

An Organizational Review of Turnover in Social Work Organizations

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Abstract

There has been a very high rate of turnover in social work dating back to as early as the 1950's. This paper examines social work from an organizational standpoint, and the high turnover rates among social workers employed within those organizations.

This paper examines the causes of the turnover among social workers, and the factors that contribute to individual turnover rates. This paper examines previously conducted literature in an effort to identify the factors associated with turnover among social workers, in an effort to identify the ethical implications and make suggestions for policy changes.

This paper suggest that there is a large need for change, not only for those working in the social work profession, but also the families that those individuals serve.

Key Words: burnout; turnover; retention; self care; traumatic stress; organizational culture

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Introduction

This research is directed to examine the continually growing turnover rate amongst social workers. The issue that this research aims to address is that the turnover rates amongst social services agencies continues to grow at a rapid rate, and retention rates are becoming lower and lower.

While this issue continues to grow across the United States, it is not confined just to American social workers. Previous conducted research has shown that this has become a universal issue and has also become an issue in places like China and Ireland as well.

Although the problem being addressed in this statement can't be pinned down to one exact date, some of the earliest research conducted on this problem suggests that it may be dated back to the early 1950's. This turnover rate continues to grow since the earliest research has been conducted on this problem and is continuing to through the present day.

The turnover rate amongst social workers seems as if it can not be narrowed down specifically to just one area of social services, and is rather a wide spread issue amongst many social service and social work agencies. This research aims to examine those individual workers who are directly involved with providing services to the families.

This research will be conducted through an extensive literature review of previously released publications on turnover rates amongst social workers. This research will utilize several theories to analyze any major emerging themes. Through these theories this research will examine any ethical implications these turnover rates may have, as well as attempting to identify any policy recommendations that can be made in an attempt to correct or start to nullify the turnover rates.

Literature Review

One of the common emerging themes amongst social services agencies is the high rates of turnover amongst employees. This literature review aims to identify common emerging themes amongst previously conducted research in an effort to identify relationships and reasons for the growing turnover rates.

Previous research conducted by Shim in 2014 explains the importance of employee retention as it does not only result in the opening of a position, but it is also costing the agency large sums of money when this position opens. Shim cites that as an employee resigns from their position it will cost the agency additional resources because they need to fill this vacancy and then spend the resources to ensure that the newly hired employee has the proper training completed (Shim, 2014).

In a previous study completed by Lawson and Claiborne in 2005, they identified three different types of turnover to examine among social workers including functional turnover, unpreventable turnover, and undesirable turnover. Lawson and Claiborne directly identified the three types of turnover and defined these three types of turnover as the following:

“Functional turnover, also called beneficial turnover, is the first kind. It occurs, for example, when workers ill-suited for the job, the work, the agency, and its surrounding community leave. Unpreventable turnover is the second kind. Retirements, deaths, and changes in life roles (e.g., a spouse changes jobs and must move to another place) account for this kind. Undesirable turnover is the third kind, and for purposes of this report, it is the most important of the three. Here, good people leave despite the agency’s efforts to retain them—at considerable cost to the agency and its clients. As this report

indicates, this undesirable turnover is a retention planning priority because it can be reduced, and in some cases, it also can be prevented.” (Lawson & Claiborne, p. 6).

Lawson and Claiborne further go on to explain further than one agency specifically in upstate New York disclosed that training alone costs them approximately \$24,000 for each employee who leaves. The issues do not stop at the astronomical cost alone, as the employee turnover increases, the efficiency of the agency may also decrease, as well as relationships with other agencies and outside service providers may suffer as newcomers do not have the built rapport with the agencies (Lawson, H.A., & Claiborne, N, 2005).

All previous research identifies several issues that may contribute to turnover rates amongst the child welfare social workers. One of the main focuses on the research conducted by Shim was organizational culture. Shim identified through their research that those child welfare agencies who are experiencing high turnover will also experience other significant issues with their agency, including things such as staff shortages, high caseloads for the remaining staff, discontinuation of the delivered services to the individuals being served by the agency, and the possibility of poor outcomes for those individuals being served by the agency (Shim, 2014).

The issue of low retention rates is not encapsulated amongst just the United States borders, as Burns cites that this has been a topic of discussion in Ireland’s parliament debates, as well as being identified as an issue in Ireland’s policy and government reports (Burns, 2011). One of the most alarming findings that Burns shed light on was that the issue of low retention rates was identified as a factor for failure to protect a child at risk (Burns, 2011). The issue at hand is not simply one that only affects the agency at hand, but shows signs of a trickle down effect as well. The absence of workers creates higher caseloads for the remaining workers, in

term creating more stress, which then could fall on the quality of service that the agency is able to provide the population that they serve.

