

Building Academic Success and Resilience in Social Work Students: An Application of Self-Determination Theory

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Abstract—A major concern for the Social Work profession concerns the frequency of burn-out and high turnover of staff, with the average career lasting just 7-8 years in the UK. The characteristic of resilience has been identified as playing a crucial role in social workers' ability to have a satisfying and successful career, thus a critical role for social work education is to develop resilience in social work students. However, a recent UK government investigation into social work education, the Neary report, recently condemned its effectiveness, concluding that the introduction of the social work degree had not increased the academic standing of social work, nor the rigor of social work practice. Therefore, we currently need to know more about how to train resilient social workers who will also increase the academic standing of the profession. The specific aim of this research was to quantify characteristics that may contribute towards resilience and academic success among student social workers in order to mitigate against the problems of burn-out and low academic standing. Although previous research has examined these factors, this field would benefit from a stronger theoretical foundation. Self-determination Theory (SDT) is a robust, evidence-informed psychological theory that has been applied to numerous contexts including health and employment. It predicts that when our needs for competence (effectiveness at mastering the environment), autonomy (sense of control and free will), and relatedness (interacting and connecting with others) are satisfied, we experience higher degrees of motivation to succeed and wellbeing. Thus when these three needs are met in social work students, they have the potential to raise academic standards and promote wellbeing characteristics that contribute to the development of resilience. The current study tested the hypothesis that higher levels of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as defined by SDT, will predict levels of academic success and resilience in social work students. Two hundred and ten social work students studying at a number of universities completed well-established questionnaires to assess autonomy, competence and relatedness, level of academic performance and resilience (The Brief Resilience Scale). In this scale, students rated their agreement with items e.g., "I bounce back quickly after hard times" and "I usually come through difficult times with little struggle". After controlling for various factors, including age, gender, ethnicity, and course (undergraduate or postgraduate) preliminary analysis revealed that the components of SDT provided useful predictive value for academic success and resilience. In

particular, autonomy and competence provided a useful predictor of academic success while relatedness was a particularly useful predictor of resilience. This study demonstrated that SDT provides a valuable framework for helping to understand what predicts academic success and resilience among social work students. This is relevant because the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness can be affected by external social and cultural pressures, thus they can be improved by the right type of supportive teaching practices and educational environments. These findings contribute to the growing evidence-base to help build an academic and resilient social worker student body and workforce.

Keywords—Education, resilience, self-determination theory, student social workers

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