Wilfrid Laurier University

Scholars Commons @ Laurier

Partnerships for Children and Families Project

Reports and Papers

2003

A Workplace Study of Four Southern-Ontario Children's Aid Societies (SUMMARY REPORT)

Cheryl Harvey
Wilfrid Laurier University

Deena Mandell
Wilfrid Laurier University

Carol Stalker
Wilfrid Laurier University, cstalker@wlu.ca

Karen Frensch
Wilfrid Laurier University, kfrensch@wlu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholars.wlu.ca/pcfp

Part of the Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Social Work Commons

SUMMARY

A Workplace Study of Four Southern-Ontario Children's Aid Societies

C. Harvey
D. Mandell
C.Stalker
K. Frensch

Introduction

Since the implementation of Child Welfare Reforms in Ontario, particularly during the late 90's, the field of child welfare has experienced powerful forces of change. These changes have left staff in many agencies feeling extremely challenged in providing positive service environments for children and families, and with creating positive working environments that attract and retain staff.

Children's Aid Societies have experienced extensive growth in the need for staff as they work to manage large increases in service volumes, and changes in funding priorities oriented to investigation, intervention, and the placement of children in care. The challenge of recruiting and retaining staff has been complicated by the reality of very high caseloads, extensive requirements for documentation and administration, and less time to serve families and children.

Staff turnover levels in an organization are an outcome of a complex set of individual and organizational characteristics. Examining these characteristics can help identify their relationship to turnover and to other indicators of organizational health and the overall quality of the helping environment for service participants and providers.

The children's aid society (CAS), also known as Family and Children's Services (F&CS), is a non-profit agency working in local communities to provide help and support to children and their families. Established under the authority of The Child and Family Services Act, the CAS is operated by a board of directors elected from the local community and by the membership at large. Services are funded through the Ministry of Community, Family and Children's Services.

The following is a summary of the full length report for "A Workplace Study of Four Southern-Ontario Children's Aid Societies". For a more detailed description of the working realities of surveyed employees, please contact The Partnerships for Children and Families Project to request a copy of the full report. Research reports can also be downloaded at no cost from www.wlu.ca/pcfproject.

Research Project: Partnerships for Children and Families Project

The Partnerships for Children and Families Project (PCFP) is a three-year research project (2000-2003) directed at understanding the lives and experiences of families and children who are served by children's aid societies and children's mental health services in Waterloo and Wellington regions of Ontario.

The Project also is committed to understanding the experiences of employees in child welfare and children's mental health to give voice to the challenges and gratifications of working in these fields. Agency partners of the PCFP identified a concern around the level of strain their employees experience as they work to provide needed services. The ensuing research was directed at:

Ø Understanding the experiences of employees working in child welfare and children's mental health

Ø Exploring sources of job satisfaction and stress, and why employees stay with and leave these organizations

Ø Discovering what contributes to a satisfying and productive workplace in child welfare and children's mental health organizations

There were four children's aid societies and three children's mental health agencies that participated in the overall investigation of employee's experiences. The results

reported herein, however, are specific to the four children's aid societies and do not include results from any of the participating children's mental health agencies.

Methodology

The workplace study consisted of two elements, an employee survey and a series of focus groups held following the survey.

Employee Survey

The employee survey consisted of 254 questions (or "items") designed to capture, the experience of being an employee in a children's aid society. The survey was divided into 8 sections that grouped items by themes such as organizational culture, occupational commitment, and job satisfaction. Survey items were selected from pre-existing valid and reliable scales measuring dimensions that have been found to be related to employee turnover, as well as measures of commitment to the purpose of the organization and a variety of demographic items.

The majority of items were answered using a Likert-type scale (e.g. strongly disagree to strongly agree) to indicate the strength of agreement with each statement. Some items required respondents to "fill in the blank" or elaborate on their response using short sentences. There was also a series of demographic questions that asked employees to indicate their age, marital status, and length of service, etc. Survey respondents could also choose to include additional written comments on a comment page provided at the end of the survey.

Procedure

All employees of participating children's aid societies received a personally addressed envelope containing the survey, an information letter, as well as a draw ticket

to enter to win a half-day at the spa. Survey packages were distributed through each agency's internal mailing system.

Employees were instructed to complete the survey and return it directly to Wilfrid Laurier University in the postage-paid envelope provided. Employees were given a three week time period in which to return their completed surveys.

Completion of the survey was completely voluntary. Employees were informed that all individual survey responses would remain confidential and that survey results would be reported in aggregate form only.

Focus Groups & Survey Comments

Approximately 6-8 months following the distribution of the employee survey, employees were asked to volunteer to participate in a series of targeted focus groups. Separate focus groups were offered for support staff, direct service workers, supervisors, and managers.

The focus groups were conducted in order to develop some context for interpreting the quantitative survey data. Analysis of the qualitative data on the survey questionnaires (i.e., comments that survey respondents wrote) contributed to the development of the questions for the focus group and were later compared to the findings from the focus group discussion.

We asked about what it is like to work in the organization, what the good things and the not-so-good things about the job are, and how the work of different departments changes people's experience in the agency. Everyone was asked what changes they would make, if given the power that would make their agency a place they could see themselves working in years hence.

Procedure

A recruitment letter was sent to all employees at each agency. The letter instructed employees who were interested in taking part in a focus group to contact the PCFP's project manager directly.

Survey Results

This section has been organized to provide an overview of aggregate survey responses. The survey results are divided into

- a presentation of demographic information about survey respondents as a group

- a discussion of what employees report that their agencies are doing well

- an examination of employee intention to leave, stress levels, and job satisfaction within the organizations

The report of study results was designed to be responsive to issues facing children's aid societies in Ontario, such as challenges retaining staff, employee burnout, and the nature of child welfare work.   Employees' work experiences were examined from several complementary perspectives. The choice to group survey respondents by department, job position, and organizational tenure where appropriate was made to parallel organizational structure for purposes of clarity.

