



A mixed-methods study of the impact of organizational culture on workforce retention in child welfare



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ABSTRACT

The recruitment and retention of a stable, qualified workforce has been an on-going challenge for the child welfare system. Prior research has identified both individual and organizational factors influencing retention and turnover in child welfare. The current study uses mixed methods to examine the impact of perceived organizational culture on workers' intention to remain employed. Thematic analysis of the qualitative data revealed that perceived organizational culture, as understood as being comprised of both relationships and values, could be related to worker retention. Based on the qualitative findings, the researchers selected quantitative measures to operationalize the various aspects of organizational culture. Results from the logistic regression indicated that intention to remain employed was significantly related to organizational culture. Implications for practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

The recruitment and retention of a stable, qualified workforce has been an on-going challenge for the child welfare system. National turnover rates in child welfare agencies range between 20 and 40% annually, and workers' tenure in these agencies average less than 2 years (American Public Human Services Association, 2001, 2003; United States General Accounting Office (GAO), 2003).

High turnover rates are detrimental for a number of reasons. They affect the system's ability to provide high quality services to children and families in every practice area including preventive services, child protection, foster care and adoption (Child Welfare League of America, 2008). Additionally, high turnover rates result in delays in achieving safety and permanency for children and families (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; United States General Accounting Office (GAO) (GAO), 2003).

Prior research has identified both individual and organizational factors influencing retention and turnover in child welfare (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Ellett, 2009; Landsman, 2001; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Strolin, McCarthy, & Carangi, 2007); however, there has been an overall paucity of rigorous multivariate research on retention, in particular (Strand, Spath, & Bosco-Ruggiero, 2010).

1.1. Intention to stay employed

Individual factors associated with worker retention in prior research include elements related to workers' perceptions about conditions within their workplaces. For example satisfaction with the job, feeling accomplished and effective, and sensing a good work-life fit have all been positively associated with job retention (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Ellett, 2009; McGowan, Auerbach, Conroy, Augsberger, & Schudrich, 2010; Strolin et al., 2007; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). Not surprisingly, higher levels of commitment to the agency and clients have also been related to worker retention (McGowan, Auerbach, Conroy, Augsberger, & Schudrich, 2010; Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). Additionally, a negative relationship has been identified between worker depersonalization and emotional exhaustion and retention (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). Finally, relationships have been recognized between retention and workers' prior job experience, with those not previously employed in child welfare more likely to stay employed (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Zlotnik et al., 2005).

Organizational factors associated with job retention include co-worker, supervisor, and administrative support, satisfactory salaries, reasonable workloads, and opportunities for advancement (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Dickinson & Perry, 2003; Ellett, 2009; Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011; Zlotnik et al., 2005). Additionally, organizational culture and workers feeling valued by the organization have also been associated with worker retention (Ellett, 2009; Zlotnik et al., 2005).

The workforce literature has often discussed intention to stay, often used as a proxy for retention, and intention to leave, used as a proxy for

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actual turnover, as opposite constructs. That is, it is generally assumed that if agencies address the major factors related to turnover intentions, workers will be more likely to intend to stay; however, research suggests that intention to leave and intention to remain employed may not be influenced by the same factors. Considerations related to intention to leave in previous research include feeling disrespected; having a low level of education; and satisfaction with the nature of the work, promotional opportunities and contingent rewards (Augsberger, Schudrich, Auerbach, & McGowan, 2012; Schudrich, Auerbach, Liu, Fernandes, & McGowan, 2012; Zeitlin Schudrich et al., 2013).

Factors related to intention to stay, discussed above, may overlap with those related to intention to leave; however, the fact that contributors to these intentions differ suggests that these are separate, but related, constructs. Therefore, intention to stay or leave should be considered not as dichotomous outcomes, necessarily, but as occurring along a continuum. This is particularly relevant as recent research suggests that actual turnover is a process that includes thinking about leaving, followed by looking for a new job, and then actively seeking out new employment prior to actual turnover (Auerbach, Schudrich, Lawrence, Claiborne, & McGowan, *in press*).

1.2. Organizational culture

An area in need of further exploration is the degree to which workers' perceptions of the culture within their organizations influence their intention to remain employed. Organizational culture has been defined in the business literature as the environment created within an organization by formal and informal communication of expectations. These communication channels are used as a vehicle for promotion of organizational values (Green, 2007). This is particularly interesting, as aspects of organizational culture have been related to factors related to job retention.

