Exploring patterns of employee psychosocial outcomes among child welfare workers

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ABSTRACT

Child welfare workers continue to suffer from increased levels of job stress and burnout, often resulting in an intention to leave. Although the literature on these psychosocial employee outcomes is extensive, much of it is limited in that it has failed to determine if variability exists across these constructs in a way that can be systematically categorized. This cross sectional exploratory study utilized a statewide purposive sample of respondents ($N = 209$) from a public child welfare organization in a Northeastern state. Two complementary cluster methods and discriminant function analysis were used to determine if subtypes of job stress, burnout, well-being, job satisfaction and intent to leave exist among public child welfare workers. Since the results yielded three different clusters of workers, an Analysis of Variance was used to identify significant group differences, while Scheffé post hoc tests were examined to determine which groups differed. Findings show that the all three clusters significantly vary from one another in terms of the adverse employee psychosocial outcomes. Our findings suggest that child welfare workers represent a heterogeneous group with dissimilar psychosocial needs. To meet those employee needs and maximize their work output, child welfare administrators should make a concerted effort to better understand the unique needs of this strained workforce.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare is a challenging and demanding helping profession. It is regarded as a high stress human service profession (Cherniss, 1980). Although the majority of workers in this field demonstrate tremendous commitment to the children and families with whom they work, child welfare workers are repeatedly faced with a number of job-related challenges. These challenges have been linked with increased levels of job stress and burnout that often result in an intention to leave. Several factors account for the high levels of job-related stress that child welfare workers endure, some of which include: heavy workloads, extensive paperwork, public scrutiny, poor compensation, difficult clients, few resources, long work hours, and unclear job expectations (Arrington, 2008; Sprang, Craig, & Clark, 2011). When workers can no longer cope with the demands of such job-related stressors, they become at risk of developing worker burnout (Adams, Boscarino, & Figley, 2006; Boyas & Wind, 2010). Given the number of stressors experienced by child welfare workers, it is no surprise that as many as 50% of child welfare workers report experiencing symptoms of burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). These adverse psychosocial employee outcomes contribute to high levels of intent to leave that ultimately results in voluntary turnover.

The U.S. General Accounting Office (2003) estimates that voluntary employee turnover rates in child welfare are between 30% and 40% nationally. Such a level of turnover is alarming given that it is associated with considerable costs for organizations, coworkers, and clients. Financial costs associated with employee turnover in child welfare vary by state; however, it is estimated that for every worker who leaves, about $10,000 will be spent to recruit, hire, and train a replacement (CSSP, 2006). Turnover has also been linked with poorer child outcomes (General Accounting Office, 2003); poorer quality of services (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005); and increased caseloads (Graef & Hill, 2000; Strayhorn, 2004). For example, management has to redistribute the workloads to other workers and reallocate monies to advertise, hire, and train new workers, while concurrently trying to keep morale high among existing employees. Child welfare workers must then deal with their own workload plus help cover departing workers' caseloads. This may partially explain why the General Accounting Office (2003) estimated that public child welfare workers have to deal with twice the number of cases recommended by the Child Welfare League of America.

Turnover can also have an effect on consumers. Clients have to deal with inconsistent services and compete with turnover for rechanneling of monies because agencies are forced to spend additional financial resources to replace departed workers (Anderson, 2000). Turnover can also disrupt the continuity of services because clients have to establish and maintain a relationship with a new worker every time there is a change (General Accounting Office, 2003). Since clients and coworkers

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invest so much in each employee, organizations therefore have to do their best to minimize voluntary employee turnover (Graef & Hill, 2000).

Although the literature investigating these psychosocial employee outcomes is extensive, no study to date has determined if, and how much, variability exists across these constructs in a way that can be systematically categorized. The existing literature on job stress, burnout, and intent to leave among child welfare workers has not established any typologies among workers that would allow organizations to develop and/or expand interventions that are specific to their needs. The purpose of the current exploratory study was to conduct a cluster analysis to determine if subtypes of job stress, burnout, and intent to leave exist among public child welfare workers. In computing a cluster analysis, we may unearth possible associations and group structures in the data not previously known that will help organizations better understand and potentially meet the workers' specific needs.

