A RURAL COUNTY'S BEST PRACTICE TO ADDRESS BURNOUT AND OCCUPATIONAL STRESS AMONG CHILD WELFARE WORKERS

A Project

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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

by
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Division of Social Work
Abstract

of

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Malinda Juhl

This survey study interviewed social workers in rural communities to explore their perceptions of burnout, occupational stress, and agency support with the purpose of establishing best practices for increasing retention rates. Participants were current or past employees of a child welfare agency in El Dorado County. This agency was chosen to represent rural communities as it faces common rural challenges such as geographical isolation, limited resources, and unavoidable dual relationships. This agency has two office locations, each with drastically different retention rates. Although they are located in the same rural county, they have the same management and the same policies and procedures. Social workers in both offices shared their perceptions of burnout, occupational stress, and agency support with the goal of assessing what contributes to the difference in retention rates. The study findings showed that burnout and occupational stress were perceived similarly in both office locations. The social workers described a punitive management style, a lack of training and feelings of emotional exhaustion or ineffectiveness. However, the social workers in the office with the higher retention rate
benefited from an emotionally supportive immediate supervisor and geographical
distance from the management described as “punitive.” These protective factors
significantly increased the retention rates in that office as it created a sense of value
among the social workers and decreased their exposure to work related conflict. While a
supportive work environment is a benefit to any agency whether in a rural or urban
setting, this study shows that the unique challenges inherent in a rural community makes
support provided within agencies more significant to the job satisfaction of the social
workers, which will therefore increase retention rates. This study highlights the
importance of a management style which honors social work values such as using
strength based approaches in addressing organizational culture, change and valuing social
workers.

_________________________, Committee Chair
Francis Yuen, D.S.W.

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Date
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Chapter 1

THE PROBLEM

The practice of social work is built upon a foundation of examining the needs of clients and communities in the face of crisis for the purpose of stabilizing the situation and instilling skills to promote growth, change, and empowerment (Ellett, 2008). When considering social workers as frontline staff ready to problem solve a crisis, one must also consider the impact of the crisis on the individual social worker. Historically, all areas of social work provide crisis intervention as a primary means of intervention when assessing individual needs. The field of social work is very diverse as are the clients the profession serves. One especially challenging facet of social work is the field of child welfare. The child welfare system primarily focuses on childhood abuse and neglect with the goal of preserving families and increasing permanency for children (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009). In a typical day, a frontline social worker might need to assess a child's safety when there are allegations of sexual abuse, physical violence, and neglect affecting one's ability to parent. In addition to assessing child safety, a social worker must preserve the parent-child bond, the family, and build a therapeutic alliance while encompassing the act of child removal (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Ellett, 2008; Faller, Faller et al., 2010). With this said, one must understand the complexity of child welfare and the burden a social worker feels when tasked with assessing the immediacy of a situation and making decisions as to the child's future. The primary burden faced by a
child welfare social worker is making a life changing decision for a child and family and hoping this decision does not result in further detriment to the child (Dillenburger, 2004).

Due to the extreme nature and stress surrounding child welfare workers, the likelihood of developing burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress is significantly increased. In addition to the susceptibility of a child welfare social workers’ suffering from stress, special attention needs to be given to social workers working in rural communities. Rural social work further compounds the likelihood of feeling the effects of stress due to challenges faced by rural communities such as isolation and limited resources (Catalano, 1997). The unique challenges experienced by rural social workers in conjunction with the limited resources social workers have at their disposal significantly increases burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress.

**Statement of Collaboration**

Malinda Juhl and Megan Ciampa equally contributed to the development, literature review, and concepts described in the thesis project. Developing the instrument for data collection, obtaining approval from the Human Subjects Committee, performing the data collection, the data analysis, and writing the thesis project were all collaborative efforts.

**Background of the Problem**

Child welfare is a very complex and gratifying field as social workers are helping children by building strong families. Unfortunately, child welfare is systematically plagued by occupational stress, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and compassion
fatigue (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). With the current state of the economy, the demand for services provided by child welfare agencies is increasing while the resources of child welfare agencies are decreasing. While this shift in the economic climate further contributes to a higher burnout rate experienced in child welfare, the negative effects of the economic crisis are amplified in rural communities because it further perpetuates limited resources. Several studies (McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009; Strolin-Goltzman, Kollar & Trinkle, 2010) indicate the range of turnover rate is 20% to 60% in child welfare offices. The therapeutic relationship built between the social worker and the client is key to promoting change. With this said, one must understand that a high turnover rate is not only a problem for the organization, but it significantly decreases the positive effect the agency has on the community (McGowan et al., 2009). For example, a therapeutic alliance cannot be established when one family has been assigned three different social workers in six weeks due to the direct effects of burnout and turnover.

