NEGOTIATING WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS FOR EMPLOYEES WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS
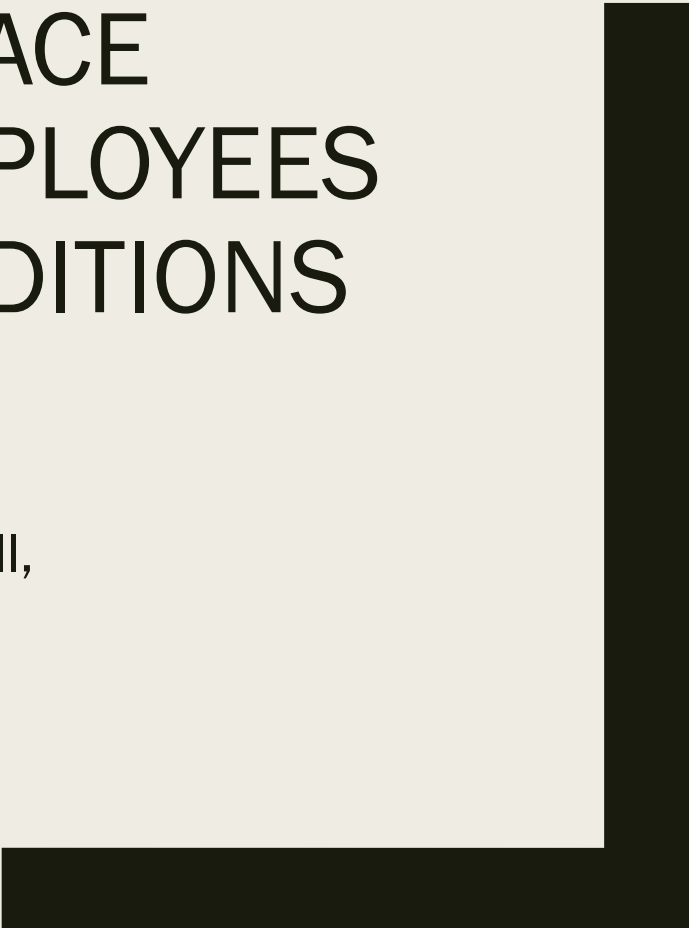
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Agenda

Paper 1

- Background information, key definitions and research question

- Methodology: Qualitative approach, using Grounded Theory strategies for data collection and analysis

- Findings: Negotiating accommodations unfolds as a non-linear, social/relational, and political process

- Conclusion, future directions for research

Background Information

- Accommodations: "individualized modifications or adjustments implemented to enable an employee with mental illness to fulfill the requirements of the job" . (McDowell and Fossey, 2014).

- Mental illness related disability claims are a significant burden in Canadian workplaces and predicted by WHO to become second leading cause of global disease

- Some changes happening in workplace legislation and training related to supporting mental health and psychological safety:

    - National Standard of Canada for Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace

    -Mental health first aid training offered through workplaces

Background Information

- Accommodating employees with MI is an interactive negotiation process (Tompa et al., 2015; Queens University IRC, 2016).

- But what happens during the negotiation process?

- Gap in understanding of how the accommodation negotiation process unfolds, what micro processes, factors and tensions come up, who is involved and what workplace forces come into play

Paper 1: The Interactive Process of Negotiating Workplace Accommodations for Employees with a Mental Illness

Research Question

How are workplace accommodations negotiated between employees with a mental health condition and workplace stakeholders?

- Given the current burdens of MI disability claims, employers need to become more aware and more progressive about supporting workers

- This research may enable organizations to become more competent at supporting its members, and foster a progressive, inclusive workplace

Methodology

- Qualitative research incorporates flexible methods to describe, analyze and interpret social phenomena and processes (Ohman, 2005; Pope, Ziebland &Mays, 2000).

- Aligns with the focus of this thesis project, which explores the lived experiences of a social and administrative process occurring in the workplace.

