

Attachment Theory, Supervision, and Turnover in Child Welfare, January 1, 2019

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Article excerpt

Turnover, or the job exit of employees, is an issue that greatly affects the field of child welfare social work. It has been reported that the national average for child welfare staff turnover is approximately 30 to 40% annually (Government Accountability Office, 2003). It is, therefore, not surprising that agencies are struggling to maintain the Child Welfare League of America (2013) caseload recommendation of twelve active cases per month as well as to meet other case practice benchmarks. Each of these active cases represents a child or family that the social worker is assigned to help stabilize and move toward exit from foster care through permanence.

With high workloads and overburdened staff, it may be challenging to find adequate time to develop the supervisory relationship. Various individual, organizational, and systemic issues contribute to these high rates of turnover. Child welfare organizations, in particular, have been shown to have highly stressful environments compared to other types of social work organizations (Jayaratne & Chess, 1984). Despite this, supportive supervision has been linked to staff retention efforts, suggesting that this relationship is critical in terms of understanding turnover (Kim & Mor Barak, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2001). While the subject of turnover influencing case practice has gained more attention in recent years, few studies have applied an attachment theoretical framework to understanding this complex and pervasive issue.

Attachment theory describes bonding and interaction elements of a caregiver-child relationship, as well as how the attachment style of the child influences child behavior and development (Ainsworth, 1964; Bowlby, 1988). The development of attachment in infancy and early childhood occurs through caregiver response and attending to the needs of the child. An in-depth discussion of how attachment forms in early childhood is outside of the scope of the current paper, but it is important to note that these early attachment relationships may impact functioning later in life (Fonagy, 2001; Harms, 2011; Ravitz, Maunder, Hunter, Sthankiya, & Lancee, 2010).

Attachment theory has been further developed to encompass issues of adulthood such as romantic partner relationships and workplace dynamics, including that of the supervisor-supervisee (Harms, 2011; Sroufe, 2005). This theory provides a framework for assessing the personality and behavioral issues that may arise in a work setting in those individuals who are insecurely attached, as well as how attachment may influence the supervisory relationship. In addition, the broadened application of this theory to the supervisor-supervisee relationship to explain how attachment-based supervisor support may moderate turnover, is a relatively new approach.

The aim of the current paper is to review factors related to turnover in child welfare through an Attachment Theory lens. To explore this, a review of the literature regarding the social issue of turnover in child welfare will be provided. The attachment theory will be applied to the issue of child welfare organizational culture and how attachment styles of supervisors and staff can not only influence worker well-being but also client outcomes.

History of the Problem

Turnover and Child Welfare Agencies

Turnover can be broadly defined as role exit in a workplace setting. In child welfare, turnover means a new caseworker will need to be assigned to work with a child who likely has experienced the trauma of abuse, neglect, and/or removal from the home. The sensitive nature of this work cannot be overstated. Social worker turnover has been shown to negatively impact permanency rates for children in foster care (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005), since change in social workers requires time for case review and building rapport with the family, among other challenges.