The stigmatization of injured workers: the construction of 'unworthiness' in the compensation process

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Based in large part on research done with
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Stigma

- a socially acquired 'stain', mark of disapproval, negative identity, stereotype

- 'injured worker' (IW): a stigmatized social status

- socially and morally discrediting

- can increase suffering, and impede rehabilitation and RTW

'Discourse of abuse'

- presumptions of (or suspicion of) bad faith, misuse of compensation and benefits

- 'easy money', 'scamming the system', faking or exaggerating harms, not wanting to work

If a person hasn't been injured and you tell him what you're collecting workers' comp, they think you're scamming the government. Right away it's 'Oh here's a lazy guy, collecting this'
(injured worker, printing)

Sources of stigma

- multiple and at different levels :
  - face-to-face interaction
  - organizational structures & processes
  - regulations and policy
  - media, society

- typically not overt, conscious or deliberate
- embedded in texts, in ways of thinking & doing

Purpose of presentation

- show how organizational structures and processes can contribute to stigmatization

- via secondary analysis findings from the study of front-line service work at Ontario's WSIB

Study of
frontline service work at the WSIB

Purpose

- characterize & explain the nature of work and client relations at the front lines – including adjudicators, nurse case managers, employer account administrators and their managers

Methodology

- ethnographic 'go-along' observation of work practices

- individual interviews with front-line staff

- analysis of institutional texts

- interpretive qualitative analytic strategies

Secondary analysis of 'front-line' study

- the role of the compensation system in the stigmatization of IWs

- how IWs are 'constructed' by interaction and by discursive and material practices at the frontline

Findings of front-line study as a whole

- Professional assembly line:
  - disciplinary role
  - mediate competing accountabilities

- Strategic discretionary activities
  - key tools of the trade
  - discursive (names/labels 'construct' and have consequences)

- To accomplish their work in a 'professional assembly line', and to navigate the difficulties and uncertainties associated with human service work, frontline staff engage in practices that can inadvertently contribute to the stigmatization of IWs.

- The construction of 'unworthiness'

The construction of unworthiness

- perceived worthiness (or deservingness) is a critical form of social capital for IWs

- IWs may be cast as unworthy
  - discourse of abuse
  - seen as cost not revenue
  - improper fulfillment of role expectations:
    illegitimacy of economic motivation
    'poster child' ideals

Adjudicator:

"The doctors didn't think he [injured worker] could walk, much less run. This man, in 6 months, he was not only walking he was running! Took himself back to work before the doctors were even ready to tell him he could go back to work. And it was astonishing, his recovery. He did that because he wanted to. There was no way that he was not going to recover. You gotta admire them, you almost want to make them your poster person. See what the human spirit can do right?.. Then on the other hand you have people who have entitlement issues, they think that they are entitled to everything and more that there's no way that we can satisfy or compensate for that injury."

Consequences of unworthiness

- reduced access to informal support

- incorporated into the rationale of adjudication decisions

Conclusions

- organizational structures/ practices can contribute to stigmatization

- in compensation process IWs acquire social and moral identities

- moral evaluations of IWs incorporated into labour process, organizational practices, institutional and professional logics

- difficult to redress organizationally embedded stigmatization

- WSIB's remarkable initiatives to end & prevent systemic stigmatization