



Understanding the diverging paths of stayers and leavers: An examination of factors predicting worker retention



Amy D. Benton

School of Social Work, Texas State University, 601 University Dr., HPB 231B, San Marcos, TX 78666, United States

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ABSTRACT

The retention of qualified, competent staff has been a longstanding challenge for child welfare agencies. Given the stressful nature of child welfare work, difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff may not be surprising. However, considering the costs of chronic turnover, efforts to increase retention are crucial. The current study utilizes a large sample ($n = 1102$) of Title IV-E graduates from one statewide consortium in order to explore the usefulness of a conceptual model for understanding retention and turnover of workers in public child welfare. Logistic regression models reflect that at least one variable from each of four categories (worker, job-extrinsic, job-intrinsic, responses to job) predicted retention. Implications for child welfare workforce research, agency practice, and Title IV-E MSW programs are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The retention of qualified, competent staff has been a longstanding challenge for child welfare agencies (APHSA, 2005; Tollen, 1960). High turnover, reduced retention, and high vacancy rates can be costly and have negative effects on agencies, remaining employees, and clients (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Drake & Yadama, 1996). When trained and experienced staff leave, the knowledge and skills that they acquired often leave with them, reducing the overall service capacity of the agency (Balfour & Neff, 1993). Worker turnover results in poorer outcomes for children such as longer stays in care and decreased chances of reunification (Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, & Zhai, 2006). Along with the increased risk of harm to children, delayed investigations due to turnover interfere with states' abilities to meet federal guidelines (U.S. GAO, 2003).

Given the stressful nature of child welfare work, difficulties with recruitment and retention of staff may not be surprising (Specht & Courtney, 1994). However, considering the costs of chronic turnover, efforts to increase retention are crucial. The Title IV-E education stipend program is the primary source of federal funding to support the improvement of the child welfare workforce (NASW, 2003) and has shown some promising results. Research indicates that Title IV-E programs are successful in preparing MSWs to work in public child welfare (Bagdasaryan, 2012; Robin & Hollister, 2002). Studies also suggest that Title IV-E improves retention, indicating longer tenures for Title IV-E participants than non participants (Jones, 2002; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). The current study utilizes a large sample of Title IV-E graduates, who have completed their contractual obligation, from one statewide

consortium in order to begin to test the usefulness of a conceptual model, or set of predictive variables, for understanding retention and turnover of workers in public child welfare. Given that these participants enter with the same preparation and initial commitment to the field (Benton, 2010), analyzing their retention outcomes should help us better understand where paths diverge for stayers and leavers.

1.1. Factors influencing retention and turnover

Individual characteristics are commonly examined in retention and turnover research. Gender appears to have mixed influence with women less likely to leave in some studies (Rosenthal & Waters, 2006; Weaver, Chang, Clark, & Rhee, 2007), and producing no difference in others (Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2008; Jones, 2002; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). Age is another worker characteristic with mixed findings (Hopkins, Cohen-Callow, Kim, & Hwang, 2010; Jones, 2002). A couple of studies indicate that younger workers are more likely to leave (Fryer, Miyoshi, & Thomas, 1989; Jones, 2002), but other studies reflect no significance (Glisson & James, 2002; Jacquet et al., 2008).

Job factors are important to consider because they identify turnover reasons where agencies may be able to intervene. However, inconsistent findings exist for caseload (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellman-Jenkins, 2005; Jacquet et al., 2008; Smith, 2005), salary (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Smith, 2005), hours worked (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Weaver et al., 2007) and peer support (Barbee et al., 2009; Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Jacquet et al., 2008). Research is more consistent in reflecting the importance of supervisory support for worker retention (Boyas, Wind, & Ruiz, 2013; Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Chenot et al., 2009; Jacquet et al., 2008; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009; Smith, 2005).

E-mail address: ab68@txstate.edu.

A third category of important variables explore worker responses to the job. Job stress while often identified as an issue for social workers provides mixed outcomes in the research (Boyas et al., 2013; Hopkins et al., 2010; Weaver et al., 2007). Two studies reflect no significance for stress (Jones & Okamura, 2000; Weaver et al., 2007). Conversely, a study by Robin and Hollister (2002) identified stress as a reason for leaving. Almost 50% of responders in another study described the job being too stressful as what made them leave (Gonzalez, Faller, Ortega, & Tropman, 2009). Burnout is another common concept for explaining worker turnover but also has mixed results. Two studies indicate that emotional exhaustion is the only subscale with significance for child welfare worker turnover (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Drake & Yadama, 1996). Another study found that burnout was not associated with turnover (Smith & Clark, 2011). Job satisfaction more consistently predicts retention (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). However, Weaver et al. (2007) found job satisfaction to be significantly correlated with intention to leave but not with actual turnover.

