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ABSTRACT. This study examines the relationship among supervisor support, availability of resources, and worker ability and their impact on workload management. Child welfare caseworkers struggle to maintain their workloads amid tremendously high caseloads and ever-increasing paperwork. A structural equation model is utilized to determine the dynamic relationship of these variables. Results suggest that supervisor support and availability of resources have a direct impact on workload management. Additionally, supervisor support is significantly associated with worker ability and availability of resources. While worker ability does not directly affect workload management, it is significantly related to availability of resources. Results of this study can be useful to public child welfare agencies by identifying variables associated with increased manageability of employee workloads.

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KEYWORDS. Child welfare, workload, retention

INTRODUCTION

The child welfare system has endured criticism in recent years for failing to adequately protect children (Schwartz & Fishman, 1999).
Those who work in the child welfare field and those familiar with child protection services know all too well this insufficiency is less a reflection of inadequacies of the caseworkers and more a consequence of overwhelming day-to-day workloads. Child welfare workers regularly handle caseloads in excess of the 12-15 active cases recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the time spent on documentation has increased as the result of external reviews imposed by legislative changes. Add to that the time caseworkers spend in court or in meetings with review boards, and the accumulated effect can significantly impact the amount of available time child welfare employees have to devote to their clients (Ellett, 1995; Malm et al., 2001; O’Donnell, 1992; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003).

Aside from affecting caseworkers’ ability to provide timely and quality services for their clients, increased workload impacts retention rates in child welfare (CWLA, 2002; Samantrai, 1992; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, in press; Winefield & Barlow, 1995). Landsman (2001) identified work overload as a significant factor in employee job satisfaction as well as in workers’ intent to stay with an organization. Excessive caseloads can cause burnout and ultimately lead to premature departure from the position. The GAO (2003) reports that stress, burnout, and workload account for 14.7% of the reasons why individuals leave child welfare.

Retention within child welfare agencies is a considerable problem in nearly every state, with national turnover rates ranging from 30% to 70% (Human Services Research Institute, 1997). High turnover affects the quality, consistency, and stability of services caseworkers provide and it also undermines their ability to establish stable, trusting relationships with their clients (CWLA, 2002). Turnover can dramatically impact clients as child welfare staff struggle to provide quality services when positions are vacant and are then filled with inexperienced workers (Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001).

While decreasing the caseload of child welfare employees is the main objective of workload management, understanding organizational characteristics that contribute to the management of current workloads can offer those in the child welfare arena possible avenues in dealing with the current workload crisis. Even at times when workloads have decreased, this knowledge can provide additional support to help workers maintain workload management. This study attempts to determine agency characteristics associated with workload management by examining the relationship between three variables empirically linked to positive employee outcomes—supervisor support, availability of resources, and worker...
ability—and determining their relationship to one another as well as their combined impact on workers’ satisfaction with their ability to manage their workload.

**Supervisor Support**

Support, more specifically supervisor support, is related to job satisfaction (Grasso, 1994; Olmstead & Christensen, 1973; Poulin & Walter, 1992; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, in press), decisions to leave or stay with the agency (Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, in Press), and job manageability (Samantrai, 1992; Rycraft, 1994). From comprehensive interviews with 23 caseworkers, Rycraft (1994) identified supervision as one of the main factors in retention. Case-worker comments tended to focus on the importance of supervision in creating jobs that were both “bearable and manageable.” Similarly, Samantrai (1992) and Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick (in press) observed that workers who had supervisors who were sympathetic and supportive tended to have positive attitudes toward their job, regardless of caseload size or other adverse working conditions. Alternatively, Samantrai (1992) found workers whose supervisors were considered non-supportive and critical put more significance on the negative aspects of their jobs.

The effects of supervisor support may be weighted by the type of support the supervisor provides. Rauktis and Koeske (1994) found workers were more satisfied when their supervisor provided emotional support rather than instrumental support. Emotional support is a form of support that enhances an individual’s self-esteem through understanding and nonjudgmental response, whereas, instrumental support comes in the form of material resources or other necessary services (Juby & Rycraft, 2005). Rycraft (1994) reported caseworkers reacted more favorably to supervision in the form of consultation and guidance than to instructive and monitoring models of supervision.

