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Social Workers in Human Resources

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SW 798: Honors Thesis

Dr. Melissa Wells
Social Workers in Human Resources

Introduction

The discipline of social work trains professionals to work with people within their larger environment (Miley & O’Melia., 2022). Human resource professionals support employees within their places of employment (Noe et al., 2017). While it may seem these two professional paths would intersect, there is limited knowledge of the experiences of social workers employed in HR settings. This Honors-in-Major thesis explores the crossover of social work (SW) and human resources (HR). Using the definition of both occupations, the goals of the work are outlined. Specifically, this thesis focuses on how mediation used by HR professionals runs parallel to SW. Data pulled from five interviews will foster an understanding of the experiences of HR professionals with SW degrees.

Although there is a limited research base on this topic, a link between HR and SW will be made in this thesis. Different professions can have unforeseen similarities. For example, HR management is a profession in which the workers are concerned with how people, policies, and systems are organized within agencies (Legge, 1995). Similarly, SW can be defined as a practice that is concerned with people’s variety of needs and the social structures causing these needs (Hugman & Smith, 1995). Therefore, by definition, HR management and SW seem to have similar professional goals in terms of working with individuals within different systems for their betterment. One of the HR tasks that most closely resembles a SW task is mediation. Mediation, which is a balancing space to create change when conflict presents itself (Almeida, 2015, p.1), is the focus of this study. Little research has been done on the effectiveness of obtaining a SW degree, specifically regarding the human resource mediation role, which this study will explore.

Paths to Human Resources
There are many paths in which professionals end up in this career field. To prepare for this type of job, students in the United States can obtain various degrees that have a cross-over between business and SW. For example, the University of Michigan offers a dual degree bachelor’s program. This dual degree program would end with a student obtaining a master's in business administration and a master's in social work. This program allows students to get a broad-scope degree in business while also focusing on SW (“Dual Degree Opportunities”, n.d.). This type of broad business degree while also focusing on obtaining SW skills could potentially be applied to HR management or any other profession that could meet in the middle of business and SW.

More specifically in HR, in India at Parul University, students are offered a Master of Social Work in Human Resource Management. This program was developed with SW in mind so students can better understand personal relations, dynamics, and behavior (“Master of Social Work in HRM”, n.d.). These skills then are applied to corporate and business mind frames so students can understand the different issues and systems that would be affecting workers. The curriculum of this program consists of two years. During the first year, students would learn the basics of HR and the environment and relations of industries and businesses (“Master of Social Work in HRM”, n.d.). Not only this, but it also includes classes that teach students how to work with individuals, groups, and communities. The second-year students would learn a lot about management within organizations and working with people (“Master of Social Work in HRM”, n.d.). Overall, this program specifically shows the direct crossover between human resources and social work in the professional scope.

After obtaining a degree and moving into looking for jobs, different placements within HR have different requirements. When looking for jobs through the Northeast HR Association
(Northeast HR Association, n.d.), many of the required skills include a bachelor’s in science which SW falls under. This suggests that at least for entry-level positions in HR management, employers are flexible in the degrees that people have obtained. Many potential employers state that if you have obtained any bachelor's, you can apply for the job (Northeast HR Association, n.d.). Therefore, this indicates that SW skills can be applied to the role of HR management in cases where employers will hire people with a Bachelor of Science or other social work degree.

**What is Social Works Role in Human Resources**

Human Resource management professionals can hold many different roles within their job. Some HR responsibilities may include “…employee recruitment, training and development, performance appraisal, and rewarding,” (Rihan, n.d., p.1). Although HR managers complete many roles for their positions, this study focuses on the mediation role of human resources. Mediation within HR can be described as “…when the conflict takes a leading role in the relationships between people, between them and the organizations and between the organizations in a given territory, and every time that the search for alternatives requires the intervention of a third party that values the communication between the parties and the decision-making ability of the litigants, in order to establish a mutual agreement, without the intervention of the judge or a negotiator,” (Almeida, 2015, p.1). No matter the role being performed by the HR professional, there is an overall goal to produce efficiency while being concerned with managing people within systems (Rihan, n.d.). Mediation is just one part of the overall makeup of HR managers’ tasks to fulfill this goal. However, it is closely aligned with many of the core social work practice components.