One common theme that is recurring frequently in the literature is the discussion of funding, both for the agency as well as the salary being provided for the workers. According to work published by Ravalier, for each dollar that is spent on social services there is at least a three dollar return to the economy (Ravalier, et al., 2022). Stuckler and Basu (2014) identified that this increased return to the economy is said to be through reduced crime rates, increased health outcomes, & higher participation in educational programs and career programs that are supported by social work and social services (as cited in Ravalier, et al., 2022).

According to Coyle, et al., (2005) there are three major levels of the stress process that play key factors on social workers retention including stressors, moderators of the stress process, and stress outcomes. Stressors are broken down into things like occupational stressors, which each individual may face, however they are unique to each individual occupation. The other two sources of stress include hassles, which are small inconvenient events that build up stress levels, and the final source is major life events (Coyle, et al., 2005).

Coyle, et al., also go on to cite seven major moderators of stress levels, which are the following:

- “1. high levels of self-esteem;
2. good social support networks;
3. hardiness;
4. good coping skills;
5. mastery and personal control;
6. emotional stability;

and 7. good physiological release mechanisms.” (Coyle, et al., p. 202)

These moderators are essentially what the name suggests, they serve to moderate the individuals stress levels. The moderators are inverse of the stress levels, therefore the better the individuals moderator may be, the lower their stress levels would be. The final level, which is stress outcomes, includes both positive and negative stress outcomes. Stress outcomes includes things like high job satisfaction and good psychological health of the social worker, but also negative factors such as burnout and the inverse of negative job satisfaction.

Although this specific research comes from an older source, it is important to consider due to the basis of identifying the stressors that are still relevant today. A common theme among previous research shows that burnout is widespread among the social work field and that it is extremely important to utilize the moderators of stress. As cited by Lewis and King (2019), “field instruction should include concrete assignments that encourage the use of essential self-care practice skills to promote success among emerging social work professionals.” (Lewis, & King, 2019, p.99)

Along with the importance of self care being taught during curriculum, studies have also shown that forcing social work students to complete internships or clinicals can also contribute to burnout. According to Benner and Curl (2018), college students who work are at higher risk of burnout because doing both diminishes the ability to focus on one area or the other (Benner & Curl, 2018).

The issues associated with trying to instill self care for those in the social work field is the fact that self care is not the same for everyone, and there is no clear widespread definition that clearly defines self care. Although there is no widespread definition of self care, it is typically understood that it is any behavior that helps to support an individuals health or well

being. As cited by Lee & Miller (2013), self care is especially important for those working in the mental health or those working with trauma (Lee & Miller, 2013). One thing that tends to be overlooked when changing things like policy amongst an agency would be individuals input on the factors surrounding workplace issues. When examining workplace issues it is generally only considering issues including the society, community, or agency level issues and how they can be addressed. Without consulting individuals when addressing workplace issues, some may be overlooked, as each case may not be the same.

Lee and Miller's research suggests that self care may be broken down into six different sections including: physical, psychological and emotional, social, spiritual, leisure, and professional (Lee & Miller, 2013). Lee and Miller (2013) also cited that there are differences between personal and professional elements of self care, and they defined both as the following:

“Personal self-care is defined as a process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote holistic health and well-being of the self, whereas professional self-care is understood as the process of purposeful engagement in practices that promote effective and appropriate use of the self in the professional role within the context of sustaining holistic health and well-being.” (Lee & Miller p.98).

Jaquelyn Lee & Shari Miller's 2013 research aimed to identify a structural foundation of support that contribute to self care, which are as follows: “(a) workload and time management, (b) attention to professional role, (c) attention to reactions to work, (d) professional social support and self-advocacy, (e) professional development, and (f) revitalization and generation of energy.” (Lee & Miller, 2013, p. 100).

A study conducted by Georganta and Montgomery (2022) aimed to examine how workplace fun may have an impact on the turnover rate as an external source. During this study

workplace fun was examined as a job resource which examines how different variables may have an impact on individuals wellbeing in the workplace. The study identifies two types of fun, organic fun where the workers create the fun environment themselves, and coworker socializing or managed fun, which would be fun activities that are managed or organized by management (Georganta & Montgomery, 2022). This study deduced that managed fun did not have a significant impact on workplace outcomes, and assumed that it may be due to being somewhat forced in nature, however, management supporting the idea of fun as a job resource helps to build trust within management and therefore leads to more favorable outcomes when protecting against job demands (Georganta & Montgomery, 2022).

