Satisfactions and stressors experienced by recently-hired frontline child welfare workers ☆

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1. Introduction

In the United States, frontline child welfare workers are tasked with meeting the child welfare systems' goals of child safety, permanency, and well-being. Child welfare workers' job responsibilities include investigating reports of alleged child abuse and neglect and assessing child safety as well as helping families care for and protect their children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2012). In light of these substantial responsibilities, many child welfare workers choose their positions due to their interest and commitment in protecting children (Rycraft, 1994) and derive a sense of satisfaction from their work and serving children and families (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Johnco, Salloum, Olson, & Edwards, 2014; Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010; Rycraft, 1994). However, new workers may be overwhelmed with job demands from the start (Fox, Miller, & Barbee, 2003). Child welfare workers commonly experience stress and burnout (United States General Accounting Office, 2003). High rates of turnover for child welfare workers occur within the first few years of hire with national annual rates ranging from 20 to 50% with the highest rates occurring during workers' first three years (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Smith, 2005). The average length of child welfare employment is less than two years (United States General Accounting Office, 2003) and high turnover rates create a constant flow of recently-hired child welfare workers.

Recently-hired workers' perspectives about their job experiences can provide unique insight about their positions. Few studies specifically examine recently-hired workers' experiences and perceptions about what contributes to worker satisfactions or worker frustrations in the beginning days on the job. Understanding workers' experiences can help identify areas to improve workers' transition and promote retention. Ultimately, these improvements and a more stable workforce can contribute to the safety and well-being of children and families (United States General Accounting Office, 2003; Boyas, Wind, & Ruiz, 2015). The current study is a qualitative analysis of interviews with recently-hired, frontline child welfare workers in Florida about the satisfactions and stressors they experience in the position.

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

Kalleberg's (1977) Theory of Job Satisfaction coupled with Ellett's (2000) Child Welfare Work Context inform our approach to identifying and understanding the satisfactions and stressors of recently-hired child welfare workers. Initiated from an analysis of nationally-representative workers in the US civilian workforce ($N = 1496$), the Theory of Job Satisfaction recognizes that job satisfaction, or an affective orientation toward current work roles (Kalleberg, 1977), is important to individual satisfaction, individual health, productivity, and organizational functioning. The Theory of Job Satisfaction also recognizes that workers balance positive and negative job attributes and derive a composite satisfaction level that influences wellbeing and employment outcomes. Rather than attributing job satisfaction solely to organizational elements, Kalleberg's (1977) theory recognizes that the values and expectations that workers attribute to their work responsibilities shape their job experiences. The importance of individuals' likes and dislikes as contributors to workplace satisfaction or stressors is well-documented (e.g., Goldthorpe et al., 1968; Spector, 1997). In addition, specific to the child welfare literature, much literature attests to the importance of worker satisfaction to job retention (e.g., Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Dickinson & Perry, 2002) and stress to increased turnover and intent to leave (Barbee, Antle, Sullivan, Huebner, Fox, & Hall, 2009; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Drake & Yadama 1996; Ellett et al., 2007; United States General Accounting Office, 2003).

Congruent with the Theory of Job Satisfaction, Ellett's (2000) Child Welfare Work Context framework proposes that employee or individual factors, such as levels of caring or levels of self-efficacy, interact with organizational factors, or workplace characteristics, such as workload demands, agency policies, administrative burden, and organizational culture. Based on analyses of child welfare workers in Arkansas and Louisiana ($N = 2140$), however, the Child Welfare Work Context framework is specific to child welfare workers. It proposes that child welfare workers are situated in a unique policy environment such that individual and organizational factors operate within the context of the external child welfare environment, including (Ellett, 2000; Ellett et al., 2007). The external environment includes the factors outside of the
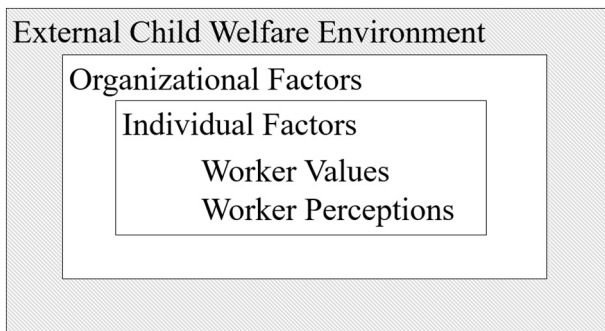
Fig. 1. Framework to examine child welfare workers' experiences of satisfactions and stressors.This figure represents the multilevel framework to examine child welfare workers' experiences of satisfactions and stressors. The framework was built on the work of Kalleberg (1977) and Ellett (2000). The two unshaded boxes depict Kalleberg's Job Satisfaction Theory which lies within the first two levels of Ellett's Child Welfare Work Context (organizational factors and individual factors). Ellett's additional level of the external child welfare environment is shaded.

workers and organization that impact both the workers and organization, including state and federal legislation; funding; media; clients; court; and public opinion.

