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Social Workers Interactions within the Profession and the Effects on Collaboration in the Workplace

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Submitted by Leigha Scholtz
May, 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis or a dissertation.

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ST. CATHERINE UNIVERSITY AND
THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
MSW PROGRAM

Collaboration among co-workers within the Social Work Profession

By: Leigha M. Scholtz

Research Committee: Chair: Philip AuClaire, Ph.D
                                    Members: Shari Hornseth, MSW, LISW
                                    Dan Porter, MSW, LICSW

Abstract

This study explored the perspectives of social workers regarding collaboration among social workers within their workplace. The perspectives were examined through the conceptual frameworks of Ecological Systems Theory specifically how interactions within the work environment affect collaborative efforts among social workers. The online survey instrument Qualtrics.com was utilized to conduct the survey which contained 44 items that were designed to operationalize the concepts of interdependence, newly created professional activities, collective ownership of goals, flexibility and reflection on the process, Index of Interdisciplinary Collaboration developed by Laura Bronstein. Data generated from this survey were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics from the 23 respondents who completed the survey. The results of this study show that social workers appear to be engaged in collaborative efforts with other social workers in their workplace and appear to have a positive perception of working among their colleagues in a collaborative way even when it may be outside of the person's job description or result in a loss of some autonomy. The results of this study that the field of social work practices implement and expand further formal procedures within social service agencies to promote collaborative work among colleagues to better serve client needs.

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<u>Introduction</u>

The social work profession is built on the idea of helping others, building relationships and working together to serve a common purpose. This research aimed to identify how interactions between social workers affect their ability to collaborate with each other in their profession. For the purpose of this research, collaboration is defined as an active process of partnership between professionals by pooling resources, linking efforts to rethink current practices and develop new responses to rapidly changing social problems (Graham & Barter, 1999; Wilson, 2004). This research is important for clinical social work practice because the need for social workers in a variety of clinical settings continues to increase as the United States healthcare system, including behavioral health, attempts to simplify services for patients through the Affordable Care Act of 2010 and to increase Accountable Care Organizations. This shift provides incentives for providers to coordinate care and provide better services to patients by increasing the communication and information that is filtered from one professional to another. Social workers will play an important role in the ability to learn, maintain and share patient information that is pertinent to providing the best care possible for the whole person, not just the immediate presenting concern. This research asks the question of how social worker's interactions with one another effect their ability to collaborate in the workplace.

Past research has identified interdependence, flexibility, newly created professional activities, collective ownership of the goals, and reflection on the process to be important in having effective collaboration among professionals.

<u>Literature Review</u>

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Professionals engage in collaboration as a way to address social issues that are beyond the scope of any one person or agency (Graham & Barter, 1999).   The ever changing population and social issues social workers are involved with requires collaboration to strengthen the social worker's knowledge and expertise in order to provide the most competent care to the client. Professionals are better able to help their clients meet specific goals and provide guidance when they become further educated within their profession regarding evidence based practices. Reese and Sontag (2001) support this stating "One barrier to full use of the profession…is a lack of knowledge on the part of each member's expertise, skills, training, values and theory." The continued work of collaboration is necessary in order for social workers to maintain their standard as a helping profession and be knowledgeable about the complex needs of their clients.

For the purpose of this research, collaboration is defined as an active process of partnership between professionals by pooling resources, linking efforts to rethink current practices and develop new responses to rapidly changing social problems (Graham & Barter, 1999; Wilson, 2004). Frequently, social workers are engaged in practice on interdisciplinary teams serving specific client populations. Social workers work as a part of the team that connects all of the pieces together for others to understand how each separate part impacts the client's success. Past research has suggested that all professions are dedicated to the wellbeing of their clients which enhances the willingness to work with one another on interdisciplinary teams (Reese & Sontag, 2001; Valios, 2009). Parker-Oliver, Bronstein, & Kurzejeski (2005) indicated social workers identified "teamwork with other professionals from other disciplines" as the most important part to

their ability to help clients. Teamwork is closely related to collaboration in many aspects and is important to identify within social workers contact with other social workers in the profession.

Index of Interdisciplinary Collaboration

The highest levels of collaboration can only be obtained when all invested parties are committed to the process and development of a specific goal. Laura Bronstein developed an Index of Interdisciplinary Collaboration (IIC) based on the model for Interdisciplinary Collaboration (Bronstein, 2002; Bronstein, 2003) which helped to assess professional interactions and services to clients. The IIC consisted of five components necessary for effective collaboration; interdependence, newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective ownerships of goals, and reflection on process (Bronstein, 2002). Bronstein's research found administrative support for collaboration, physical space available to collaborate, and having time during the workday to collaborate all were statistically significant in the ability and dedication to the professional for engaging in collaboration. This research identifies the importance of agencies to be aware of the needs of the social workers to enhance the opportunity to collaborate with one another.

Interdependence. Laura Bronstein (2002) defines interdependence as the occurrence of and reliance on interactions among professionals where all are dependent on the others to accomplish their tasks and goals. In order to work interdependently the professionals must maintain a clear understanding of their roles in the process and use them appropriately. Professional work that can be characterized as interdependence include physical time spent together, oral and written communication between the

colleagues, and respect for and value of colleagues opinions and input on the task at

hand (Bronstein, 2002). The success of interdependence relies on the colleague's ability

to effectively communicate with one another throughout the process and maintain an

understanding of each professional's role in the collaboration.

     Newly created professional activities. Newly created professional activities are

plans, programs and goals that can be achieved with collaboration than could with the

same professionals acting independently (Bronstein, 2003). These activities will promote

fundamental changes in the way services are designed and delivered to clients.   The

activities are unique and important as they do not duplicate what the professionals may be

able to do on their own but promote new possibilities not previously explored. These

activities are important to maximize the individual expertise of each collaborator

(Bronstein, 2002).

     Flexibility. Unlike interdependence, flexibility encourages role blurring among

collaborators. Flexibility identifies the willingness for professionals to adapt to changes

and make compromises to individual preferences or beliefs for the good of the

collaboration. With the ability to accept changes and compromises the collaborators may

be able to identify new and unique ideas to work towards the specific goal at hand.

     Collective Ownership of Goals.   This refers to shared responsibility throughout

the entire process of the collaboration which includes joint design, definition,

development, and achievement of the goals (Bronstein, 2002). In this process each

collaborator takes responsibility for his/her part in the success, failure and behaviors that

support constructive development of the goal. This involves developing realistic

objectives and goals, a shared vision and mission and broad-based decision making as

well as the ability to compromise. These all work together to increase the willingness for

all parties to support the process from beginning to end resulting in a higher chance for

success through collaboration.

    Reflection on the Process. Reflection on the process refers to the idea of being

conscious of the efforts to work together (Bronstein, 2003). The collaborators think and

talk about their working relationships and process and where collaborators incorporate

feedback about their process to strengthen relationships and effectiveness (Bronstein,

2002).

 Relationships

    Relationships are an important part of human life, and professional relationships

are no different.   Relationships among professionals can promote collaboration if

strengthened or can diminish collaboration if not kept in mind. In Bronstein's research

(2002) she identified a correlation between professional relationships and collaboration.

Her findings support the theory that a strong professional affiliation would produce

higher levels of collaboration. As alliances with the social work profession and the

agency were both shown to be statistically significant, the alliance with the agency

showed a stronger correlation than commitment to the social work profession.   This

supported the idea that professionals strengthen their scope of concern and action with

areas of interest they are familiar and have accessibility to.   This correlation is tied into

the invested interest of the parties in order to enhance collaboration.

    When working among other professionals it is natural to develop personal

relationships among co-workers. In Bronstein's research of a group of NASW members

she predicted that respondents indicating personal affiliation for their colleagues would

have overall higher levels of collaboration. Bronstein's theory was validated by the

results of her research. The respondents answered Likert scale questions which included

"I like the colleagues from other disciplines whom I work with in my primary work

setting", "My colleagues from other disciplines and I do not socialize outside of work",

"My colleagues from other disciplines and I trust each other" and "My colleagues from

other disciplines do not understand my personal values and perspectives" (Bronstein,

2002). All four questions were found to be statistically significant when correlated with

collaboration. This correlation strengthens the idea that personal relationships have an

effect on the collaboration efforts among one another.   Bronstein encouraged further

research in this area as it is an area of the social work profession that is currently not

addressed frequently.