In a study completed by Ravalier et al. (2022), that was previously referenced in this research, the individuals examined the working conditions of social workers around the globe and how those working conditions directly impact the services delivered, burnout rates, and retention amongst those employees. As cited by Ravalier et al., chronic workplace stress is the equivalent risk factor for developing cardiovascular disease as is smoking or high blood pressure. Cardiovascular disease is not the only risk factor associated with chronic workplace stress, as there are also links to psychological issues such as anxiety and depression (Ravalier et al., 2022).

Chronic stress in the workplace is a significant factor that social workers face across the globe, where it contributes to negative risk factors on health, but also contributes to a negative impact on the organizations that the individuals are employed with. Ravalier et al. (2022) cites a study conducted in the UK in 2018/2019 where anxiety and depression were responsible for fifty four percent of all health related days off, and further explains that these were the leading causes of long-term absences from work (Ravalier et al., 2022).

McFadden et al. (2015) cites burnout as “the experience of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion that can arise from long-term involvement in occupational situations that are emotionally demanding.” (McFadden et al., 2015). McFadden et al. also goes on to further cite that burnout and stress are significant factors in developing both physical and psychological illness. Although burnout can occur in any occupation, the risk is tremendous in social workers, especially those in the area of child protection, due to factors like slim chances for advancement, long work hours, extreme amounts of paperwork, and high caseloads. As cited by McFadden et al. (2015), child protection workers face at least four conditions of adversity, including work stress, burnout, trauma, and vicarious traumatization, and suggests that these factors may contribute towards declining staff well being (McFadden et al., 2015). McFadden et al. further goes on to cite that even though there is a much higher risk for children protection workers of facing burnout, there has been studies showing that between fifty and seventy percent of workers are working effectively without signs of burnout or disfunction.

One factor that has not been previously mentioned is personal history of childhood trauma in individuals and how that may impact their experience with burnout or vicarious traumatization. McFadden et al. (2015) cites that a personal history of childhood trauma increases the risk of a child welfare worker experiencing secondary traumatic stress (McFadden et al., 2015). Although this personal history of childhood trauma can be a motivation to enter this work, this also showed that it can be a hinderance in increasing the risks of secondary traumatic stress.

Sobeck et al. (2023) cited that a national survey on child welfare workers showed an estimated thirty to forty percent turnover per year nationwide and that the average length of tenure is two years or less (Sobeck et al., 2023). Sobeck et al. also went on to further cite another

longer and more expansive study amongst child welfare workers, examining caseworkers in 46 states and supervisors in 43 states, where it was concluded that the turnover rate fell between twelve and twenty two percent annually for caseworkers, and about twenty percent per year for supervisors (Sobeck et al., 2023).

The research conducted by Sobeck et al. (2023) goes on to further explain that the ramifications of high turnover rates does not halt at just a position becoming vacant, it is also associated with worse outcomes for permanency and child safety, poor outcomes for the workers ability to establish and maintain relationships with the clients being serviced, and children staying in care longer with a decrease in the chances of reunification (Sobeck et al., 2023). Going forward, increasing turnover results in things such as higher caseloads for the remaining workers. As cited by Sobeck et al. (2023) it costs an agency approximately \$54,000 for each employee who leaves (Sobeck et al., 2023).

A study conducted by Leedham in 2022 examined how the media portrays social workers and the impact it may have. Leedham cited that in an analysis of almost 2,000 news articles regarding social workers, roughly 67 percent of the articles were negative in manor geared towards the social worker (Leedham, 2022). Leedham went on to further cite that a review of almost 400 articles in the United States were examined and about 58 percent of the articles were positive stories about social workers (Leedham, 2022).

A study completed by Hu et al. (2022) cites that a survey conducted in China revealed that over 50 percent of all of the respondents intended on leaving the social work profession, on average, within the upcoming 14.5 months (Hu et al., 2022). While Hu et al. focused on the intentions of social workers intentions of leaving the field of social work, they also identified the point that in China the social workers are not necessarily required to hold a specific bachelor

degree, but rather are required to pass a social work test in order to be employed as a social worker (Hu et al., 2022).

The link that Hu et al. (2022) have identified in the turnover rate in China is that without requiring a bachelor degree, it may not have a significant impact on turnover intentions. If you require a bachelor degree, it may have an impact on turnover rates as those workers spent years on schooling, as well as practicum to work in the social work profession (Hu et al., 2022).