Burnout is a condition in which a social worker experiences emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of job and personal satisfaction. Burnout also includes physical symptoms of stress such as gastrointestinal issues, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and changes in eating habits (Kim, 2010; Smith & Clark, 2011). The effects of burnout not only produce significant physical strain, but close attention also needs to be paid to the psychological strain due to emotional numbness and indifference. These stress symptoms hinder a child welfare social worker's ability to
perform not only the job-related duties, but it also impairs his judgment to accurately assess crisis situations. The direct result can be seen by children either being left in harmful situations or being removed from their families unnecessarily (Kim, 2010).

The social work field is known for compassion, empathy, and mutual respect. Social workers utilize empathy as a skill in which they are able to not only identify a client's feeling but experience this or a similar feeling for the purpose of gaining insight and building rapport with the client (Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). The act of experiencing a client's feeling promotes a mutual understanding of the client's experiences, thus validating the client's feelings, experiences, and reactions. This reduces the client’s feelings of being alone and misunderstood. Using empathy not only helps to build the therapeutic alliance, but it provides a foundation of mutual respect, which is key to promoting change (Sabo, 2011).

The consequence of using empathic understanding is it can make the social worker susceptible to secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue. A social worker can experience secondary trauma by empathizing too much with a client's personal experience so the client's trauma laden story becomes a personal experience for the social worker (Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Repeated exposure to secondary traumatic stress over a period of time without treatment can create compassion fatigue in which social workers are essentially exhausted from caring (Berzoff & Kita, 2010). A social worker suffering from compassion fatigue typically has decreased job satisfaction and increased risk of burnout as their ability to empathize with
the clients is greatly diminished (Morazes, Benton, Clark, & Jacquet, 2010; Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

Occupational stress is the trauma social workers experience through the direct actions of their agency, which also contributes to a higher burnout rate and increased turnover (Faller et al., 2010). Occupational stress is most often seen as unmanageably high caseloads, poor or lack of supervision, unreasonable time constraints, unclear expectations or job descriptions, and a high-conflict work environment (Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Mazzola, Schonfeld, & Spector, 2011; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Historically, child welfare has been known for high levels of occupational stress and lack of support provided by the agency as a means of alleviating stress felt by social workers. Turnover itself increases the effects of occupational stress as social workers are constantly managing caseloads left behind by social workers who have left the agency (Faller & Ortega, 2010; Mazzola et al., 2011). This constant juggling of caseloads does not only affect the morale of the child welfare agency but it also strains the agency's relationship with community partners.

Child welfare social workers in rural communities not only suffer from the burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress common to the social work field in general, but their stress is exacerbated by problems unique to rural communities, such as isolation and lack of resources (Catalano, 1997). A rural community can be described as having a low population density. Typically there are few social service agencies, educational opportunities, and community partners specializing in meeting the mental
health needs of the community. Furthermore, people living in rural communities can be characterized as having conservative political views, traditional family values and roles, low socioeconomic status, and an educational background consisting primarily of high school graduates (Catalano, 1997; Gumpert & Saltman, 1999). This creates a rural culture valuing work ethic over education, placing less emphasis on technological advancements, and paying more attention to promoting self-sufficiency. Many rural communities are geographically isolated from surrounding areas, which attracts people who value rural culture, specifically its emphasis on self-sufficiently. However, this can be seen as a disadvantage to the social work community because the goal of social work is to reach out to people in need. Furthermore, the isolation of the rural community promotes limited job opportunities, limited mental health services, and a lack of adequate transportation, which can be affected by severe weather conditions (Gumpert & Saltman, 1999).

A unique challenge for social workers in rural communities is occupational stress can be further intensified by unavoidable dual relationships, limits to confidentiality, and limited support for social workers suffering from burnout and occupational stress. In addition, social workers practicing in rural communities may experience role confusion due to minimal staffing and high turnover rates in child welfare agencies. This is evidenced by agencies providing less in-agency support to their social workers due to the small size of the agencies. It can also be seen by the limited community partnerships that might provide support for social workers because of cross-contamination in regard to
personal and professional objectives. In urban settings, social workers can reach out to surrounding communities to get confidential mental health support, but because of the inherent isolation of rural communities, that is often not an option. The geographical isolation in conjunction with severe weather changes further perpetuates feelings of professional isolation as there are limited opportunities for social workers to manage their feelings of burnout and occupational stress (Catalano, 1997; Gumpert & Saltman, 1999). More research needs to be done on burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress as it relates to social work in rural communities.

