Children and Youth Services Review 35 (2013) 1657–1669

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Organizational tenure among child welfare workers, burnout, stress, and intent to leave: Does employment-based social capital make a difference?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 January 2013
Received in revised form 30 May 2013
Accepted 14 July 2013
Available online 25 July 2013

Keywords:
Voluntary employee turnover
Organizational tenure
Child welfare workers
Employment-based social capital
Job stress
Intent to leave

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that child welfare organizations have a prominent role in safeguarding their workers from experiencing high levels of job stress and burnout, which can ultimately lead to increased thoughts of leaving. However, it is not clear whether these relationships are shaped by their length of organizational tenure. A cross-sectional research design that included a statewide purposive sample of 209 child welfare workers was used to test a theoretical model of employment-based social capital to examine how paths to job stress, burnout, and intent to leave differ between workers who have worked in a child welfare organization for less than 3 years compared to those with 3 years or more of employment in one organization. Path analysis results indicate that when a mixture of dimensions of employment-based social capital are present, they act as significant direct protective factors in decreasing job stress and indirectly shape burnout and intent to leave differently based on organizational tenure. Thus, organizations may have to institute unique intervention efforts for both sets of workers that provide immediate and long-term structures of support, resources, and organizational practices given that their group-specific needs may change over time.

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1. Introduction

Voluntary employee turnover is a significant challenge that continues to confront child welfare practice. In the United States, voluntary employee turnover rates in child welfare are estimated nationally to range between 30% and 40% (General Accounting Office [GAO], 2003). When an employee voluntarily leaves, this may translate to an organizational loss of a significant source of human capital and result in considerable separation, recruitment, training, and productivity costs (Moynihan & Landuyt, 2008). The Center for the Study of Social Policy (2006) estimates that, on average, a child welfare organization's loss amounts to about $10,000 for every employee that leaves and may potentially cost up to $1.4 million (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005). These are financial resources that could have been allocated to other important parts of the operation — the vulnerable children and the families that they assist.

Although the rate of turnover within child welfare systems is alarming, even more alarming is the short period of time it takes child welfare workers to part ways with their organizations. We conceptualize the length of time employed in an organization as organizational tenure (Ng & Feldman, 2011). Numerous sources estimate that child welfare workers stay with their organization, on average, only between 2 and 4 years (American Public Human Services Association, 2005; GAO, 2003; National Council on Crime, Delinquency, 2006), with most leaving within the first year. This is a concern, given that it takes an average of 2 years of organizational tenure to develop the necessary skills and practice wisdom to work independently and effectively in the field of child welfare (Csiernik, Smith, Dewar, Dromgole, & O'Neill, 2010; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). Moreover, it is mainly the most competent workers who leave their organization sooner, given that it is relatively easier for them to secure employment elsewhere (Lambert, 2006).

Examining intent to leave to predict turnover is important because it measures the intentions of a worker, and typically, the act of leaving is premeditated by a notion to leave (Freund, 2005; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001). Evidence suggests that a significant relationship exists between intent to leave and organizational tenure (Carmeli & Freund, 2009; McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009; Strand, Spath, & Bosco-Ruggiero, 2010). However, this research is limited in that these studies merely control for tenure. As of yet, a study has not been performed that has parceled out the effects of organizational tenure on intent to leave (Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007), despite the recognition that length of time matters in the child welfare context. Child welfare research has failed to examine the possible moderating role of organizational tenure within the context of the organizational climate and negative psychosocial employee outcomes. This is a significant gap in the child welfare literature given that empirical evidence in other fields of study suggests that organizational tenure is an important characteristic to consider when assessing employees' attitudes and behaviors (Bradley, 2007; Wright & Bonnett, 2002). Thus, there is a need to

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0190-7409/$ – see front matter © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2013.07.008

investigate the process of adverse employee outcomes to differentiate between workers at different stages of their careers (Bradley, 2007; Brenner & Bartell, 1984), in particular among child welfare workers who face significant levels of job stress that often result in job burnout.

The current study responds to this knowledge gap by examining how organizational and individual factors shape perceptions of job stress and motivations of intent to leave among two tenure groups employed in a public child welfare setting: workers who have been employed in the organization for 3 years or more and those employed for less than 3 years. Specifically, we conducted a path analysis that examined how organizational features directly and indirectly shaped perceived job stress, burnout, and intent to leave by tenure group. Lambert, Hogan, and Barton (2001) maintain that more research needs to be devoted to examining the direct and indirect effects of multiple factors that influence a worker's intent to leave, such as the moderating effects of organizational tenure. We examined a theoretical model that attempts to identify whether the paths to job stress, burnout, and intent to leave differ based on the tenure group of the worker.