**Available Resources**

Empirical literature addressing the impact of resource unavailability in child welfare systems is lacking. However, the existing literature supports a relationship between availability of resources and ability of employees to perform their jobs adequately.

Child welfare agencies are plagued by limited resources required to ensure appropriate services are provided to children and their families,
especially in remote areas of the country (American Public Human Services Association, 2005). A lack of resources impedes a worker’s ability to deliver quality services to their clients (Anderson & Gobeil, 2003). If quality resources do not exist, clients receive services that are at best second rate, and may make the difference in client outcomes. In the face of insufficient resources, a caseworker may resort to alternative means in order to provide assistance to their client. The additional time required to seek out and establish alternative services can greatly impact the limited amount of time a caseworker has to maintain his/her workload.

While adequate resources may be necessary for caseworkers to perform their jobs, unless the worker has the knowledge and skills required to access those resources, available resources may be overlooked or underutilized. A worker who is unable to access available resources due to a lack of worker ability is comparable to a worker who does not have resources available to him/her.

**Worker Ability**

Inadequate training and preparation for work in child welfare are often reported as reasons for leaving the child welfare field (Cohen, 1992; Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; CWLA, 2002; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, in press). In an agency that often taxes those with adequate skills and knowledge, a lack of ability can easily overwhelm those without the training and preparation necessary to meet the job requirements of child welfare.

Additionally, worker ability has the potential to directly affect workload management. Well-trained employees are best equipped to make good decisions about child welfare (Child Welfare League of America, 2002). The lack of adequate skills and knowledge diminishes a worker’s ability to complete tasks accurately and in an acceptable amount of time. With caseloads well above the acceptable levels, worker skills and knowledge are especially important in maintaining child welfare workloads.

**METHODS**

The current literature suggests workload management is a concept that may be affected by several variables, namely supervisor support, availability of resources, and worker ability (American Public Heath Services Association, 2004; Child Welfare League of America, 2002;
One of the more rigorous analytical designs for use in identifying relationships between several variables at a given time is structural equation modeling (SEM). This study will examine the dynamics among supervisor support, availability of resources, and worker ability and their overall impact on workers’ satisfaction with their workload management.

Sample

The data for this study were obtained from a survey administered by the Protective Services Training Institute (PSTI) to Child Protective Service (CPS) employees in the state of Texas. PSTI, through a contract with the Department of Family and Protective Services, implemented a longitudinal study designed to examine training effectiveness and retention trends. The initial survey was administered to CPS employees at the end of a six-week training academy. Subsequent surveys were administered at six months, eighteen months, and three years. Surveys were developed to reflect the training workers received and how they utilized it. The retention items were developed based on a review of the empirical literature on retention and turnover. The data for this study were extricated from the one-year survey. The selected sample consists of 350 CPS employees who were hired between January and December of 2002.

The majority (85.4%) of respondents were female, while Whites accounted for the largest ethnic group at 48.6%. Blacks (22%) and Hispanics (26.6%) made up approximately a quarter of the responses each. More employees had Bachelor’s Degrees (87.5%) than any other degree. Less than 1% of employees had a PhD and 10.6% had a Master’s Degree. Social work (29.4%) was the degree most often reported, followed closely by sociology/criminal justice (28.3%), and psychology/counseling (19.1%).

Approximately one-half (48.3%) of the respondents lived with a partner, 45.7% stated they were living alone, and 6% did not respond to the question (Table 1). Almost all (93.7%) of the respondents reported they were the primary caregiver to two or less children, while over half (52.9%) reported they had no dependent children at all. Only 4.6% employees reported three dependent children, while the remainder (1.8%) reported four or more. The average number of children was less than one (.77) per respondent. Average income for the sample was $47,727.76.
Measures

The operationalization of the criterion factor, satisfaction with workload management, consisted of three statements: (1) I am satisfied that I have a manageable client caseload; (2) I am satisfied that I have a manageable paperwork load; and (3) I am satisfied that I have a manageable computer workload. Responses ranged from “1” (Strongly Disagree) to “4” (Strongly Agree). Internal consistency was good for this measure, with a coefficient alpha of .90. CFA factor loading results were .849 for the caseload manageability, .904 for paperwork manageability, and .852 for computer manageability.