2. Literature review

The majority of research recognizes that individual and organizational factors shape workers' experience (Boyas, Wind, & Kang, 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). While organizations cannot change individual characteristics, it can change how it does business in order to maximize the experiences of its workers. An organization's climate can have a profound impact on a worker's psyche. Some researchers have maintained that organizational factors, such as its climate, will have a larger effect on the psychological functioning of a worker than individual characteristics (Boyas et al., 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001). Thus, the worker experience is a byproduct of the organization's climate. Since organizational climate has such a powerful impact on employee outcomes, we included several dimensions that have been cited by Boyas and Wind's (2010) version of employment-based social capital. We also included other factors, such as job satisfaction and well-being, which have been found to also impact worker attitudes (Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Demilt, Fitzpatrick, & McNulty, 2009; Hombrados-Medieta & Cosano-Rivas, 2011; Levy, Poertner, & Lieberman, 2012; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan, & McCarthy, 2008; Tham, 2007; Van de Vaart, Linde, & Cockeran, 2013). Finally, we also included age and organization tenure as individual characteristics that also shape the employee outcomes of interest (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Boyas et al., 2012; Boyas, Wind, & Ruiz, 2013; Hamama, 2012; Jinnett & Alexander, 1999; Kim, 2011; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; Manlove & Guzell, 1997; Maslach et al., 2001; McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Parker & DeCotiis, 1983).

Although child welfare workers experience a great deal of job stress working in the frontlines of child welfare, a portion of it also stems from the organizational context in which they work. The organizational climate represents a contextual state that is associated with the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of an organization's employees (Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005). Climate may include aspects of the work place such as supervision, job demands, communication practices, peer relationships, and other related practices that capture the psychological influence of the work environment on individual psychosocial functioning. Glisson and Green (2011) maintain that the organizational climates of child welfare systems vary in terms of the quality of the work environment. Such difference may partially explain why some employees thrive and why some do not.

The organizational environment has a lot to do with whether an employee develops negative or positive employee psychosocial outcomes (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). When the quantity and forms of job-related stressors exceed an individual's ability to cope, it makes that individual susceptible to developing adverse employee psychological functioning. While earlier research

looked at how the organizational climate was related to performance, more current research is investigating how the organizational climate is associated with various employee outcomes (Shim, 2010). For example, the organizational context can give rise to job stress (Boyas & Wind, 2010) and burnout (Boyas et al., 2012). It can also shape an employee's decision to stay (Ellet, 2009) or leave that organization (Aaron & Sawitzky, 2006). The organizational context also shapes work-related outcomes such the quality of services they render to their clients (Glisson & Green, 2011). In this regard, the organizational climate can exacerbate or ameliorate the stresses associated with child welfare. In fact, it has been maintained that organizational factors are likely to have a greater impact on the development of adverse employee outcomes than individual factors (Boyas et al., 2012; Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Maslach et al., 2001).

Although there is growing interest, there is limited research regarding the effects organizational climate has on the child welfare workforce (Shim, 2010). However, Boyas and Wind (2010) established that various dimensions of what they consider employment-based social capital have direct effects on various employee psychosocial outcomes. They make a case that various dimensions of the work place, such as trust, coworker support, supervisor support, organizational commitment, communication, influence, and organizational fairness are salient among child welfare employees (Boyas & Wind, 2010). They maintain that when a mixture of cognitive dimensions of employment-based social capital is present, they function as direct protective factors in decreasing the likelihood of adverse employee outcomes.

2.1. Organization climate and job stress, burnout, and intent to leave

Recent research has shown that higher levels of employment-based social capital have been linked with lower levels of job stress, burnout, and intent to leave (Boyas & Wind, 2010, Boyas et al., 2012; Boyas et al., 2013). Within an organizational setting, trust refers to the expectancy that individuals within an organization will abide by collective social norms, roles, and ethical standards (Muhlberger, 2001). Intraorganizational trust is an important aspect of a work setting (Dirks, 1999); yet, there is minimal research in the child welfare literature. However, the existing literature in other fields suggests that trust is essential to maintain functional relationships between supervisors and subordinates in order to minimize job stress (Spector, 2002). It should be recognized though that research in this area has produced dissimilar results. Results in some studies point towards a significant relationship between trust and job stress (Ross, 1994; Vigoda-Gadot & Talmud, 2010). Yet, a study by Parker and DeCotiis (1983) found that a significant relationship between trust and job stress did not exist. However, the direction of the relationship appears to be consistent, with an increase in trust resulting in a decrease in job stress. We also found evidence that supports the notion that trust shapes burnout; in essence, as workers' perception of trust increases, burnout decreases (Harvey, Kelloway, & Duncan-Leiper, 2003; Timms, Graham, & Caltabiano, 2007).

Another important psychosocial outcome is communication. Conrad and Scott-Poole (2012) define communication as "a process through which people, acting together, create, sustain, and manage meanings through the use of verbal and nonverbal signs, symbols within a particular context" (p. 5). Good communication is essential between workers, peers, supervisors, and subordinates, since it is a foundation for trust, cooperation, and support (Ferres, Connell, & Travaglione, 2004). Although researchers have pointed out to the importance of considering the relationship between communication and job stress (Ray & Miller, 1991; Stamper & Johlke, 2003); there is very little empirical evidence examining this relationship (Chen, Silverthorne, & Hung, 2006). However, there is evidence that communication is associated with burnout. In a study of 211 registered social workers in California, an association was found between communication and emotional exhaustion, a