used to test for differences between pre-and posttest scores for the AFDC and food stamp trainees on the learning gain assessment. A .05 level of significance was used for all analyses.

RESULTS

The results of the study are organized according to the three major areas of interest. These were: effectiveness of training, attitudes toward CST, and use of CST skills on the job.

Effectiveness of Training

Findings suggest that the training programs were effective in teaching policy and procedure. Responses to specific questions on the caseworker and supervisor surveys indicated that both groups perceived the training in a positive way. Caseworkers reported they were adequately trained to begin their jobs in the areas of policy

(86%), documentation (93%), and budgeting (90%). They perceived trainers as effective in teaching casework skills (92%) and policy (93%). Supervisors also believed that training was adequate in the areas of policy (92%), documentation (92%), and budgeting (91%).

Despite generally positive attitudes, many supervisors were concerned about the time associated with CST. A majority (71%) of supervisors thought CST should be shortened to allow time to teach more policy. However, 48% of supervisors supported the idea of adding time to training rather than cutting time available for CST to add policy material.

H_{1a}. Pre-post scores on policy information. The learning gain assessment revealed significant increases in pre-post scores for both AFDC and food stamp trainees. AFDC scores ($n = 38$) increased by an average 4.71 points from pre to post, $t(20) = 9.04, p = .0001$, which constitutes a 34.7% improvement. Food stamp scores ($n = 41$) increased by an average 8.9 points, $t(16) = 13.73, p = .0001$, representing a 36% improvement.

H_{1b}. Relationship between caseworker performance and perceptions of training adequacy, attitudes toward CST, and perceptions of barriers to use of skills on the job. The more adequate AFDC caseworkers believed the training to be, the higher their final grades ($r = .23, p = .02$). Correlations between final grades and attitudes toward CST and perceptions of barriers to skill use were not significant for AFDC workers. For food stamp caseworkers, there were no statistically significant correlations between caseworker final grades and any of the three factors.

H_{1c}. Demographic differences on pre-post scores and caseworker perceptions of training adequacy. Two demographic characteristics were associated with final grades. There was a positive relationship between length of service and average final scores for both AFDC ($r = .30, p = .002$) and food stamp ($r = .27, p = .007$) caseworkers. Females ($n = 81$) had higher final averages in the food stamp training program than did males ($n = 13$), $t(13.6) = 2.5, p = .03$. There were no significant relationships between final scores and race, age, or county type. There were also two demographic differences related to caseworkers' perceptions of training adequacy. Nonurban caseworkers ($n = 131, M = 5.1$) were more likely than urban caseworkers ($n = 95, M = 4.8$) to find that policy training in documentation was adequate to get them started on the job, $t(224) = -2.5, p = .01$. Nonurban caseworkers ($M = 5.0$) were also more likely to find that trainers were effective in teaching casework skills than were urban workers ($M = 4.6$), $t(160.9) = -2.42, p = .02$.

H_{1d}. Relationship between caseworker and supervisor perceptions of training adequacy. There was no significant correlation between caseworkers' and supervisors' perceptions of the adequacy of training.

H_{1e}. Demographic differences in supervisors' perceptions of training adequacy. Unlike the findings for caseworkers, there were no significant differences in supervisors' attitudes toward training effectiveness according to any of the demographic characteristics studied.

Attitudes Toward Casework Skills Training

Both caseworkers and supervisors tended to view CST as relevant to effective performance of the caseworker's job. Caseworkers thought it was important to empathize with clients (97%) and to let clients know they care (96%). They also thought CST was helpful in teaching them to work with angry clients and use confrontation skills (81%).

In general, supervisors had similarly positive attitudes toward CST. However, responses to survey items indicated some variability in supervisors' perceptions regarding caseworkers' use of skills on the job. A majority (58%) thought they could tell a difference between caseworkers who had CST and those who did not. Perceptions of the relevance of CST for veteran workers was somewhat unclear. Although there was no significant correlation between length of service with the agency and caseworker attitudes toward CST, most supervisors (61%) reported that veteran workers believed they wasted their time by spending 5 days in CST. However, the same percentage of supervisors reported that veterans who attended training learned to work more

effectively with clients.