**Mediation**
In the professional world, many have made connections between SW and HR. In general, having a SW background in a business setting can be beneficial for many reasons. SW can be defined as a profession that balances three main goals: “…maintaining social order and providing social welfare services effectively, helping people attain personal fulfillment and power over their lives, and stimulating social change,” (Payne, 2006, p. 189). Based on what is known about mediation from Almeida (2015), the goals of SW closely align. To start, mediation is a skill that requires offering a space for open communication between different parties when there is conflict. This space allows for employee voice to be facilitated and even challenge higher ups within the agency (Saundry, 2018). This, in turn, allows for social order to continue while listening for places in which resources can be given to both parties. Further, mediation can promote employee satisfaction and boost the work environment. This sets employees up for greater satisfaction and fulfillment in their professional lives. Lastly, depending on the scope of the issue, bigger things can lead to bigger changes. A specific conflict could lead to a workplace environment shift or a policy change. Either way, the outcome of a conflict resolved by mediation can push forward social change within the office.

All three dimensions of SW goals, (1) provision of services, (2) helping others, and (3) social change, are closely aligned with the goals set forth by mediation within an office setting. It seems as though with a SW background and training, professionals could have specific skill sets that allow for an effective mediation process. Whether the goals in mind are applied to individuals or a business, the conversations and actions taken must require the same skill set to accomplish the same outcome. Therefore, in this study, individuals with SW degrees will describe their experiences in applying their learned SW skill sets to their mediation role in HR management.
Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging

Within the ethical standards laid out for social workers, there is a focus on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in our work with all individuals (National Association of Social Workers, 2017; Council on Social Work Education, 2022). Within a workplace, there are people from all over who identify in different ways, leading to intersections of many identities including those defined in the Council on Social Work Education (Council on Social Work Education, 2022). With that being said, one article states that having social workers in an HR role could produce better outcomes with harassment claims (Bullinger, 2018). Obviously, with clients feeling a sense of belonging being an important focus of this work, people with SW backgrounds have the education and training to handle situations in which people feel othered. This training could lead to an enhanced skill set to handle situations in which employees experience harassment within the workplace. Not only this, but this article also states that social workers could produce better outcomes in hiring underrepresented populations with the support of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) incentives (Bullinger, 2018). This could enhance the efforts of DEIB committees that exist in many businesses because social workers have formal training on implementing it into their everyday work. Overall, social workers in this role could account for more resilient companies that have a better output due to a sense of belonging and inclusion within the business.

Employee Engagement

The established ethical standards that SW abides by would overall produce better employee engagement due to the inclusive and diverse atmosphere they could produce (National Association of Social Worker, 2017). Through a SW degree, these professionals will have a background in ethical practice and justice work within the world. This background could be
applied to HR by a person with a SW degree focusing on changing corporate culture around ethics (Bullinger, 2018). To complement a culture of companies having a money-driven focus, social workers within agencies can help shift the focus to promoting the overall well-being of the employees. By doing this, employees would be performing in a better work environment which overall is encouraging for producing better employee work (Bullinger, 2018). Therefore, by doing so indirectly, a more engaged staff can lead to better outcomes for the business.

These same benefits of including a social worker as an HR manager have been found in other articles as well. For example, one touched on the benefits of a social worker's community engagement-building skills for companies to utilize (“The new role...”, n.d.). Not only community within the office, but also outside of the office setting. Within the office, SW skills can be applied to boost employee relationships and engagement by building rapport and a more inclusive work environment. Outside of the office, SW skills that could include pulling resources and integrating the surrounding area into the company can have beneficial effects on the company’s revenue and purpose in the community (“The new role...”, n.d.). Overall, these SW skills are a strength for HR managers trying to heighten employee engagement and community awareness.

This is important because depending on the effectiveness of a HR manager’s work, employees may be more engaged and satisfied with the company. One study found that employees who have positive perceptions of HR within their agencies have higher levels of engagement, feel more supported by the agency, and overall want to stay at the employer for longer (Alfes et al., 2013). This positive perception comes from positive interactions which can be facilitated especially in mediation moments. Open, effective communication being prioritized by HR can create a better dynamic for employees and the company. This was found again in a
study done by Anthia (2014). This research found that work environment and coworker relationships were the biggest predictors of employee engagement. These findings highlight the importance of how mediation done by a social worker in HR can benefit the workforce and agency.

Historically, there have been some articles such as the ones above that compare SW to HR management and highlight the strengths of the crossover of skills. However, there is limited research on the specific skills that are utilized by social workers in a HR position. More specifically, there is limited research on people's experiences in transferring skills from a SW degree into the HR mediation role, which this study will explore.