Of specific interest to these researchers is the rural community of El Dorado County. El Dorado County spans 1,707.88 square miles between Sacramento, California and the state of Nevada; its total population in 2010 was 181,058. There are 106 people per square mile as compared to 239.1 people per square mile in the state of California. The rate of population growth, concentration of youth, and concentration of the elderly are all higher in El Dorado County than the average in the state of California. There are four main cities in El Dorado County: El Dorado Hills, Cameron Park, Placerville, and South Lake Tahoe. Human Service agencies are most concentrated in Placerville and South Lake Tahoe. Placerville is based at the western edge of the county and the elevation is 1900 feet. South Lake Tahoe is located at the eastern edge, bordering the state of Nevada and the elevation is 6500 feet. The population is 86.6% Caucasian, 12.1% Hispanic or Latino, and less than 4% of mixed races, Asian, American Indian,
African American, or Pacific Islander. In 2010, 7.6% of El Dorado County’s population was below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

Child welfare social workers from a child welfare agency in El Dorado County were interviewed to determine their perspectives on occupational stress, burnout, and what rural agency supports are available. This agency was chosen for this study because of its unique situation in regard to social worker burnout and occupational stress. To ensure antinomy and minimize risk to the participants of this study, the agency and participants involved are not identified. This is a child welfare agency in El Dorado County that employs social workers in two separate office locations. Both offices are in the same rural county and have the same management and the same policies and procedures. However, one office has an incredibly high turnover rate while the second has little to none. For the purposes of this study, the office with the high turnover rate is referred to as “Office A,” and the office with the low turnover rate is referred to as “Office B.” Our study interviewed past and current social workers in both targeted offices about the occupational stress, burnout rates, and agency support offered in their respective offices as a way to pinpoint what the difference in turnover rate can be attributed to.

**Statement of the Research Problem**

Child welfare social workers in rural communities have increased development of burnout and occupational stress due to a combination of factors including the nature of working in child welfare and the uniqueness of rural culture. If these factors continue to
remain unacknowledged with limited treatment offered, the result will be a continued high turnover rate within these agencies. The research question is what can rural agencies do to address the effects of burnout and occupational stress in order to increase the retention rates of their experienced social workers?

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of social workers living in rural communities in relation to burnout and occupational stress, with the goal of establishing best practices for retention of child welfare social workers in rural agencies. For this study, these researchers interviewed current and past employees of a child welfare agency in El Dorado County. The interview assessed the social workers’ perspectives of burnout within their office, what occupational stress might contribute to the rate of turnover, and what, if any, agency support is available to promote retention. The purpose of this study was to help increase the understanding of retention and promote knowledge of the best practices applied by rural child welfare agencies.

**Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized the ecological perspective and social learning theory to examine the effects of burnout and occupational stress on rural child welfare social workers. The ecological perspective focuses on relationships between systems and how each system influences and adapts to the current environment. The ecological perspective understands how interrelating systems can be in a constant state of flux and how the goal of the system is to achieve balance (Hepworth, Rooney, Rooney, Strom-
When examining the child welfare system and what contributes to burnout and occupational stress, one must identify how this system operates in conjunction with social worker values and rural and organizational culture. The ecological perspective offers an approach identifying how individuals, families, communities, organizations, and policies influence each other while also pinpointing strengths and weaknesses of the system (Hepworth et al., 2005). For the purpose of this study, this approach was used to understand the transactional process between the systems with the hopes understanding and maintaining the system.

The social learning theory is also used to analyze human behavior, interactions, and how behavior is influenced by systems and primarily rural and organizational culture. Often, individuals are less influenced by directives and objectives, but rather by their own beliefs, feelings, and motivations (Corey, 2005). The social learning theory provided an approach in which the nature of child welfare and organizational culture was viewed in terms of addressing personal needs and human resources.

**Definition of Terms**

**Burnout**

Burnout is a condition in which negative psychological and physical symptoms, such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, reduced sense of job satisfaction, social dysfunction, and sleeping or eating disturbances are experienced by social workers due to occupational or secondary stress.
Compassion Fatigue

The definition of Compassion Fatigue refers to feelings, thoughts, and reactions that emerge in the social worker due to overexposure to a client's traumatic experiences and suffering, which occurs over a period of time. Compassion fatigue can refer to the extent of one's diminished capacity to care as a result of a social worker's mental and emotional fatigue.

Occupational Stress

The definition of Occupational Stress refers to the extent of stress felt by an individual social worker due to high job demands, high caseloads, unclear job description and job expectation, and poor supervision. Occupational stress is the result of an incongruence between perceived job demands, job expectations, and perceived level of support in the actual work environment.

Rural Communities

Rural communities are defined as areas with low population densities. According to literature, there is not an agreed upon population density that would qualify a community as rural. Instead, a community can be identified as rural if it faces certain challenges common to rural communities such as limited resources, geographical isolation, and inadequate public transportation.

Assumptions

This research yields to the assumption that current and past employees of the targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County have an increased development of
burnout and occupational stress dependent on the rural status of the office. The second assumption is that this agency has the desire to pursue the best practices to prevent burnout and occupational stress while therefore simultaneously promoting retention. The third assumption is that the social workers employed by this child welfare agency face the rural challenges as described in the literature review.