H_{2a}. Relationship between caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes toward CST. There was a modest positive relationship between the attitudes of caseworkers and their supervisors concerning caseworker use of skills on the job ($r = .25, p = .0008$).

H_{2b}. Relationship between caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes toward CST and perceptions of training adequacy. There was a moderate positive relationship between caseworkers' attitudes about using casework skills on the job and their perceptions of training adequacy ($r = .39, p = .0001$). Similarly, supervisors who perceived the training programs as a whole to be effective were more likely to have positive attitudes toward caseworker use of casework skills on the job ($r = .25, p = .002$).

H_{2c}. Demographic differences in attitudes toward CST. Nonurban caseworkers ($n = 131, M = 4.2$) were more likely to find that CST was useful in their work with clients than were their urban counterparts ($n = 96, M = 3.8$), $t(222) = -2.09, p = .04$. There were no differences in caseworker perceptions according to age, race, sex, or length of service with agency. African American supervisors ($n = 30, M = 3.7$) had more positive attitudes about workers' use of casework skills than did White supervisors ($n = 105, M = 3.2$), $t(133) = 2.30, p = .02$. There were no other significant demographic differences among supervisors.

Use of Casework Skills on the Job

Findings indicate that caseworkers do use casework skills on the job to some extent. According to caseworker rankings, attending skills are used most often, followed by questions, reflections, and summarization. A small majority of caseworkers (54%) felt they did not have time to use casework skills. However, fewer (38%) reported that using casework skills on the job was more time-consuming. Nearly all supervisors (90%) reported that their trained caseworkers used casework skills with clients. Caseworkers perceived that their supervisors valued CST (81%), but also believed that untrained colleagues viewed the skills as not useful in their jobs (57%).

H_{3a}. Relationship between caseworkers' attitudes toward CST and perceptions of barriers to skill use. There was a modest inverse relationship between caseworker attitudes toward use of caseworker skills and their perceptions of barriers to using the skills on the job ($r = -.23, p = .0004$).

H_{3b}. Demographic differences in caseworker use of skills on the job. There were several demographic differences relating to caseworkers' use of casework skills on the job. Food stamp workers who handled ongoing caseloads ($n = 135$) perceived more barriers to using casework skills on the job than did AFDC workers or food stamp intake workers, $t(225) = 2.04, p = .04$. White caseworkers ($n = 156$) reported more barriers to using casework skills on the job than did African American caseworkers ($n = 64$), $t(281) = 2.74, p = .007$. Nonurban caseworkers ($n = 130, M = 3.0$) were more likely to feel frustrated when they realized they were not using the casework skills than were urban respondents ($n = 95, M = 2.6$), $t(223) = -1.99, p = .05$. Similarly, nonurban caseworkers ($n = 130, M = 2.6$) were more likely to believe that lack of time prevented them from being respectful to clients (urban $n = 92, M = 2.1$), $t(220) = -2.31, p = .02$.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Effectiveness of Training

The data indicate that policy knowledge and casework skills were adequately taught and were implemented, at least to some extent, in the work place. The results of the pre-post learning assessment indicate that trainees did learn policy as a result of training. Supervisors and caseworkers were consistently favorable about AFDC and food stamp policy training and believed very strongly that the training was adequate to get new workers started on the job.

Despite positive opinions about training, many supervisors think that CST should be shortened to allow time for more policy training. Because certain policy topics were originally omitted from training when CST was added,

it is not surprising to find tension between what may be viewed as competing areas of training. Supervisors want certain topics covered in training, whether the consequence is reducing the time spent on CST, extending training, or a combination of both.