Theory

Several theories have been used in the study of HR work. One of the theories is conflict theory. Conflict theory says that incompatible goals, solidarity, organization, mobilization, hostility, and resources are all factors that could result in conflicting behavior (Bartos & Wehr, 2002). This theory relates to the current study because the role of mediation in HR arises when there is conflict between people. Therefore, applying this theory is rooted in the causation of mediation.

Another theory that relates to this study is the resource-based theory. This theory states that different enterprises have different established resources that allow them to flourish in different ways. Therefore, even comparable enterprises will not have the same outcomes due to the resources they obtain and the competencies to utilize the resources (Olalla, 1999). This theory relates to the study because having an effective HR manager who can produce employee engagement and retention as explained before is an internal resource for a company. Therefore, knowing what training is the most effective for HR is important because the better the training,
the better the HR professional will be. This could mean that with a SW trained HR professional, companies can have a certain edge over their competitors.

One additional theory that relates to this study is the human capital theory. This theory states that a high education level is positively correlated to an increased skill set that allows for high productivity (Strober, 1990). Applying this to the current study would correlate because this study will allow an understanding of the effectiveness of SW skills learned through formal education being applied to HR management. This study builds on the belief that having a college degree can instill skill sets that create a more effective human resource professional, especially when practicing mediation.

Current Study

This study will help understand the experiences of people with SW degrees and how they apply the learned skills to a HR profession, especially to the mediation role. This study builds on conflict theory, resource-based theory, and human capital theory. All of these highlight the way in which employees can be positive resources for a company with the correct training. Therefore, this study will explore if SW can be a helpful path for HR professionals.

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative design, with a convenience sample. This study was reviewed and approved through the Institution Review Board (IRB #FY2024-42).

Sample

The sample of participants was found through snowball and convivence sampling. Potential participants were found through word of mouth, online searching through LinkedIn, and an email sent to New Hampshire National Association of Social Workers members. In total, 15 people were personally contacted to request participation.
From my personal contacting and the NH NASW member email, five (N=5) people with SW degrees were engaged in in-depth, semi-structured interviews. To begin, one participant heard about through word of mouth around my university was contacted to inquire about interest in participation. This participant was amicable to participate. Using snowball sampling, this participant shared contact information for another potential participant. I outreached this contact three times and did not get an answer for an interview. While this outreach was happening, I found 8 potential participants through a public profile on LinkedIn. Two participants had their contact information online which I utilized to outreach. Both of these potential participants consented to participate in the interview. The other 6 did not have their contact information online. Therefore, I emailed their agency asking for the direct contact information of their HR manager. From this, four of the agencies did not answer while two gave me the contact information. I outreached these two potential participants three times and did not get an answer. The last means of finding potential participants was utilizing a recruitment message in the New Hampshire’s National Association of Social Workers membership email newsletter. The faculty member supervising this research emailed the Executive Director of the NH NASW the recruitment email for this project with my contact information. All members then received this email and could reach out if interested. I received three emails from this method. Two potential participants consented to participate. I outreached the third person three times and did not get an answer. In the second interview from the NASW outreaching, the participant did not have any experience working in human resources, so this data was not included in the findings.

Those who were recruited and eligible to participate had to fit certain guidelines. To begin, they needed to have a degree in SW whether that was bachelor’s level or beyond.
Additionally, all participants needed to have experience working in an HR role. This could have been previous experience or current.

**Measures and Interview Questions**

During the IRB approval process, I crafted interview questions for future research. All questions were linked to what skill sets the participants took from their degree and applied to their HR role emphasizing mediation. The questions asked during the interviews were the following: What were the major takeaways from your social work degree, specifically, the skill sets? Have you had any experiences with mediation in human resources? If yes, what did it look like? What skill sets are being used the most in human resources? In what ways did your social work degree help you with the human resources role?