**Justifications**

The best practices learned from this study can be adapted and applied in other rural communities to increase retention rates while decreasing rates of burnout and occupational stress. Better retention rates will increase the effectiveness of the social work profession by preserving the therapeutic alliance with children and families by providing a positive work environment for social workers, allowing the agency to focus attention on client centered goals rather than on human resource difficulty, and fostering a positive relationship with community partners. To promote resiliency, compassion, and job satisfaction, social workers must rely on individual, community, and agency strengths to help cope. In rural communities, however, there is a pervasive lack of resources at the community and agency level. This study could provide knowledge about what services or support given at the agency level are most effective at mitigating the effects of occupational stress. In turn, rural agencies could provide those services and support to their social worker to avoid turnover, thus increasing their overall effectiveness.
Limitations

This study is limited to social workers either currently or were previously employed at the targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County. This study does not measure burnout, compassion fatigue, occupational stress, or agency support personally experienced by the social workers being interviewed. Although burnout is discussed in this study, the actual rate of burnout is not measured.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review presents current research and findings on burnout, occupational stress, and rural social work. In addition, empathy, compassion fatigue, support offered to social workers by their agencies, and complications arising from living and working in rural communities and El Dorado County specifically are discussed. Appropriate headings information regarding empathy, compassion fatigue, burnout, rural communities, organizational culture, occupational stress, agency support, and El Dorado County are provided.

**Empathy**

The foundation of social work and the practice of client engagement hinges on the belief that one can fully understand multiple facets of the human experience. This understanding of the human experience is built upon the idea of using empathy as a means for understanding the client's experience. Social work education teaches that empathy is the greatest tool used to build relationships with children and families (Figley, 2002; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). Social workers listen to the client's story and share in a mutual understanding of their pain, reactions, and disruptions in life due to trauma (Bride, Radey, & Figley, 2007; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). Although, empathic engagement has long been recognized as the foundation for understanding a client's trauma, it can also been seen as a way of inducing a social worker’s feelings of trauma associated with the client's sharing of their personal traumatic experience.
Research of the literature suggests empathizing with a client's experience of being traumatized can result in the process of the social worker becoming traumatized with the client's trauma laden story as the social worker is sharing the emotional burden and facilitating the healing process (Bride et al., 2007; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). Many child welfare social workers engage in empathic understanding as a means of understanding the family's history of abuse and trauma. This complete understanding of the child's and family's history of trauma is the foundation on which child welfare social workers determine an appropriate intervention strategy (Bride et al., 2007; Figley, 2002; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Sabo, 2011). In addition, a child welfare social worker's ability to engage in the therapeutic relationship strongly influences the degree to which the unconditional positive regard is established; it also increases the client’s ability to engage in authenticity and mutual empathic understanding. The more a child welfare social worker engages in mutual empathy, the greater the risk of internalizing the client's trauma (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006).

Compassion Fatigue

Research indicates the child welfare system struggles continuously with an environment plagued by emotionally challenging situations, as the population served is deemed highly at risk and vulnerable (Figley, 2002; Sabo, 2011). Child welfare social workers are expected as helping professionals to engage in mutual understanding and provide unconditional aid in the face of crisis when dealing with sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, general neglect, exploitation, and abandonment. A review of the
literature indicates compassion fatigue can be described as a natural consequence of behaviors and emotions resulting from either the knowledge of a traumatic event experienced by a person or the stress resulting from helping the traumatized person (Radey & Figley, 2007; Sabo, 2011). Compassion Fatigue also refers to feelings, thoughts, and reactions that emerge in the social worker due to overexposure to a client's traumatic experiences and client suffering, occurring over a period of time. It is widely recognized effective trauma treatment involves the child welfare social worker who assists the child and family through their traumatic experience. This traumatic experience often involves a process in which the client must repeatedly recall memories of the event or multiple events over a period of time to bring closure to the experiences (Bride et al., 2007; Figley, 2002; Radey & Figley, 2007). Child welfare workers may assist in bringing closure to the trauma and abuse incurred by a child; however, the indirect exposure to trauma significantly affects the child welfare social worker. The effects of ongoing exposure to trauma treatment creates inherent risk of significant behavioral, cognitive, and emotional changes within the child welfare social worker. This repeated exposure over the course of time increases the effects of compassion fatigue (Bride et al., 2007; Radey & Figley, 2007; Sabo, 2011).

The effects of compassion fatigue, like any other form of fatigue, diminishes one's own capacity to cope when engaging with the complicating factors associated with trauma (Figley, 2002). Compassion fatigue can also refer to the extent of one's diminished capacity to care as a result of the child welfare social worker’s mental and
emotional fatigue. The effects of compassion fatigue experienced by child welfare social workers is believed to effect their professional judgment and ability to properly engage in assessment of a crisis situation (Bride et al., 2007; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Figley, 2002). According to Berzoff and Kita (2010), the cognitive effects of compassion fatigue can be seen as poor concentration, minimization, and apathy (Berzoff & Kita, 2010). Compassion fatigue can create the potential for a child welfare social worker to misdiagnose a situation and engage in poor treatment planning and intervention, which may further perpetuate the abuse experienced by clients. The above happens in social workers with compassion fatigues as opposed to in those social workers not suffering from compassion fatigue (Bride et al., 2007; Radey & Figley, 2007).