The proposed model comprised three predictor variables: availability of resources, worker ability, and supervisor support. Supervisor support was entered into the equation as a latent variable supported by four indicators: case guidance (“I have received casework guidance from my
supervisor”), emotional support (“I have received emotional support from my supervisor”), supervisor availability (“My supervisor is available for me”), and help with problem solving (“My supervisor helps me to problem solve”). Responses ranged from “1” (Strongly Disagree) to “4” (Strongly Agree). Reliability for these items was very good, resulting in an alpha of .94. CFA of the supervisor support model resulted in the following loadings: case guidance, .86; emotional support, .91; availability, .90; problem solving, .89.

Availability of resources was determined using a 4-point Likert scale for responses to the question, “I am satisfied that I have the resources to do an adequate job.” Answers ranged from “1” for “strongly disagree” to “4” for “strongly agree.” Greater satisfaction was associated with higher numerical values for this variable.

The third predictor variable, worker ability, was a composite score of the following items. Each statement was answered using a 4-point Likert scale that ranged from “Strongly Disagree” to “Strongly Agree.”

- I am capable of assessing sexual abuse cases.
- I am capable of assessing physical abuse cases.
- I am capable of assessing neglect cases.
- I am capable of assessing substance abuse cases.
- I am capable of assessing domestic violence cases.
- I am capable of saving and submitting case documentation in CAPS.
- I understand the risk assessment tool and its differences from case disposition.
- I am able to create service plans for families and children which meet the needs for permanency, safety and well-being.
- I have the adequate skills and knowledge to testify in court.
- I understand the foster care system.
- I know how to process a removal.
- I know how to process a placement.

Internal consistency for these items resulted in a coefficient alpha of .87. Factor analysis revealed a two-factor dimension with categories that can be designated as service delivery abilities and case processing abilities.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship among supervisor support, worker ability, and availability of resources on an
employee’s satisfaction with their ability to manage their workload. Data were examined with a structural equation model using path analysis with maximum likelihood estimation based on correlation matrices. The goodness-of-fit indicators utilized for this study included the Goodness-of-Fit Index (GFI), the AGFI (Adjusted Goodness-of-Fit Index), the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), the PCLOSE (the p-value of a test on RMSEA), and the Chi-square ($\chi^2$) value. Recommended levels for each of these indicators are as follows: GFI $\geq .90$ (Bentler & Bonnet, 1980), AGFI $> .90$ (Medsker, Williams, & Holohan, 1994), RMSEA $< .05$ (Browne & Cudeck, 1993), PCLOSE $> .05$, and $\chi^2 > .05$ (Bollen & Long, 1993).

Consistent with recommendation of Anderson and Gerbing (1988), confirmatory factor analysis was used to test the measurement models prior to testing the structural model. Two measurement models were used in this study. The first model consisted of the criterion factor “satisfaction with workload management” and was supported by caseload, paperwork, and computer. Results of CFA suggested the model was adequate. CFA revealed a nonsignificant Chi-square value of 2.55 ($p = .254$) and factor loadings ranged from .849 for caseload management to .852 for computer management to .904 for paperwork management. Overall fit of this measurement model was good [CFI = .999; GFI = .996; AGFI = .987; RMSEA = .023; PCLOSE = .562].