Prior experiences with collaboration

       The ability to collaborate with professionals may be impacted by the experiences

of collaboration in different settings. After engaging in a professional activity for the

first time, it usually becomes less difficult to do the same activity again in the future.

Bronstein's research supported this idea.   The analysis of her data did not show a

correlation between the experience of an internship and later collaboration as significant.

However, there was a significant correlation between a positive experience in an

internship and the levels of collaboration later in their career (2002). This research

expresses the need for social worker's to experience positive interactions and

partnerships with co-workers as an early intervention to promote continued team work

throughout their career.

<u>*Conceptual Framework*</u>

The conceptual framework that was utilized in this study is Ecological Systems Theory. The profession of social work focuses on the biological, psychological and social influences surrounding clients, and this focus should also be addressed when it relation to social workers interactions with colleagues as well.

Ecological systems theory can be broken down into two aspects to understand the diverse nature of the theory. The ecological part of the theory focuses on the processes of interactions between people and a system can be broadly defined as a set of things that come together forming a whole. When addressing these two parts as it relates to social work collaboration the social workers interactions with one another is important to understand as it has an impact on the ability for the workers to function well together, forming a well-developed program or agency.

Ecological Perspective

The ecological perspective focuses on interactions between people in relation to their environment (Jansson, 2011; Ungar, 2002). This model is concerned with the processes of the interactions such as the use of space, technology and social organization within the agency and how employees utilize these aspects to increase their collaboration efforts with one another.

The term ecology was referred to as interdependence among organisms in the natural world when first used by Ernst Haeckel in 1868 (Ungar, 2002). The use and definition of ecology can be used in social work to identify the interdisciplinary study of interactions between people and their environment. The ecological perspective identifies

the need of the client not only as just an individual, but as an individual that is affected by the environment around them. This in an important idea in social work as it works closely with the person-in-environment that social workers focus closely on in all of their work.

Past research has shown that people adapt to their environments and as a person enters into new situations he/she adapts to its demands (Greif & Lynch, 1983). With the addition of the person in the identified environment, the situation then structurally changes as well. This leads to the idea that people are constantly creating, restructuring and adapting to their environments, which in turn results in a change to that environment as well. The changes that occur among the individual and the environment are important to identify in situations that involve collaboration with co-workers and other social workers, as the input and work may change at that time as well. It is important to understand and be prepared for the changes that occur as the physical structure or dynamics of a work setting adjust to the involvement of different professionals.

The social work profession is based on the notion that social workers will work with diverse groups of people and will do so competently and effectively. In order to do this, the social workers ability to understand the changes taking place and how to adapt to those changes is crucial.

The most recent beliefs of successful collaboration using the ecological perspective refer to eight key principles in practice (Ungar, 2002). These principles include intrinsic value, diversity and diverse solutions, structured alliances, management by stakeholders, divestment to community, public policy and community empowerment, enlightened development, and ethical obligations to foster change. These principles aim

to include a broad array of necessary areas to be addressed by social workers when making decisions related to providing best service to clients. These principles can as easily be focused on the importance of using these principles when collaborating with other professionals.

Systems Perspective

A system can be defined in many ways but in general terms is thought of as a group of pieces that come together forming a whole. These pieces of the system can be very diverse and complex but each piece compliments others around it to build and maintain the whole system and serve the common purpose. There are many parallels between the general idea of a system and the role of social worker in an agency working towards a specific client or agency goal. In a social system, the pieces work mutually together and can influence the behavior of the other pieces.

Systems theory was developed by von Bertalanffy in the 1920s (Robbins et al., 2006)and formally practiced beginning in the 1950s (Skyttner, 2005). The longstanding principles of systems theory include the ideas that the whole is more than the sum of its parts, the whole determines the nature of its parts and the parts are inter-dependent and dynamically inter-related (van Gigch, 2002).

Systems theory has direct importance in social service organizations. The many subsystems that make up an agency or organization interact together in order for the agency to function properly. The continued interactions between the subsystems require the individuals working within those subsystems to adapt and change as the needs of the system changes (Anderson & Carter, 1990).

Ecological Systems Theory

Putting both the ecological perspective and systems perspective together forms a holistic approach for the ecological systems model. This model brings together the components of how interactions with one another impact the ability to collaborate as well as how that collaboration affects the system or agency as a whole and its impact to social work practice.

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to explore how the interactions of social workers impacted the ability to collaborate with one another in the workplace. This study sought to identify themes through respondent responses, of positive and negative interactions that affect the ability to work with others to meet a common goal.

Research Design

The researcher conducted a quantitative study by surveying Minnesota-based social service providers who employ licensed social workers within the agency. The research tool used was previously developed by Laura Bronstein (2002), The Index of Interdisciplinary Collaboration. This tool was modified to relate specifically to social work interactions and collaborations within the discipline of social work. This study utilized the online survey software Qualtrics.com that was accessed by voluntary participants. The study was advertised to the social service agencies and social workers

via email. The advertisement for the participation within this study was distributed

through the clinical supervisor of each agency (see Appendix A).

Likert responses were used to measure the participants' responses to questions

about (a) interdependence (b) newly created professional activities (c) flexibility (d)

collective ownership of goals and (e) reflection on the process as it relates to

collaboration with social workers (See Appendix B).

Sample

This study sought the participation of social service agencies that employ social

workers licensed through the State of Minnesota. The researcher contacted agencies who

employed a large number of licensed social workers and was willing to distribute the

surveys to the licensed workers at the agency. The researcher emailed the survey

information to the clinical director each agency who had agreed to participate. The

clinical directors then forwarded the information to the licensed social workers within the

agency. The researcher received 23 respondents who completed the survey in its entirety

for the study.

The social workers in the study varied in the specific license that they had at the

time of the survey. Licenses include Licensed Social Worker (LSW), Licensed Graduate

Social Worker (LGSW), and Licensed Independent Clinical Social Workers (LICSW).

Protection of Human Subjects

Prior to conducting research this study the researcher received approval from the

IRB located at the University of St. Thomas and has been previously reviewed and

approved by a research committee to ensure the protection of human subjects.

The nature of the study presented has limited risks for the participants. The participation in the survey is voluntary and survey participants will give informed consent upon beginning the survey by clicking on a tab indicating they are giving consent for the survey. Anonymity was ensured due to participant's anonymous online completion and submission of the questionnaire onto Qualtrics.com.

Data Collection

The data was collected by Qualtrics.com. Qualtrics.com generates the data through their automatic statistical program. The researcher used survey instrument containing 44 items that were designed to collect information about collaboration efforts of social workers in regards to their work with other social work professionals.

The questionnaire items included independent variables of years of practice as a social worker, whether working in the private or public sector, main area of work independently or in a team context, and primary area of focus in social work (mental health, children, psychotherapy, refugees, etc). Questions within the survey operationalized the dependent variables of: interdependence newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective ownership of goals, and reflection on the process as it relates to collaboration with social workers.

Data Analysis

This quantitative study utilized descriptive statistics through frequency distributions and bar charts as well as descriptive tallies to analyze the data obtained within the survey. Descriptive statistics were used to present the discrete variables of the participants as well as the variables within the survey questionnaire including interdependence, newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective ownership of

goals and reflection on the process of collaboration. The researcher used Qualtrics.com's

statistical package along with SPSS to run the statistics. Descriptive statistics and

inferential statistics were both used to interpret the data.