**Data Collection and Analysis**

This study was approved by the University of New Hampshire Institutional Review Board (IRB) #FY2024-42 before any data was collected. This study engaged in a qualitative design to explore the mediation experiences of HR professionals who have SW degrees. Interviews began in December of 2023 and ended in March of 2024. Potential participants were sent an informed consent document prior to the interviews via email. Before interviews began, they were asked if they had received and read the document and then asked for verbal consent from the participant. Data for this study was taken during the scheduled Zoom semi-structured interviews. These zoom calls lasted from 15 to 30 minutes to collect data. There was a question guide sheet in front of me to ask during these interviews. While the questions were being answered by each participant, typed notes were being taken on my laptop under each question with their answer.
I analyzed all of the data for qualitative themes. After each interview, I extended the brief notes I took during the zoom call. I would spend 30-45 minutes immediately after the interviews typing out in full length what the interviewee had said during the time we spoke. I typed out full notes immediately after the interviews to ensure the most authentic and accurate responses were recorded for data collection. Once all of the interviews were complete, I put the notes I took side by side on my computer. I then began coding for the theories (human capital theory, conflict theory, and resource-based theory) through the different answers from participants. I started by looking at the first question and reading through each interviewee’s answers. After I did this, I utilized color coding to find themes throughout the answers. Therefore, I highlighted all similar words and processes for the first question. I then repeated this process for the next three questions.

**Study Aims**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of those with SW degrees working in HR. Specifically, to understand if the skill sets learned in their education applied to their role of HR during mediation.

**Findings**

The study results are looked at through a lens of conflict theory, resource-based theory, and human capital theory. The findings illustrate how HR professionals feel as though their SW degree aligns with the skill sets, they utilize in their HR positions. The participants’ responses are organized into three major themes which are explained below. These themes were created through color-coding the saturated pieces of interviews found between the data.

*Theme one: Process of mediation.*
The results of this study suggest that the participants did engage in mediation activities. In this study, all four of the participants said they have dealt with conflict within the HR role. Three of which named this mediation, while one named it disciplinary action. No matter the name of it, they all seemed to have similar patterns of ways in which they handled conflict. Additionally, there were similar skill sets used that have linkage to the skills they took away from their social work degree.

Below is Table 1 highlighting the different ways in which they go about the process of mediation and handling conflict as an HR professional. All of these quotes were taken when the participant was describing what the process of mediation looked like for them and what skills they found themselves using the most in these moments. Additionally, each participant stated that they felt as though their SW skills helped them in mediation moments due to the overlap in skills.

Although some of the participants did not describe all of these moments as mediation, there was a theme of experiences with handling conflict between employees within the HR position. These quotes show the different ways the participants approach these situations and showcase the overlap of SW skills used.

**Table 1**

Skills each participant uses during mediating conflict.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Social Work Skilled Used in Mediation (Disciplinary)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Resolving peer conflict.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Therapeutic listening skills.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Creating a space for people to feel safe.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Motivational interviewing.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Using case management skills to remain organized.”</td>
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<td>---</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Handling confidential information.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Active listening.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Calming presence.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Recognizing when I should jump in and when I should step back.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“People just need someone to listen to them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Motivational interviewing.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Promoting self-reflection.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Training for having a diverse work force and how to be sensitive.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Using biopsychosocial view to keep in mind what is happening outside of work for this individual.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“Consult to identify the issue.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Support their success.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Space to share what happened.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Room to respond.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Collaborative approach.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Theme two: Social work degrees are beneficial for human resources.**

The findings show that having SW degrees made the interviewees feel as though they had the correct skill sets for their HR positions. When asked the last question in regard to if they felt as though their degree helped them in the HR position, all participants answered yes. Participant 1 strongly believed that her degree has helped with their current HR position.
“Absolutely. All of the clinical skills I learned were transferred. One of the things I love about social work is the scope of populations it can serve and even in human resources it can be applied. Anything people focused where you need to tolerate a lot, a social work degree can apply. Social work really teaches you the skills to work with people and handle anything.”

(Participant #1)

Participant 1 answered the last question in a way that proves that a SW degree is applicable and beneficial for the HR role. Not only this, but they also extended the usefulness to other occupations that work with people. However, they did also speak on the difficulty of having a SW background when things need to become disciplinary focused.

“It can be a challenge to switch between a social work hat and human resources hat. For example, there has been someone not showing up on time and the empathic social worker in me knows this is because of difficult things they have been handling. But the human resources professional in me knows I need to focus on what is best for the business and having employees that are meeting our standards.”