Compassion fatigue can also be described as a constant state of tension due to the chronic preoccupation with client traumatization. According to Figley (2002), the effects of compassion fatigue can also been seen as numbing or an avoidance of reminders associated with a client's trauma laden story. The experience of compassion fatigue can also create a sense of helplessness, powerlessness, guilt, and an increase in isolation from areas of support (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Bride et al., 2007; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Figley, 2002). These symptoms of compassion fatigue present as real complications affecting child welfare social workers’ abilities to provide an accurate assessment of a family in addition to coping with their own experience of trauma due to emotional depletion. In direct client contact, a child welfare social worker may suffer behaviorally from compassion fatigue as evidenced by irritation, impatience, and
hypervigilance (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Bride et al., 2007; Figley, 2002; Sprang, Whitt-Woosley, & Clark, 2007). It is important to note these symptoms are often disconnected from real trauma experiences and the symptoms of compassion fatigue are experienced due to a depletion of the child welfare worker’s emotional energy (Figley, 2002; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Sabo, 2011).

Irregardless of the many descriptors of compassion fatigue, research indicates the emergence of compassion fatigue is due to an overexposure of the therapeutic relationship (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon connected to the therapeutic alliance created between the child welfare social worker and family. Child welfare social workers are expected to fully engage their emotional energy in building this relationship, as it is a critical element in eliciting a therapeutic response (Sabo, 2011; Sprang et al., 2007). Compassion fatigue begins in the therapeutic relationship with shared emotions and evolves due to repeated exposure to client traumatization. Overexposure over the course of an extended period of time can negatively affect a child welfare social worker’s professional and personal lives; however, the extent of compassion fatigue experienced is resultant on the work environment and resources offered by a child welfare agency (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Sabo, 2011). Research shows self-care can greatly lessen the experience of compassion fatigue; however, a supportive work environment and supervision can act as a means of self-care (Sprang et al., 2007).
Burnout

Burnout is a condition characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and a reduced sense of personal and job satisfaction. Social workers experiencing burnout may be cynical toward their agency or clients, they may feel ineffective, or simply do not care anymore (Anderson, 2000; Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Maslach, 2003). Emotional exhaustion is the most noticeable symptom; it is an intense feeling of continual weariness developed slowly over time and often includes negative perceptions of the social worker’s colleagues, clients, and agency (Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007). Other effects are irritability, depression, a decrease in interpersonal skills, unresponsiveness, and decreased job routine. In addition to the negative psychological effects, burnout commonly manifests through physical symptoms such as gastrointestinal issues, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and changes in eating habits (Bell et al., 2003; Conrad et al., 2006; Kim, 2010; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Smith & Clark, 2011).

Burnout is commonly caused by challenging, high conflict or dysfunctional work environments, otherwise known as occupational stress; this includes high caseloads, conflicting roles, and demanding job expectations with little or no positive reinforcements (Faller et al., 2010; McGowan et al., 2009; Morazes, et al., 2010; Simon, Pryce, Roff, & Klemmack, 2005). When these negative aspects of an agency become overwhelming, burnout is likely to develop in the social workers. Some literature suggest developing burnout is a survival mechanism for social workers as a way to mitigate the
career pressure caused by these toxic work environments (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Jenaro et al., 2007; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2009; Simon et al., 2005; Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007).

Child welfare social workers are at an increased risk of developing burnout because of the high stress nature of their job and work environments. Specifically, child welfare workers are tasked with assessing families for safety and making life and death decisions on a daily basis (Anderson, 2000; Boyas & Wind, 2010). The social workers are expected to engage the clients through dual roles; on one hand, the social worker is a support and guide to the family, but on the other hand, the social worker has the power to remove the children. The expectation to fulfill these two conflicting roles creates more daily stress on the social workers (Caringi & Rankin Hall, 2008; Zosky, 2010). Aside from working with families directly, these social workers have an inordinate amount of documentation and legal documents to prepare for each case, which can be laborious and time consuming (Anderson, 2000; Yamatani, Engel, & Spjeldnes, 2009; Zosky, 2010). Not only does the inherent stress of their job make child welfare social workers more susceptible to burnout, but they also handle increased stress due to an unsupportive public, aggressive client, and a lack of autonomy in the decisions they make (Conrad et al., 2006).

The psychological, social, and physical effects of burnout on child welfare social workers also decrease their abilities to perform well at work. The mental and emotional exhaustion may lead to inaccurate assessments which may have devastating
consequences such as children being removed from a home unnecessarily or children remaining in dangerous situations (Bell et al., 2003; Caringi et al., 2008; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Stalker et al., 2007; Yamatani et al., 2009; Zosky, 2010). The depersonalization, cynicism, and negative views the social worker experiencing burnout has toward the agency, other colleagues, and the clients can also interfere with the social worker’s assessment of a family (Conrad et al., 2006; McGowan et al., 2008; Stalker et al., 2007).