One aspect of organizational culture is the degree to which workers' individual values are congruent with those of the organization. Individual values are described as strongly held and enduring preferences of the way things ought to be while organizational values are "norms that specify how organizational members should behave and how organizational resources should be allocated." (Edwards & Cable, 2009, p. 655; Linzer, 1999). The degree to which individuals' values align with those of the organization in which they are employed has been widely accepted as one key to the quality of the fit between employee and employer (Godrich, 2010). Congruency of these values has been related to the frequency and modality of communication within organizations and employee performance measures, including employee attitudes and attendance (Adkins, Ravlin, & Meglino, 1996). Additionally, higher congruency has also been related to increased job satisfaction, greater motivation, increased employee identification with the organization, and reduced intention to leave (Edwards & Cable, 2009; Godrich, 2010).

Another aspect of organizational culture is communication, which has also been related to the congruency between individual and organizational values (Edwards & Cable, 2009). In this way, the nature of relationships between individuals within the organization often characterizes organizational culture, and bureaucracy is seen as an additional component of organizational culture (Berson, Oreg, & Dvir, 2007).

Guided by the literature, the current study uses mixed methods to examine the impact of perceived organizational culture on intention to remain employed in a sample of voluntary child welfare workers in a large urban community. The use of this mixed methods design provided the researchers with an opportunity to operationalize the concept of perceptions of organizational culture and develop a measurement specific to the child welfare workforce.

2. Material and methods

The current study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of Columbia University and Yeshiva University.

2.1. Research design

The current research was part of a larger study of workforce turnover among voluntary service workers ("SSW Professors Evaluate, Strengthen Child Welfare Workforce with \$2.5 M U.S. Health and Human Services Grant – University at Albany-SUNY," 2008). While the initial study focused on an analysis of the quantitative data, the current research expands upon those findings by utilizing a mixed-methods approach to examine factors impacting workforce turnover more deeply and in a different light – directly through the eyes of the workers – while empirically understanding the relationship between organizational culture and the outcome variable, intention to remain employed, which was used as a proxy for actual job retention. In the mixed-methods research conducted in this study, findings from the qualitative analysis were used to inform the quantitative analysis. A final interpretation of the findings was ultimately based upon both the qualitative and quantitative results (Cresswell, 2009). The research design for the present study is illustrated in Fig. 1.

The advantages of mixed-methods designs are that they take advantage of the strengths of both the qualitative and quantitative methods they employ. In general, qualitative methods are stronger on understanding the context of a phenomenon; however, weaknesses can include researcher bias and lack of generalizability. Quantitative methods, on the other hand, are less biased and more generalizable, but these often lack the depth available in qualitative research. Mixed-methods are seen as a way to leverage the strengths of each of these while mitigating weaknesses (Cresswell, 2009).

2.2. Sampling

The sample included child welfare workers employed at 202 voluntary agencies in a large northeastern city. All workers and supervisors in the preventive service programs under contract with the city ($N = 1624$) were asked to respond to an anonymous paper survey. Voluntary preventive service programs in this jurisdiction provide a range of services that are designed to promote child safety, positive family relationships, and community linkages, and all are oriented toward preserving the family unit. They are intended to assist families in which children are at-risk for abuse, neglect, and/or foster placement.

Out of the potential pool of 1624 possible respondents, a total of 538 survey responses were returned, which represents a total response rate of 33.1%. To obtain this, the directors of each program initially received a cover letter with sufficient copies of the survey instrument packet for all staff members. Each survey instrument packet consisted of a copy of the paper survey, a consent form, and a stamped return envelope for each staff member. Directors were asked to distribute the instrument packet to each worker and supervisor, encouraging, but not requiring, them to participate. Efforts to increase the response rate included a letter to all the program directors from the deputy commissioner responsible for preventive services explaining the city's interest in the study and requesting cooperation; a follow-up letter from the research team and additional calls to program directors with initially low response rates were made to encourage participation in the study.

2.3. Measures

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and in two different ways to accommodate the mixed-methods design. Qualitative data were collected through an open-ended question on the same written survey instrument in which quantitative data was collected. Additionally, focus groups were also held to gain a greater understanding of factors that may lead to job turnover.

2.3.1. Qualitative data collection

Qualitative data were collected in two ways. First, respondents completing the written survey were asked an open-ended question, "What

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