- Adopted Grounded Theory (GT) techniques of data collection and analysis

- GT provides flexible strategies to iteratively analyze processes about which little is known, and generate conceptual statements, or theories, about how actors interpret those processes (Charmaz, 2014; Chun Tie, Birks &Francis, 2019)

Data Collection

- Initial, purposive sampling strategy

- Followed by more targeted, theoretical sampling to refine/focus emerging themes

- Recruited individuals between the ages of 18 and 60 years old who were employed, or recently employed (in past 3 years), in a Canadian workplace

12 study participants:

a) 6 workers who had experience requesting/ negotiating accommodations

b) 6 stakeholders: managers, disability management professionals, human resources staff, occupational health and safety professionals

Data Collection & Analysis

- Individual phone interviews, using a semi-structured interview guide that allowed participants to share their experiences/insights about negotiating accommodations

- Interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded and analyzed according strategies of constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014)

      -initial and focused coding, clustering and memo writing

Findings

- **The accommodation negotiation process often unfolds as:**
  - *Non linear and dynamic; a combo of formal and informal micro processes and tensions*
  - *A social/relational process*
  - *A political process*

  Workplace forces acting on the negotiation process such as:
  - *Employer capacity*
  - *Psychological health and safety in the work place*
 - *Stigma*

Findings: Non linear, flexible process

This is a non linear, multidimensional process shaped by political, social, temporal and organizational forces.

"It depends on the manager, it depends on the employee... It depends if it's a good employee or not. So it is quite formal but I do have managers who make informal arrangements, which is totally fine with us. The difficulty is if the manager makes an informal arrangement that goes on for a long period of time...then the managers like why am I doing this. So the advantage of having formalized is it tracks it and it makes it specific. I think there's a lot of advantage to the informal accommodations when the manager and the employee have a good relationship." (quote from Kate, a disabil. Manager on the flexible nature of accommodation process)

Findings: Social and interactive process

- The negotiation process is social and interactive
- Collaboration, communication and cooperation
- Who are the stakeholders involved in negotiating accommodations?
  - 2 tiers of stakeholders: internal and external (see map)
  - Internal: worked directly with the employee in the workplace to discuss, negotiate and implement accommodations
  - External: less involved in the employee's workplace; assisted the internal stakeholders in guiding the accommodation process or providing support to the employee during the process.
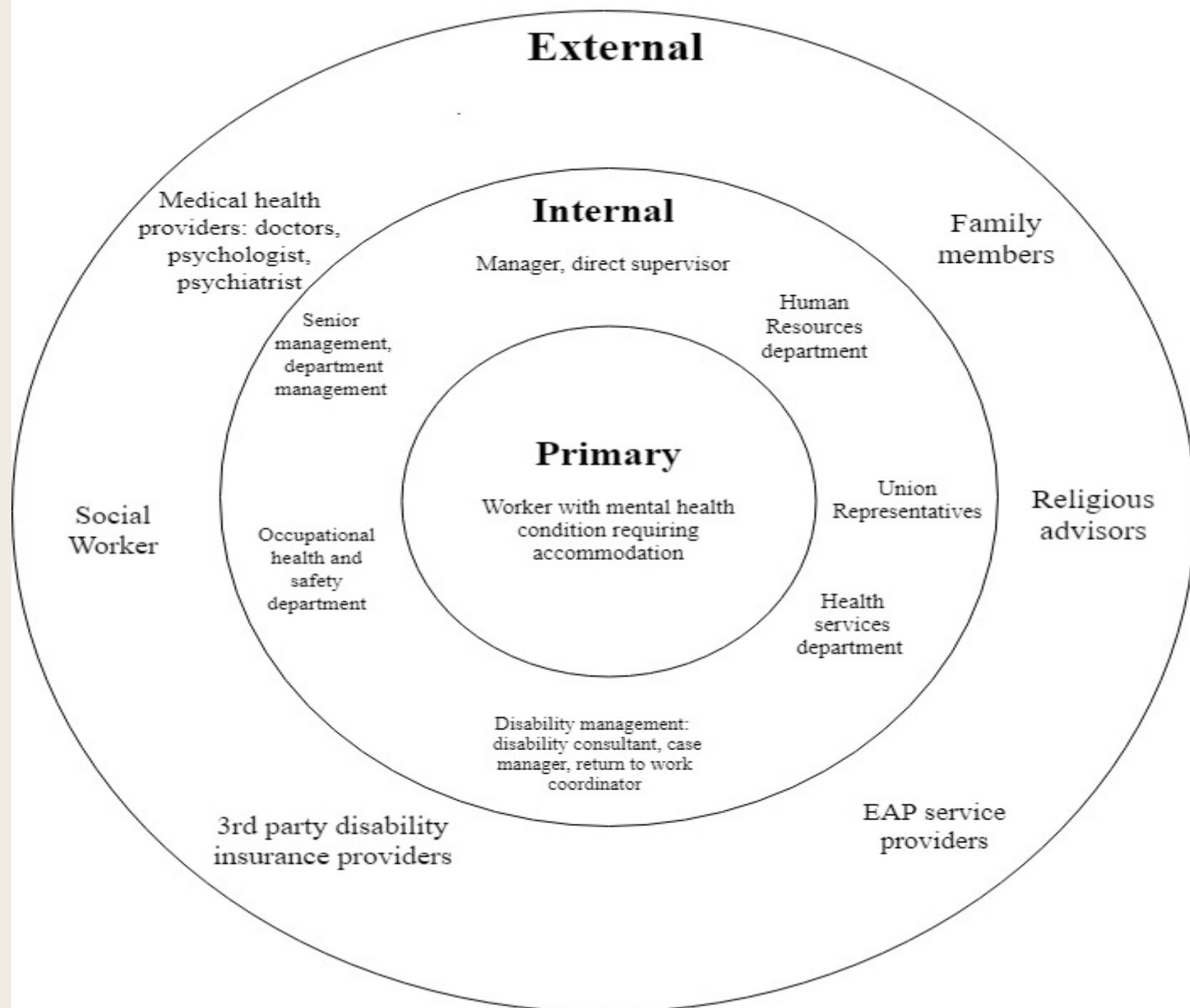
External

