Equity and fairness perceptions in the child welfare workforce

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ABSTRACT

The role ethnic identification plays in worker perceptions of workplace dynamics in child welfare services (CWS) organizations has not often been a topic of inquiry. The current study follows the unexpected finding from a previous study in which African American (AA) social workers were significantly less likely to report that they would remain in their CWS agencies than European American (EA) workers. Utilizing a mixed methods approach, the authors explored whether inequity from bias in CWS agencies related to ethnicity was a contributor to intentions to stay/leave. The results revealed no significant relationships between ethnicity and job satisfaction or intentions to stay in CWS agencies among EA, AA, or Hispanic/Latino (HL) workers. However, striking findings emerged related to worker perceptions of court duties concerning inequitable workloads and pay.

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1. Introduction

Retention has become a significant focus in the child welfare services (CWS) literature in recent years (Chenot, 2007; Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009). However, the role ethnic identification may play in worker perceptions of the dynamics in CWS organizations has not often been a topic of inquiry. The current study follows the unexpected finding from a previous study by the first author with a large sample (n = 767) of child welfare workers. In that study, African American (AA) social workers were significantly less likely to report that they would remain in their CWS agencies than European American (EA) workers (Chenot, 2007). While this finding was of concern, the focus of that study did not lend itself to revealing which factors might influence AA workers to want to leave their agencies at higher rates than EA workers.

The plan for the current study included an approach aimed to unearth some of the factors that affect willingness to remain employed in CWS agencies among AA workers compared to EA workers and Hispanic/Latino (HL) workers. The authors of this study believed that a purely quantitative approach would be unlikely to fully address the phenomena in question, specifically given the importance of individuals' subjective experiences in explaining their decision-making. It was important to the authors to obtain a deeper, more contextualized understanding of the experiences of the respondents. Therefore, a mixed methods approach was adopted with an emphasis on qualitative methods.

2. Literature review

Although many studies have explored work conditions and retention in public child welfare organizations; few have considered variations in the perceptions of workers from different ethnicities concerning these topics. For instance, researchers have examined the impact of job development, support, and advancement opportunities on worker commitment and retention, but have not evaluated the role of ethnicity in the experience of these work-related dynamics (Kleinpeter, Pasztor, & Telles-Rogers, 2003; Landsman, 2001). Additionally, several studies examining retention reported no significant differences in workers' intent to stay in their CWS agencies or outcomes based on workers' race/ethnicity (Glisson & James, 2002; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2008; Jones, 2002). However, Faller, Grabarek, and Ortega (2010) found that being a worker of Color predicted lower levels of intentions to stay, but did not predict actual turnover. Similarly, as previously mentioned, the lead author conducted a study which indicated that AA workers were less likely to report intentions to stay than EA workers (Chenot, 2007). The current study sought to explore whether worker perceptions of fairness and equity influenced intent to stay in child welfare organizations.

2.1. Equity and fairness

Equity and fairness in organizations is usually embedded in the context of "organizational justice" in the organizational behavior literature. Organizational justice can be defined as the manner in which workers perceive the fairness of decisions — especially in relation to allocation or outcome distributions, the decision-making process, and the treatment employees experience in relation to procedures, distributions and relational interactions (Colquitt, Conlon, Wesson, Porter, & Ng, 2001; Whitman, Caleo, Carpenter, Horner, & Bernerth, 2012).

Equity as a construct for understanding worker attitudes and behavior was first introduced by Adams (1965). Equity theory suggests that workers compare the level of reward they receive in return for their level of effort against the effort–reward outcomes of others. Equity perceptions are based on the degree to which conditions in the organization appear the same for all employees (Latting, 1991). Worker perceptions of equity in organizational practices appear to be related to the effects of support, advancement opportunities, and the distribution of responsibilities and rewards. These effects are likely to be reflected in "outcomes" such as job satisfaction, commitment and retention (Ambrose & Kulik, 1999). In a national study of nursing home social workers, Simons and Jankowski (2008) found perceived equity in pay and benefits predicted increased job satisfaction, which in turn was linked to lowered turnover intentions.