As cited in Schweitzer et al. (2013), the concerns in regards to recruitment and retention of qualified individuals to serve in a social worker roll has gotten to the point where it is being called a workforce crisis (Schweitzer et al., 2013). Social workers, especially child welfare workers, face many challenges due to their positions including verbal and physical acts of violence, firsthand experiences of verbal and physical aggression from clientele, and home visits that may be in unsafe homes or neighborhoods (Deaver et al., 2022). Deaver also cites that these things can also occur in a secondhand manner when learning of violence or threats that may occur to coworkers, which may also lead to secondary traumatic stress (STS) (Deaver et al., 2022). As cited by Deaver et al. (2022) secondary traumatic stress can be defined as the following: “The natural consequent behaviors and emotions resulting from knowing about a traumatizing event experienced by a significant other—the stress resulting from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person,” with symptoms mirroring those of posttraumatic stress disorder” (Deaver et al., 2022, p. 429).

Deaver et al. (2022) further goes on to explain that child welfare workers are particularly at risk for secondary traumatic stress with a study showing up to 92% of child welfare workers experiencing at least one secondary traumatic stress symptom in the week prior due to their work. As cited in Deaver et al., there is a negative relationship with workplace violence and job

satisfaction, as well as a relationship between child welfare workers experiences with safety related challenges and job retention as well as engagement (Deaver et al., 2022). According to a study cited by Jackie Thomas in 2016, a study consisting of 1,000 randomly selected social workers revealed that 75% of the social workers participating in the study have experienced some form of burnout in their lifetime, and compassion fatigue rates were between 13 and 30% of those interviewed (as cited in Thomas, 2016).

Other studies have also examined retention rates amongst master of social work students and what their retention rates look like after their Title IV-E funding requirements expire, and as cited in Schweitzer et al. (2013) job satisfaction and burnout are significant predictors on retention. Schweitzer et al. (2013) also cites other factors having significant impact on an employee and their retention such as support from management, caseload size, overall workload, and how quickly a new employee receives a full caseload (Schweitzer et al., 2013). In a 2009 study conducted amongst 785 master of social work alumni 92% of respondents indicated that earning an above average income was not only important, but was also associated with retaining social workers as cited by Schweitzer et al. (2013).

Research completed by Wermeling (2013) showed that out of 785 individuals comprised from three separate master of social work alumni listings, 31% had already been out of the workforce and approximately another 13% were considering leaving the field, therefore roughly 44% of those individuals surveyed would no longer be in the social work field (Wermeling, 2013). The results of this study showed that those who were out of the workforce and those who intended to leave had less experience in the social work field compared to those individuals who were intending to stay (Wermeling, 2013). Linda Wermeling also cited in this study that those individuals who intended to stay in the social work profession reported that having an above-

average salary was more important than it was to those who had already left or had intentions of leaving the profession.

Another area that Linda Wermeling's 2013 research suggests is that there is a significant number of individuals in the social work profession who also reported being a caretaker for another individual. This caretaking for individuals ranged from being a primary caretaker for a child to being a primary caretaker of a spouse or an elderly relative, however this may need to be taken into consideration as it is another barrier that those in the social work profession face. This factor also needs to be taken into consideration because it created added financial responsibilities, which was a noted response for reasoning from those individuals who had left the social work profession or those who had intentions of leaving the profession (Wermeling, 2013). This research also noted that those who did not have intentions of returning to the profession had noted a higher caretaking responsibility than those who intended to return. One of the most expected findings of this study is that those who left the profession and those who were intending to leave cited that they do not believe that society adequately values the profession. One final point that Linda Wermeling cited in her 2013 study is that there has not been a large increase in doctoral students in regards to social work, which is where important information and studies generally come from, while undergraduate social work programs continue to expand (Wermeling, 2013).

In a study conducted by McCarthy (2021), she identified the need for an interprofessional care team among social workers, especially in medical social work and substance abuse social work positions. As cited by McCarthy, due to the high turnover rate among social workers and court professionals, this can act as a barrier to successfully implementing interprofessional care teams among child welfare agencies (Han, Carnochan, & Austin, 2007, as cited in McCarthy,

2021, p. 130-131). Interprofessional collaboration can be helped or can be hurt by power dynamics and are something that must be given consideration when developing and putting in place collaborative models (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). One example of interprofessional care team is collaborative care, where providers from separate specialties work together in order to provide the best and most efficient care for the individuals (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). The study conducted by Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft also cited a study completed by the Interprofessional Education Collaborative (2011) where they identified four major core competencies for interprofessional collaborative practice which are as follows: “(1) adopting values/ethics for interprofessional practice; (2) understanding interprofessional roles/responsibilities; (3) enhancing interprofessional communication; and (4) facilitating teams and teamwork.” (Interprofessional Education Collaborative, 2011, as cited by Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016, p. 101).

