Compassion fatigue, burnout, and compassion satisfaction: Implications for retention of workers

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The quality of service delivery in response to child maltreatment is significantly affected by the ability of organizations to recruit and retain competent, committed staff (Alwon & Reitz, 2000; Pecora, Briar, & Zlotnik, 1989). Implementing the requirements of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, strategic responses to class action lawsuits, agencies’ efforts to achieve accreditation, and states’ efforts to address the Program Improvement Plans (PIP) resulting from their federal Child and Family Services Reviews have brought renewed urgency to recruitment and retention problems in child protection related organizations (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & Lane, 2005). Prior research has suggested that both organizational factors (e.g., better salary, supervisory support, reasonable workload, coworker support, opportunities for advancement) and personal factors (e.g., professional commitment to children and families, previous work experience, education, job satisfaction, efficacy, personal characteristics, role overload/conflict stress, and burnout, including emotional exhaustion which is a component of burnout most linked to turnover) affect the decisions made by child protection staff to stay or not stay in service organizations (Zlotnik et al., 2005).

The purpose of the Conrad and Kellar-Guenther (2006) study in this issue of the Journal was to understand better the risk of compassion fatigue (the trauma suffered by the helping professional) and burnout (emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of personal accomplishment), and the potential for compassion satisfaction (the fulfillment from helping others and positive collegial relationships) among child protection staff in Colorado. In this study, approximately 50% of child protection staff suffered from high or very high levels of compassion fatigue, but the risk of burnout was considerably lower. Participants with high compassion satisfaction had lower levels of compassion fatigue and lower levels of burnout. Overall, more than 70% of staff expressed a high or good potential for compassion satisfaction. Based on the findings from this study, the authors believe that compassion satisfaction may help mitigate the effects of burnout.
This study is important as it highlights the conditions under which staff might experience compassion fatigue but not burnout thereby providing suggestions for strategies that could foster job satisfaction in spite of the stress associated with work in child protection agencies. Prior research comparing staff members who stay or express intent to stay in child welfare jobs suggest that workers who stay have lower levels of emotional exhaustion (Cahalane & Sites, 2004) and staff who leave or express an intention to leave their jobs have higher levels of burnout (Dickinson & Perry, 2002).

While the findings of the Conrad and Kellar-Guenther (2006) study are somewhat inconsistent with prior research, it is possible that their more specific focus on compassion fatigue and compassion satisfaction and how those constructs relate to burnout, advance the understanding of the complex interplay between personal and organizational factors that affect the climate of child protection work, and the eventual impact on the individual employee.

In their implications, Conrad and Kellar-Guenther (2006) suggest that access to social support and having opportunities to process the traumatic aspects of the day to day work may be important factors in helping workers overcome the stressful aspects of child protection work. These recommendations are consistent with prior research that suggests that workload impacts burnout when social support is low (Koeske & Koeske, 1993) and the availability of social support decreases burnout (Um & Harrison, 1998). Similarly, the findings of Lewandowski (2003) that suggest that increased isolation increases frustration, which in turn may increase burnout on the job also are consistent with the findings of Conrad and Kellar-Guenther (2006), which suggest that levels of compassion satisfaction are related to lower levels of burnout. Taken together, these findings suggest the need for managers to create organizational conditions to help workers process the negative impact of daily job stress and to deal specifically with the secondary trauma associated with involvement in child abuse and neglect cases on a regular basis. Future research should examine the specific benefits of policies and procedures and other strategies that may reduce burnout among child protection staff and increase job satisfaction and retention. Studies should be designed with tight control (i.e., random assignment to receive specific strategies or not receive specific strategies) and to follow employees over time to consider both short- and long-term outcomes.

Furthermore, it is important to explore the specific connections and pathways between emotional exhaustion, compassion fatigue, compassion satisfaction, burnout, and retention in child protection work. Researchers should use standardized measures and advanced statistical procedures to explore the complex relationships among relevant factors. Use of structural equation modeling, for example, might increase the understanding about the complex relationships between these varied constructs. By using structural equation modeling, Drake and Yadama (1996) found that depersonalization on the job was related to emotional exhaustion and that emotional exhaustion was related to job exit. Findings from studies such as these can point to the optimal timing when organizational strategies might be beneficial to address both compassion fatigue and burnout.

References