The lack of correlation between the supervisor and caseworker perceptions regarding adequacy of training seems to indicate that the two groups tended to judge training using different criteria. Supervisors may evaluate training based on the extent to which trainees return to the office capable of functioning fairly autonomously (e.g., not require much supervisory attention). Trainees, on the other hand, may regard the training experience as preparation to begin the job, with little expectation of functioning autonomously at the conclusion of training. Furthermore, trainees may be unaware of aspects of policy and procedure that are not taught in the training program; however, supervisors will be aware of these gaps and may judge training accordingly. These different perspectives could account for the lack of correlation between perceptions of training adequacy for the two groups, even though both groups perceive training as very effective.

There was a notable absence of significant correlation between final grades and either caseworker attitudes toward CST or their perceptions of barriers to use of skills on the job. It would seem that caseworkers' performance on exams may be completely independent from their attitudes toward CST. Similarly, caseworker's perceptions of barriers to use of casework skills with clients are not related to how well they mastered the policy content taught in training. The significant correlation between grades and caseworkers' perceptions of training adequacy is not surprising because trainees who do well in the programs might be expected to value the training more highly.

Attitudes Toward Casework Skills Training

The data reflect generally positive attitudes among both supervisors and caseworkers. Most workers clearly find the knowledge and skills taught in CST to be useful and relevant in their work with clients. Supervisors are generally supportive of CST, but their responses are somewhat more mixed than are those of caseworkers. However, supervisors expect their workers to use casework skills with clients, and most (90%) find that caseworkers are using the skills.

The low positive correlation between supervisor and caseworker attitudes toward CST could indicate that supervisors' attitudes have some influence on how their caseworkers view the use of these skills, but there are obviously other influences as well. It is unlikely that caseworker attitudes toward CST have as much impact on supervisors' attitudes because supervisors have previously been caseworkers and have probably formed opinions based on their own experience. Further research would be needed to examine the direction of the influence and to account for other factors that could explain more of the variance in caseworkers' and supervisors' attitudes toward CST.

It is interesting that both supervisors and caseworkers are more likely to have positive attitudes toward caseworker use of casework skills on the job if they also find the overall training program itself to be effective. Given supervisors' and caseworkers' beliefs about the importance of policy training, it seems likely that they may be predisposed to be positive about CST if they believe the policy component of training has been effective. Thus, for training programs that combine policy and relational topics to have credibility and the support of caseworkers and supervisors, such programs must adequately address policy topics.

The perceived relevance of CST is less clear among veteran workers than for newly hired workers. The somewhat contradictory findings from veteran workers and supervisors could be related to veterans not believing the information learned is worth the time investment required. It is also possible that veterans may take offense at being required to attend CST, believing that they already know how to work effectively with clients. Although supervisors may hear such complaints from veterans, they may also observe these workers interacting more relationally with clients following the training.

The issue of training veteran and new workers in the same class is an important one. If separate training

sessions were held for veterans, policy training could be tailored more specifically to experienced workers because there is some knowledge and skill overlap between the AFDC and food stamp programs. Specialized training would also allow CST to be more directly linked to the needs of veteran workers.

Use of Casework Skills on the Job

Responses from both groups indicate that many workers do use casework skills on the job, at least to some extent. These findings are supported by information from another component of this study that found that clients felt comfortable with caseworkers, were happy about how they were treated, and believed their caseworker listened to them and understood their feelings and situations (Kropf, Lindsey, & Carse-MeLocklin, 1993). One of the limitations of this study is that there is no direct measure of the frequency with which caseworkers actually use casework skills. Thus, whereas no firm conclusions can be drawn about how frequently or well workers use casework skills with their clients, it seems probable that many do use these skills on the job with some degree of competence.