Kalleberg's (1977) and Ellett's (2000) models provide a framework to examine child welfare workers' experiences of satisfactions and stressors at the individual, organizational, and external environment levels. As illustrated in Fig. 1, Kalleberg (1977) highlights the importance of workers' individual values and perceptions in an organizational context. Ellett's (2000) framework contributes the importance of the contextual policy environment in a multilevel model specific to child welfare. By examining the meanings that individuals give to their work through examining their experiences provides an excellent opportunity to understand the daily repertoire of frontline welfare work in a field with high turnover (Kalleberg, 1977; United States General Accounting Office, 2003). We apply the model to focus broadly on workers' likes and dislikes, conceptualized as satisfactions and stressors, of their work as they adjust to the child welfare workforce. Through detailing recently-hired workers' satisfactions and stressors, this manuscript informs practice and policy strategies to improve worker wellbeing and reduce turnover. The following sections outline the literature related to recently-hired workers' satisfactions and stressors. We supplement the limited literature on recently-hired workers' experiences with relevant studies examining retention and turnover more broadly, well-researched phenomena that relate to workers' early work experiences.

2.1. Individual factors

Many individual factors contribute to the satisfactions or stressors workers experience. Workers report high levels of job satisfaction regarding the nature of their work, in terms of its meaningfulness and the job tasks (McGowan, Auerbach, Conroy, Augsberger, & Schudrich, 2010). Workers enjoy being able to provide assistance to and work closely with children and families (Johnco, et al., 2014) and seeing positives changes in the families they serve (Eaton, Anderson, & Whalen, 2006). Similarly, and perhaps not surprisingly, workers committed to child welfare and those with a sense of personal and professional mission have stronger intents to remain in child welfare (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Morazes et al., 2010; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994). Alternatively, workers with a disconnect between their professional values and their agency's values are more vulnerable to job exits (Zeitlin, Augsberger, Auerbach, & McGowan, 2014).

Workers' outlooks also contribute to satisfactions or stressors. Those with high self-efficacy and the perception they can do their job

successfully may feel less stress. Research has found child welfare workers who described their environment as exciting, unpredictable, and constantly changing were more likely to remain in their positions, while an employee's inability to adapt to frequent, unanticipated changes was a contributing factor to worker turnover (Ellett et al., 2007). Thus, as Kalleberg's (1977) Theory of Job Satisfaction posits, worker attitudes influence their experiences of satisfactions and, arguably, stressors.

2.2. Organizational factors

Child welfare workers function within agencies which have organizational factors, including caseload size, administrative demands, and work environments, which contribute to worker satisfaction and stress (e.g., American Public Human Services Association, 2005; Ellett et al., 2007; Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Great variations related to these organizational factors exist across agencies and child welfare systems (United States General Accounting Office, 2003). Likewise, the factors may change within a specific entity over time.

Workers frequently cite excessive workloads as contributing job dissatisfaction (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Large caseloads interfere with workers' ability to perform their job successfully (e.g., Blome & Steib, 2014; United States General Accounting Office, 2003) and can translate to the need to work more than 40 h per week (Ellett et al., 2007). Subsequently, the need to work overtime can contribute to high levels of stress (Dickinson & Perry, 2002). In a qualitative study examining factors influencing child welfare workers' decisions to leave, the 24/7 on-call nature of the work coupled with unpredictable or long hours often intruded on personal and family life (Ellett et al., 2007).

Administrative demands, including paperwork, documentation, and court-related duties, can also be time-consuming and stress invoking. Studies consistently find that heavy administrative burdens limit the amount of time that workers spend with clients often creating stress and burnout (Altman, 2008; Barbee et al., 2009) and, ultimately, turnover (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Ellett et al., 2007).

Despite almost universally large workloads and administrative demands, organizations can promote worker satisfaction through positive work environments (Eaton et al., 2006; Johnco et al., 2014; Shim, 2010). For example, workers enjoy working in an environment where they feel support from their co-workers, supervisors, and overall agency (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Johnco, et al., 2014). Likewise, workers gain a sense of satisfaction through quality supervision (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman and Dickinson, 2008; Rycraft, 1994). Alternatively, organizations with less trust in workers, unclear work expectations, little worker support, poor or inadequate supervision, and less worker commitment increase worker stress (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Kim & Kao, 2014; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2015).

2.3. External environment factors

Outside of individual and organizational factors, the external environment, including laws, courts, public opinion, and clients can influence worker experiences (Ellett, 2000; Ellett et al., 2007). The external environment is context specific, thus changes both over time and by specific child welfare systems. State and federal law set the parameters in which agencies function. For example, federal legislation, such as the *Adoption and Safe Families Act* (1997; Public Law 105-89), outlines time requirements for caseload procedures including initial visits and case determinations and the resulting timelines and requirements can increase worker pressure (e.g., Han, Carnochan, & Austin, 2008). In addition, public scrutiny and legal liability contribute to stress, particularly among new workers as they adjust to their new positions and learn new skills (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

The client population served by the child welfare system can be both