In preparing this report for participating children's aid societies, we assumed that managers and staff would be most interested in knowing about 1) the things that agencies are doing well, 2) employee's intentions to leave their agency, and 3) the levels of stress that employees are experiencing. The first three sections of this report address these topics. In part 3, we include direct service workers' (DSWs) replies to questions about

the amount of time spent documenting their work, and the time spent in face-to-face contact with clients. The final section reports the results of a variety of measures of job satisfaction.

<u>Return Rate</u>

There were 403 completed surveys returned out of a total of 817 distributed surveys for a return rate of 49.3%. Although not ideal, this return rate can be considered to provide valid information about how children's aid societies' employees view themselves and their organization.

Part 1: Good News

What do employees see children's aid societies doing well?

Forty-seven percent of agency employees who responded to the survey indicated high levels of overall job satisfaction, and among direct service workers, 41% reported high levels of overall job satisfaction. An overwhelming 99% of agency staff reports that they are moderately or highly satisfied with the intellectual stimulation provided by their jobs. A majority (62%) of staff appears to be highly satisfied with the adequacy of informational resources and the competency of supervisory resources, and 72% of employees are moderately satisfied with promotion availability and process, while 18% are highly satisfied with the promotional availability associated with their jobs.

This satisfaction extends to measures assessing financial reward, where 38% of all employees reported high levels of satisfaction with salary and benefits and 59% reported moderate satisfaction with their financial rewards.

Fifty percent of employees reported low levels of intention to leave, and 12% reported a strong intention to leave their agency. Among direct service workers, 44%

scored in the low range on thoughts about leaving their agency, and 15% scored in the high range on intention to leave.

Part 2: Employee Turnover

Are there many staff members intending to leave their agency? Are there differences in experiences of the workplace between employees who plan to stay and those who plan to leave?

To answer these questions, we began by classifying survey respondents by the degree to which they indicated they intended to leave their agency. We divided the scale into three categories, a low, medium and high score. A low score, one indicating not at all likely to leave and a high score, seven indicating extremely likely to leave.

Then, we examined whether there were differences in people's intention to leave their agency depending on which department they were in or which type of position they held. The two tables below show the results of this analysis.

Intention to Leave By Department [1]

	Intention to Leave			
	low	med	high	Total
Family Services/Ongoing	67	46	18	131
	51.1%	35.1%	13.7%	100.0%
Intake	35	34	12	81
	43.2%	42.0%	14.8%	100.0%
Children's Services	37	36	11	84
	44.0%	42.9%	13.1%	100.0%
Administrative	36	23	3	62
	58.1%	37.1%	4.8%	100.0%
Legal	13	4	3	20
	65.0%	20.0%	15.0%	100.0%
Total	188	143	47	378
	49.7%	37.8%	12.4%	100.0%

---

[1] Where the total in any table is lower than the total number of surveys returned, it is because of some missing information on completed surveys.

We see that 12% of all employees in the four agencies scored in the high category on intention to leave. Among the four agencies, high intentions to leave ranged from 6.5% to 17%. Almost 50% of all employees reported low intentions to leave their agency. Administrative employees were least likely to intend to leave, while those in the Intake and Legal areas were slightly more likely than other groups to score in the high range on intention to leave.

When we look at the same data by the type of positions held by agency employees, we see that direct service workers (DSWs) are at least twice as likely as those in other positions (except lawyers) to want to leave their agency (agency range was 6-19%). The majority of support staff, supervisors, and managerial staff are not intending to leave their organizations. [Table not shown]

Intention to Leave By Position

To learn more about DSWs' higher scores on this variable, we looked more closely at this group. When one looks at the relationship between department and intention to leave for Direct Service Workers only, we see that intention to leave is highest among DSWs in Intake. Family Services workers are most likely to have low intentions to leave; over half are in this category.

Intention to Leave By Organizational Tenure

To learn whether there were particular time periods during a person's career with the organization when they were more apt to want to leave, we next looked at the influence of organizational tenure on an employee's intention to leave.

Not surprisingly, longer tenured employees have less intention to leave their employers than those who have been with the agency only a few years. Those who have been with the agency between 1 and 2 years and between 2.5 and 5 years were the most likely to have strong intentions to leave. Perhaps these earlier years are those when both employee and employer assess their mutual suitability. What this data does not show, of course, is whether this is the point at which many actually leave.

Intention to Leave By Organizational Tenure for Direct Service Workers Only

Since direct service workers returned 61% of the survey questionnaires, we also looked at the relationship between tenure and this group of workers only. Although high intention to leave seems to be greatest among those tenured between 2.5 and 5 years, a surprisingly high proportion of DSWs in the job for less than a year are high on intention to leave.

Turnover Intentions and Survey Scale Scores

To try to understand more about what may contribute to strong intentions to leave and similarly strong intentions not to leave, we examined in more detail those in the low and high categories on this scale. We looked for significant[2] differences between these two groups on responses to the other survey scale scores. Both the scales on which these two groups differed significantly and those on which they did not are shown below.

---

[2] When we say "significant differences", we mean "significant" as judged by a statistical test of significance.

High Intention to Leave – Higher on	High Intention to Leave – Lower on	No Significant Differences
§ Emotional exhaustion § Depersonalization § Image violation § Intention to Quit § Job search – active § Job search – preparatory § Perceived inequitable employment relationship scale § Role ambiguity § Role conflict § Work-family conflict	§ Agreeableness § Conscientiousness § Cultural inventory – clan, innovations § Job satisfaction – overall § Job satisfaction - resource adequacy, comfort, challenge, promotions § Loyalty § Occupational Commitment – affective, continuance, normative § Organizational commitment – affective, continuance, normative § Organizational trust § Organizational justice – distributive, procedural, interactional § Organizational support – instrumental, affective § Personal accomplishment § Supervisor support § Work group cohesion	§ Autonomy § Cultural inventory –market, administrative § Family-work conflict § Job satisfaction –financial § Union support

Here we can see that those who reported strong intentions to leave are discontent on several dimensions.