Findings

This study sought to explore how interactions between social workers impact their

ability to collaborate with one another in the workplace. The survey questionnaire

contained 44 questions that operationalized the collaboration efforts of social workers as

it relates to interdependence, newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective

ownership of goals and reflection on the process. Descriptive analysis was conducted to

breakdown respondent's answers to questions throughout the survey. Inferential statistics

were conducted with this research using ANOVA and t-test. The inferential statistics did

not show any statistically significance data from the study. The inferential statistics are

not discussed in the findings due to the lack of significance in the analysis. The

researcher shows descriptive analysis of each subscale used in the study to show trends in

social work responses to this study.

Respondents

The survey included 23 respondents who fully completed the survey

questionnaire. Descriptive analysis conducted on question #1 'What is your current

social work license?' and coded as the variable 'Current License' (*See Figure 1).* Four

participants were Licensed Social Workers, seven respondents were Licensed Graduate

Social Workers, and twelve respondents were Licensed Independent Clinical Social
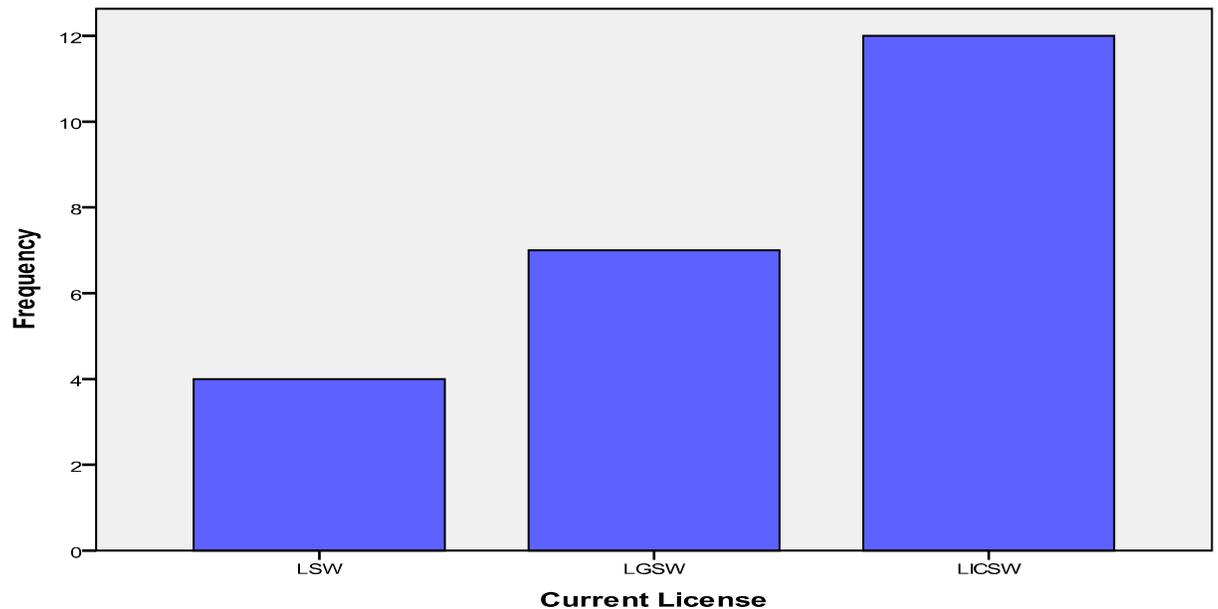
Workers.

Figure 1. Current Licensure of Respondents

A second descriptive analysis was conducted on question number two 'How many years have you been licensed as a social worker?' and coded the variable as 'Years Licensed in Social Work' (*See Figure 2).* Nine respondents reported being licensed for less than five years, eight respondents reported being licensed for 5-10 years and six respondents reported being licensed for 11-20 years. The 23 respondent's time employed at their current position ranged from three months to over nine years. The mean amount of time being employed in their current position was 3.5 years.
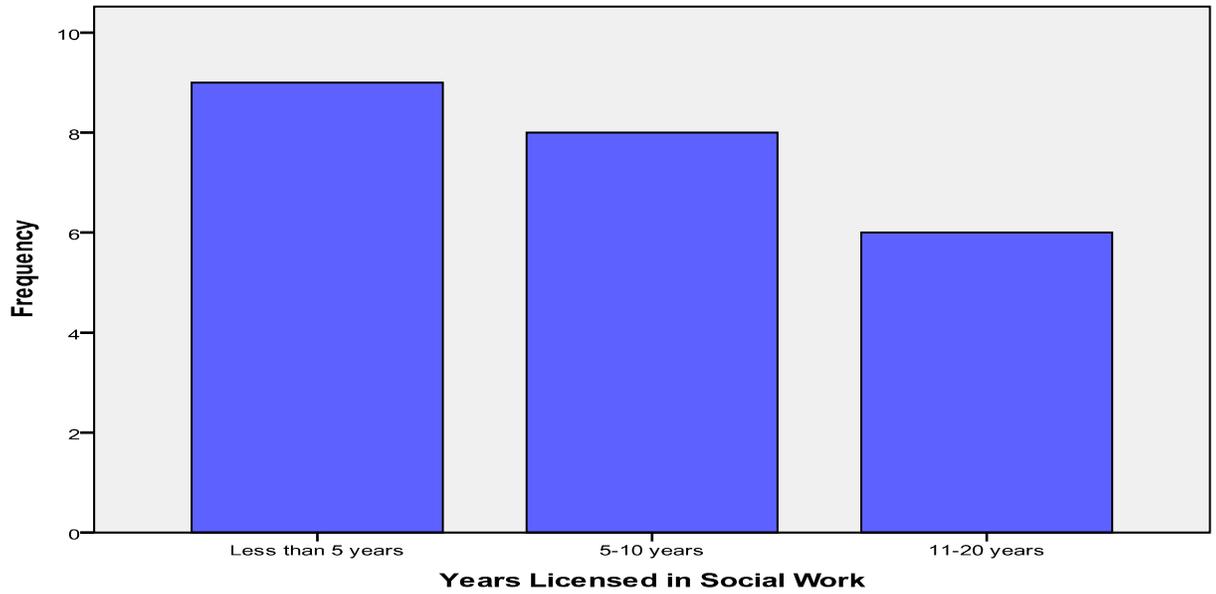
Figure 2. Number of Years Licensed in Social Work

A third descriptive analysis was conducted on question #6 'What is your primary practice area of focus?' and coded the variable as 'Primary Area of Focus' (*See Figure 3).* One respondent (4%) reported the focus of his/her work in Domestic Violence, two respondents (9%) worked primarily with families, two respondents (9%) working with mental health and chemical dependency and 18 of the respondents (78%) reported

primarly working with mental health as their primary area of focus.
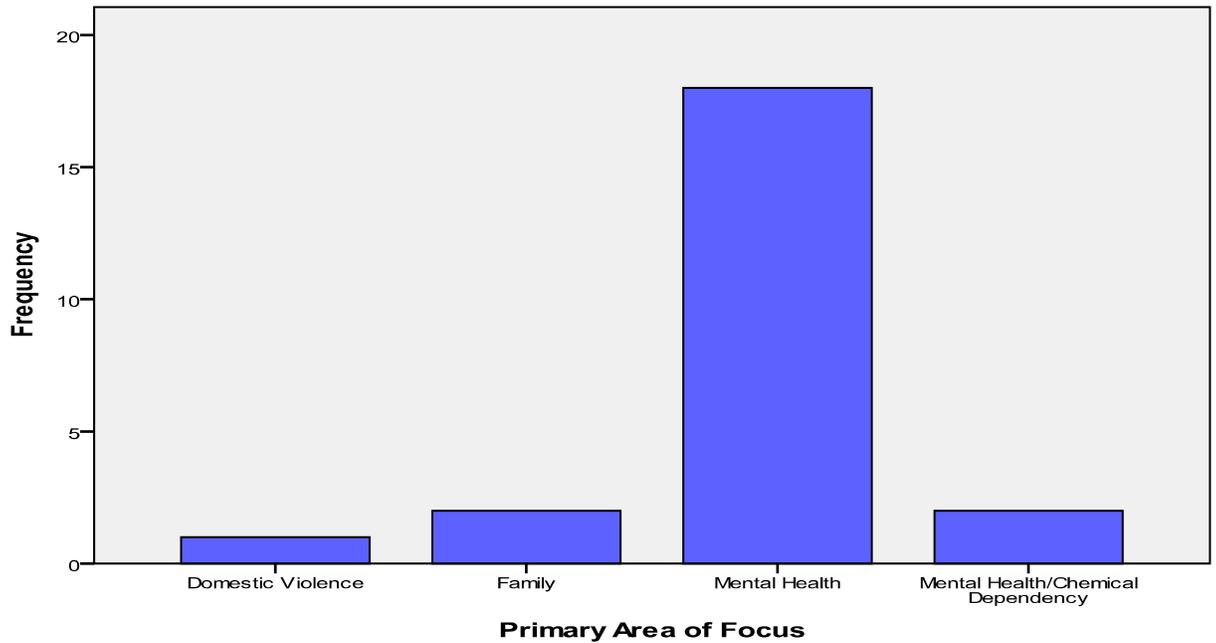
Figure 3. Primary Area of Focus

