



## Employment-based social capital, job stress, and employee burnout: A public child welfare employee structural model

Javier Boyas<sup>a,\*</sup>, Leslie H. Wind<sup>b,1</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Texas at Arlington, School of Social Work, 211 S. Cooper, Arlington, Texas 76019, United States

<sup>b</sup> University of Southern California, 2300 Michelson Drive, Irvine, California 92612, United States

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### ABSTRACT

This cross-sectional study examined the relationship between employment-based social capital, job stress and burnout among public child welfare workers in a Northeastern state. Since one of the core functions of social capital is support, this study examines how employees' perception of support from multiple organizational dimensions, such as trust, social relationships with coworkers and supervisors, organizational commitment, communication, influence, and fairness can shape levels of job stress and burnout. Utilizing a purposive sample of 209 employees, results of structural equation modeling indicate that social capital in the form of communication, supervisory support, organizational commitment, influence, and trust shared a significant association with job stress. Employment-based social capital had varying effects on burnout as characterized by emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Emotional exhaustion was significantly associated with age, influence, supervisory support, organizational commitment, and job stress, while depersonalization was predicted by age, organizational commitment, and job stress. Implications for organizational practice and future research are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Child protection is an exceedingly challenging and stressful occupation. Although the majority of employees in this field demonstrate incredible commitment and effectiveness, child welfare workers are repeatedly faced with a number of job-related challenges that have been linked with job stress and burnout. Research estimates that as many as 50% of child protection workers report compassion fatigue and burnout (Conrad & Keller-Guenther, 2006). Burnout is defined as "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion and cynicism that occurs frequently among individuals who do 'people work' of some kind (Maslach & Jackson, 1981, p. 99)". Examining burnout is a continuing significant concern in the area of child welfare since it is often reflected in the development of negative attitudes and feelings of incompetence, a distant and possibly neglectful attitude toward the job, and faulty judgments, which may potentially impair client services (Stevens & Higgins, 2002). Furthermore, employees experiencing burnout may easily become angry and irritated, exhibit stubbornness and inflexible thinking, abuse substances, express cynicism about the agency, and become increasingly less productive (Azar, 2000).

A number of stressors within child protection practice have been associated with burnout. Child protection workers face the stress in the field of having to make immediate decisions on difficult cases, managing large caseloads, and dealing with continuous media scrutiny (Martinez, 2004). Organizational stressors stemming from the organizational structure, climate, and management style exist as well (Cooper & Cartwright, 1994). Although such stressors in the workplace sometimes cannot be entirely circumvented, when the number and types experienced exceed the individual's ability to cope with them comfortably, job stress can make an employee susceptible to burnout (Kilpatrick, 1989; Lee & Henderson, 1996).

One of the primary buffers against job stress and burnout is perceived organizational social support (Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayana, & Schwartz, 2002; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). From an employee's perspective, the organization functions as a critical source of socio-emotional resource and such perception of high esteem by the organization helps to meet an employee's need for appreciation, admiration, and attachment (Eisenberger, Aselage, Sucharski, & Jones, 2004). Since one of the core functions of social capital is support, this study examines employees' perception of support from multiple organizational aspects are significantly associated levels of job stress and burnout.

Our investigation distinguishes itself from existing research by conceptualizing employment-based social capital as the social resources embedded within the organizational climate of a public child protection system. The impact of such social relationships in the workplace on outcomes such as job stress and burnout should not be undervalued or

\* Corresponding author. The University of Texas at Arlington, School of Social Work, 211 South Cooper, Suite 101D, Arlington, Texas 76019, United States. Tel.: +1 817 272 0712; fax: +1 817 272 5229.

E-mail address: [jboyas@uta.edu](mailto:jboyas@uta.edu) (J. Boyas).

<sup>1</sup> Tel.: +1 949 437 0003; fax: +1 949 437 0022.

disregarded (Siggins, 1992) since job stress and burnout are both associated with high rates of employee turnover (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; McKee, Markham, & Scott, 1992; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Mor Barak; Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006). Empirical evidence has implied that turnover is associated with substantial costs for organizations, workers, and clients. Amidst increasing rates of child maltreatment reports and high employee turnover rates, child welfare workers must manage their own workload plus assist in covering departing workers' caseloads. At the same time, clients contend with inconsistent services and welfare agencies spend increasing financial resources for recruitment and training of new personnel (Anderson, 2000). To effectively respond to the needs of this strained workforce, employers must better understand the complex interaction of factors that contribute to burnout among child welfare workers and, in particular, those aspects that reduce negative outcomes. We argue that the context of employment-based social capital is salient in understanding employees' perception of the organizational climate in which they work and its potentially buffering effect against job stress and burnout and, by extension, service quality and child outcomes. Applying structural equation modeling, we tested a previously validated theoretical model of employment-based social capital (Lowe & Schellenberg, 2001; Requena, 2003) and examined its direct effects on job stress and burnout.

