



# Job burnout and affective wellbeing: A longitudinal study of burnout and job satisfaction among public child welfare workers



Erica L. Lizano <sup>a,\*</sup>, Michalle Mor Barak <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> California State University, San Bernardino, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Southern California School of Social Work, United States

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## ABSTRACT

Workplace experiences that threaten the affective well-being of child welfare workers pose a hazard to child protection organizations as a whole. This study tests a series of proposed interrelationships of workplace demands and resources as predictors of burnout development and the subsequent impact of burnout on affective worker well-being (e.g. job satisfaction) using longitudinal data collected from a sample of public child welfare workers. This study uses multi-group path models to test hypotheses about the temporal order of the relationships between work demands and resources, burnout, and job satisfaction. The hypothesized models were tested individually by social support in the workplace and specialized child welfare training. The overall theory-driven conceptual model tested performed as was hypothesized with some noteworthy exceptions. Findings from the multi-group path models suggest that the type and level of job resource moderate the relationship between job demands, burnout and job satisfaction. Job demands had diverging effects on several relationships in the model with the exception of two relationships. The relationships between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization and emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction were consistent across all groups and models. This finding suggests that regardless of social support and specialized training, emotional exhaustion is positively related to depersonalization and negatively related to job satisfaction. All models demonstrated good model fit. This article describes the implications of study findings on future research and workforce management practices in child welfare organizations.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the antecedents to job burnout have been studied extensively among child welfare workers, few of those studies examine the impact of burnout on affective well-being. For most working people the meaning of work goes beyond it being a source of income. Work for many individuals provides purpose (Morse & Weiss, 1955), a sense of identity, meaning, feelings of accomplishment, and connectedness to others (Cartwright & Holmes, 2006; Chalofsky, 2003; Kahn, 1974). A great amount of research has been done to better understand the work conditions that lead to a “happy” and satisfied worker and what things inhibit this from occurring (Judge, Piccolo, Podsakoff, Shaw, & Rich, 2010; Lambert, Hogan, & Barton, 2002; Lee & Cummings, 2008; Loher, Noe, Moeller, & Fitzgerald, 1985). A key finding that has emerged from this stream of research is that job burnout is a threat to job satisfaction (Bhana & Haffjee, 1996; Brewer & Clippard, 2002; Burke, Koyunco, & Fiksenbaum, 2010; Hombrados-Mendieta, & Cosano-Rivas, 2011; Koeske & Kelly, 1995; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Maslach & Florian, 1988; Um & Harrison, 1998). Job burnout, the feelings of emotional depletion,

cynicism, and a lack of efficacy in the workplace (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), has been linked to a number of adverse affective consequences including a reduction in job satisfaction (Faragher, Cass, & Cooper, 2005; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Lee, Lim, Yang, & Lee, 2011). Workplace experiences that threaten the affective well-being of child welfare workers, such as job satisfaction, pose a hazard to child protection organizations as a whole. Job burnout can lead to reduced job satisfaction which can consequently affect work performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001), commitment to the organizations (Gunlu, Aksarayli, & Perçin, 2010; Jernigan, Beggs, & Kohut, 2002; Landsman, 2001, 2008), and employees' desire to stay in the organization (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; DePanfilis, Levy Zlotnik, 2008; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan & McCarthy, 2007).

This study tests a series of proposed interrelationships of workplace demands and resources as predictors of burnout development and the subsequent impact of burnout on affective well-being (e.g. job satisfaction) using longitudinal data collected from a sample of public child welfare workers. Though several gaps exist in the human service literature on job burnout and well-being, this study focuses on two important gaps in knowledge pertaining to the relationship between burnout and

\* Corresponding author at: 5500 University Parkway San Bernardino, CA 92407, United States.

well-being among child welfare workers. The present study tests the consequences of burnout on affective well-being, an area of research that has received limited attention in child welfare workforce studies. Furthermore, the studies on job burnout and job satisfaction that have been conducted among child welfare workers examining the consequences of burnout rely heavily on correlational analysis. The use of cross-sectional research designs does not allow for testing key hypotheses about the temporal order of the interrelationships between workplace experiences, burnout, and worker well-being. Using longitudinal data analysis, this study tests a series of hypotheses about the temporal order of the relationships between work demands and resources, burnout, and job satisfaction.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Child welfare workers and job satisfaction

No job satisfaction benchmark rates of child welfare workers exist. Nevertheless, findings from Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, and Dickison (2008) national study on job satisfaction among child welfare workers in the United States suggest that, as a whole, child welfare workers are between undecided about their level of satisfaction and somewhat satisfied with their jobs. Although we cannot ascertain child welfare workers' job satisfaction overall, what can be surmised is that the job satisfaction of these workers has important managerial and administrative implications in child welfare organizations for two key reasons. First, as a form of affective well-being, job satisfaction is a critical aspect of worker wellness. Secondly, the affective well-being of workers (e.g. job satisfaction) has the potential to critically impact worker performance and consequently organizational outcomes.