The second measurement model consisted of the supervisor support factor, which was supported by four indicators: case guidance, emotional support, availability, and help with problems. Results of the CFA suggest an adequate model with a nonsignificant Chi-square value of 3.24 ($p = .198$) and factor loadings ranging from .86 for case guidance to .91 for emotional support. Factor loadings for supervisor availability and help with problem solving were .90 and .89, respectively. Overall fit of the measurement model was adequate [CFI = .999; GFI = .995; AGFI = .977; RMSEA = .042; PCLOSE = .449].

Subsequently, the four predictor and one criterion variables were entered as the proposed model with one-directional paths linking each of the predictors to the criterion. The first model resulted in the following output: CFI = .962; GFI = .936; AGFI = .889; RMSEA = .092; PCLOSE = .000. Chi-square for the overall model was significant ($\chi^2 = 102.81, p = .000$). While the CFI and GFI were within the acceptable range, the AGFI, Chi-square, RMSEA and PCLOSE were not. Therefore, it was determined this model did not provide an adequate fit with the data. Subsequent steps were taken to improve the model beginning with the addition
of a path between worker ability and supervisor support. This improved
the model; however, RMSEA (.062) and PCLOSE (.165) were still out-
side the acceptable range. Additionally, Chi-square ($\chi^2 = 58.08$, $p = .000$) con-
tinued to reflect significance.

Further changes incrementally improved the fit of the model. Addition
of a path between worker ability and resources strengthened the model
substantially to a point where all fit statistics fell within the acceptable
range ($\chi^2 = 30.42$; $p = .177$; CFI = .997; GFI = .981; AGFI = .965;
RMSEA = .028; PCLOSE = .909); however, this resulted in an insignif-
icant critical ratio value for the path between worker ability and satisfac-
tion with workload management. The path was deleted from illustration
in Figure 1 because the critical ratio value for the path between worker
ability and satisfaction with workload management was not statistically
significant.

To further strengthen the model, a path was added between supervi-
sor support and resources. This final model proved to be the best fit
($\chi^2 = 27.95$, $p = .262$; CFI = .998; GFI = .983; AGFI = .968; RMSEA =
.022; PCLOSE = .947).

All loadings and regression paths in the model were positive (Table
2). Loadings were high (≥ .85) within both measurement models and all
paths were significant within the proposed model. Regression weight
was highest (.43) for the path between resources and satisfaction with
workload management. Other regression weights included: supervisor
support and worker ability (.39); worker ability and resources (.20); su-
pervisor support and satisfaction with workload management (.18); su-
pervisor support and resources (.14). Overall, this model accounted for
25% of the variance in satisfaction with workload management.

**DISCUSSION**

While child welfare agencies may have limited control over the case-
loads assigned to their employees, certain characteristics within the
agency can help caseworkers deal more effectively with excessive work-
loads. Supervisor support, availability of resources, and caseworker ability
all are contributing factors associated with satisfaction with workload
management. Having available resources was the most influential vari-
able; however, supervisor support increased both the workers’ perception
of available resources and their ability to adequately perform their job
duties besides directly affecting satisfaction with workload management.
**TABLE 2. Regression Weights and Factor Loadings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Loading</th>
<th>Regression Weight</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support-Workload management</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support-Resources</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor support-Worker ability</td>
<td>.39</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case guidance-Supervisor support</td>
<td>.86</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional support-Supervisor support</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability-Supervisor support</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with problems-Supervisor support</td>
<td>.89</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worker ability-Resources</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources-Workload management</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caseload-Workload management</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paperwork-Workload management</td>
<td>.90</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer work-Workload management</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>.000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Satisfaction with Workload Management

Satisfaction with workload management was directly and indirectly impacted by supervisor support, directly impacted by availability of resources, and indirectly impacted by worker ability. The four indicators that supported the satisfaction with workload management factor were substantial. Paperwork management was the strongest contributor to the satisfaction with workload management factor, while caseload management and computer management were substantial contributors. While paperwork is the largest contributing indicator, increased paperwork often follows increases in caseloads. Similarly, increased computer work often follows increases caseloads. Therefore, increases in paperwork and computer work are probably the result of high caseloads.

