

Regular article

Counselor emotional exhaustion and turnover intention in therapeutic communities

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Abstract

Counselor turnover is a significant problem facing substance abuse treatment agencies. Understanding the role of organizational culture in predicting burnout and turnover intention may yield important information on how to address turnover in treatment organizations. Using data collected from 817 counselors employed in a national sample of 253 therapeutic communities (TCs), structural equation modeling was used to estimate the associations between emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, and three measures of organizational culture: centralized decision making, distributive justice, and procedural justice. The model controlled for counselor demographics, credentials, and earnings. Counselors' emotional exhaustion scores were higher in TCs with greater centralized decision making ($p < .01$) but lower in TCs where greater distributive justice ($p < .05$) and procedural justice ($p < .001$) were reported. Likewise, turnover intention was positively associated with centralized decision making ($p < .05$) and inversely associated with the workplace justice measures ($p < .001$). These data suggest that management practices in TCs and perhaps in other types of substance abuse treatment facilities likely play a substantial role in counselors' well-being and in their decisions to leave their jobs. Because these practices are not structural features of organizations, they may be targeted for intervention and change. © 2006 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Although voluntary employee turnover is a concern for most types of organizations, the loss of counseling staff in substance abuse treatment facilities has especially strong impacts. Loss or change in counselors has implications for both the quality of care delivered and the program management. The loss of these employees disrupts patient care (Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Lum, Kervin, Clark, Reid, & Sirolo, 1998) and increases costs for organizations that must then attract, hire, and train additional counseling staff. The rate of voluntary turnover is notably high among substance abuse treatment counselors (McLellan, Carise, & Kleber, 2003). These negative consequences of counselor

turnover as well as their high rates have generated considerable interest among program managers in understanding its causes and reducing its incidence (Gallon, Gabriel, & Knudsen, 2003; Hser, 1995; Laundergan, Flynn, & Gaboury, 1986).

Data from both treatment settings and other types of human service organizations suggest that emotional exhaustion, a key component of burnout, and turnover intention are key precursors of actual turnover. Therefore, understanding the predictors of emotional exhaustion and turnover intention may offer important insights into how treatment organizations can reduce counselor turnover. Drawing on theoretical principles of social exchange and using data from 817 counselors employed by therapeutic communities (TCs), this research examines the associations between emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, and three aspects of organizational culture: centralized decision making, procedural justice, and distributive justice. The TC setting

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is particularly appropriate for testing these ideas because it involves substantial intensity of interaction between counselors and clients and often is involved in treating clients with a broad range of deeply seated problems in addition to their substance abuse (De Leon, 2000). TCs represent one of the five major substance abuse treatment modalities in the United States (Prendergast, Podus, Change, & Urada, 2002). Given their significance in the delivery of substance abuse treatment services in the United States, it is important that the parameters of their operation be documented.

Emotional exhaustion is defined as the perception that one's emotional resources have been completely expended (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach & Jackson, 1981). It is one of the three dimensions in Maslach and Jackson's (1981) classic model of employee burnout. The present research focuses on this dimension because emotional exhaustion may better encompass the true nature of burnout than the other two dimensions of depersonalization and diminished personal accomplishment (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Shirom, 1989; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998). Further, a focus upon emotional exhaustion builds on a prior set of literature that has documented the positive association between this dimension and turnover intention (Barak et al., 2001; Blankertz & Robinson, 1997; Lee & Ashforth, 1996).

The negative consequences of emotional exhaustion are wide reaching. Negative organizational outcomes include poor job performance (Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998) and reduced client satisfaction with the services they have received (Garman, Corrigan, & Morris, 2002; Vahey, Aiken, Sloane, Clarke, & Vargas, 2004). Emotional exhaustion also has negative consequences in terms of illness, fatigue, and depression for the employees themselves (Burke & Deszca, 1986; Cherniss, 1980; Kahill, 1988; Pines & Maslach, 1978). Individual-level emotional exhaustion is consequential for other employees who interact with the burned-out individual, as there is a "social contagion" effect where burnout spreads among organizational members (Bakker, Schaufeli, Sixma, & Bosveld, 2001; Halbesleben & Buckley, 2002). Finally, longitudinal studies have demonstrated that emotional exhaustion is significantly associated with voluntary turnover (Maslach & Jackson, 1986; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Given the constraints of cross-sectional research methods, it is difficult to study directly the process of employee turnover; hence, turnover intention has been identified as a useful proximal measure (Farkas & Tetrick, 1989). Self-reported intentions to quit have repeatedly been demonstrated to predict actual turnover (Tekleab, Takeuchi, & Taylor, 2005). The validity of this approach is further supported by the meta-analytic work of Griffeth, Hom, and Gaertner (2000) who demonstrated that the effect size of intention to quit on actual turnover is considerably larger than the predictive power of other job-related factors on turnover behavior. Thus, understanding the aspects of work and organizational culture that are associated with turnover

intention is critical if the larger issue of counselor turnover is to be addressed.

1.1. Conceptualizing predictors of emotional exhaustion and turnover intention

An extensive literature suggests that stressful experiences in the workplace have implications for the well-being of employees (Barling, Kelloway, & Frone, 2005). Substance abuse treatment counselors face a wide range of stressors that result from organizational conditions and the social interactions they have with their clients. Certain stressors within the substance abuse treatment profession are difficult to mitigate (Shoptaw, Stein, & Rawson, 2000). For example, substance abuse treatment agencies face an increasingly turbulent environment where they are expected to deliver more and higher quality services with fewer resources (Lamb, Greenlick, & McCarty, 1998). In particular, TCs have been impacted by a newly demanding regulatory environment as they have become increasingly mainstreamed within the substance abuse treatment system (De Leon, 1999, 1995). Melnick and De Leon (1999) note that TCs have been impacted by the managed care environment that has sought to reduce treatment costs. In this environment, most programs cannot simply increase tangible rewards such as wages to increase the retention of counselors. Similarly, counseling involves substantial "emotional labor" (Hochschild, 1983) in building therapeutic relationships with clients, many of whom have not voluntarily entered treatment (Hiller, Knight, Broome, & Simpson, 1998). Additionally, these clients are often recidivists because of the chronic, relapsing nature of addiction (McLellan, Lewis, O'Brien, & Kleber, 2000). Further, they typically have complex mental and physical needs that require counselors to coordinate the delivery of additional health services (Kessler, Chiu, Demler, & Walters, 2005; Sacks et al., 1998). These clinical complexities are likely to be highly prevalent in TC settings, as clients in residential programs tend to report more severe problems (Melnick, De Leon, Thomas, & Kressel, 2001). As Cordes and Dougherty (1993) observe, human service occupations such as counseling are at high risk of burnout "because they are constantly dealing with other people and their problems" (p. 628). These challenges that are based on therapeutic relationship are intrinsic to the occupation and, therefore, are not as amenable to intervention as other organizational factors.

In contrast, certain management practices within treatment organizations have the potential to reduce employee exhaustion and turnover intention through changes in the social interactions between management and counselors. The primary advantage of an emphasis on change within an organization's culture is that it does not require infusion of costly resources. Instead, these management practices, facilitated within the social interactions of everyday organizational life, develop perceptions among employees

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