Managers and administrators in child welfare organizations have an ethical responsibility to protect the well-being of their workforce. Workers are the driving force of child protection services. Child welfare workers are charged with the critical task of protecting children and promoting their growth and happiness within stable family settings. The satisfaction of workers with their job is an important component of overall life satisfaction (Near, Rice, & Hunt, 1978), and the subjective and psychological well-being (Diener, 1984; Spector, 1997; Warr, 1990) of workers. Job satisfaction, as a form of affective well-being, is a complex emotional reaction to one's perception of the relationship between what one wants from one's job and what one perceives it as offering (Locke, 1969). The general sphere of psychological well-being is concerned with feelings or affect, within which feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction lie (Warr, 1990). Worker well-being is broadly conceptualized as a multi-domain person-related construct taking into account the impact of workplace experiences on the physical, emotional, affective, and psychological wellness of individuals (Danna & Griffin, 1999).

In addition to influencing the well-being of workers, job satisfaction has the potential to influence organizational performance and outcomes. In their quantitative and qualitative review of 312 workforce samples, Judge, Thoresen, Bono and Patton (2001) found a moderate relationship between job satisfaction and performance. Within child welfare workforce research, the relationship between job satisfaction and performance has not been examined. The organizational outcomes that have been linked to job satisfaction within the child welfare workforce literature include organizational commitment and turnover. Previous child welfare workforce studies have found a positive and significant relationship between job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Landsman, 2001, 2008), commitment to the child protection field (Landsman, 2001), and intention to stay on the job (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman & Schudrich, 2010; DePanfilis, Zlotnik, 2008; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan & McCarthy, 2007).

It is important to contextualize job satisfaction of child welfare workers within the broader context of workforce management issues

in the public child welfare sector. The child protection sector has historically faced serious challenges with the recruitment and retention of qualified workers (Government Accountability Office, 2003; Perry, & Ellett, 2008). At the peak of the retention crisis in the United States, it was estimated that some public child welfare agencies were seeing as much as a 30–40% annual workforce turnover among workers with less than two years tenure (Government Accountability Office, 2003). As the public child welfare sector has become increasingly deprofessionalized, it has been more difficult to attract and/or retain professionally educated social workers (see Perry & Ellett, 2008). The challenge of attracting and keeping skilled workers to the field is attributed to the nature of child welfare work which includes working with families and children with complex needs, carrying the burden of child safety, poor pay, and high caseloads (Government Accountability Office, 2003).

Challenges in maintaining a stable and qualified child welfare workforce have endured (Fulcher, & Smith, 2010), and so has the interest among practitioners and researchers to address those challenges (Kim & Kao, 2014; Perry & Ellett, 2008). Efforts have been made to attract and retain professionally trained child welfare workers because they are better equipped to serve clients and families facing a number of complex problems compared to their non-professionally trained counterparts (Zlotnik, 2003). The most far-reaching strategy used to create a more stable workforce includes federally funded specialized child welfare programs. Federal funds under Title IV-E have been allocated for training initiatives that incentivize specialized child welfare training through financial support for continued education and curriculum development at the baccalaureate and masters levels. Federal funding for specialized child welfare training is administered by the U.S. Children's Bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS; Zlotnik, 2003). The funds have been used largely for specialized agency–university child welfare training partnerships between public child welfare agencies and schools of social work (Risley-Curtiss, 2003). Though training content may vary between counties and states, the focus of specialized child welfare training is on implementing competency-based curriculum that equips employees for child protection work.

### 2.2. Job burnout

Job burnout is an individual stress syndrome contextualized within complex social relationships in the workplace (Maslach & Goldberg, 1998). Burnout consists of three dimensions including emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that develop in response to *chronic* exposure to stress in the workplace (Maslach, 1993, 2003). Job burnout causes a depletion of the individual's emotional resources and personal energy (Leiter & Maslach, 2001). As a reaction to chronic stress, job burnout can lead to job behaviors including withdrawal, which diminishes the opportunities to have satisfying work experiences. *Emotional exhaustion* is the central dimension of burnout and refers to feelings of being emotionally depleted due to over-extension. Maslach and Goldberg (1998) suggest that work overload and personal conflict at work are the central sources of exhaustion. Emotional exhaustion represents the individual strain dimension of burnout. Cynicism, or *depersonalization*, is the interpersonal dimension of burnout that develops as a protection against feelings of exhaustion. When the exhaustion becomes too overwhelming for the individual, he or she detaches from the work and becomes cynical and disconnected from clients and co-workers. The third dimension of job burnout, *personal accomplishment*—is postulated to be the self-evaluation dimension of the syndrome. Maslach and Goldberg (1998) propose that the interrelationship between emotional exhaustion and depersonalization is a causal one whereby feelings of emotional exhaustion lead to depersonalization. The third dimension, reduced personal accomplishment, is posited to develop separately.

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