In addition to the inherent increased stress on social workers who work in child welfare, the Child Protective Services offices are notorious for high levels of occupational stress. According to Yamatani et al. (2009), the average Child Protective Services social worker has a caseload two to four times larger than what is recommended by the Child Welfare League of America in order to perform according to job standards (Yamatani et al., 2009). Another organizational contribution to burnout is a constantly changing work environment and unclear roles and expectations, typical of Child Protective Services offices. The secondary traumatic stress, or vicarious trauma, experienced by Child Protective Services social workers is constant and intense. To adequately process the experiences, the social workers need to have supportive, available, and empathic supervisors with whom to discuss the cases. This would assist the social workers in managing stressful emotions, feeling nurtured, and it would help them gain a better perspective of the case. Instead, poor supervision and a lack of agency support are
commonly found in these agencies, further leading to burnout (Anderson, 2000; Boyas & Wind, 2010; Zosky, 2010).

The devastating effect of burnout is turnover. Many social workers were originally drawn to the profession because of a passion to help the underserved people in our communities. Ultimately, they stay in the overworked, underpaid profession because of the personal fulfillment and job satisfaction gained from helping clients. When organizational stress decreases job satisfaction, it leads to burnout and leaves social workers feeling depressed, ineffective, cynical, and emotionally exhausted. Unfortunately, when an agency has high occupational stress, a downward spiral of conflict and turnover occurs because as occupational stress contributes to burnout, burnout contributes to turnover, and a high turnover rate further increases the organizational stress of the agency (Bell et al., 2003; Boyas & Wind, 2010; Conrad et al., 2006; Stalker et al., 2007). For example, an agency with a high conflict work environment makes the social workers at high risk of burnout, which makes them at high risk of turnover, increasing the work load and role confusion of the remaining social workers, which in turn increases rate of burnout, and so on (Anderson, 2000; Boyas & Wind, 2010; Yamatani et al., 2009). This cycle is clearly occurring in Child Protective Services offices as the turnover rates range from 20-60% (Strolin-Gotzen et al., 2010). Although turnover has been a chronic issue in child welfare, the recent economic crisis further intensified the instability of these offices as social service budgets were cut across the nation. In California 600 Child Protective Services social worker positions were cut.
The results have been devastating. For example, Sacramento County is operating with only two-thirds of previous staffing levels with the same demand for services (Boyas & Wind, 2009; Branan, 2010; Ellett, 2008; Westbrook et al., 2006).

The high burnout and turnover rates in Child Protective Services offices negatively affects the social workers themselves, the agencies they work for, and the larger community. The social workers experiencing burnout suffer from the mental, emotional, and physical symptoms such as depersonalization, depression, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, social issues, and eating and sleeping disturbances (Bell et al., 2003; Conrad et al., 2006; Kim, 2010; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Smith et al., 2011; Zosky, 2010). Social workers experiencing burnout commonly feel isolated from colleagues and do not feel comfortable reaching out for support, which intensifies their personal and professional dissatisfaction while limiting their ability to process stressful emotions (Barbee, Antle, Sullivan, Huebner, & Fox, 2009; Bell et al., 2003; Zosky, 2010).

A review of the literature indicates the concept of burnout has long been understood as an organizational problem and not typically an individual issue. Burnout is a response to stressors within the organizational environment and an adaptation to the environmental culture the agency produces. This issue is seen as a problem within the organization as many agencies can alleviate the occurrence of burnout by rotating staff assignments, decreasing one’s caseload, and encouraging staff to perform self-care in the form of taking time off in an effort to reduce burnout (Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). It
is important to note that for an agency to effectively triage burnout, the agency must fully understand not only the concept of burnout but the presenting symptoms. Agencies are negatively affected by high rates of burnout and turnover because of the drain of resources on agencies already understaffed and over budget. Although the turnover rates are high and budgets are being cut, the job demands are stagnant and the amount of families in need of services is increasing, so it is imperative for agencies to fill empty positions (Anderson, 2000). The time and money it takes to recruit, hire, and train new social workers would be better spent on clients in need. In addition, the already overworked supervisors have a constant burden to give extra training and support to the new social workers. The instability of the office creates a barrier to the social workers building rapport with each other and establishing an internal support system, which would serve as a protective factor against burnout (Bell et al., 2003; Conrad et al., 2006).

Burnout and turnover have an especially negative effect on the families being served and the larger community. The high caseloads, a direct effect of a high turnover rate, further reduces the amount of time a social worker has to spend with each family. The limited amount of time impedes the social worker’s ability to build a positive working relationship with the family, which is often a catalyst to change (Caringi et al., 2008; Morazes et al., 2010; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). Furthermore, the more limited a social worker’s time is when assessing a family for safety, the more likely it is a mistake will be made (DePanfilis, & Zlotnik, 2008; Morazes et al., 2010; Yamatani et al., 2009). Another ramification of high turnover rates is that social workers’ response times
when investigating reports of abuse and neglect are inevitably increasing due to the increasing workload, which possibly leaves children in dangerous situations (Massie, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2006).