Supervisor Support

Similar to previous research (Samantrai, 1992; Rycraft, 1994), this study suggests supervisor support is directly related satisfaction with workload management. Workers who received more support from their supervisors perceived their overall workload as more manageable. Supervisors have the potential to increase their workers’ skills and knowledge by imparting their own experience and abilities onto their workers. Supervisors who are available and supportive continue providing education and training to workers past the initial training period required in most child welfare agencies. This support can be invaluable for workers dealing with oversized caseloads and paperwork.

Supervisor support positively impacted worker ability. Similar to the effect supervisor support has on satisfaction with workload management, this type of support provides the worker with additional educational experience and training once they are situated full time in their work units. The additional attention the worker receives from a supportive supervisor can increase their ability to execute their jobs assignments more effectively.

Supervisor support was also positively associated with availability of resources. While supervisors cannot create resources that do not exist, supportive supervisors may provide more direction to caseworkers in locating available resources. Results of this study indicate supportive supervisors are instrumental in generating situations where identification of and access to available resources is improved, thereby increasing workers’ ability to better manage their workload.
With a factor loading of .91, emotional support was the largest contributing indicator of the supervisor support factor. This finding supports other studies (Samantrai, 1992; Rauktis & Koeske, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Sharma et al., 1997) identifying emotional-type support as more effective than other types of supervisor support. Although to a lesser degree, the other supervisor support indicators contributed substantially to the supervisor support factor. Supervisor availability, help with problems, and case guidance were all significant indicators of the supervisor support factor.

**Worker Ability**

Worker ability, in this study, was not directly related to Satisfaction with Workload Management but was indirectly related through Availability of Resources. This variable was also significantly impacted by supervisor support. The relationship between worker ability and availability of resources was a positive one, suggesting higher degrees of Worker Ability were associated with increased perception of available resources. One possible reason for this is workers with adequate training and supervisor support are more likely to have increased knowledgeable of available resources and know how to access them.

**Availability of Resources**

Availability of Resources was significantly related to Satisfaction with Workload Management in this population. Knowledge of available resources can help workers tremendously by providing a buffer to an already overwhelming workload. The amount of time it requires to locate services, or find alternative services, for clients when resources are not readily available or known can decrease the amount of time a worker has to focus on his/her current workload.

With insurmountable caseloads a constant in many child welfare agencies, this information can provide insight into different avenues agency administrators can use to increase caseworkers’ ability to handle high caseloads. Training and mentoring that involves imparting knowledge of available resources can improve a worker’s ability to successfully manage his/her workload. By understanding what resources are available and how to access them, workers would be free to focus more on client contacts, paper, computer work, and other requirements of the job.

Supervisor support is a major influence in a worker’s ability to manage his/her workload. Some forms of support are more preferable in increasing
workload management and, according to this study, emotional support, availability, help with problems, and case guidance provide substantial effects on workload manageability. By supplying workers with supervisors who are sensitive to the stress of the job, who are adequately knowledgeable of child welfare, and who are able and willing to contribute to the ongoing training of the workers in their unit, caseworkers’ satisfaction with their ability to manage their workload will improve.

While this research suggests satisfaction with workload management can be improved by increasing availability of resources, worker ability, and supervisor support, it is not meant to be a substitute for reducing the high caseloads workers currently have. The ultimate goal is to reduce each worker’s caseload so it is more manageable. This information is intended for use in cases where reduction of caseloads is currently not possible and for additional support in the manageability of workload at times when caseloads fall within the recommended levels.

The data used for the study were collected at only one period, after the worker had been employed for one year. Cross-sectional data lack the ability to control for many of the threats to internal validity. For example, satisfaction with workload management may have a very different structure after a worker has been employed with CPS for longer periods of time. Therefore, results of this study should be used with the understanding of these limitations.

Additionally, this study was based on a convenience sample of child welfare workers in Texas who responded to a one-year survey. As a result, findings cannot be generalized beyond the sample. However, this study does reflect relationships found in previous studies. Replication of this design using data collected from various regions as well as at various points in time can strengthen these results.

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