Interdependence

There were nine Likert-scale questions within the survey which were focused on interdependence. These questions are identified in Figure 4 below. The highest rated responses on the interdependence scale were two questions with 100% of the respondents agreeing to the questions "I utilize other social work professionals for their expertise" and "I view part of my professional role as supporting the role of others with whom I work". The second highest rated response at 97% was "Incorporating views by my social work colleagues improves my ability to meet client's needs". The third highest rated response at 74% was "I consistently give feedback to other professionals in my work setting". The fourth highest agreement response with 52% was to the question "My colleagues with whom I work have a good understanding of the distinction between my role and their role(s).

The three questions that received the least percentage of agreement were "My social work colleagues and I rarely communicate" at 4% of respondents agreed. "Teamwork with other social workers is not important in my work setting" and "Cooperative work with social work colleagues is not part of my job description" having 9% of respondents reported to agree, respectively.
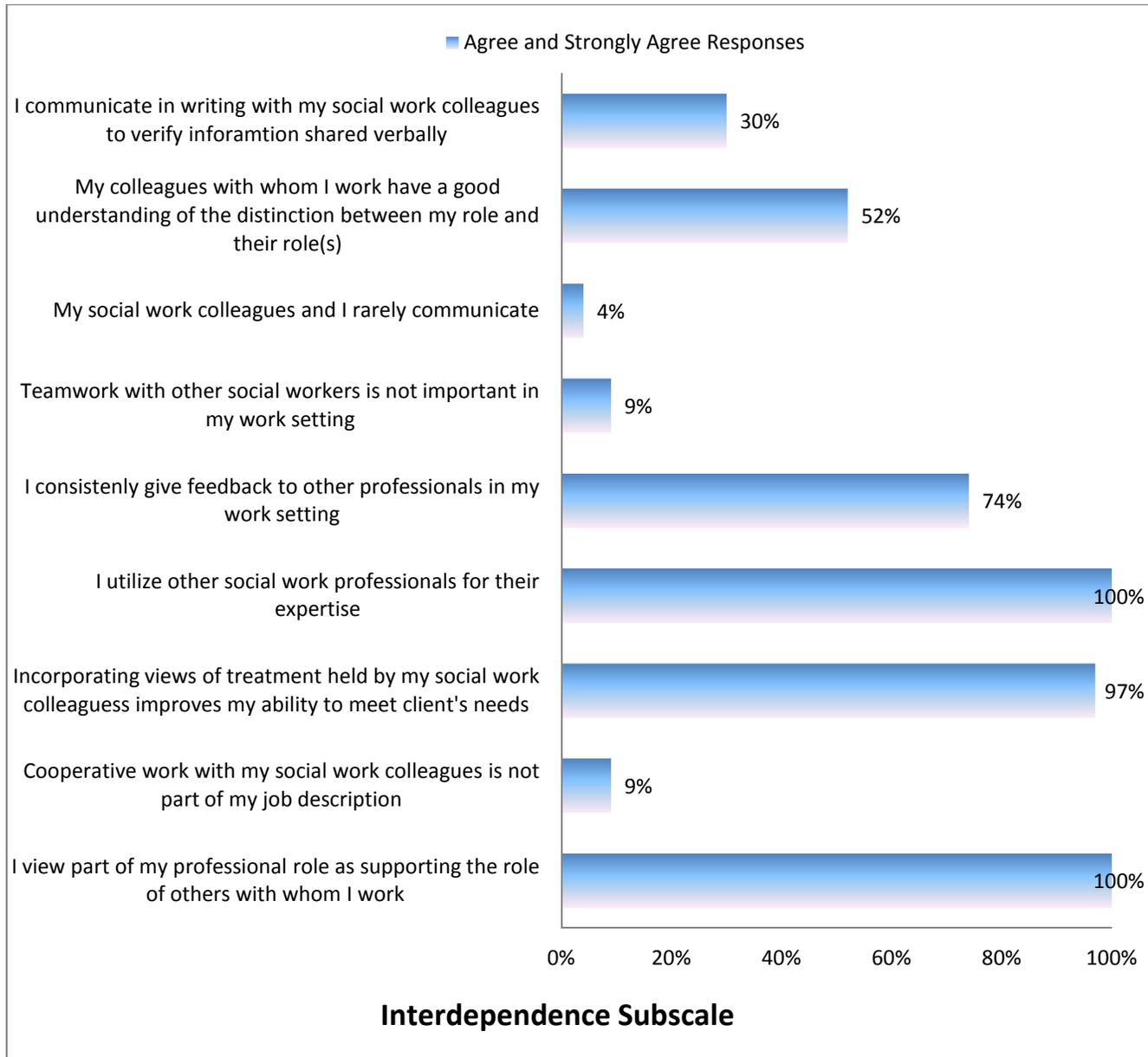
Figure 4. Responses on Interdependence Subscale