Ø They are more emotionally exhausted and more likely to distance themselves (depersonalization) from their clients than employees who do not have strong intentions to leave.

Ø They are experiencing considerable role conflict and ambiguity in their jobs.

Ø They feel that their personal values and those of the agency do not match.

Ø They perceive that their work is negatively affecting their family life. They are more dissatisfied with their jobs overall, and on all job satisfaction dimensions except financially.

Ø They do not trust the organization and perceive the organization as treating employees unfairly. Probably related to this, they do not feel as much pride in the agency as do other employees.

Ø They experience less support from the organization in terms of training and assistance to do their work.

Ø As might be expected, they are preparing to look for another job.

Part 3: Employee Stress

What are the levels of stress, or emotional exhaustion, felt by children's aid society employees? Do employees who differ on levels of emotional exhaustion, also differ on other experiences of the workplace?

To measure employee stress, we used the Maslach Burnout Inventory's scale[3] for Emotional Exhaustion (EE). Using the definitions of "low" (0-16), "moderate or medium" (17-27), and "high"(28 or over), provided by the authors for social service employees, we looked at the distribution of low, medium, and high scores by department, position, and organizational tenure.

Emotional Exhaustion by Department

The findings demonstrate that almost 40% of all employees scored in the high range on emotional exhaustion, suggesting that a significant proportion of employees are experiencing high levels of stress. Individual agencies had between 29% and 46% of their

---

[3] Maslach Burnout Inventory-Human Services Survey by Christina Maslach and Susan E. Jackson. Copyright 1986 by Consulting Psychologists Press, Inc. Palo Alto, CA 94303.

employees in this category. This level of EE among child welfare employees is consistent with the recent research with Metro Toronto child welfare workers done by Regehr et al. (2000)[4].

Administrative employees are most likely to report experiencing low levels of EE, and the majority of employees (56%) in legal departments report high EE. Almost half of employees in Intake (46%) also report high levels of EE.

Emotional Exhaustion by Position

Turning to look at whether the positions respondents held in their agencies had an impact on their experience of EE, we see that the 3 of the 4 lawyers in the survey sample report high EE. Almost half of the managers, a third of the supervisors, 29% of support staff, as well as 44% of DSWs (agency DSW range was 29-50%) report having a high level of emotional exhaustion. Clearly, many people at every level in child welfare organizations experience being emotionally exhausted.

Emotional Exhaustion by Department for Direct Services Workers Only

When we look more closely at departments, DSWs only, and EE, we find that workers in Children's Services are somewhat more likely than those in Intake and Family Services to report low EE levels. Similarly, DSWs in Intake and Family Services are somewhat more likely to score in the high range on EE. However, there is no area of direct service work where the majority of employees are not moderately or highly emotionally exhausted.

Emotional Exhaustion by Organizational Tenure

---

[4] Regehr, C., Leslie, B., Howe, P., & Chau, S. (2000). *Stressors in child welfare practice.* Toronto: Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto and Children's Aid Society, Toronto.

To see whether, for example, new employees experienced more stress than those who had been working for the agency for a long time, we looked at emotional exhaustion by organizational tenure:

Ø   Those employees who have been with the organization between 2 and 2.5 years are most likely to report high levels of exhaustion (54%). Is this a time when some are asked to take on more responsibility? Are they expected to be experts after two years, or to mentor others for example?

Ø   Among those who have been with the agency for less than six months, one third report high levels of emotional exhaustion, suggesting that introduction to the organization is highly stressful for many.

Ø   The experience of EE does not diminish with tenure in the organization for a significant proportion of employees. More than one third of employees who have been with the agency for more than 10 years report high levels of EE.

Emotional Exhaustion by Organizational Tenure for Direct Service Workers Only

When we examine the relationship between level of EE and tenure in the organization for direct service workers only we see the following:

Ø   42% of DSWs who have been working at the agency less than 6 months report high levels of emotional exhaustion.

Ø   EE seems to decrease somewhat for DSWs who have been with the agency longer than six months, but rises again, and between 2 and 2.5 years the largest proportion (73%) of Direct Service Workers are highly emotionally exhausted.

Ø   42% of DSWs with more than 10 years of experience in the agency are highly emotionally exhausted. Is the cumulative experience of working in child welfare

inevitably this draining? How effective can people be in their work with others when they are highly stressed especially if this continues over many years?

Emotional Exhaustion and Survey Scale Levels

We next looked for significant differences in how levels of emotional exhaustion (EE) were related to individuals' perceptions of themselves and their workplace as measured by the other survey scales. The greatest number of significant differences between people at different levels of emotional exhaustion occurred between those who reported low levels of emotional exhaustion and those who reported high levels. These are shown in the next table.

High on Emotional Exhaustion, Higher on:	High on Emotional Exhaustion, Lower on:	No Significant Differences
§ Depersonalization § Family-work conflict § Image violation § Intention to leave § Intention to quit – time § Job search – active § Job search – preparatory § Perceived inequitable employment relationship scale § Role conflict § Role ambiguity § Work-family conflict	§ Agreeableness § Autonomy § Conscientiousness § Cultural inventory –clan, innovation, administrative § Job satisfaction – comfort, challenge, financial reward, resource adequacy, promotions § Job satisfaction -- overall § Loyalty § Occupational commitment – affective § Organizational commitment – affective, normative, continuance § Organizational justice – distributive, procedural, interactional § Organizational support – affective, instrumental § Organizational trust § Personal accomplishment § Supervisor support § Work group cohesion	§ Cultural inventory –market § Occupational commitment – continuance, normative § Union support

<u>Antecedents to Emotional Exhaustion</u>

Researchers have studied many variables that might be seen as antecedents to emotional exhaustion. These include variables related to aspects of the person themselves, of the job, and about the organization[5]. Antecedents that researchers identified include role conflict, role ambiguity, perception of inequity in the employment relationship, a perception of a lack of fairness in the process and outcomes of organizational decisions, lack of supervisor support, client interaction time, professional tenure, and personal agreeableness.