In the 2016 study conducted by Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, they aimed to understand how the interprofessional collaboration in health care settings impact social workers. During this study they found that working in an organization where the culture supports and encourages the collaboration was found to be important for successful collaboration in those social workers who participated in the study (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016). This study also identified that individuals attitudes and beliefs towards collaboration has an impact on how well the collaboration as everyone needs to be on board in order for it to be successful (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft 2016). The study also pointed out that the roll of humanizing a patient and advocating for them can also create tension between the collaborative team inferring that the social worker may be working against the rest of the team to advocate for the clients needs (Ambrose-Miller & Ashcroft, 2016).

A study completed by Lin & Deng (2018) in China examined turnover intentions among social workers throughout China. Through this study some theories were confirmed, like the fact that age and time in their roll contributes to be a significant factor in turnover intentions (Lin & Deng, 2018). This study inferred that the correlation between a social workers age, as well as their tenure in their position, and the intention to leave a position could be due to commitment and also a lack of job alternatives the longer the tenure in their current position (Lin & Deng, 2018).

In research conducted by Burns (2010), he refenced a publication by the National Social Work Qualifications Board (2006), that showed nearly 60% of recent social work graduates in Ireland got their career started in a child welfare setting (National Social Work Qualifications Board, 2006, as cited by Burns, 2010, p. 524). The research conducted by Burns further examined turnover rates among social workers, specifically those working in a child welfare position. This study showed that twenty-two of the forty-three workers who were interviewed stated that a position in child welfare social work was their preferred area for a position in the social work field, while others expressed that they needed to use this position as a stepping stone to gain knowledge and experience towards their desired path (Burns, 2010).

This research conducted by Burns is important to consider as much of the other literature does not take into consideration the perception of a child welfare social work position as an entry point into the social work field. Due to this perception of this being a starting point for new social workers, one could assume that the turnover intentions for such child welfare workers would in turn be higher since it is not their desired career path. Although several responses to the interviews expressed using the child welfare position as an entry point, the vast majority of responses expressed through interviews showed that they chose to accept a position in child

welfare social work because they felt a strong desire to help children and felt that they were making a difference in the lives of children (Burns, 2010).

The research conducted by Burns also showed that the other twenty-one participants who entered the child welfare field had expressed that they had initially entered child welfare either to gain experience to gain entry elsewhere, or they expressed that they felt the need to enter directly into child welfare as they felt a lack of opportunity in other areas of social work (Burns, 2010).

This research that was conducted by Burns also showed that many of the individuals who originally may have accepted a position within the child welfare realm to use it as an entry point ended up revising their decision and remaining in the child welfare realm. Burns expressed that nearly two-thirds of the individuals who originally did not intend to stay in a child welfare position ended up staying as a result of their experiences in the position (Burns, 2010).

According to Zhang et al. the following could be said about stressors in the work place: “Individuals’ emotional response is based on their perception and evaluation of reality; therefore, different individual characteristics, organisational environments and even social factors may affect a person’s cognitive evaluation of stressors, thus causing different challenge and hindrance stressor outcomes.” (Zhang et al., 2022, p.1151). This explanation of an individuals’ perception of reality shows that each individual may have a different perception of an organization, management, or even social factors amongst that organization which may influence that individual and their decision to remain in that position and the turnover rates directly.

Zhang et al. further goes on to express that an individual who has a positive perception towards work related stress can be influential towards other individuals inspiring their perception to also be a more positive towards workplace stressors (Zhang et al., 2022). Zhang et al. cites career resiliency as an important factor to note when considering turnover, and cites the

definition of career resiliency as the following: “Career resilience is the ability of members within an organisation to adjust themselves to a relatively poor professional environment when facing difficult work situations, as well as better deal with various stressful situations.” (London, 1983; Hou & Li, 2011, as cited by Zhang et al., 2022, p. 1153).

Zhang also goes on to express the following: “According to AET, career resilience as an individual trait can effectively regulate the relationship between events and emotional responses and further affect organisation members’ emotional experience and cognitive evaluation of work events (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Career resilience’s characteristics of proactively coping with difficulties and actively catching opportunities in the workplace can help individuals recognise the positive aspect of stressors, which can facilitate their positive emotion and help them adapt to stress in the workplace environment.” (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996, as cited by Zhang et al., 2022, p. 1153).

Zhang et al. study further expresses the relationship between challenge stressors and social workers workplace engagement, showing that challenge stressors had a significant impact on positive emotion and work engagement (Zhang et al., 2022). This study also showed that hindrance stressors, which are usually things that may be uncontrollable within the organization, also had a negative impact on positive emotion and work engagement, and showed that positive emotion has a positive impact on workers, expressing that the positive emotion is more likely to encourage workers to face a problem head on rather than avoiding it (Zhang et al., 2022). This study expressed that these findings are fairly consistent with previous studies and the outcomes that may have been expected based on the previous studies findings.