Newly created professional activities

There were six Likert-scale questions within the survey focused on newly created professional activities. This subscale is identified below *(Figure 5)*. The question "Creative outcomes emerge from my work with social work colleagues that I could not have predicted" in the subscale received 100% agreed responses from clients. The second highest response rate was 96% from question "Working with other social work colleague leads to outcomes that we could not achieve alone". The third highest response rate was 78% of responses to "Organizational protocols reflect the existence of cooperation between social work professionals". The fourth highest response rate was 65% to question "Formal procedures/mechanisms exist for facilitating dialogue between social workers". The fifth rated response had an agreement percentage of 61% to question "Distinct new programs emerge from the collective work with my social work colleagues". The lowest rated response in this subscale was 35% agreement to "I am not aware of situations in my agency in which a coalition, task force or committee has developed out of interdisciplinary collaboration".
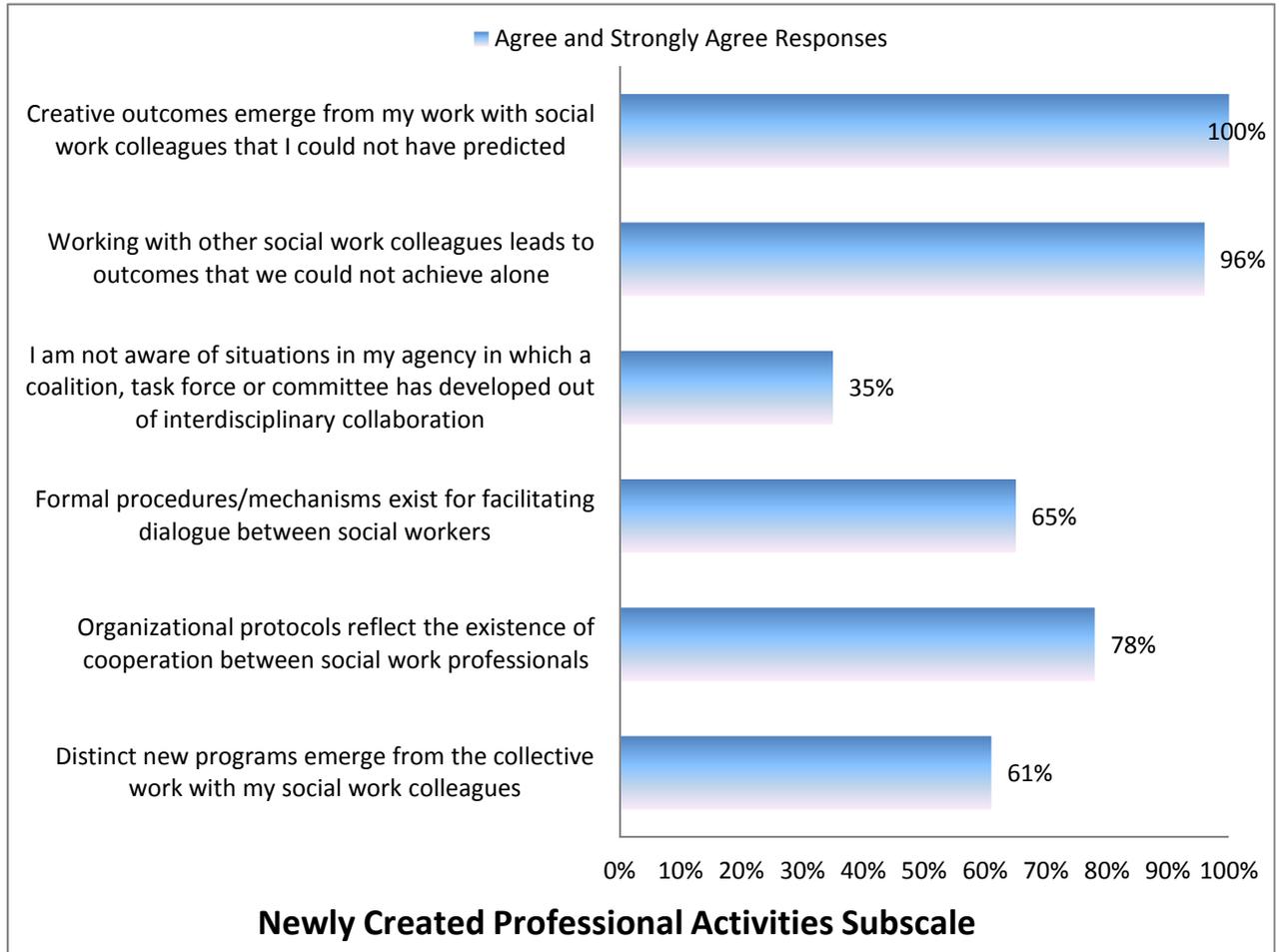
Figure 5. Responses on Newly Created Professional Activities subscale

Flexibility

      There were six Likert-scale questions within the survey focused on flexibility.

The questions listed in this subscale are identified below (*see Figure 6*). Two items on

this subscale received 100% agreed responses. These two items were "I utilize formal

and informal procedures for problem solving with my social work colleagues" and "I am

willing to take on tasks outside of my job description when it seems important". The

third highest rated response in this subscale at 91% was "My social work colleagues and I

work together in many different ways". The fourth highest rated response question with

83% agreement was "Relationships with my colleagues sustain themselves despite

external changes in the organization or outside environment".

The lowest two responses with agreed responses were to the questions "I am not

willing to sacrifice a degree of autonomy to support cooperative problem solving" had

13% agreed and the question "The social work colleagues with whom I work stick rigidly

to their job description" had no respondents agree with the statement.

■ Agree and Strongly Agree Responses

Relationships with my colleagues sustain themselves despite external changes in the organization or outside environment — 83%

My social work colleagues and I work together in many different ways — 91%

The social work colleagues with whom I work stick rigidly to their job descriptions — 0%

I utilize formal and informal procedures for problem solving with my social work colleagues — 100%

I am not willing to sacrifice a degree of autonomy to support cooperative problem solving — 13%

I am willing to take on tasks outside of my job description when it seems important — 100%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Flexibility Subscale

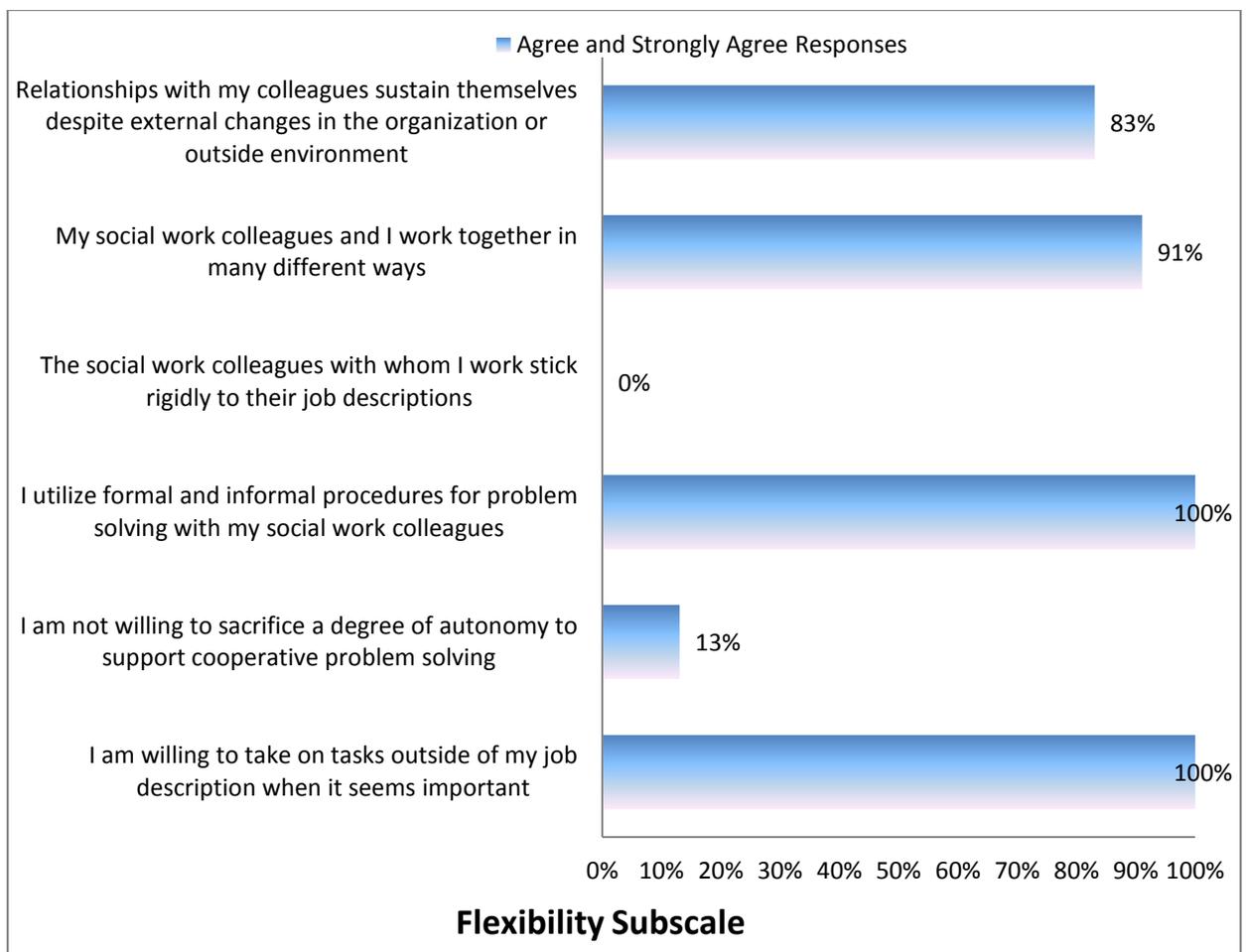*Figure 6. Responses on Flexibility Subscale*

Collective ownership of goals

There were six Likert-scale questions within the survey focused on collective ownership of goals. The questions from this subscale are identified in Figure 7 below. Ninety six percent of responses agree with the statement "My interactions with colleagues from a social work background occurs in a climate where there is a freedom to be different and disagree". The second highest response with 83% agreed "My social work colleagues work through conflicts with me in efforts to resolve them". The third and fourth highest response agreement rates were 78% to question "When social work colleagues make decisions together they go through a process of examining alternatives" and 70% agreed "Colleagues from all professional disciplines take responsibility for developing treatment plans".