Medical health providers: doctors, psychologist, psychiatrist

Family members

Internal

Manager, direct supervisor

Human Resources department

Senior management, department management

Primary

Worker with mental health condition requiring accommodation

Union Representatives

Religious advisors

Social Worker

Occupational health and safety department

Health services department

Disability management: disability consultant, case manager, return to work coordinator

3rd party disability insurance providers

EAP service providers

Findings: Social and interactive process

Cooperation vs. Collaboration

- The degree of cooperation and collaboration may not be equal; implicit understanding among some workers that their cooperation/ quietly following steps may be what determines if they get accommodated

- Problematic when workers expected a more collaborative, guided experience, or if they feel it is not a reciprocal, collaborative process where their needs are being heard.

Findings: Social and interactive process

Wendy, a part time health administrator described her frustrations and being disappointed that negotiating an accommodation plan was not a process of mutual cooperation and collaboration with her health and safety coordinator; rather, she did not receive guidance throughout the process:

- *"I absolutely understand it as a two-way system, right? Me providing exactly what I need as a worker and from her insight to give feedback in terms of what she's also found…. That decision never happened, it was more so "hi, how are you feeling? Here are the things I would like.. We are done working on your accommodations"…it feels a little like I was given the short end of the straw, just because once again I have not experienced this before ."*

Findings: A Relational Process

- Negotiating accommodations is a relational process
- Employees reported feeling more supported during the process when internal stakeholders, ie. direct supervisor or manager,
  - dedicated time to supporting them
  - invested in them as an employee
  - showed empathy and understanding of their needs for accommodations
- Julie, a mental health specialist , describes her positive accommodation experience with a manager who recognized that she was struggling:

"I had a manager who was trained, who understood, who was compassionate. And was willing to put in the blood and tears to work with me to get me back because she saw the value in the work that I did…."