(Participant #1)

Participant 1 highlighted the benefits of having a SW degree and the way the skills are transferable to any people focused job. However, they also touched on the potential difficulty of switching from a SW to HR hat and how to manage empathic tendencies that can be associated with a SW role. Participant 2 had similar beliefs on a SW degree being helpful for her HR job.
“Yes, it has been really helpful. Learning how to work with a diverse workforce has come up a lot for me. All of my employees are different ages and hold different cultural identities. My MSW really helped prepare me to recognize the importance of seeing people’s diverse background and using it as a way to communicate effectively with them. I also took a class that discussed how to fire people which is extremely applicable as the director of human resources. Another class was a strategic planning course. This helped me immensely with planning courses of action and taking initiatives to ensure that our agency is more desirable for both employees and customers.”

(Participant #2)

Participant 2 spoke on classes that have since connected to her HR position. Furthermore, she spoke on things that she has been able to feel as though she is ahead of others due to her SW degree. She spoke specifically about how her social work classes gave her a leg up on knowing about mental health and substance abuse signs that are now being talked about in workplaces.

“Recently there has been a big push for mental health needs within the workspaces. I sat in on a conference that discussed signs and symptoms of mental health issues while working with employees. My social work degree allowed me to already have a leg up in this new discussion for human resource people. Especially having a recovery friendly environment is extremely important within this topic. Again, my social work degree really helped me get ahead on this.”

(Participant #2)
Participant 3 also believes that her SW degree definitely helped grow skill sets that are used in the HR position. She also touched on a specific class from her SW degree that she feels as though correlates to her HR position and allowed her to be more prepared working with others.

“My MSW definitely helped with my skill sets. Fundamentally, the degree helped me understand human behavior. My human person environment class allowed me to understand why people act the way they do and why people do the things they do. Having this understanding lets me teach people in mediation when I am teaching others how to self-reflect. Really focusing during mediation on the thought process that it is not about you, it is about the way that I process things. My previous case management role really let me grow my skill sets of motivational interviewing which my MSW started to talk about.”

(Participant #3)

Following this trend, Participant 4 expressed her belief that her SW degree is useful with her HR role. She touched on different skills that her SW degree touched on that she has brought into her HR position with her. She also argues the point that SW can be applied to various different roles.

“My social work background lets me see the bigger picture and think about things in a way that is really person by person or case by case. People skills and especially instilling empathy and compassion are strengthened by a social work degree. Although those things can be found in many different places, social work naturally builds on them and being able to see the person in
When asked if their SW degrees were helpful in their HR positions, all participants spoke to the applicable crossover of having the degree and working in HR. They spoke about different classes that applied as well as skill sets that they use. Overall, the findings are that people with SW degrees believe that their knowledge can be used effectively in the role of an HR professional.

*Theme three: Overlap of taught skill sets at different social work programs.*

Throughout all of the interviews, there was a theme within the skill sets of SW that kept reoccurring which was using a broad lens to work with individuals within a system. Participant 4 spoke about how her SW degree has been extremely helpful in her work especially when working with others. Specifically, they said the following:

“Social work helped align how I understand issues of mental health symptoms and stressors by looking at the bigger picture rather than just the individual.”

*(Participant #4)*

This participant explained that the wide lens approach changes the way they think about things going on in others' lives. Their SW degree focused on people within their environment and attending to the individual in front of them while keeping in mind the systems at work in
their everyday lives. This same skill set was mentioned by Participant 3. They spoke about a conflict that occurred between a professor and themselves during their time in a social work program. This conflict led to her strengthening her ability to look at the bigger picture when looking for solutions.

“Through this experience, I was able to look into the policy regarding the issue and how it should be handled. I believe it should be the teachers’ responsibility to teach their students the unknown. Looking into this policy helped me realize that I wanted to practice macro-level social work. It lets me look at things with a broader lens. Instead of looking at things in a narrow way, everything should be taken into perspective and look outside of the box.”

(Participant #3)

Outside of skill sets, Participant 2 spoke about SW assessment skills she used while working in HR. She believes that working in HR also means working with people who could have mental health issues as well. They believe that SW programs allow employees to assess signs of this within workspaces.

“Many people are using alcohol and weed which can interfere with work. A substance use class I took taught me the signs of substance abuse. With my social work background, I was able to learn the signs of early mental health issues and burnout. Knowing these things with my own employees allows me to take precautionary steps for a happier work environment.”

(Participant #2)
Participant 2’s ability to assess mental health concerns within staffing came from her knowledge of the early warning signs. This same type of skill was mentioned by Participant 1. Participant 1 focused on the specific assessments obtained in her time completing a SW degree. There is a focus on assessing for safety, harm, and burnout which was taken away by these participants.