Twenty six percent of responses agreed "Decisions about approaches to treatment are made unilaterally by professionals in my agency". No respondents agreed to the statement "My social work colleagues are not committed to working together".
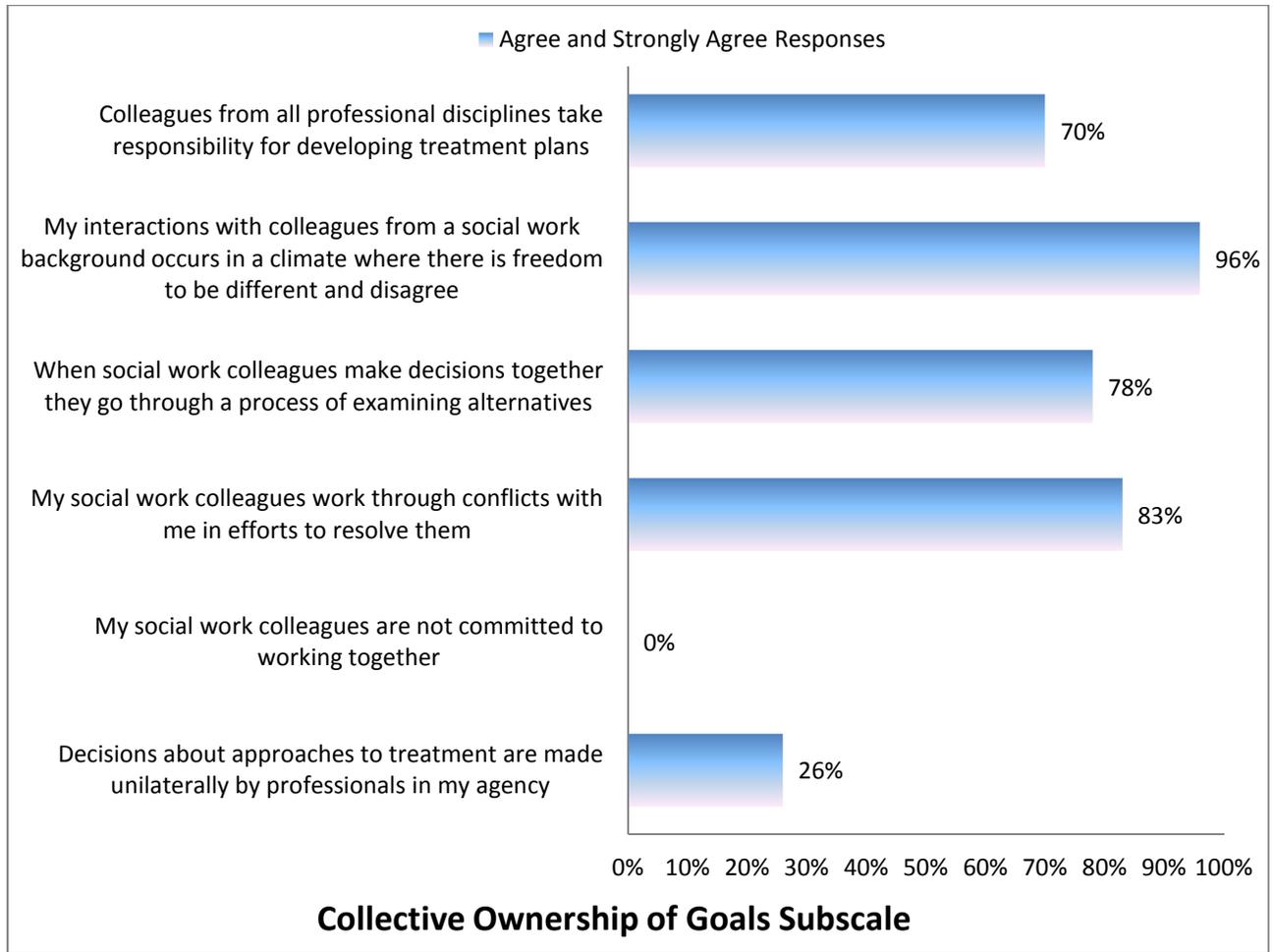
Agree and Strongly Agree Responses

Colleagues from all professional disciplines take responsibility for developing treatment plans — 70%

My interactions with colleagues from a social work background occurs in a climate where there is freedom to be different and disagree — 96%

When social work colleagues make decisions together they go through a process of examining alternatives — 78%

My social work colleagues work through conflicts with me in efforts to resolve them — 83%

My social work colleagues are not committed to working together — 0%

Decisions about approaches to treatment are made unilaterally by professionals in my agency — 26%

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50% 60% 70% 80% 90% 100%

Collective Ownership of Goals Subscale

Figure 7. Responses on Collective Ownership of Goals Subscale

Reflection on the process

There were 10 Likert-scale questions within the survey focused on reflection on the process. The questions included on this subscale are identified in Figure 8. One hundred percent of responses agreed to the statement "I work to create a positive climate in our organization". The second highest response was at 87% of responses agreed "I am optimistic about the ability of my social work colleagues to work with me to resolve problems". The third highest response was 78% of respondents agreed "I help social work colleagues to address conflicts with other professionals directly". The statements "I

discuss with professionals the degree to which each of us should be involved in a

particular client case" and "My social work colleagues are as likely as I am to address

obstacles to our successful collaboration" both had 70% of respondents report to agree

with those statements. The next highest response rate was 65% to the statement "My

social work colleagues and I talk together about our professional similarities and

differences including role, competencies and stereotypes". Fifty two percent of

respondents agreed "My social work colleagues and I often discuss different strategies to

improve our working relationships". Forty eight percent of respondents agreed "Social

work professionals are straightforward when sharing information with

clients/patients/students".

     Nine percent of respondents agreed to the statement "My social work colleagues

and I do not evaluate our work together". No respondents agreed to the statement "My

social work colleagues do not attempt to create a positive climate in our organization".