Analysis

There have been several common themes that have emerged throughout the course of this paper. One of the common themes across the studies examined was that organizational culture plays a factor directly on turnover rates among social work. One theory that can be used to examine this theme is David McLelland's need theory. In this theory McLelland expresses that individuals are influenced by one of three different factors that would hold influence on their motivation for specific tasks. This theory expresses that individuals have the need for affiliation, the need for power, and the need for achievement (McLelland, 1965, as cited in PSU, n.d., para. 1).

This theory can be directly related to organizational culture factors, especially in the first need of the need for affiliation. The theory went on to further explain:

“The need for affiliation (designated nAff) is the motivation to establish and maintain friendly relationships with others. This is similar to Maslow's social needs and Alderfer's relatedness needs. People high in the nAff desire the approval of others and often conform to the wishes of others. They prefer to work with others rather than alone and in a cooperative work environment.” (McLelland, 1965, as cited in PSU, n.d., para. 2).

The need for affiliation motivating to establish and maintain friendly relationships with your peers and others within the organizational structure is essentially expressing what the previously mentioned study conducted by Zhang et al. expressed. Zhang et al. (2022) expressed that positive emotion has a positive impact on workers and the individual would be more likely to face any problems that they encounter, rather than avoiding it (Zhang et al., 2022).

The following is how McLelland defined the need for achievement:

“The need for achievement (designated as nAch) is the need to demonstrate high performance levels and high standards of excellence. People who have a high nAch are motivated by opportunities for personal improvement and self-success. They prefer tasks that are moderately difficult, have a strong desire for feedback about how they are doing, and tend to work alone rather than with others. In addition, high nAch individuals desire challenging jobs over which they have some control. In contrast, low nAch individuals are more satisfied with jobs that have a high probability of success and involve little challenge” (McLelland, 1965, as cited in PSU, n.d., para. 4).

The need for achievement, the final of the three needs in McLelland’s need theory, also directly expresses themes that have been emergent throughout the course of this literature review. Throughout the literature review, all studies expressed just how hard the social work field is, and how the stressors of the career field can wear on an individual. Throughout the course of the literature it was a common theme that an individual may stay in a social work position that may not be their desired position because they feel a sense of achievement when they are able to achieve a successful outcome on a case.

Another theory that can be used to examine emerging themes across the literature review, which could be arguably one of the most widespread theories, would be Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. Maslow (1943, 1945) expressed in his theory that there are five areas of a hierarchy that can be arranged in a pyramid type scheme where the individual must accomplish the needs from the bottom tier up. The five levels of the hierarchy are physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. This theory can be applied to this research in the fact that it may have an impact on the turnover rate due to the individual needing to meet each of the individual needs amongst the hierarchy.

Each tier of the hierarchy is important to consider, as the more effort is being put in to meeting each tier's needs, the more comfortable an individual may be at an organization and, in turn they may be more likely to stay within that organization. If you examine the structure of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, starting in the physiological needs, an organization should strive to provide a comfortable working environment, a salary, and other basic needs such as water and a coffee station.

When examining the turnover rate in social work from Maslow's hierarchy of needs it is especially important to examine it from the safety section of his pyramid. As it has been expressed throughout the research, social workers, especially those who are working in child welfare are conducting case work in sometimes extremely dangerous situations. If an organization is not providing proper channels to ensure safety, the turnover rate would likely be higher and retention rates lower. As previously cited by Deaver et al. (2022), many child welfare workers had experienced secondary traumatic stress due to threats to their safety or even learning of threats to a coworker's safety. Maslow's hierarchy of needs expresses that one can not advance to the next tier of the pyramid before ensuring their needs are met from the ground up.

The safety and security section of Maslow's hierarchy of needs also includes employment and social ability. Due to employment being in this tier, one can also assume that this would include perceptions of job security, which may also have an impact on retention and turnover rates. The final piece of the safety and security tier is social ability. One could assume that social ability from an organizational standpoint could include an employees' ability to express their needs when it comes to their perception of safety or any other organizational needs that may be required.

The next theory that can be used to examine the turnover and retention rates in social work is Herzberg's two-factor motivation and hygiene theory. This theory explains that all individuals are motivated by hygiene factors like job safety, pay, company environment, and policies. On the motivational side it explains that there are motivators within the job itself, for example the opportunity for internal advancement within an organization. This theory is important to examine when looking at the turnover rate, just as Maslow's hierarchy of needs, it covers the basis of human needs and what an individual requires of an organization to be successful, or to stay within an organization in a long-term capacity.