We maintain that organizational tenure matters significantly because the first few years of employment serve as a critical time for child welfare workers to develop essential practice and coping skills, which may ultimately minimize voluntary turnover. It is plausible that workers learn to acclimate to their work conditions over time (Bradley, 2007) and thus learn to better manage the workplace strains. Moreover, we further assert that organizational tenure differences create different workplace contexts that influence the accumulation of employment-based social capital in ways that safeguard against adverse employee psychosocial outcomes. For example, workers with longer organizational tenure are likely to develop more social ties and meaningful relationships with other workers inside and outside their units (Ng & Feldman, 2011), which may make it easier to ask and receive assistance and/or guidance when needed. Moreover, we examined organizational aspects because the literature on turnover has established that organizational factors are the major driving force that contribute to the high rates of turnover experienced by child welfare agencies (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; Strand et al., 2010). Westbrook, Ellis, and Ellett (2006) suggest that turnover can be best explained and understood by concurrently examining the relationships shared by organizational and individual variables, which is why the current study examined how levels of intent to leave, burnout, and job stress are shaped in the context of organizational tenure. Our path analysis model was developed with the intention of providing a way of understanding the complex interaction of multiple factors that contribute to intention of leaving the organization during a period when child welfare workers are most vulnerable in developing adverse psychological employee outcomes (i.e., job stress and burnout), which often result in increased notions of leaving. This investigation can provide a better understanding of the precursors of intent to leave that an organization could use to target modifiable areas of the organizational climate that may alter intentions of leaving (Lambert et al., 2001). Otherwise, once an employee leaves, there is nothing the organization can do aside from assuming the costs associated with replacing the worker and the possible interruption of services to their clients (Dalessio, Silverman, & Schuck, 1986).

2. Theoretical framework of employment-based social capital and model

Workers' perception of social relationships in their place of employment can be assessed through their perception of the level of support they receive (Hagan, 1994). The emphasis placed on the relational aspects of the workplace reflects the importance and defining attribute of employment-based social capital (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Generally speaking, Leanna and Van Buren (1999) maintain that social capital is a concept of social development that is cultivated through relationship building that is submerged in the social relationships and networks in which a person is involved (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999). In the process of interacting with one another, individuals and groups have the potential to combine and use resources to help themselves and others (Portes, 2000). Employment-based social capital can promote collaborative relationships among coworkers of an organization if properly encouraged and developed, thus allowing groups to accomplish more than isolated individuals (Coleman, 1988; De Cremer & Stouten, 2003; Putnam, 1995, 2000).

Lin's (1999) social resource approach was used to conceptualize our notion of employment-based social capital. In using a resource approach, emphasis is on the nature of an organization's resources (Lin, Ensel, & Vaughn, 1981) as an element of its culture (Leanna & Van Buren, 1999) that is embedded within the organizational climate of a public child welfare system. Viewing this issue through a social capital framework can provide a more thorough explanation of the psychosocial processes that occur in a workplace, and therefore can provide a clearer explanation by assessing the perception of interpersonal relationships (Watson & Papamarcos, 2002) in regard to how psychosocial processes exacerbate or safeguard the psychological health of workers. Given that support is one of the core functions of social capital, this study examines child welfare employees' perception of support from multiple organizational features. It speaks to the practices, norms, and linkages that make up an organization's culture and embodies the traits that represent the set of connections an employee has with organizational peers, subordinates, and superiors (James, 2000).

Resources for social growth and social support can be gained from a social circle, in our case the organization. Lin (2000) recognizes this process as resource patterns linked in interaction patterns. Significant social returns can result from the social web created by social interactions. These social returns can come from those we know and also from others we are linked to by our associations but do not know yet. For example, if a longer-tenured worker encounters a difficult case or situation, he or she knows that coworkers and supervisors are there to serve as a safety net. During this moment of need, a worker's colleagues can help by providing support, solutions, or possible strategies. However, social resources that may be available to existing members of the organization may not be readily accessible for newer workers. It is only when the newcomers are able to build social ties with existing workers that previously untapped resources become available. Thus, we maintain that the milieu of employment-based social capital is salient in understanding employees' perception of the organizational climate in which they work. Moreover, these potentially supportive relationships can make a difference for workers (Baruch-Feldman, Brondolo, Ben-Dayan, & Schwartz, 2002) by potentially buffering against job stress, burnout, and intent to leave, and by extension, enhancing service quality and child outcomes (Baruch-Feldman et al., 2002).

Even though social capital encompasses measurements of structural components (i.e., network size), it also has internal cognitive components. Uphoff and Wijayaratna (2000) propose that "cognitive" components are psychosocial processes that are embedded in the mind and therefore are difficult to measure. However, this form of social capital is attitudinal and subjective in nature (Uphoff, 2000). Cognitive social capital speaks to the shared norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs that influence people toward collective action in the workplace (Krishna & Uphoff, 2002). Cooperation and coordination among colleagues is driven by this personal cognitive bond. Harpham, Grant, and Thomas (2002) maintain that the simplest way of viewing this form of social capital is to measure what people "feel" in terms of social relationships.

2.1. Model of employment-based social capital

A conceptual model of employment-based social capital was used in this study. This model has been tested and validated by a number of researchers as a useful explicatory factor for satisfaction and quality of life in the workplace (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lowe & Schellenberg,

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