To examine the impact of these antecedents, we used multiple regression. We first looked at the relationship between EE and the variables within each category of antecedent variables (i.e., personal, job, and organizational variables). Then we selected only those variables that were significant antecedents within each category and used them in our final set of regressions.

For the whole group of respondents, an inequitable employment relationship, a perception of lack of fairness in the outcomes of employment decisions (organizational justice – distributive) role conflict, the "doability" of the job, and the personality characteristic, agreeableness, are all significant contributors to EE. Role ambiguity, tenure in one's profession, amount of client contact time, and perceptions of the fairness of processes of organizational decisions (organizational justice – procedural) were not significant.

---

[5] For a review of this research see: Stalker, C. & Harvey, C. (2002) *Professional Burnout in Social Service Organizations: A Review of Theory, Research and Prevention*. Waterloo, ON: Partnerships for Children and Families Project, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University.

For DSWs, agreeableness was not significant, and for new DSWs, only role conflict and the perceived fairness of the outcomes of organizational decisions were significantly related to EE.

The theory about stress and burnout suggests that high levels of depersonalization (distancing oneself from one's clients), high levels of work-family conflict, low levels of job satisfaction (all areas), intention to leave, and preparation for job search are seen as consequences of high emotional exhaustion. It is likely that a vicious circle develops, whereby, for example, job stressors such as role conflict or perception of injustice lead to employee stress, which contributes to family conflict, which in turn may contribute to more emotional exhaustion, and more family conflict.

These results raise a number of questions and concerns. How are these employees with high EE coping? How is this level of stress affecting the clients the agency serves? Is it possible to intervene early in the employee's tenure with the agency in a way that would reduce high levels of EE at later stages? Is this high level of stress manifesting itself in high levels of illness, absenteeism, or disability claims? Are agency role models, i.e., managers and long-tenured employees, inadvertently "saying" that high EE is just part of the job?

Whether low levels of a sense of personal accomplishment are causes of emotional exhaustion or consequences is unclear. It is likely that at least for some employees increased depersonalization and distancing from clients contributes to a lower sense of personal accomplishment. Maslach et al. state that when both EE and depersonalization are high and personal accomplishment is low, burnout exists.

Part 4: Job Satisfaction

Are people satisfied in their jobs? Why or why not?

The graph below shows the percentage of low, medium, and high scores on each of the six job satisfaction scales included in the survey.

Job Satisfaction Scales
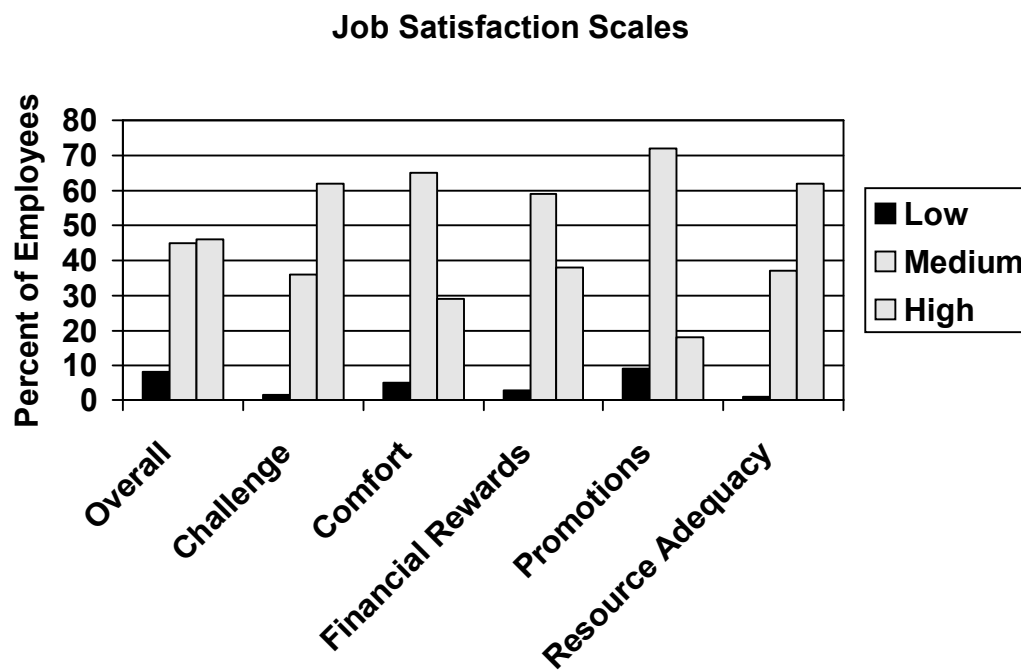
The graph shows that the majority of employees are either highly or moderately satisfied with their jobs overall; employees are especially well satisfied with the intellectual challenge offered by their jobs and with the adequacy of informational and supervisory resources. Most employees are only moderately satisfied with the "doability" (comfort) of their jobs, the financial rewards, and the process and availability of promotions.

As in earlier parts of this report, we examined job satisfaction results by department, position held, and organizational tenure. The first set of tables to follow shows these results for overall job satisfaction.

Overall Job Satisfaction – By Department

Forty-seven percent of all respondents are highly satisfied with their jobs overall. The proportion of highly satisfied employees ranged from 43 to 58% at the participating agencies. Legal and Administrative department employees are most likely to be highly satisfied; Family Services workers are least likely to be in this category. Only 8% of employees report low job satisfaction.

Overall Job Satisfaction –By Position

Managers are most likely to be highly satisfied, with 73% of those respondents in that category. Over half of supervisors and support workers are also highly satisfied. Lawyers themselves are least likely to be highly satisfied.