“I attended a 2-year clinical master’s program which focused heavily on clinical skill sets. I really took away assessment skills, suicide assessment, and self-harm assessment. Overall, I learned, how to interact and assess individual clients.”  
(Participant #1)

The emphasis on assessment skills was further touched on by Participant 3’s interview. This participant focused specifically on a biopsychosocial approach and how they were able to pull that into their HR role to enhance the program as a whole.

“I used a lot of assessment skills you know. Really assessing things with a biopsychosocial view. This let me determine where the students were at and how I could fill the gaps in the program to enhance the students’ ability to work.”  
(Participant #3)

Throughout the interviews, the data shows that different SW programs have an overlap in the takeaways for students’ post-graduation. Whether that is the of teaching assessment skills or the lens in which they approach situations, both can be used when working with people.

Discussion
Through these interviews and data collection, I have found that social work degrees have helped support these participants in their human resources roles. In each theme pulled from the data, there are findings that allow for conclusions to be made which are discussed below.

The first theme focused on the process of mediation for the participants. Specifically, this study found that although not all HR professionals classify what they do as mediation, they all have dealt with some type of disciplinary meeting. As explained previously, mediation is a process that takes place when conflict takes the leading role in a dynamic (Almeida, 2015, p.1). Conflict theory relates to this study because it outlines the leading factors of conflict (Bartos & Wehr, 2002). This can be helpful when facilitating mediation when exploring the cause of strain within the room. Therefore, whether these times are coined mediation or discipline by the HR managers, there is a common goal to diminish the leading role of conflict. As found in this study, many of the skill sets obtained from their SW degrees are applied into the moments of mediation. Therefore, this study found that these HR managers are using SW skills to create an effective environment to problem-solve conflict.

Theme two focused on SW degrees being useful for HR positions overall. In the participant responses, it was broadly found that learning how to work with people and gaining social work skills, such as listening while creating a space for comfort and change, was useful. This finding relates to the resource-based theory because the interviewees attested to the fact that their SW degree allowed them to excel in their HR jobs. Resource-based theory allows employees to be a resource for a company to do better than competitors (Olalla, 1999). Therefore, these HR professionals with SW degrees are a resource within their agency to perform better than others due to the social work background that they obtained. As the literature says, utilizing SW skills can be important when striving for employee engagement (Bullinger,
2018). The interviews show that these individuals believe that the skills they have acquired from their degrees have a transferable place not only within mediation, but in all of the HR roles. This, in turn boosts employee engagement and satisfaction with a more cohesive work environment.

Further, Alfes et al. (2013) noted that employees who have trust in their HR department leads to more employee satisfaction and engagement. The interviews focused on the positive environment and safe space they provide employees for mediational moments. Many commented on the partnership aspect of finding common ground for successful mediation. Therefore, this sense of trust will boost employee engagement and satisfaction as found in previous literature. All of which are skills that the interviewees linked to their SW background.

In theme three, the overlap of taught SW skill sets at different SW programs was found which related to human capital theory. The human capital theory believes that the higher the quality and level of education, there is a higher skill set learned which makes for higher productivity (Strober, 1990). This emphasizes the importance of education and its direct link to efficiency in the workplace. In this study, there was a clear overlap in skill sets that were taken away from the SW universities that these participants went to. Therefore, no matter the place of education, the quality simply from obtaining a SW degree seems to be universal. Because the participants positively correlate their degrees to working in HR, having this SW degree was human capital for their careers. In the responses, there was a focus on how SW utilizes a broad scope of viewing an individual. This allows for the participants to zoom out and look environmentally at what is happening for the individual in front of them. This same type of mind set in seen in the discussion of HR as a profession. As explained by Legge (1995), HR is a field that examines both people and systems. The interviews show that SW teaches the skill of attending to the individual in front of you while also examining the systems at play behind them.
Therefore, these findings highlight the overlap of skill sets between SW and HR. Not only this, but there was an emphasis on assessment skills being taken away from SW degrees. From mental health assessments to biopsychosocial assessments, this study found that SW programs are instilling assessment skills into their students. This overlap of skill sets is also seen within Parul University and the course plan laid out for students that are in the Master of Social Work in Human Resource Management program.