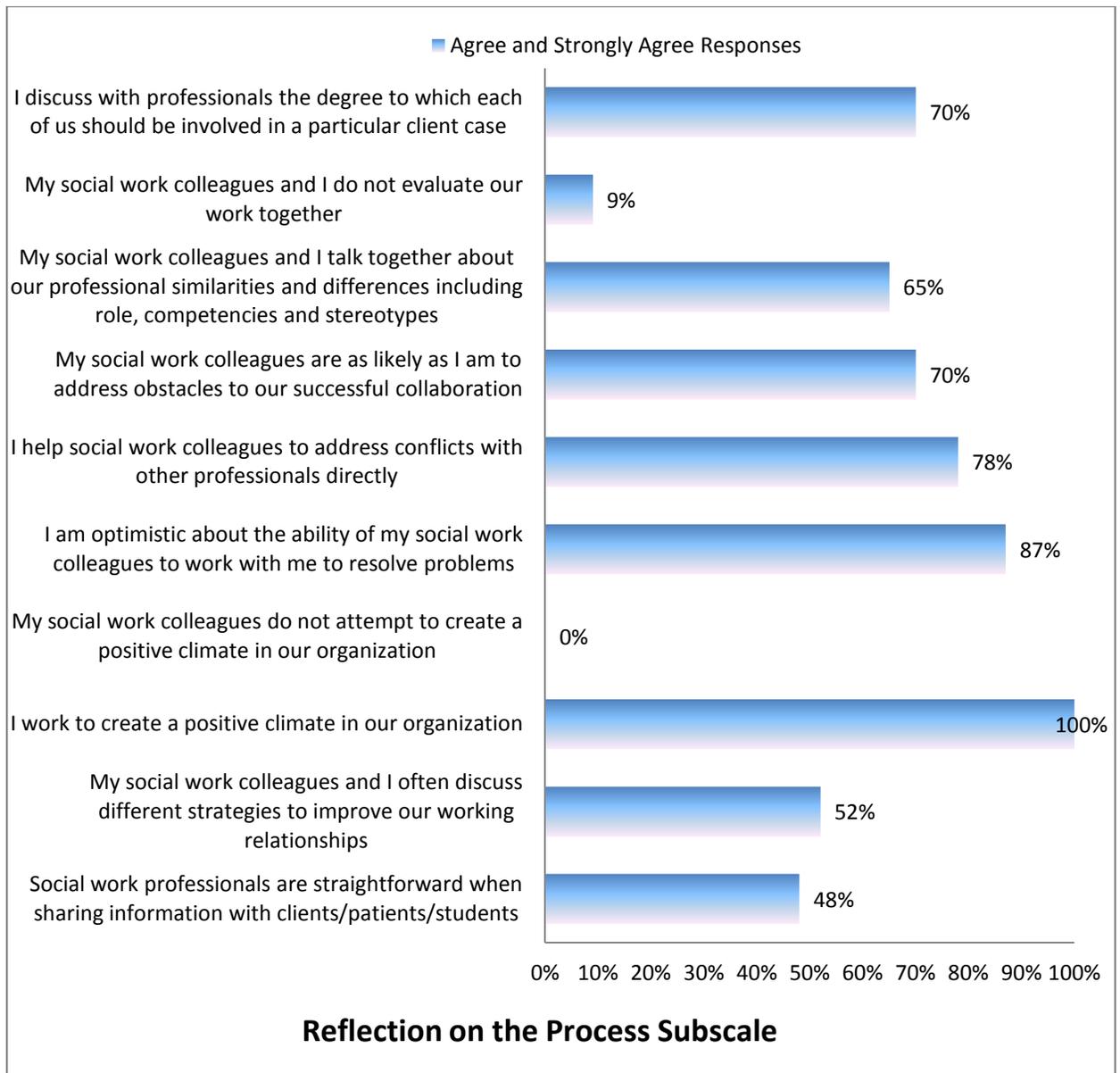Figure 8. *Responses for Reflection on the Process Subscale*

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore how interactions between social workers affect their ability to collaborate with one another. The following section attempts to reflect on the results of the current study and provide recommendations for future research and implications for social work. The results of this research indicate that

the majority of social workers have a positive outlook on collaborating with other social

workers and have experienced positive outcomes in doing so. Commitment to the

profession and their current position are present throughout the research.

When further discussing the findings of the research, it is important to remember

the data provided is based off respondent's perspectives. It is therefore necessary to

consider what may shape these perceptions, the amount of exposure to collaborative work

with other social workers. As noted in the literature review, current research supports the

need for agencies to be aware of the needs of social workers to enhance collaborative

work (Bronstein, 2002).

It is also important to identify how the primary area of focus in social work may

impact the beliefs around collaboration and teamwork. The majority of respondents to

this study worked in a mental health setting which promotes a team approach to the work

and social workers are frequently working with one another in this setting. Other areas of

focus in social work may not require work with other social workers, such as working in

a host setting which may be a nursing home or hospital. In these situations the social

worker may not have the opportunity to collaborate with other social workers.

Interdependence

Interdependence refers to the reliance on interactions among professionals to

accomplish tasks and goals. One hundred percent of the respondents agreed that it was

part of their professional role to support co-workers, 57% strongly agreed. The study

respondents also reported to have a clear understanding of the difference in roles of each

professional while maintaining a strong belief that it is important to help others as well.

Newly created professional activities

In the social work field programs, funding and expectations of workers are constantly evolving which makes it important for agencies and social worker's to develop new ways to work with one another and provide the best possible services to clients. The results of the research identified 57% of respondents noted the development of new programs as a result of collaborative work with their social work colleagues. New programs help to continue the growth of the agency and ability to serve clients. As the needs of each client differ from the next the ability to call upon many different possible outcomes or solutions to client situations or problems is imperative. The results of the study show that working with social work colleagues leads to created outcomes that could not have been predicted. These new outcomes will likely lead to more positive outcomes for the clients. Ninety two percent of the respondents agreed that these creative outcomes occur within their work with others, one respondent disagreed with this statement.

Collaborative work is important as it provides new opportunities to develop new programs and illicit creative outcomes that could not be done independently. Eighty seven percent of the respondents agreed that creative outcomes that are produced could not have been achieved alone.

Flexibility

Flexibility as it relates to collaboration has some expectation of blurring the roles of professionals in the workplace. Teamwork is closely identified with collaboration as they both can be defined as a working partnership with others (Wilson, 2004). At times

the teamwork may require workers to go outside of their job description in order to assist

a colleague. When respondents in this research were asked if they were willing to take

on tasks outside of his/her job description if it seemed important, 100% of the

respondents either agreed or strongly agreed. The response rate speaks to the dedication

of social work professionals to being flexible and participating in activities for the good

of the team or agency. When taking on tasks outside of one's job description there is a

possibility of needing to have more oversight or supervision related to these tasks which

may impact social worker's willingness to help. Seventy eight percent of respondents

reported that they would be willing to give up a degree of autonomy to support

collaborative work, 22% of the respondents reporting that they would not give up a

degree of autonomy to support collaborative work.

Collective ownership of goals

Over three quarters of the respondents in the study reported examining

alternatives with their social work colleagues before making decisions together. This

appreciation and understanding of the need to identify alternatives demonstrates a strong

collective ownership of what the colleagues are attempting to accomplish. In order for

colleagues to share in the goal of the agency or current task an environment of openness,

ability to be different and ability to disagree need to exist. From the sample of

respondents in this study, 22 of the 23 respondents reported their interactions with

colleagues to be in a climate with freedom to be different and disagree which is

congruent with past research.

Reflection on the process

A key fundamental principle of social work practice is communication which transfers into the importance for colleagues to reflect on and communicate with one another about the process of collaborating and receive feedback to improve for the future. The results of this study indicate that the social workers in the research discuss strategies to improve working relationships and address obstacles that arise. Over 60% of the respondents are open to discuss their professional similarities and differences as it relates to role, competencies and stereotypes in their work with colleagues. Social workers engage in reflective practice on a routine basis through supervision and informal communication with colleagues. Reflection is important to help social workers be aware of their personal biases and to make changes to their practice.

Strengths and Limitations

A significant limitation of this research is the utilization of a convenience sample. The respondents were recruited by two local social service agencies which limit the ability to generalize their responses. People who choose to participate in an online survey may differ from those who choose not to participate. Furthermore, the survey sample is limited in the number of respondents and also by the lack of diversity in the areas of practice. Most of the respondents practice with a focus on mental health. Therefore, the results of these findings will not be generalized to the social work profession as a whole.

This survey was developed by Laura Bronstein who has conducted much research in the area of collaboration of social workers. The survey has been identified as a reliable

tool to use in research on collaboration. The findings of this research may evoke lead to

more measurement of collaborative efforts in the social work practice. Agency

involvement in collaboration of its social work employees may change or improve.

Implications for Social Work

This study will add a body of knowledge about collaborative practice among

social workers. The survey inquired about a large range of questions related to

collaboration with coworkers which is important as it gathered a broad range of

information. The survey was able to identify many different situations that may impact

collaboration among professionals by the use of Likert scales and descriptive tallies in the

data analysis.

The information from this research will provide a starting point for social service

agencies and administrators to identify how to promote collaboration within the agency

or corporation among social workers.

Summary and Conclusion

Previous studies within the literature review indicate the need for collaborative

work among professionals in order to provide the best client centered care. The primary

research on social work collaboration has been conducted by Laura Bronstein who

believes in five core components to successful collaborative efforts: interdependence

newly created professional activities, flexibility, collective ownership of goals, and

reflection on the process. Overall, the results of this study show that the five components

that Laura Bronstein identifies are important and are met most of the time as reported by

social workers in the study.