Overall Job Satisfaction – By Department for DSWs Only

Levels of high job satisfaction among DSWs are somewhat lower than the average with 42% indicating high overall job satisfaction (agency range: 35-54%). Family Services workers are least likely to report high job satisfaction; however, Children's Services workers are more likely to have low overall job satisfaction ratings. Intake workers are least likely to report low job satisfaction and the most likely of all DSWs to be highly satisfied with their jobs overall.

Overall Job Satisfaction – By Organizational Tenure

When we examine the impact of organizational tenure on overall job satisfaction, most new employees tend to be highly satisfied. This high satisfaction diminishes after the first year of employment, rises again between 2.5 and 5 years, falls off between 5 and 10 years, and then rises to 48% of long-tenured staff who are highly satisfied. This

pattern raises the question of whether some time periods in a person's career with an agency are less satisfying as they struggle with increased or different responsibilities or with issues of long-term commitment to an organization.

Overall Job Satisfaction – By Organizational Tenure for DSWs Only

For Direct Service Workers, overall job satisfaction may drop considerably in the period of tenure between one and 2.5 years, but then increases again for the group who stays with the agency for more than 2.5 years. Interestingly, compared to all employees, the few DSWs who have been with their agency for more than 10 years are much less likely to be highly satisfied with their jobs. Only 34% of DSWs with more than 10 years tenure are highly satisfied compared to 49% of the total group of long-term employees. Seventeen percent of long-tenured DSWs are dissatisfied with their jobs, while 9% of all employees are in this category.

Levels of Job Satisfaction – Overall

We examined the relationships between the job satisfaction scales and all other survey scales. Below is the summary of the significant differences on the other scales found between those who score high and those who score low on the overall job satisfaction scale. The pattern is very similar for the remaining aspects of job satisfaction, so those tables are not repeated here.

Notice that some of the scales that are about the job itself are significantly related to job satisfaction in the expected directions. That is, high job satisfaction is related to lower role ambiguity and lower role conflict. High job satisfaction is also significantly related to other results of the employment experience, such as lower emotional

exhaustion, lower intention to leave, less image violation, and higher organizational commitment.

High Job Satisfaction -- Overall, Higher on These Scales	High Job Satisfaction -- Overall, Lower on These Scales	No Significant Differences
§ Agreeableness § Autonomy § Job satisfaction – challenge, comfort, promotions, and resource adequacy § Loyalty § Occupational commitment – affective and normative § Organizational commitment – affective and normative § Organizational culture – market, clan, innovation and administrative § Organizational justice – distributive, procedural, and interactional § Organizational Support - instrumental and affective § Organizational trust § Personal Accomplishment § Supervisor support § Work group cohesion	§ Depersonalization § Emotional exhaustion § Image violation § Intention to Leave § Intention to Quit § Job Search- Active § Job search – preparatory § Perceived inequitable employment § Role ambiguity § Role conflict § Work-family conflict	§ Conscientiousness § Family-work conflict § Job Satisfaction –financial reward § Occupational commitment – continuance § Organizational commitment – continuance § Union support

An Overview of Focus Group and Survey Comment Results

In total, 13 focus groups were conducted across the four participating child welfare agencies. Four focus groups with direct service workers (one at each agency), three supervisor focus groups, three administrative staff focus groups, and three focus groups with upper management were conducted.

In general, the survey data was consistent with the focus group data. Notes from the focus groups were subjected to coding in order to extract themes that were then grouped. At the broadest level, the categories of themes that emerged from discussion and comments on the survey questionnaires were: 1) the nature of the work itself; 2) the way the work is structured; 3) what helps to make it a good place to work; 4) what is not helping; and 5) what is needed to make it a good place one would want to keep working in.

Following are the sub-categories under each of the broader themes:

The work itself

Perceptions and feelings about the work are very mixed. Some employees see the work as challenging, interesting, worthwhile, rewarding and gratifying. Gratification was connected to believing that one's work is important and conducive to positive change for clients. Some employees find the work highly stressful, unsatisfying and not what they had expected. This is related in large part to the volume of work and the fact that there is more documentation than client contact and in-depth social work for many workers. It is also related to the perception that many families are difficult and angry, and that workers see little change over time for some clients. The predictable struggle to reconcile the "policing" element with the "social work" element of child welfare is strongly in evidence, though it appears to be intensified by current policies and practices both within and beyond the agencies. Comments indicate that there is too little time and too few community resources available to do meaningful social work that will help families. Employees worry about the effects on clients of the way child welfare services are currently structured. Community-based workers say their jobs allow for more

prevention-oriented service despite caseloads, and for seeing that one is having a positive effect.

The current emphasis on standardized risk assessment, documentation, court preparation and funding dilemmas appears to have changed the way many employees experience the work. This emphasis limits the scope of their work and affects the way they see their role. The nature of child welfare work has exposed employees to attitudes within the court system and the broader community that they experience as devaluing their role. In addition to concerns about risks to the safety of children, there are concerns about the responsibilities and liabilities entailed in trying to manage these risks.

<u>The way the work is structured</u>

The "doability" of the job appears to be the main issue, although to varying degrees in different agencies. Related to doability among direct service workers are issues primarily of: adequate training, size of caseload, amount of documentation, timelines, and expectations that exceed the number of hours available (hence, overtime issues). For managers, doability issues are sometimes related to the difficulty of taking action on larger organizational issues because of the need to deal with immediate crises and operational matters. The non-doability of the work is stressful and contributes to people feeling limited in their roles. Employees have varying experiences of how their work is structured. For example, some workers like the flexibility that Intake affords them; others said that there is too little structure in Intake for any but the most organized workers.