**Rural Communities**

While community resources are helpful standards of practice for dealing with occupational stress, social workers living in rural communities have fewer options available to them. For example, therapeutic groups are recommended as an effective way for social workers to manage their stress (Ting, Jacobson, & Sanders, 2008), but in rural areas, it is difficult to work with groups in general because there is often not enough people with similar experiences that could form a group (Gumpert & Saltman, 1999). Forming a group of professionals in a rural area would be especially difficult because there is a documented lack of educated professionals in rural areas. Many rural communities are geographically isolated from surrounding areas, do not have adequate public transportation available, and traveling is often difficult due to weather (Gumpert et al., 1999). These compounding factors make it unrealistic that rural social workers can rely on utilizing services from surrounding communities. If rural social workers are left to use the services available in their own community, more obstacles arise, such as the lack of anonymity and distrust that people will honor confidentiality. Part of this is due to the rural culture encouraging gossip and face-to-face interactions. Even daily business is often dealt with on a personal level (Gumpert & Saltman, 1999).
Not only is it more difficult for rural social workers to utilize community services to help manage their occupational stress, but living and working in a rural environment intensifies the effect of secondary traumatic stress on social workers. The trauma the client experiences is felt by the social worker also, making the social worker at even more risk of burnout. In addition, living and working in a rural environment can foster feelings of social and professional isolation (Gumpert & Saltman, 1999), and there is sometimes a lack of recreational activities to help reduce stress during non-working hours.

In urban areas, social workers can keep their professional and personal lives separate, but in rural settings dual relationships are unavoidable. Typical social work education and job training encourages social workers to avoid dual relationships, for instance, by referring the client to a different social worker. However, many social workers were not educated or trained on what to do if there are no other social workers to which to refer clients (Catalano, 1997). Not only is a dual relationship a complex situation to maneuver through as a social worker, but rural social workers are often put in the situation without any guidelines on how to do it ethically. Dual relationships not only put extra stress on social workers during working hours, but it is also difficult for social workers to relax and “let go” of work when they are not working because they run into co-workers, other professionals, and clients around town. Because there is no anonymity in small towns, social workers are always visible and hold a certain profile within the community. Social workers must constantly be aware of this and make sure to preserve their professional reputation in town. This makes it difficult for social workers to have
personal lives independent from their professional status (Catalano, 1997). When all of these factors come into play in the life of a social worker, it causes compounded levels of stress without a safe outlet, which can easily exacerbate the effects of occupational stress.

**Organizational Change/Organizational Culture**

The practice of social work is full of many uncertainties among the client and organizational systems. The ability to cope with any uncertainty is said to be linked intimately with one’s values and beliefs about the world and the organization in which they choose to practice social work (Morgan, 1996). Social work education focuses on the culture of the client, the family system, the organizational structure and the community. This focus is necessary for providing insight into the dynamics of the system and what can influence change. According to Morgan (1996), the idea of culture in relation to organizations and management became a popular topic during the 1980s and 1990s (Morgan, 1996). When considering the culture of an organization, one often explores the ideology of the organization which has a specific pattern of development and knowledge that breathes life into values and beliefs, which, in turn, becomes a set of daily rituals (Mohr & Wolfram, 2010; Morgan, 1996). When identifying occupational stress, it is important to understand this construct lies on a continuum as the organization in and of itself is a cultural phenomenon varying not only on the organization's stage of development but on the climate of the agency and society in which it operates (Mohr & Wolfram, 2010).
Organizations can have both a corporate culture and various subcultures in which the interactions construct several social realities. One way of observing these organizational cultures is to observe the daily functioning of the various subgroups. Through observation, the patterns of behaviors, interactions between individuals, and the subtle nuances of language become evident. In addition, one may learn the organizational culture is fragmented, evidenced by the idea that people say one thing and do another (Mohr & Wolfram, 2010; Morgan, 1996). This leads to fragmented subcultures in which groups are formed for the purpose of preserving or resisting the change within the agency. The past few years have demonstrated a marked change in economic climate, which leads to dynamic changes in the work environment. Mohr and Wolfram (2010) discuss that work settings are in a constant state of unrest due to downsizing, restructuring, and rapid changes in priorities (Mohr & Wolfram, 2010). Mid-level management must face changes such as receiving new instruction even before the completion of a current task. These types of changes add increasing pressure to the already strained work environment facing child welfare workers (Kenny & Cooper, 2003; Mohr & Wolfram, 2010; Morgan, 1996).