The issue of whether caseworkers have time to use casework skills with clients was of particular interest due to the high caseloads and the limited amount of time available for interviews. Although time does appear to be a factor in use of casework skills, it is not a clear-cut issue. Although slightly over one half of caseworkers reported that they do not have enough time to use casework skills, almost one half do perceive themselves as having the time. An important question for future research is identification of the factors that influence these varying perceptions. It does not seem to be simply an urban/nonurban phenomenon because there was no difference between the two groups on the question related specifically to having time to use casework skills. However, there is some indication that time constraints may be perceived as more of an issue by nonurban than by urban caseworkers. This is somewhat surprising because urban caseworkers tend to have larger caseloads and are presumably under more time pressure. However, this finding may reflect a difference in perceptions of what constitutes an appropriate worker-client relationship between workers in urban and nonurban areas. There is also evidence that ongoing food stamp workers may experience more barriers to using casework skills, but it is unclear if this is just a time issue or if other factors are involved. The higher caseload level and more impersonal nature of the food stamp interview (as compared with the AFDC interview) probably contributes to this difference. The difficulty food stamp workers have in using casework skills should be taken into account in development of programs specifically for food stamp staff.

The issue of time to use casework skills with clients may be more of a perceptual problem than an actual one, although some workers will be more adept than others at integrating skill use into the eligibility interview. The moderate inverse relationship between caseworker attitudes toward CST and their perceptions of barriers to using the skills on the job suggest that caseworkers who perceive CST to be relevant to their jobs are less likely to find barriers to use of the skills. However, because correlation analysis does not address the issue of causality, further research would be needed to verify this prediction.

Trainers must teach workers how to make optimal use of casework skills given the short length of time and structured nature of the eligibility interview. Directly addressing this issue with trainees will increase the credibility of the training as well as enhance their ability to actually use the skills in the field.

One limitation of the study is the lack of a control group that prevents the determination of differences between how caseworkers who have not received CST and caseworkers who have received the training interact with clients. Supervisor and caseworker perceptions indicate there may be a difference. According to caseworkers, untrained workers do not value using casework skills with clients. Apparently caseworkers are not being told this information directly by untrained workers, but this perception may be formed by indirect means perhaps as new workers observe how untrained workers interact with clients. A slight majority of supervisors also believe a difference exists in how the two groups of workers interact with clients. This finding raises an issue about the effect of the agency environment on worker-client relationships and interactions. If new caseworkers return to the agency to work with untrained veterans who devalue the use of casework skills, will new caseworkers actually use the skills? Training programs should address this issue by helping new workers develop strategies

for continuing to use the skills in what may be an unreceptive office environment. Mandated skills training for all eligibility staff should also be considered to alter the agency environment.

Demographic Findings

All three areas of the study had hypotheses related to possible demographic differences. The most striking of these findings was between caseworkers in urban and nonurban areas. As discussed above, the higher caseloads and greater time pressures on urban caseworkers may account for most of these differences. For instance, urban caseworkers who have larger caseloads and less time with each client may be more likely to devalue the effectiveness of their CST training than nonurban workers who may find it easier to use the skills with clients. This situation probably accounts for why nonurban caseworkers are more likely to find the skills more useful than are urban caseworkers. Nonurban caseworkers were also more likely to find training in documentation to be adequate. However, because urban counties often have additional documentation requirements above those required by the state, it is likely that urban caseworkers do need additional documentation training on their return to the office. It is important to note that even though statistically significant differences were found between the groups, there were only slight differences in means, so these findings may not have much practical significance.

The other demographic findings of interest concern differences between White and African American caseworkers and supervisors. African American supervisors have more positive attitudes about caseworker use of casework skills than do White supervisors, and White caseworkers perceive more barriers to using the skills than do African American caseworkers. These differences may indicate more of a sensitivity to the emotional needs of clients on the part of African American personnel.

The New Eligibility Worker Training seems to be effective at teaching policy and casework skills. Many caseworkers seem to use what they learn in the classroom when they return to the county office. Both caseworkers and supervisors have generally positive attitudes toward the use of casework skills, with supervisors being somewhat less consistent in this regard.

This evaluation indicates that eligibility workers can be taught both policy and interpersonal helping skills in an integrated fashion. Though policy will probably always be the highest priority for caseworkers and supervisors alike, both groups can see the relevance and importance of caseworkers learning effective interpersonal helping and interviewing skills. Such an approach to training eligibility staff can better prepare them to meet the multiple tasks required in their jobs—determination of eligibility through application of policy and development of an effective and respectful working relationship with their clients.

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