What helps to make it a good place to work

Broad consensus on the value of the team, collegial support, and supervisory support is evident. These are especially important because of the risk, stress, liability, and potentially high visibility associated with the work. Where these supports are experienced as strongly positive, the dissatisfactions and concerns related to the work itself and the structure of the work seem to be counterbalanced or outweighed.

Within each agency, restructuring has been experienced by some as positive, and by others as negative, apparently depending on department and/or position. Supervisors appreciate the opportunities for training and promotions. Having a stable core of qualified, experienced front line workers who are suited to child welfare work was mentioned as very important. However, the definition of what constitutes a well-qualified or suitable worker varies. Maintaining a balanced life and having boundaries in place between work and one's personal life help to make the work itself more manageable. Some feel that changing jobs within the agency periodically is helpful. Among workers, supervisors and managers, a sense of strong agency purpose and values that are congruent with their own is seen as helping to make the stresses and challenges worthwhile.

What isn't helping

Inadequate support and inadequate resources are the two very prevalent problems identified. Inadequate support by the organization takes a number of forms: inadequate case-focused supervision (related to amount, quality and focus), lack of validation and trust when difficult situations or problems arise, and feeling devalued. Recognition and feeling valued are also related to financial remuneration and promotional practices.

Given the perceptions of risk and hard work that are devalued by many clients and by courts and the community, it makes sense that feeling valued and supported within the organization would be of paramount importance. Inadequate resources are a problem within agencies (staffing levels, caseloads, lack of time to work with clients) and in broader communities (funds and services available to support families).

Many employees have experienced difficulties when their agency has undertaken major restructuring or expansion. The resulting changes and increased turnover have been disruptive. For example, some mentioned inadequate communication about court processes and organizational processes during the times of transition. Workers feel that supervisors and senior management do not always demonstrate the leadership, especially in planning and team building, which workers feel is crucial to their success and satisfaction in the job. This is consistent with senior management's own comments about the lack of time to do the kind of debriefing and planning that they see as necessary, and reflections upon how little "real change" or "progress" has actually resulted from the many changes that have been implemented. Senior managers expressed awareness of the dilemma that workers face as a result of competing demands and experience similar dilemmas themselves.

What's needed

- Good supervision and managerial support.

- Strong sense of team.

- Lower caseloads for new workers and complete training prior to assuming a caseload.

- More qualified and experienced workers and supervisors leading to more staff, hired more selectively, and better retention.

- More social work, less paper work.

- Better service to clients meaning more direct contact with clients, and within that contact

    - more orientation towards strengths and empowerment of families

    - permanent planning for children within allotted time

    - less adversarial processes.

- More equitable distribution of caseloads and capping of caseloads.

- Wishes for regular supervision and team meetings, and the need to prepare workers well for the jobs they do. The latter includes initial training prior to beginning work and educating workers adequately about the available resources in the community.

- More proactive, effective leadership at all management levels, rather than a reactive, crisis-oriented way of operating.

- Increasing and improving communication between departments and from management to workers.

- Fair and consistent regulation/management of flextime, overtime, and compensatory time.

- Up-to-date technology.

- A number of wishes for change were aimed at establishing cultures of caring for the well being of all employees within agencies.

- Even where there is satisfaction with starting salaries, workers wanted a salary structure that is fairer as workers gain experience and status in the agency.

- Workers want to know the agency is advocating with the ministry for changes and/or working with community partners to develop additional resources.

Discussion

We began our study of workers' experience of the workplace in Children's Aid Societies knowing that the implementation of Child Welfare Reforms in Ontario initiated strong forces for change within the child welfare system and within each child welfare agency. Funding priorities more oriented to investigation, intervention, and the placement of children in care led to high growth in the number of staff required to manage large increases in service volumes. High caseloads, extensive requirements for documentation and administration, and less time to serve families and children resulted. In many agencies, staff felt extremely challenged in providing positive service environments for children and families, and agency managers found it more difficult to sustain the positive working environments that attract and retain staff.

Our focus in this study has been to understand the complex set of individual and organizational characteristics that contribute to staff turnover, to other indicators of organizational health, and to the overall quality of the helping environment for service participants and providers. Using the workplace survey results and the comments of both survey respondents and focus group members, we looked in particular at what might predict or be related to an employee's intention to leave their agency, to experience high levels of burnout or emotional exhaustion, and to be satisfied with her or his job.

Perhaps our most striking finding is that despite high levels of EE, satisfaction with the nature of the work itself is quite high. For example, among those direct service workers who were highly emotionally exhausted, just 18% reported low overall job satisfaction and 20% were highly satisfied. This experience of being both highly satisfied

and highly emotionally exhausted was indicated in qualitative data as well. How can people who are working so hard and feeling so emotionally burdened be satisfied with their jobs?

We speculate that, at least to some extent, this is explained by the research literature that suggests that social workers as a group are strongly motivated to give of themselves in order to help others. This is supported by the literature on women's roles in the helping professions (e. g., Baines, Evans, & Neysmith[6]; Callahan[7]), and child welfare is certainly a woman-dominated field at the front-line level. People attracted to child welfare – especially those who stay beyond the initial two years – may be individuals who are particularly altruistic. In the qualitative data there were numerous references to the importance of helping children, and in light of the many statements about the community's lack of appreciation for this important work, there may be a certain sense of personal mission for some workers that keeps them feeling good about their work.

In addition, there are indications in the quantitative data that suggest that a norm of high emotional exhaustion dominates child welfare agencies. Recall that 47% of managers and 37% of all long-tenured employees (42% of DSWs in this category) reported high levels of EE. This pattern shows that agency leaders and their longest term employees seem to have a high tolerance for high EE so that being emotionally drained becomes accepted as simply a part of the job.

---

[6] Baines, C., Evans, P., & Neysmith, S. (Eds.) (1991). *Women's caring: Feminist perspectives on social welfare.* Toronto: McClelland Stewart.
[7] Callahan, M. (1993). Feminist approaches: Women recreate child welfare. In B. Wharf (Ed.) Rethinking child welfare in Canada. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Inc.