**Limitations**

This study had several limitations related to the type of research, the process of collecting and analyzing data, and the means of finding participants. To begin, one limitation of this research study was that it did not include quantitative data. This study was only qualitative, and notes were taken during the interviews. These notes could have missed words or been interpreted the wrong way which could have skewed the data. If done as a mixed method study, the response rate could have potentially been higher due to a different and less time-consuming means of data collection. Another limitation was the fact that no background or demographics of participants were recorded. This could have been added to the research and created more specific findings for different subgroups of participants. The last limitation was the means to find the sample of participants. With word of mouth and snowball sampling, it was hard to find many people willing to participate which led to less data to pull from. Utilizing a quantitative survey that was sent out to more groups of social workers could have been less time-consuming for participants, which may have increased their willingness to participate.

**Implications for practice**
This study has multiple implications for both social workers and HR professionals. Each theme mentioned in the findings has takeaways important for social workers and HR professionals to know.

To begin, within the process of mediation, SW skillsets are effective. Human resource professionals need to know this because learning and utilizing SW skill sets can help them become better HR professionals. This can increase their job satisfaction and their performance as a professional. Not only this, but these skills within mediation can create a more inclusive and constructive learning environment for all employees. This, in turn, leads to better outcomes for overall businesses that hire human resource managers with training and skill sets from SW.

This, additionally, plays into the second theme of SW degrees being beneficial for HR positions. Although there is a limited amount of research on social workers in HR agencies, there are practical benefits of having those people in HR roles. While many skills sets correlate with the specific role of mediation, there is a general consensus that SW degrees help overall in HR roles. For example, SW education has a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion which has been found to be beneficial training for HR professionals trying to make a diverse work environment (Stewart & Harte, 2010). This is important because it leads to greater job satisfaction, more skilled HR professionals, and a better work environment. This concept of employee satisfaction from a diverse work environment also can predict employee outcomes with longevity at a workplace (Kundu et al., 2017). This further shows the importance of having someone who has a background in diversity, such as a social worker, in an HR position.

Research also shows how management plays a role in a more engaged workforce (Kular, et al., 2008). With an HR professional playing a big role in the management of a company, there is greater chance of engagement of employees with social workers in the position. Employee
engagement can be used as a tool in mediation that leads to less of a turnover intention with employees (Winaro et al., 2021). Therefore, proving that social workers in this role can have long term effects on employees within agencies.

Social workers need to know this information because it can broaden the scope of jobs that their skill sets apply to. Although human resources may not be a traditional social work role, it is clear that many of the necessary skill sets are taught through a SW degree. This path to HR is under-recognized in multiple ways. To begin, people with backgrounds in SW may not recognize the broad scope of occupations available to them with their skill sets and training. Not only this, but people in HR may not realize the different ways in which they can get training to excel in their jobs. At the majority of universities, SW and HR are not recognized as having any commonalities. Further, these specializations are typically housed in different colleges. Based on the findings of this study, individuals can broaden the way they view SW skills. Bigger than that, universities can offer classes that teach the clear overlap between SW and HR.

When looking at theme three, there is an obvious overlap of takeaways in terms of the value of skill sets from SW programs. Further, these skillsets were found to be useful within an HR setting. Therefore, this can be important to know because moving forward, programs can be created that include the crossover of SW and HR. These reoccurring SW skill sets that are used in HR can be an emphasis and basis of future education programs to focus on when training social workers who plan to work in HR.

**Future research**

This study suggests several possibilities for future research. One theme I noticed throughout interviewing participants was the commonality of holding a case management role before stepping into a HR position. For future research, there could be a focus on case
management skills developing and supporting the HR role. Because case management can be held by providers with a range of degrees, this will change the focus of the study. This can be important research to determine if a case management role allows for good skill sets to build for HR professionals. Another focus of future research could be other types of jobs people held after obtaining their SW degrees. College degrees can be utilized in many unexpected ways. Therefore, future research can focus on SW skill sets and their application to other fields as well.

Future research could also examine educational pathways to HR careers. It may be that human resource classes are generally housed in business schools. Additionally, future studies could examine whether and how HR content is included in the curriculum of SW students. Clearly, there seems to be a lot of overlap and transferable skills. Therefore, future research can be done at a university level to examine the choices revolving around the curriculum, in particular SW and HR.

**Conclusion**

A social work degree can be utilized in many different ways. This analysis explores the experiences of human resource professionals who have SW degrees. Specifically, this study examined how social work skill sets are used in HR mediation. Through semi-structured interviews, the results show that people who hold social work degrees believe that their degrees can be applied to various roles within human resource careers. Further, they attest that background and training in social work was an asset to their career in human resources.
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