One can make the assumption that individuals do not like to be stuck in dead end jobs with no opportunity for advancement. Herzberg's theory expresses that there needs to be opportunity for advancement within an organization to successfully meet motivational needs. Based on this theory, one would think that as motivational needs are increased, retention rates may also increase. If an individual is in an organization where there are little to no opportunities for advancement, there may be a greater risk of turnover.

The hygiene factors expressed in Herzberg's two-factor theory are some of the same factors that are expressed in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This goes to show that some of the most basic needs may be overlooked, however they can be some of the most important factors in employee retention. One very important factor, especially in child welfare social work, is employee safety. It has been mentioned throughout this research, as well as through previous literature that has been conducted, that child welfare workers are continuously exposed to potential safety threats. From an organizational standpoint, an organization must have the proper procedures and regulations in place to ensure each employee has a sense of safety, even if they are required to be exposed to potential safety hazards through a normal course of their work.

Another theory that can be directly applied to this research is the social exchange theory. The social exchange theory expresses that all human social behaviors and relationships are based on a weight between the exchanges and relationships and an examination of risk and reward for that individual. This theory believes that there is a risk and reward examination both in personal relationships and professional relationships. As previously mentioned in research, child welfare workers are forced to be exposed to potentially dangerous situations throughout the course of their work, ultimately forcing them to weigh the risks and rewards of their position.

Some potential risks that a child welfare worker may face during their investigations or interviews with a family may include weapons, diseases, hostile individuals and potentially unsafe or condemnable homes, as they are often required to meet with clients in their homes. Some of the rewards that child welfare workers may take in to account are a sense of accomplishment in being able to help the children and families that they are required to work with. Salary, benefits & organizational culture can also all be considered when someone is weighing their rewards in the social exchange theory.

Another theory, that literature examined through this review has also expressed, is the equity theory proposed by John Adams. This theory that Adams proposed expresses that when an organization is providing advantages for an employee they are more likely to retain a higher morale and a more positive attitude towards their work. This theory also expresses the inverse, that if an employee feels they are being taken advantage of, or if they feel as though they are being treated poorly by an organization there will likely be a drop in their motivation or their production in their roll within the organization.

This theory relates to this literature, as well as previous theories that have been mentioned in the fact that there is an examination of risk and reward. The risk and reward in this

theory is slightly different, as it is examining what advantages an employee is being offered, however it is essentially a risk reward situation that an employee is still evaluating. This theory expresses that the better an employee is being treated the higher the morale, and as previously expressed in the literature review, the higher an employee morale the more likely they are to stay in their organization due to higher organizational morale and organizational culture.

Ethical Implications

With the high turnover rate in social work, especially in the child welfare realm, there are ethical implications that can be associated with the turnover. One ethical implication of the high turnover rates is that the quality of services provided may decrease. As previously mentioned, as an individual decides to leave an organization that organization must then attempt to fill that vacant position. Due to an employee leaving and a position becoming vacant, this requires a case to then be transferred to another individual causing higher caseloads, which may become unmanageable, or the case may go to a newer worker who does not have the same amount of experience as the employee who left an organization.

Another thing to consider when examining this ethical implication is the rapport that the previous worker had with each family. Especially in child welfare work, it is extremely important for the worker to build a rapport with a family, which can be extremely difficult and time consuming, and when a position becomes vacant and the case is passed along to another employee that rapport may be lost and the new worker may be forced to start from the ground up building a sense of rapport with the family or children being served. This is especially important to consider when working with children who may be in congregate care, like a foster care or a residential treatment facility, due to things like abandonment or attachment issues. If a child

develops rapport with a social worker and has a sense of advocacy from an individual and they chose to leave an organization it may have a direct negative impact on that child.

If the turnover continues to remain extremely high among social workers, it can be assumed that there will continue to be a distrust between the public or communities being served and the organizations that are attempting to provide the necessary services. It appears that continuous high turnover rates amongst social services organizations may also create a never ending cycle due to the repercussions of those who leave and what implications and stress that can create for those who chose to stay with the organization.

Policy Recommendations

One major area that needs to be examined when recommending policies to improve an organization's retention rates in a social work organization is their onboarding practices. It is extremely important that a new employee must complete an extensive onboarding process, whether they are new to the social work field or new to that organization or position. It is important that when completing this onboarding process they should understand thoroughly what will be expected of them in their roll, rather than a broad generalization of what the position may entail. It is also important that the organization provide as much training and education as possible so that the employee can understand not only the situations they may face, but also how they can deal with them and how they can implement safe practices for self care.