As for the experience of high overall job satisfaction, some specific aspects of job satisfaction clearly contribute to this. The regression results indicate that a sense of personal accomplishment, satisfaction with the intellectual challenges provided by the job, feeling that the job is "doable", and having adequate supports in terms of informational resources and competent supervisors are important determinants of overall job satisfaction. Their presence in an agency makes a difference for employees, perhaps helping to counter the heavy emotional burden they also experience.

When we examined the antecedents of emotional exhaustion among the personal, job, and organizational variables measured in the survey, we found that low agreeableness, or a low tendency to be cooperative, non-critical, and sympathetic towards others was an antecedent of EE among the whole group of survey respondents. Those individuals who are competitive, judgmental, and egocentric may not be well suited to work in child welfare agencies since they are more likely to experience high EE. This personality feature was not a significant predictor of EE when DSWs alone were examined, perhaps signaling that there is not a lot of variance in agreeableness among DSWs.

For new DSWs (2.5 years or less agency tenure), only high role conflict and perceptions of low distributive justice were significant antecedents of high EE. These DSWs may be spending many hours trying to determine to whom they should be paying most attention about how to do their jobs, and then feeling that the rewards do not justify these efforts.

The high levels of depersonalization found among all employees (30%) and particularly among DSWs (37%) are also a concern. We wonder how trusting, respectful

relationships can possibly be formed under those conditions. How can one work effectively with clients when the helping relationship is so distant? Does an impersonal and unfeeling attitude toward clients contribute to adversarial relationships that are more likely to require court intervention?

Image violation (a measure of the fit between an individual's goals and values and those of their employer) is a significant antecedent to a person's intention to leave an organization. Significant predictors of image violation include two features of organizational culture: the emphasis on participation, teamwork, and concern for people; and, a focus on service excellence and results. This finding indicates that employees generally, and DSWs particularly, expect to find both these characteristics in their organizations, and experience image violation when they do not. Child welfare employees also expect their employer to behave with integrity, treat them fairly, and clearly define job responsibilities. They expect a friendly and cohesive group of colleagues as well. Again, when these valued expectations are not met, employees experience image violation and are more likely to want to leave their employer.

For new DSWs, a perceived lack of organizational integrity, unclear responsibilities, and a low emphasis on service excellence are particularly salient antecedents to a sense of image violation.

High image violation, high emotional exhaustion, low job satisfaction, low affective organizational commitment (feelings of wanting to stay with the organization), and low continuance organizational commitment (feelings of needing to stay and needing to avoid the costs of leaving) are all significant antecedents to high intentions to leave the organization in this sample of child welfare workers. This is true for all employees

regardless of their tenure in the agency and for DSWs alone. These variables have all been identified in previous research as significant predictors of intentions to leave an organization.[8]

Our results indicate a relationship between organizational tenure and several job attitudes and these relationships are particularly strong for DSWs. For example, the job satisfaction regression results showed that newer DSWs are likely to be more satisfied. Furthermore, viewing the results of overall job satisfaction by organizational tenure, the newest employees (less that half a year) were the most satisfied. Emotional exhaustion peaked for all employees between 2 and 2.5 years (73% of DSWs in that group were high on EE!). This high level of EE in such a large proportion of a sub-group is statistically linked to high intention to leave. Turnover intentions sharply diminished for all employees and for DSWs after five years of employment and were highest at the 1-2 and 2.5-5 year periods.

Presumably, those who are highly dissatisfied and intend to leave do actually leave. They may be individuals who had not been committed to child welfare work in the first place. They may also be those who employees referred to in the qualitative data as not being well suited to this kind of work. Suitability, in the eyes of employees, has to do with both personal qualities and strengths in relation to both the demands of the work and also to coping capacities and strategies.

In the focus groups (at all employee levels) and in the survey comments, numerous references were made to the need for a stable core of experienced, qualified front-line workers. The lack of sufficient experienced workers makes everyone's job

---

[8] Harvey, C. & Stalker, C. (2003). *Understanding and Preventing Employee Turnover.* Waterloo, ON: Partnerships for Children and Families Project, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University.

more difficult. In discussing retention problems, some supervisors and managers offered a useful insight: the first two years (approximately) of the front-line worker's job acts as a kind of "seasoning" period, during which DSWs have a great deal to learn and develop their own ways of managing their heavy workloads. Those who stay on usually have the ability, at that point, to direct more energy and attention to the clinical aspects of their jobs and have probably begun to develop coping strategies.

One could speculate, therefore, that at roughly the two-year point, anyone who was not initially committed to child welfare work or who was not able/willing to cope with the significant challenges of the job, leaves. Those who stay may be more satisfied with their jobs because the nature of the work and their ability to manage the job has improved for them.

Two other things may happen at around the point where DSWs are considered to be "experienced". They may be hoping for promotion or transfer to a preferred department, they may achieve the promotion or desired transfer and they may – whether they succeed in these or not -- be given increased responsibility. Thus, job satisfaction may rise for some. For others, (e.g., those denied a promotion or lateral transfer) feelings about the organization may become more negative. Some workers, who were not upset about how they themselves have been treated, said that their feelings about the organization took a downturn when they saw valued colleagues being treated in a way they perceived as unfair.

We have spent some time in this discussion focusing on rather difficult issues such as high emotional exhaustion and intentions to leave the organization, but, it is important to recognize that many individuals working in child welfare are long tenured

and highly satisfied. Almost half of all the employees who have worked in their agency more that ten years are highly satisfied; 76% are highly satisfied with the intellectual challenge of their jobs; over 60% do not feel highly emotional exhausted and only 3% intend to leave their agency. Even when we look at DSWs with 10 or more years tenure, we see that 34% are highly satisfied with their jobs overall, 58% are not highly emotionally exhausted, and only 6% are thinking a lot about leaving the agency. Clearly, something is going well for these individuals. They have apparently found the fit that has eluded some others. The qualitative data shows this too; we noted that many employees find the work worthwhile and gratifying. We can learn as much from these positive experiences as from the more negative ones.