1.2. Assessing the current research

While there are a number of studies that explore factors related to worker turnover and retention in child welfare settings, the research is inconclusive and is hindered by varying definitions and conflicting findings (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). Furthermore, on closer review, the number of studies which utilize turnover or retention as an outcome is limited; with many examining only intent to stay or leave. There are mixed findings regarding the use of intent to stay or leave as proxy for actual retention or turnover behavior; with some questioning its use (Hopkins et al., 2010; Weaver et al., 2007) and others supporting it (Dickinson & Painter, 2009; Levy, Poertner, & Lieberman, 2012). Additionally the child welfare workforce literature is often atheoretical, with only a few studies articulating the use of theoretical frameworks (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Smith, 2005). Increased identification of theory relevant to child welfare research could advance the literature's ability to explain the complex process involved in decisions to stay or leave.

Responding to the call for more theory-based research (Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007) the author of this study aimed to assess evidence for a conceptual model that may help to explain turnover and retention specifically in the field of public child welfare. Utilizing an existing large data set, this study examined relevant theories to select existing variables for inclusion. Additionally by utilizing actual retention with a large sample (1,102), the author hopes to contribute to the knowledge base regarding worker retention by identifying strategies that may be used by public child welfare agencies to retain child welfare workers. Given that the study population consists of specially trained MSW graduates, the study also identifies possible areas for universities to improve their Title IV-E programs.

2. Conceptual framework

The nature of child welfare work includes both emotionally rewarding and emotionally draining tasks, making this work distinct from organizations often studied in management research. Consequently, existing models and theories used to explain worker experiences of, and responses to, the job may not adequately address all the factors involved in child welfare work. Human service organizations (including child welfare) often share the bureaucratic characteristics of other organizations, such as having an established internal structure for control and coordination as well as being goal-driven but can still be considered distinct from other organizations (Hasenfeld, 1983). One such distinction is the role of clients as both consumers and raw material. Further, researchers indicate that child welfare settings specifically have unique characteristics which may influence retention (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Smith, 2005). Therefore, a model of retention

and turnover that draws from the wealth of management literature but also addresses factors specifically relevant to child welfare is recommended. Three fields, theoretical literature, empirical child welfare literature, and qualitative analysis of participant interviews (described in detail elsewhere, Benton, 2010), were explored in order to establish key points of overlap for understanding retention. The conceptual model considered here is derived from selecting predictive variables that appear to exist at these points of intersection.

Common to the management literature is the notion that turnover is determined by multiple and multi-level factors at the individual, organizational, and local market levels. Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) provide a detailed model based on an analysis of previous reviews of turnover studies in organizational behavior and industrial psychology. Theories important to understanding worker behavior and thus influential in model adaptation include social exchange theory, perceived organizational support (POS) theory, and motivation-hygiene theory. Social exchange theory "starts with a simple metaphor involving two persons, each of whom provides benefits to the other, contingent upon benefits from the other" (Emerson, 1981, p. 32). In the agency setting, this theory suggests that supervisor support is expected in exchange for worker performance. If supervisor support is lacking or absent, workers will seek to change their exchange relationship. POS theory is grounded in social exchange theory with a specific focus on work settings. Similar to social exchange theory, worker behavior is based on an expected mutual exchange. An important component of POS is the idea that stressors will reduce POS to the extent that they are perceived as controllable by organization (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). Motivation-hygiene theory provides more depth to the analysis of worker experiences by distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic job factors (Herzberg, 1967). It is useful when examining child welfare worker behavior to consider the roles played by the nature of the work (e.g., successfully reunifying a family or finding an adoptive family for a child = intrinsic) and by organizationally controlled job factors (e.g., salary, caseload = extrinsic). The analysis of qualitative data gathered from the larger study from which current sample is pulled, supports the distinction of extrinsic and intrinsic job factors, as well as the overall importance of these factors to outcomes (Benton, 2010). Given the insights provided by the relevant theoretical and empirical research, as well as the qualitative analysis, the following conceptual model is suggested (Fig. 1).

3. Method

The overall study employed a mixed methods design, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data from a larger, ongoing evaluation of Title IV-E programs administered by a statewide consortium. Human subjects protection approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board for the larger, ongoing program evaluation. Due to the current study being a subset of the ongoing evaluation and not requiring any new information from participants, it is included under the larger study's approval. The research presented here focuses on the use of the quantitative data to explore components of a conceptual model and to inform the knowledge base regarding factors influencing retention.

3.1. Participants

The study sample consists of child welfare workers who received at Title IV-E stipend while working on their Masters in Social Work (MSW) in one state. Title IV-E stipend recipients agree to make a year for year commitment to work in public child welfare after graduation. Therefore, if a participant receives the Title IV-E stipend for two years, the contractual obligation to work in public child welfare is two years. During the period 1996–2008, 2295 Title IV-E graduates completed their contractual obligation and were sent a self-administered survey six months to a year after completion of their contractual obligation. The survey had a response rate of 49% (1129 of 2295). Surveys which contained a

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