Organizational climate and burnout among home visitors: Testing mediating effects of empowerment

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ABSTRACT

While a large body of literature exists regarding the negative effects of burnout among human service workers, less is known about the organizational strategies that may play a role in its reduction or prevention. Using data from a survey of 179 home visitors in a statewide voluntary child maltreatment prevention program, we use hierarchical regression and structural equation models (SEM) to examine the processes of burnout. We found significant direct effects of a positive organizational climate predicting lower levels of burnout as well as mediating effects of worker empowerment on burnout. Findings suggest that research and practice would benefit by focusing on improving the work environment and empowering workers.

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1. Introduction

Worker burnout is a serious concern in human service organizations. Emotionally burnt-out workers are unhappy with their jobs and are more prone to leave (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Drake & Yadama, 1996) resulting in disruptions in services for clients. A large body of literature is available on the antecedents of burnout (see Boyas & Wind, 2010; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001) and significant advances have been made in understanding the pathways to burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Leiter, Gascón, & Martínez-Jarreta, 2010; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012). But mechanisms to reduce burnout remain elusive (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004).

Over the past two decades home visitation has emerged as a widely implemented service delivery model in prevention and intervention programs (Donelan-McCall, Eckenrode, & Olds, 2009). Specific goals and program content may vary, but home visiting programs tend to focus on optimizing child health and development by targeting services to expectant mothers or families with infants and young children. Community based organizations have been entrusted to operate most of the existing home visiting programs and are generally supported by public funding. As of 2010, home visiting programs using a variety of models have been implemented across 46 states and the District of Columbia (Pew Center on the States, 2011). As part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (2010), $1.5 billion of new federal funding has become available over 5 years to expand and improve state-administered home visitation.

Research on home visitation workforce issues is limited. There are only a handful of studies on home visitor burnout. These studies found that home visitor burnout affects the quality of relationships that are developed with clients and the amount of time spent on home visits (Burrell et al., 2009; Sharp, Ispa, Thornburg, & Lane, 2003). Beyond the negative impact of burnout on the home visitor and client relationship, little is known about how to reduce or ameliorate its effects (Hiatt, Sampson, & Baird, 1997; Jones Harden, Denmark, & Saul, 2010).

A growing interest in reducing or preventing burnout among various groups of human service workers has prompted researchers to examine a variety of organizational characteristics that might play a role in influencing this outcome (Leiter & Maslach, 2004). These include workload and work pressure (Leiter et al., 2010; Maslach et al., 2001; Um & Harrison, 1998; Yoo, 2002), task orientation (Kotzer & Arellana, 2008), and supervisory support (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Koeske & Koeske, 1993; Manlove, 1994; Swanson & Power, 2001; Yoo, 2002). Guterman and Jayaratne's (1994) early work on child welfare workers found that increasing a worker's sense of control at work positively affected worker effectiveness and reduced worker stress. Recent studies on health care workers found that empowered workers experienced less burnout (Gilbert, Laschinger, & Leiter, 2010; Leiter et al., 2010).

Building on recent advances in understanding the complex pathways to burnout (see Boyas & Wind, 2010; Leiter et al., 2010), this study examines the processes by which organizational climate influences worker burnout. We present a model testing the mediating roles

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of empowerment and supervisory support on the relationship between organizational climate and burnout for a sample of home visitors working in community-based organizations.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Defining burnout

Beginning with Freudenberger's (1974) introduction of the term "burnout" to describe emotional and physical exhaustion of staff members employed in the human services professions, there has been considerable research investigating burnout among human service workers. Maslach (1976) further developed the concept of studying emotions in the workplace by interviewing a wide range of human services workers about emotional stress generated by their jobs. More recently, burnout has been defined as a prolonged response to chronic emotional and interpersonal stressors on the job, and is characterized by three dimensions: exhaustion, cynicism (depersonalization), and inefficacy (Maslach et al., 2001). Emotional exhaustion has been studied the most and refers to feelings of being overextended and depleted of one's emotional and physical resources. Over 25 years of research on this construct has established its complexity, and places the individual stress experience within the larger organizational context as well as individual workers' perceptions of their jobs.

While burnout can exist in many different types of work settings, researchers assert that burnout is a serious concern in the human services field, particularly in child welfare practice (Anderson, 2000; Bunston, 1997; Dane, 2000; Shim, 2010). Among human service workers, burnout has been implicated in decreased job satisfaction, a desire to leave the job, and somatic and psychological symptoms (Greenglass & Burke, 1991; Koeske & Koeske, 1993; Martin & Schinke, 1998; Whippen & Canellos, 1991). Similarly, turnover and intention to leave the field have been associated with high levels of burnout among child welfare workers (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Shim, 2010).