It must be acknowledged that there are limitations to any study like this one. We need to keep these in mind when drawing conclusions about what the results might mean. For example, we do not know if the individuals who responded to the survey or participated in the focus group are in some way different from employees who did not respond. The survey response rate (49%) is lower than would be ideal. And, this is a cross-sectional study that is a snapshot at one point in time rather than a study that follows a group of people over a long period of time. For example, we do not know if the experience of individuals currently in the first year of employment is identical to the first year experiences of people now approaching their fifth year. On the other hand, the results do reflect the experiences of a significant proportion of the agencies' employees at this time, and are therefore deserving of attention.

Many of the issues raised in this report will not be new to the readers. Aware that many of these issues are complex and not easily resolved, we next address some implications of these findings for managers of child welfare agencies.

Implications

The pervasiveness of high levels of emotional exhaustion among child welfare employees is unacceptable. It is important for managers to reduce the perceived normalcy of emotional exhaustion by demonstrating behaviours that are congruent with more balance between work and other aspects of one's life. In addition to modeling work-life balance, managers must create policies and practices that reinforce this balance and a caring culture. As suggested by agency employees themselves, what's needed in this regard includes consistent regulation of flextime, overtime, and compensatory time, as well as equitable distribution of caseloads and capping caseloads. Also, specific training for new workers about how to manage a caseload and the documentation demands that go with that might be helpful. These types of efforts will have an impact on the job's "doability".

New DSWs also need even more attention than is currently provided about managing the competing role demands within their jobs. Here, training and regular supervision are especially important. Helping workers recognize the small gains their clients make can enhance low levels of personal accomplishment.

The high levels of depersonalization among employees also need to be addressed. Can supervisors and managers, who tend to have lower levels of depersonalization, share a caring view of the agency's clients, encouraging a helping relationship that itself is characteristic of the agency's overall caring culture?

To counter perceptions of a deficit in the reciprocity relationship between employees and their agencies and of a lack of fairness in the outcomes of employment decisions, managers might communicate more clearly how and why decisions are made. There may also be opportunities to examine and revise promotion policies and salary structures. More managerial and supervisory attention to demonstrating appreciation for a job well done and for just how difficult it is to do a good job may also reduce perceptions of an inequitable employment relationship and again enhance personal accomplishment.

It is also important to maintain high levels of overall job satisfaction as a counterbalance to the emotional demands of the job. Intellectually interesting work supported by adequate resources is crucial and employees generally felt very satisfied with those aspects. How can more employees become more highly satisfied? Again, we suggest this might be achieved by looking at increasing the "doability" of the job, as well as by reviewing policies regarding promotions (can more lateral opportunities be introduced and be made attractive?), encouraging supervisors and others to provide non-financial rewards (e.g. recognition, appreciation), and by reviewing salaries (more rewards for experience?).

Agencies that cultivate a caring and a service excellence culture are less likely to have employees who experience incongruence with their own values and goals. We mentioned some actions above that can enhance a culture of caring. Emphasizing a service excellence culture can result from proactive leadership. For example, working with the Ministry and community partners for adequate supports, selecting expert and

caring supervisors, and making sure they have time to engage in regular supervision are concrete, proactive actions. Transparent decisions and a lot of communication all the time also build these cultures and trust in the organization at the same time.

All these actions sum to creating a workplace in which people commit themselves to staying -- they are challenged, but not overwhelmed, satisfied but not complacent, and feel that they are doing work that they, their leaders, and their community value.

We have suggested a number of strategies that managers might consider in their efforts to improve the work experience of employees within their particular agencies. We do think, however, that it is legitimate to ask whether it is possible to reduce the emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and intention to leave that this study has revealed solely through changes under the control of agency managers. We wonder whether the "image violation" that is a significant predictor of intention to leave is, at least to some extent, related to the current approach to child welfare in Ontario. Many individuals trained in social work find the present approach to child welfare disturbing. The strong emphasis on risk assessment and protection of the child, coupled with the minimal interest and resources directed towards the well-being of parents and families, is seen by many as short-sighted, and ultimately harmful to children. The emphasis on investigation of parents rather than on an assessment of what parents need followed by a societal commitment to providing the support that parents need is very troubling.

Some of the comments in focus groups reflected awareness that many of the problems are not so much at the agency level, but rather at a Ministry and ideological level. Workers point to the need to spend more time documenting risk assessments and preparing court briefs, leaving less time for relationship building and work with parents.

Many agency managers have also expressed considerable concern about the direction of child welfare policy. Recent discussions suggest the current system, predicated on a narrow focus of child protection, is reaching its breaking point. The number of children in care in Ontario has increased by 40% over the last six years. Of the 52 children's aid societies in Ontario, all but two are facing significant financial strain as they carry escalating expenditures associated with foster care and salaries[9].

In addition to serious questions about the financial sustainability of the current child welfare system, we would argue that considerable costs are being exacted from its employees. Ultimately, the cumulative effect of high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization among direct service workers at the "front line" impacts service delivery and the child's and family's experience of child welfare services. Indeed, other investigations of the efficacy of the child welfare system from the client's perspective under the Partnerships for Children and Families Project illuminate serious gaps in the quality of services and service delivery[10].

Consequently, in addition to the ideas we have offered to agency managers about ways they might improve the experience of employees, we want to encourage a serious review of the current approach to service delivery so that, to the importance of protecting the child, we add the provision of genuine help to the child's parents when they come to the attention of Children's Aid Societies.

---

[9] Ontario's children's aid societies face severe cash crunch, debt. (2003, January 28). The Record.
[10] For a complete listing of research reports addressing child welfare services from the client's perspective, please visit www.wlu.ca/pcfproject.