Another policy suggestion is to reward and acknowledge employees where it is deserved. This policy suggestion can be broad, but is important to consider as many social work positions are considered to be "thankless" positions. This is a policy that can be put in place in many different facets. Starting small an organization can send out an organization wide email coming from a supervisor or a or upper management when they believe that an individual went above

and beyond in their roll or has a success story to share. This policy can also be advanced in having some sort of benefit for an employee attached to it. This is something that can even be viewed as an employee spotlight type situation or an employee of the month type situation. If an employee is recognized for their superior achievements, if an organization has the means, they should attach some sort of benefit like a stipend or possibly an extra day off to encourage superior services amongst that organization.

One of the largest and most important areas that an agency must examine their policies are the ones pertaining to work-life balance. An organization should strive to create policies that are beneficial to the employee in creating sufficient balance between the stressors at work and time to care for themselves. There are many areas where an organization can create policies to ensure there is a proper work life balance and some of those may include paid time off, parental leave, flex time, remote work, mental health days and holidays off. All of these examples listed can be beneficial to employee retention by creating ways for an employee to decompress from the stressors of every day social work environments.

One major point of emphasis for policies going forward that should be considered is the use of flex time. Many social work positions often require an employee to work unusual hours as they are subject to the availability of the clients that they are providing services to, so it is important that an organization allow their employees to flex their time as needed if they work later than normal hours one day they should allow them to leave early another day when they have the capability to.

Another suggestion that may be tied in to the working hours of an employee may be to hire as hourly employees rather than salary. As previously stated social workers are often subject to working abnormal hours or extended hours during a normal work day, however those

employees are often salaried, which may leave them with a sense of increasing work with no reward. If an employee is paid an hourly wage rather than a yearly salary, it may help to keep motivational levels high as they would be fairly compensated for each hour that is being worked, rather than expecting additional or abnormal hours for no additional compensation.

One final policy recommendation that can be made is for an organization to hold employee appreciation days throughout the year. A suggestion for this policy could be to implement a monthly employee appreciation day where it could be something as small as coffee and donuts to provide a motivational boost for employees. Another example of this could be an organization hosting something to encourage self care for the employees, such as a stretch and restore event or something like a massage clinic for employees.

Summary

In summary, this literature conducted a comprehensive analysis of turnover rates amongst social services agencies both in the United States and throughout the world. This issue is not a new issue, with literature dating back to around the 1950's, however there has not been a large amount of research conducted on what may be causing the issues.

Through a comprehensive literature review, this paper examined previous literature which researched the issue of turnover and retention rates in social work. Through this literature review, several common themes emerged as reoccurring themes. There were several contributing factors as to why an individual may vacate their position within a social services organization, but some of those reasons identified previously are organizational culture, high caseloads for employees, low funding both from an organizational and salary standpoint, stress, and secondary trauma or burnout for individuals through work experiences.

Another theme that was identified throughout the course of this research is the fact that there will be other factors associated with the high turnover rates, especially in child welfare work. These factors that were identified included higher caseloads for the remaining workers, relationships with other agencies will suffer, staff shortages, discontinuation of services being provided to families, as well as even the possibility of failure to protect children being served.

Much of this research highlights the harsh and stressful working conditions that social workers, especially those in the child welfare realm, face on a daily basis and how that stress contributes to the decision to leave that area of work. This research highlights that these working conditions and contributing factors are not only held to the United States, but has also shown the same issues in places like Ireland and China.

Some of the ethical implications that could come about if this issue is not corrected included the quality of services provided being lesser, rapport with clients not being attained, and a growing distrust between the agencies and the public being served. The ethical implications of not being able to develop rapport due to turnover can have very great repercussions, as mentioned in this research due to children involved in foster care services having a distrust towards workers and progress not being made due to workers constantly changing.

There are few policies that can be recommended to fix this issue of high turnover rates in social work, with the first being an extensive onboarding process to include all of the necessary training, job shadowing, but also a thorough explanation of the stressful and dangerous situations that a worker might encounter so they know exactly what they can expect. Another policy recommendation is the use of flex time as well as the utilization of remote work when available. Many social workers are subject to working long abnormal hours, but allowing them to utilize flex time to come in late or leave early, as well as working from home to do administrative work

when available, is important especially if they are a salaried employee due to the feeling of working for no additional compensation.

In closing, this research showed that the very high turnover rates amongst social work agencies is not limited to one realm of social work, and is also not limited to any specific geographic area of the world. This research showed that this is an important topic to consider and there needs to be more research conducted to further examine the implications of the turnover, but also policy recommendations on a larger scale. This should be a topic that is researched further on every level, including as high up as the government in an effort to lessen the impact that the organizations may see.

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