



Relationships between work–life balance and job-related factors among child welfare workers



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationships between work–life balance and several job-related factors among 573 public child welfare workers in a northeastern state in the United States of America. It explored job-related correlates of work–life balance and the possible mediating role of work–life balance between these factors and job satisfaction. Multiple regression analysis demonstrated that the job-related factors organizational support, job value, work time, and income were significantly associated with work–life balance among child welfare workers. It also confirmed that work–life balance partially mediated the associations of organizational support and job value with job satisfaction. Implications for child welfare research, policy, and practice are proposed based on the empirical findings.

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1. Introduction

In the context of personal life and family demands in contemporary society (Carlson, Grzywacz, & Zivnuska, 2009; Hobson, Delunas, & Kesic, 2001; Lewis, 2003; Moen & Yu, 2000), the capacity of balancing employees' work and personal lives is essential for the well-being of workforce. A national survey (Hobson et al., 2001) disclosed that the 10 most stressful life events for US workers revolved around major life and family issues. As working couples have become the norm in society (Moen & Yu, 2000), rising household financial and care needs (Hobson et al., 2001), together with increasing expectations for personal satisfaction and enjoyment (Lewis, 2003), have a high propensity to cause conflicts between employees' work responsibilities and their personal life demands (Carlson et al., 2009). Workers, including in child welfare, are obliged to balance their work and life roles and domains simultaneously. It is therefore necessary to understand their work–life balance by administrators and researchers.

Child welfare is regarded as a demanding and stressful field with challenging working conditions. It entails large caseloads, long hours, on-call responsibilities, inadequate compensation, insufficient supervision and training, lack of adequate resources to serve children and their families, stringent state and federal policy requirements, etc. (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). On one hand, working conditions are likely to worsen the existing conflicts between work and life among child welfare workers. This suggests a strong need to understand the

possible job-related correlates of work–life balance in child welfare. On the other hand, working conditions are likely to result in low job satisfaction, which has powerful and far reaching consequences for social workers and organizations (Lambert, Pasupuleti, Cluse-Tolar, Jennings, & Baker, 2006). Given the evidence-based influence of work–life balance in shaping job satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2006; Losoncz & Bortolotto, 2009), the role of work–life balance as a mediator of the relationship between working conditions and job satisfaction merits close attention.

Work–life balance has been intensively studied in business, management, and other disciplines (e.g., Carlson et al., 2009; Connell, 2005; Dean, 2007; Greenhaus, Collins, & Shaw, 2003; Hobson et al., 2001; Jang, 2009; Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010; Lewis & Campbell, 2008; Losoncz & Bortolotto, 2009; Mescher, Benschop, & Doorewaard, 2010; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010; Virick, DaSiva, & Arrington, 2010). However, it is still a novel research topic in social work, let alone child welfare research. Some studies explored the association between work–life balance and job retention in child welfare (Smith, 2005; Strolin-Goltzman, Auerbach, McGowan, & McCarthy, 2007), but various job-related correlates of work–life balance have been under-examined so far. Although prior research asserted the impacts of work–life balance on social work and human service worker job satisfaction (Lambert et al., 2006), the mediating effect of work–life balance on job satisfaction is still an untouched issue among child welfare workforce.

This study seeks to examine the relationships between work–life balance and job-related factors supervisor support, organizational support, job value, work time, income, supervisory status, tenure, and job satisfaction among 573 public child welfare workers in a northeastern state in the United States of America. It explores job-related correlates of work–life balance and the possible mediating role of work–life

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balance between these factors and job satisfaction. Implications for child welfare research, practice, and policy are proposed based on the empirical findings.

2. Literature review

2.1. Work–life balance and its correlates

2.1.1. Work–life balance

Research on the balance between individuals' workplace, household, and other aspects of life has developed over time (Dean, 2007; Jang, 2009; Lewis, 2003). Initially the studies emphasized on work–family balance and later on moved to work–life balance (Lewis & Campbell, 2008). The term “balance” was both distinct from and interrelated with conflict and enrichment in work and family domains (Carlson et al., 2009). In general, work–life balance encompassed broader activities than work–family conflict and was keen on gender equality. While work–family conflict focused on care for family dependents and tensions resulting from incompatible demands of work intruding on family responsibilities, work–life balance addressed non-earning activity and servicing work and personal life needs for all employees (Carlson et al., 2009; Fenner & Renn, 2010; Lewis, 2003; Lewis & Campbell, 2008). The major concern of the research in work–life area was how to integrate work and personal life of the workforce (Lambert et al., 2006).

Extant research from various fields has revealed the negative outcomes of work–life imbalance and the beneficial consequences of work–life balance for individuals and organizations. Work–life imbalance negatively affects productivity, absenteeism, organizational commitment, turnover, parenting problems, domestic violence, stress, illness, life satisfaction, etc. (Greenhaus et al., 2003; Hobson et al., 2001) and is positively related to job satisfaction, organizational commitment, family functioning, and well-being of employees (Carlson et al., 2009; Jang, 2009; Ollier-Malaterre, 2010).