Social workers in the study agree that it is part of their role to support other

professionals in their work through teamwork which improves the results and creates

positive outcomes with their practice. The respondents in the survey have a high level of

dedication to the profession. Their responses were consistent with the core principles of

social work practice and ongoing communication with colleagues in the workplace. The

findings were consistent with previous research indicating dedication to the employer and

profession play a large role in professional's willingness to collaborate with others

(Bronstein, 2003).

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<u>Appendix A</u>

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT

How do social worker's interactions with one another effect collaboration in the workplace?

I am conducting a study about how personal relationships of social workers in the work place affect their ability to collaborate professionally together. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because your position of employment allows for you to be involved with many social workers in the same agency who may gather information from one another frequently. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Leigha Scholtz, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, College of St. Catherine/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Philip AuClaire.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is: to identify and explore how relationships of co-workers, specifically social workers, affect their ability to collaborate with one another. As professionals in the social work field, social workers acknowledge their personal biases and values that may affect work with their clients, but it is interesting to identify if these biases and values affect their work with colleagues as well. If so, how do social workers address these situations?

Procedures:
If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: A link to an online anonymous survey will be sent via email from the clinical supervisor at your agency. You will be asked to complete the Likert scale survey responding to questions related to collaboration with co-workers. Once you have completed the survey, the results will be submitted to Qualtrics.com for the researcher to begin gathering data. No identifying information will be received from the survey, besides the answers given on the survey.
The project requires each student to complete a presentation on the research and data analysis, which is presented in front of individuals attending the presentation at St. Thomas University. Along with presenting this research I will be having up to three research committee members reviewing the data collected as well, as a reliability check to ensure my understanding of the data is consistent with other professionals. This reliability check helps to reduce bias in the data analysis.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:
The study has no risks. This study is strictly being completed as a requirement of the Social Research course to develop a greater understanding of the process of conducting

quantitative research and its implications to the Social Work Profession. There is no risk to the interviewee in being a part of this study.

The study has may have benefits for the social work profession in the future. Results of the research may lead to new information regarding what impacts the collaboration among social workers and how that can be improved to support one another and for the overall advancement of the profession.

Confidentiality:
The records of this study will be kept confidential. Research records will be kept in a locked file located on the researchers computer which is password protected, and no one besides the researcher has knowledge of this password. The results of the surveys and data collected will be destroyed by August 1, 2012.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the survey at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used to complete the study.

Contacts and Questions
My name is Leigha Scholtz. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 612-756-4956. You may also contact my research chair, Philip AuClaire at pauclaire@gmail.com.   You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:
I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audiotaped.

APPENDIX B

Survey Questionnaire

The purpose of this study is to explore how social workers collaborate in the workplace. The following questions are designed to attempt to answer the overall question of this study that is; "How do personal dynamics of social workers affect collaboration in the workplace?"

The following questions are multiple choice or have a box to enter answer to question asked. Please select one option that best fits your response to the question.

SELECT ONE OPTION BY CLICKING THE CIRCLE NEXT TO YOUR RESPONSE.

1.) What is your current social work license?

- o LSW
- o LGSW
- o LICSW
- o LISW

2.) How long have you been licensed as a social worker?

- o Less than 5 years
- o 5-10 years
- o 11-15 years
- o Over 16 years

3.) In years, how long have you been at your current position?
- o _____

4.) In what sector do you currently practice?

- o Private
- o Public
- o Both Private and Public

5.) In what setting do you primarily practice?

- o Independent setting
- o Team setting
- o Both independent and team setting equally

6.) What is your primary area of focus? (Ie. Mental health, children, psychotherapy, refugee populations)

- o   _____

The following statements ask for you to respond using 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neither Agree or Disagree, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. Please select one option that best reflects your answer. **SELECT YOUR ANSWER BY CLICKING ON ONE OF THE PROVIDED RESPONSES THAT BEST FITS YOUR RESPONSE.**

6.) I utilize other social work professional for their expertise

7.) I consistently give feedback to other professionals in my work setting

8.) Teamwork with other social workers is not important in my ability to help clients

9.) My social work colleagues and I rarely communicate

10.) My colleagues with whom I work have a good understanding of the distinction between my role and their role(s).

11.) I communicate in writing with my social work colleagues to verify information shared verbally.

12.) I view part of my professional role as supporting the role of others with whom I work.

13.) Cooperative work with social work colleagues is not part of my job description.

14.) Incorporating views of treatment held by my social work colleagues improves my ability to meet client's needs.

15.) Distinct new programs emerge from the collective work with my social work colleagues.

16.) Organizational protocols reflect the existence of cooperation between social work professionals.

17.) Formal procedures/mechanisms exist for facilitating dialogue between social workers.

18.) I am not aware of situations in my agency in which coalition, task force or committee has developed out of interdisciplinary collaboration.

19.) Working with other social work colleagues leads to outcomes that we could not achieve alone.

20.) Creative outcomes emerge from my work with social work colleagues that I could not have predicted.

21.) I am willing to take on tasks outside of my job description when it seems important

22.) I am not willing to sacrifice a degree of autonomy to support cooperative problem solving

23.) I utilize formal and informal procedures for problem-solving with my social work colleagues

24.) The social work colleagues with whom I work stick rigidly to their job descriptions

25.) My social work colleagues and I work together in many different ways

26.) Relationships with my colleagues sustain themselves despite external changes in the organization or outside environment

27.) Decisions about approaches to treatment are made unilaterally by professionals in my agency

28.) My social work colleagues are not committed to working together

29.) My social work colleagues work through conflicts with me in efforts to resolve them

30.) When social work colleagues make decisions together they go through a process of examining alternatives

31.) My interactions with colleagues froma social work background occurs in a climate where there is freedom to be different and disagree

32.) Colleagues from all professional disciplines take responsibility for developing treatment plans

33.) Social work professionals are straightforward when sharing information with clients / patients / students

34.) My social work colleagues and I often discuss different strategies to improve our working relationships

35.) I work to create a positive climate in our organization

36.) My social work colleagues do not attempt to create a positive climate in our organization

37.) I am optimistic about the ability of my social work colleagues to work with me to resolve problems

38.) I help my social work colleagues to address conflicts with other professionals directly

39.) My social work colleagues are as likely as I am to address obstacles to our successful collaboration

40.) My social work colleagues and I talk together about our professional similarities and differences including role, competencies and stereotypes

41.) My social work colleagues and I do not evaluate our work together

42.) I discuss with professionals the degree to which each of us should be involved in a particular client case

APPENDIX C

University of St. Thomas / College of St. Catherine
School of Social Work
2004 Randolph Avenue
Mail: F-15
St. Paul, MN 55105

December 6th, 2011

To Whom It May Concern,

This letter acknowledges the intent of Leigha Scholtz to engage in a research study within this agency. As depicted in her Appendix A Leigha will be surveying various social workers at our agency regarding their individual experiences throughout their work. It is our understanding that no identifying information about our staff related to age, gender or ethnicity will be mentioned in the study and that participation of our staff will be completely voluntary.

Based on the information Leigha has provided to us, we provide consent for her to move forward with her method to conduct the research she needs in order to complete her clinical research paper needed for graduation. We do ask that while in the course of data collection, if one of our staff accidently divulges any identifying information about another staff person or about themselves or a client, that Leigh redacts this information from her data in order to protect confidentiality.

If there are any modifications that need to be made to Leigha's mode of data collection, we ask that she inform us to ensure that all social work staff is protected from any unforeseen issues that may arise.

Sincerely,

Agency Representative, LICSW

APPENDIX D

December 12, 2011

Leigha Scholtz
4510B Cinnamon Ridge Trail
Eagan, MN 55122

Hello Leigha,

Guild Incorporated is supportive of the distribution of the survey instrument and to use the data collected to complete your research described in your letter to our Clinical Director. The agency would like to see the results of the survey when it is completed.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at 651.925.8471.

Cordially,

Agency Representative
Senior Director, Services