Though equity has played a foundational role in terms of theory development, the construct of fairness appears to be used most often in the organizational behavior literature to indicate individual perceptions of equitable conditions in organizations (Whitman et al., 2012). A key element leading to fairness perceptions is consistent application of procedures and the absence of bias (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Colquitt et al., 2001). Perceived bias in organizations degrades views of equitable treatment among some in the workforce. Perceptions that employees are treated fairly tend to lead toward more satisfaction, organizational commitment, and willingness to remain in organizations (Cohen-Charash & Spector, 2001; Whitman et al., 2012). Chou's (2009) study of direct care workers in assisted living facilities confirmed this perception–intention relationship, finding that perceptions of unfair pay and unfair workload were both related to turnover intentions. In fact, while perceived unfairness in pay was associated with intentions to leave, actual salary was not; which further supports the need to examine workers' subjective experiences when exploring the problem of turnover (Chou, 2009). This is particularly the case in the child welfare workforce literature. Cahalane and Sites (2008) found significant differences in perceptions of fairness for stayers and leavers among social workers from CWS agencies, but did not indicate any differences in findings by race or ethnicity.

One study of CWS workers reflected that female workers of Color reported lower levels of fairness than female White workers. However, in the same study, male workers of Color reported higher levels of fairness than male White workers (Kyonne, Kelly, & Yoon, 2006). Conversely, in another study by Kyonne, Yoon, Kelly, and Lauderdale (2007), ethnicity was not found to be important with regard to fairness perceptions.

2.2. Present study

In the present study the constructs of equity and fairness will be used to indicate individual perceptions of the conditions in CWS organizations as rated by line workers. Perceptions of bias, on the other hand, will indicate inequitable or unfair treatment of individual workers in these agencies. This study makes a contribution to the literature by providing an investigation of variations in equity and fairness perceptions linked to the ethnic identifications and work assignments of respondents.

3. Study aims

The aim of this study was to examine factors, particularly ethnicity, that lead to varying levels of intent to stay within CWS agencies. The interviews were conducted with open inquiry as the guiding frame of reference. However, some potential contributors to reduced job satisfaction and intentions to stay among workers from varying ethnicities were considered during the construction of the interview protocol. The authors considered inequity to be a potential contributor; and one of the explanatory indicators of this to be bias in the agency related to ethnicity. Bias was viewed as a potential contextual component of AA and possibly HL workers' experiences that might be encountered in their agencies. If workers view themselves as being treated in a way that is different than others in the same employee classification, especially by administrators and supervisors, the potential for viewing this treatment as unfair increases.

Within the context of these initial lines of inquiry, questions that accompany the aim of this study include:

1. Are there differences among workers from various ethnic backgrounds concerning intentions to stay in their CWS agencies?
   a. If there are differences in intentions to stay by ethnicity, which factors contribute to these differences?
2. Do CWS workers view the work conditions in their agencies as equitable or fair?
   a. Do the perceptions of CWS workers concerning equitable or fair treatment of the workforce in their agencies vary by ethnicity?

4. Methods

The sample in this study (n = 70) was gathered from three separate public child welfare agencies in one state. These agencies operate in a county managed child welfare system with oversight from the state. The three agencies are situated in two distinct geographical areas (urban/rural) within three different demographic settings. The sample was recruited from within each of these agencies via e-mail and hardcopy invitations sent through the administration to line workers. This approach resulted in a convenience sample of those workers who were interested in a study on "diversity in the child welfare workforce."

In order to gather accurate representations of equity perceptions in the CWS workforce, the authors used a mixed methods approach. A survey was used to gather quantitative data concerning several variables that are commonly used in workforce research such as, job satisfaction and intent to stay in the agency. The measures have been used with previous studies and have consistently yielded acceptable to strong reliability indicators with those samples (Chenot et al., 2009; Landsman, 2001). In addition, interview data was collected in order to encourage narratives that were likely to include statements about the way respondents experienced the treatment of workers in their agencies.

A structured interview protocol was developed for this study that was used in the interviews with all participants. It included some questions which were useful for stimulating narratives about the respondents' perceptions of equity in their agencies though the subject was not raised by the interviewers. The protocol included the following items: "Describe your typical clients. Describe your coworkers' typical clients. How many cases do you have? How many cases do your coworkers have? Describe how you see your work as similar or different from others with your title in the agency. What makes your work difficult/easier for you? and What makes your work rewarding/unrewarding?"

Surveys and interviews were administered by the lead author in two of the agencies and the lead author and two graduate students in one of the agencies. The graduate students were trained by the first and second authors. The interview protocol was followed closely by each of the interviewers though non-scripted follow-up questions