The goal of this study is to explore correlates of work–life balance. It concerns such job-related factors as supervisor support, organizational support, job value, work time, income, supervisory status, and tenure. Socio-demographic factors are also included as controls.

2.1.2. Work–life balance and supervisor and organizational support

In work environment, supervisor support was social support for employees granted by supervisors. Employees also received support from co-workers and organizations where they perceived that they were valued and cared about in the organizations (Stamper & Johlke, 2003). Hopkins (2005) stated that supports from supervisors and organizations were required in successful integration of employees' work and lives. In organizations without officially sanctioned work–life policies or programs, supervisor support was crucial in helping workers strike a work–life balance. This was confirmed by Jang (2009) who stated that both perceived supervisor support and workplace support were related to work–life balance for working parents. Since support could mitigate conflict and stress caused by work and life responsibilities, it is expected that child welfare workers will experience better work–life conditions if they receive more supervisor and organizational support.

2.1.3. Work–life balance and job value

Job value, i.e., appreciation of the value of child welfare work (Smith, 2005) and its relation with work–life balance are still under-specified in child welfare. Only one study in child welfare involved job value and it indicated that job value was not associated with child welfare workers' job retention (Smith, 2005). However, a study of nurses in Australia appeared to challenge this finding because the study found that intrinsic and extrinsic work value did impact upon intention to leave employment and job satisfaction (Hegney, Plank, & Parker, 2006). Studies confirmed that work value altered individuals' subjective nature of work experience (Miller, 1980) and affected job choice decision (Judge &

Bretz, 1992). If appreciating the value of child welfare work can alter employees' job facet perceptions and decision, it may facilitate the workers' perception of work–life balance. However, the relationship between job value and work–life balance is still unknown.

2.1.4. Work–life balance and other job-related factors

The job-related factors work time, supervisory status, income, and tenure may be correlates to work–life balance among child welfare workers. In their study of working mothers, Losoncz and Bortolotto (2009) confirmed that negative work–life balance was associated with long working hours and work overload. If an employee allots more time for work, he or she will lack time and energy for personal and family life thus resulting in conflicts between work and life domains. Similarly, supervisors, undertaking much more job responsibility, pressure, and intensive work content, hence usually with higher income than their subordinates, may have degraded work–life balance. In addition, an employee with longer tenure in the position is highly likely to be experienced in the job and have adapted himself to it, thus having a better work–life condition. However, work time, supervisory status, income, and tenure have rarely been examined in work–life literature of child welfare workers.

2.1.5. Work–life balance and socio-demographic factors

Socio-demographic variables gender, age, race, and locality have been treated as control variables in relevant research (Lambert et al., 2006; McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009). Gender has been strongly emphasized in work–life discussions (Connell, 2005; Lewis, 2003; Lewis & Campbell, 2008; Mescher et al., 2010; Moen & Yu, 2000). The gendered portrayal of work–life balance practices (Lewis, 2003; Mescher et al., 2010) asks for examination of work–life balance between gender groups. It is obvious that older workers have fewer family responsibilities and personal development demands than young and middle-age workers. Therefore, it may be valid to assume that older workers may face lessened work–life imbalance than their younger counterparts. Race has rarely been examined in previous work–life research, but its relationship with crucial workforce constructs such as organizational commitment in social work (Lambert et al., 2006) reminds us of the possible ethnic differences in work–life balance. Although the rural/urban differences in job satisfaction, intention to leave, and retention were examined in detail among child welfare workers (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson, 2008; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007; Westbrook et al., 2006), few studies have looked at work–life balance across localities. Only McGowan et al. (2009) reported that urban workers were lower in work–life balance than rural workers in their research on intention to leave. Hence, socio-demographic factors gender, age, race, and locality are included as control variables in the present study.

2.2. Mediating effect of work–life balance on job satisfaction

Job satisfaction represented employees' evaluative feelings about the job. This received considerable attention over the past several decades (Sharma et al., 1997; Spector, 1985). Several studies have examined characteristics and predictors of job satisfaction in child welfare settings (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; Barth et al., 2008; Sharma et al., 1997; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). Empirical research indicated that age (Spector, 1985), salary (Spector, 1985), locality (Barth et al., 2008), supervisor support (Rauktis & Koeske, 1994), supervision (Barth et al., 2008), and tenure (Lambert et al., 2006) had their roles in explaining job satisfaction for social workers or child welfare workers. For nurses and other workforces, perceived organizational support (Bradley & Cartwright, 2002; Lee & Cummings, 2008; Stamper & Johlke, 2003), job values (Blood, 1969; Bokemeier & Lacy, 1987; Hegney et al., 2006; Kwak, Chuang, Xu, & Eun-Jung, 2010; Meglino, Ravlin, & Adkins, 1989; Miller, 1980;

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