Findings: A Relational Process

" Because she [the coordinator] doesn't seem to have a good idea on what exactly the treatment is, what it entails, and what are the effects of it... she cant help guide me in terms of some of the suggestions that she might have from her point of view as a healthcare professional.. So I'm kind of having to navigate this on my own. I don't think I was every provided suggestions of what she had found helpful with some people she might have worked with that had mental illness.. And how that might have benefitted them"
(Wendy)

Findings: A Political Process

- The capacity to access accommodations varied across employees, often depending on:

- Work sector

- Political influences ie. the worker's position, job status and seniority within the organization.

- Implicit understanding reported by some workers that access to certain supports may not be available to everyone

- Part time, contract, seasonal or precarious employees reported disparity in access to support compared to full time, senior, permanent employees

Findings: A Political Process

- Wendy, a part-time, temporary worker described challenges and continued delays getting a light changed in her workspace that was causing her migraines:

- *"If I were a permanent staff member, I wouldn't have had to wait a month to have the light taken off.... I felt that, this is my personal interpretation, that because I wasn't a full-time staff member, she wasn't sure if I could actually have those lights turned off in that specific area."*

- Kaitlyn, a seasonal employee described the hierarchy of access to universal accommodations:

- *"The lower down the rung you get... the less ability you have to access those resources that you need. They only reserve those types of resources for people who are there permanently and we all know that".*

Findings: Workplace Forces

- A number of workplace factors impacted how employees with MI experienced the negotiation process, what they find helpful, and what can pose challenges:

- Psychological health and safety in the workplace

"if you have a culture that's supportive of inclusion and fairness and actually talks about accommodation, that can be very helpful" (Elizabeth)

- Establishing clear accommodation policies and practices that are accessible to everyone

"they should have some sort of proper manual… There's nothing in particular about how specific things could be requested". (Wendy)

"I'm already going through enough stuff if I'm asking for accommodation… the last thing I want to do is go see this small print of our collective agreement" (Ariel)

Findings: Workplace challenges

- Stigma, discomfort around discussing mental illness at work

- As a result, some workers feared disclosing their need for accommodations, disguised their needs for support into something more acceptable (ie. Sick days for hospitalizations)

- Or they struggled in silence

Findings: Workplace Forces and challenges

■ Kaitlyn, a former part time employee in the service industry describes the struggle to hide her mental health condition at work at times when she really needed support:

"It was kind of me disguising what was going on, like for instance I had a relative who died and I couldn't go to my boss and say help, I've gotten lost in the deep end, I've gone little psychotic here, and it's kind of really a rough week ."

" Because people still look at it as crazy… And crazy is something that those people don't want to work with".

Findings: Workplace Forces and challenges

- Negative discourse around supporting employees with mental illness vs. normalized, discourse around physical disabilities in the workplace.

"So, it's really a discomfort…. But we don't have it with a broken leg, why do we have it with a broken mind? But people do." (Samantha, disability manager)

- Employer capacity is a challenge

- As described by Elizabeth, an occupational health nurse at a large academic institution, *"if you're a manager and you don't know how to accommodate, or even what your responsibilities are, if you don't have additional supports within the organization, that can make it very difficult."*

Discussion and Conclusion

- This study has provided some transparency to what occurs as employees with mental illness negotiate workplace accommodations by describing how this process unfolds.

- The negotiation process is a non linear, political, interactive and relational process.

- While many workplaces may mandate an overarching linear, formal negotiation process, this study shows that in reality, workers and stakeholders experience the process as a combination of formal and informal micro processes and proceedings, and tensions around accessing supports, trust, pecking order, seniority and work culture *

Discussion and Conclusion

Future directions:

■ There may be a need to explore how smaller organizations are doing in terms of supporting employees with MI. What can be done to mobilize employers to be more progressive?

■ There are tools available ie. those developed by Great West Life's Workplace Strategies for Mental Health (https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com/) and the National Standard of Psychological Health and Safety*

■ But how are these tools being implemented? Are they experienced as useful and supportive? What are smaller companies doing well? What kinds of challenges are employers at those companies experiencing?

Question and Answer

Thank you!

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