## 2. Social capital as a supportive theoretical framework

The quality of social relationships within an organization can be assessed through a worker's perception of the level of support received (Hagan, 1994). Such relational perspective reflects the importance and defining characteristic of employment-based social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). In broad terms, social capital is an asset that is embedded in social relationships and networks (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). In the process of interacting with one another, individuals and groups have the potential to combine and utilize resources to help themselves and others (Portes, 2000). This form of intangible capital, if encouraged and developed between members of an organization, can promote collaborative relationships that allow groups to accomplish more than individuals working in isolation (Coleman, 1988; De Cremer & Stouten, 2003; Putnam, 1995, 2000). In this study, social capital is defined as multidimensional resources reflecting the moral fiber of social relations within an organization (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). Through the social capital framework, the psychosocial processes that operate within the workplace can be better explained by assessing the perception of interpersonal relationships (Watson & Papamarcos, 2002) in terms of how they exacerbate or safeguard against job stress and employee burnout. Such relationship building can have significant impacts in promoting and enhancing the well being of individuals and groups (Kao, 2004).

Our conceptualization of employment-based social capital utilizes the social resource approach (Lin, 1999), which emphasizes the nature of the resources embedded within a network or an organization (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981) and as an element of an organization's culture (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). It speaks to the communication practices, norms, and linkages that make up an organization's culture and represents the traits that exemplify the network of relationships an employee has with organizational peers, subordinates, and superiors (James, 2000). These potentially supportive relationships can make a difference in workers' levels of stress and burnout (Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002). For the purpose of this study, several aspects of employment-based social capital were examined, including (1) trust/cooperation, (2) social relations with coworkers and supervisors, (3) organizational commitment, (4) communication, (5) influence, and (6) fairness. Lowe and Schellenberg (2001) argue that these aspects of the workplace can be examined to better understand the quality of workplace relationships.

### 2.1. Trust

Trust serves as a component that makes up social capital (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Rahn & Transue, 1998). Mishra and Morrissey

(1990) argue that trust is at the heart of all relationships, in both social and work settings. Within work settings, trust refers to the expectation that people within an organization will abide by commonly held social norms, roles, and ethical dictates (Muhlberger, 2001) and that an employer will act fairly (Lowe & Schellenberg, 2001). Leanna and Van Buren (1999) suggest that trust is necessary for people to work together on common projects. Cooperative relationships exist as a byproduct of building trust. Therefore, when trust and cooperation are established, we hypothesize that an employee is less likely to feel high levels of job stress.

### 2.2. Social relations

Work-based social capital is embedded within the social relationships existing within an organization (Coleman, 1988). The relationships in which someone participates constitute an important resource during social interactions by providing members with "the collectivity-owned capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249) that can improve individuals' opportunities and prospects (Coleman, 1988). Coleman (1988) suggests that, through a personal web of relationships, individuals can work in concert to achieve certain types of goals and outcomes. These goals and outcomes would not be possible in the absence of the norms, expectations and trust that are inherent in social relationships (Coleman, 1988). Thus, social relationships serve as the bonds between individuals that act as the building blocks of an organization (Field, 2003). Within an organization, the relationships between workers and management play a critical role in the establishment of accepted norms, obligations, and expectations. Management can set the tone by creating an environment that is supportive and less restrictive. Both supervisors and coworkers can play a significant role in supporting the professional norms, expectations, and obligations that are conducive to a more supportive workplace (Martinez, 2004; Mor Barak et al., 2006).

### 2.3. Organizational commitment

Organizational commitment emphasizes the worker's attachment to the organization rather than solely to the job (Lee & Henderson, 1996) and an employee's identification with an organization and its goals (Lowe & Schellenberg, 2001). Employees who have higher levels of organizational commitment are more likely to support the efforts of the organization and its functions. They are also more likely to put forth added effort beyond what is expected (Williams & Anderson, 1991). It is likely that organizational commitment assists workers in managing the demands and pressures of high-stress work environments such as child protection. Based on this premise, we argue that when organizational commitment is high, stress levels are low.

### 2.4. Communication

Communication is a basic feature of any effective and cooperative work relationship (Lowe & Schellenberg, 2001); it underlies the majority of organizational procedures (Euske & Roberts, 1987). Effective communication is essential in creating order and keeping employees informed of important organizational issues and changes. Open channels of communication are conducive to giving employees a voice and also providing them with all of the important and necessary information needed to fulfill their job functions. Communication plays a key role in employment-based social capital since it is at the heart of maintaining the norms of interaction, support, and relationship-building exchanges that are part of an organizational climate. Low levels of communication are believed to contribute to higher levels of job stress.

### 2.5. Influence

Influence relates to the capability of having a say in the decision-making process in one's work (Lowe & Schellenberg, 2001). Others

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