2.2. Organizational Climate and burnout

In the human services field in general, and in the field of child welfare specifically, services are usually provided in an organizational setting (Arches, 1991). Thus, much research has focused on organizational characteristics such as workload and work pressure and the role they play in mitigating or intensifying burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Um & Harrison, 1998; Yoo, 2002). Understanding the effects of organizational climate has advanced a great deal in recent years identifying an array of factors that contribute to burnout and turnover (Ellett, 2009; Strolin-Goltzman, 2010).

Among these factors, work pressure has been identified as being responsible for a significant amount of the job strain in human service professions (Manlove, 1994; O'Driscoll & Beehr, 1994, 2000). Workload and time pressure have also been found to be strongly and consistently related to burnout, particularly the exhaustion dimension (Maslach et al., 2001; Reid et al., 1999).

Conversely, task orientation, or an emphasis on good planning, efficiency and getting the job done, offsets some of the effects of work pressure. Kotzer and Arellana (2008) found that despite moderate work pressure perceived by nurses in a hospital setting, staff, overall, affirmed a highly positive work environment on their units. Of particular relevance was the influence of task orientation on concern about and commitment to the job. In another study among medical professionals (Chan & Huak, 2004), task orientation was the only significant predictor of emotional health, among a number of work environment factors.

2.3. Worker empowerment

The concept of empowerment has a long history, especially in social work. But worker empowerment is a relatively new concept to be

tested out in organizational settings (Lee & Koh, 2001). The way that empowerment is conceptualized also varies from field to field. The fields of social work and psychology tend to equate empowerment with a worker's perception of self-efficacy (Conger & Kanungo, 1988) or control over the work (Ugboro & Obeng, 2000).

Control over work, in turn, has been identified as a protective factor in worker stress (Atkinson, 1999; Koeske & Kirk, 1993, 1995; Latack, 1986; Leiter, 2005). Workers' perceptions of control include their assessments of their ability to participate in and influence important decisions and their capacity to exercise professional autonomy in their work (Leiter, 2005). Within human service organizational settings, workers are more likely to exercise efficacious responses to their clients when they have the opportunity to manage and influence stressful situations (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994). The perception of control is also associated with higher job and life satisfaction (Koeske & Kirk, 1995), as well as better performance and lower stress (Boyd & Schneider, 1997; McKnight & Glass, 1995; Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997). In a large sample of health care workers, empowerment has shown to decrease burnout (Gilbert et al., 2010; Leiter et al., 2010).

There are other reasons to be attentive to whether, and to what extent, a work force is empowered (Wallach & Mueller, 2006). First, there is a parallel process whereby the supervisor–worker relationship mirrors the client–worker interaction (Ackerson & Harrison, 2000; Bartle, Couchonnal, Canda, & Staker, 2002). The organizational expectation that staff provide services in an empowering manner may be contingent on whether employees experience an empowering work site, especially when they are low status professionals (Fulton, 1997; Gutierrez, GlenMaye, & DeLois, 1995). Second, empowered workers are those who can demonstrate initiative and confidence in their abilities (Ripley & Ripley, 1992), assume responsibility (Thorlakson & Murray, 1996; Yoon, 2001), function as collaborative team members (Howard, 1998; Simon, 1994), better adapt to changes in the way services are implemented (Haugh & Laschinger, 1996; Howard, 1998), and feel satisfied (Fulford & Enz, 1995).

Few studies, however, have investigated the organizational characteristics of community-based organizations that may enhance or diminish worker empowerment (Peterson & Speer, 2000). A study examining the parallel process model suggests that the ability of workers to share their power with clients and to engage in a range of interventions requires an empowerment-based practice as its foundation (Gutierrez et al., 1995). The most effective workers drew on organizational supports and their own feelings of personal power in their work with clients. While research has advanced the conceptualization of worker empowerment in the organizational context (Gutierrez et al., 1995; Lee & Koh, 2001; Wallach & Mueller, 2006), the role of empowerment on the relationship between organizational factors and burnout in social service settings has yet to be empirically tested.

2.4. Supervisory support

Supervision is an integral part of many jobs in the human service field, particularly in child welfare. A group of individuals are often assigned to a supervisor who monitors their workload and performance. In return, a worker can rely on her/his supervisor for support and guidance. In the field of home visiting, a working alliance between a group of home visitors and a supervisor is essential in conducting home visits as scheduled. Increased hours of direct supervision have been associated with better program retention (McGuigan, Katzev, & Pratt, 2003) while reflective supervision has been associated with effective implementation (McAllister & Thomas, 2007).

Social support from supervisors has been shown to prevent burnout (Koeske & Koeske, 1993; Manlove, 1994; Swanson & Power, 2001; Yoo, 2002). Frequent and sensitive supervision is crucial in maintaining morale and professional competence and increases the self-efficacy of the worker (Ellett, 2009; Hardy-Brown, Miller, Dean, Carrasco, & Thompson, 1987). Research also indicates the significant bearing that supervisors