Typically, a sense of shared organizational culture within child welfare is seen has having an understanding that all members have shared beliefs, values, and philosophies embodying a social worker’s code of ethics. The strength of an organization’s culture serves as a means of directing its members and eliciting behaviors that influence change (Ellett, 2008; Westbrook et al., 2008). The culture of child welfare agencies is a crucial
dynamic defining the context in which child welfare social workers operate. The professional organization culture established within a child welfare agency reflects both organizational and personal characteristics, influencing one's intention to remain employed as a child welfare social worker (Ellett, 2008; Faller et al., 2009; Kenny & Cooper, 2003).

**Occupational Stress**

The child welfare system is full of many challenges ranging from client-related stress to work environment stress (Dillenburger, 2004). Child welfare social workers are continuously working in crisis situations as they are making critical decisions regarding child safety, children's well-being, and decisions toward permanency on a daily basis (Ellett, 2008; Morazes et al., 2010; Westbrook et al., 2008). The pressures of crisis work is great; however, when lack of support, poor line-management, poor supervision, and improper management are factored in, the pressures of crisis work increases (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Dillenburger, 2004; Faller et al., 2010; Kenny & Cooper, 2003; McGowan et al., 2009). Occupational stress needs to be addressed by an organization as it is one of the leading causes of turnover.

High turnover in child welfare causes not only a discontinuity in an organization’s sense of culture, but it causes a disruption in services provided to children and families (Ellett, 2008; Westbrook et al., 2008). In addition, poor retention in child welfare can leave child welfare social workers feeling undervalued by the organization causing this rate of turnover to remain cyclical (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Morazes et al., 2010;
Westbrook et al., 2008). When the culture of child welfare employees remains poor, employees begin to focus on the negative aspects of the job and work environment. When this occurs, the perception of job strain increases and the interactions between many child welfare social workers begin to breathe life into a newly established organizational culture that believes the system of child welfare is broken and beyond repair. This reinforces feelings of burnout and occupational stress and further promotes instability in child welfare as people continually seek employment at which an employee feels supported (Beehr, Bowling, & Bennett, 2010).

Systematically, child welfare has had increasingly high turnover rates, poor retention, and a lack of stable workforce. If this issue is not properly addressed, child welfare will continue to experience a shortage of competent workers who are unable to address their struggles with burnout and occupational stress. Research has shown child welfare agencies have adopted a solution to improve job satisfaction; however, little research is available to determine if these strategies remain in place under the constant strain of workload demand in the ever-changing landscape of child welfare. Furthermore, little research is known whether agency strategies for improving retention are adaptive and make modifications for changing work environments (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Faller et al., 2009; Kenny & Cooper, 2003; Westbrook et al., 2008).

The child welfare culture is constantly evolving due to changes in state mandates and financial constraints, thus creating a constant state of flux for an organization. Within an organization, occupational stress can occur due to incongruence in perceived
expectations and realistic expectations. In addition, occupational stress can occur within child welfare when perceived demand and capability differs and when organization and social worker values clash (Dillenburger, 2004; McGowan et al., 2009). The experience of occupational stress can be seen on a continuum of job-related stressors such as burnout and high turnover. Ongoing exposure to patient complexity, perceived lack of time, unclear expectations, and the inability to meet expected goals may lead to the experience of fatigue, which is one form of occupational stress (Faller et al., 2009; Morazes et al., 2010; Sabo, 2011; Westbrook et al., 2008). Occupational stress can also be described by work overload, lack of control, lack of reward, lack of community, lack of fairness, and value conflict (Beehr et al., 2010; McGowan et al., 2009; Sabo, 2011).

Workload demands can have a pronounced effect on child welfare social workers’ perceptions of stress and tasks that can be accomplished, thus increasing burnout. When burnout is experienced, child welfare social workers often look to supervision to discuss presenting symptoms. When considering supervision in child welfare, one must examine the relationship found between the child welfare social worker and supervisor (Faller et al., 2009; Morazes et al., 2010). Support from one's immediate supervisor and the level of quality in supervision is found to have significant effects on a child welfare social worker's intent to remain employed with an organization. Research has shown the quality of supervision received in child welfare is an integral component in worker retention (Morazes et al., 2010; Westbrook et al., 2008).
The experience of occupational stress can be alleviated by factors such as a decrease in caseloads, an increase in flexibility with time management and schedules, quality supervision, better front-line management, and organizational commitment (Dillenburger, 2004; Mazzola et al., 2011). In addition, many child welfare social workers come into child welfare with minimal field experience, thus resulting in increased feelings of fatigue. Child welfare social workers look not only to supervision to address this issue, they require training to further develop skills and coping strategies (Beehr et al., 2010). This alleviation of occupational stress directly addresses the professional responsibility of a child welfare social worker. However, the personal aspect of occupational stress also needs to be addressed by an organization to provide an encompassed approach to treating the symptoms associated with occupational stress. Child welfare social workers constantly challenge the child and family to change and establish personal growth. With this said, the child welfare social worker themselves also wants to be challenged and experience her own sense of personal and professional growth, and many social workers develop their personal working objectives (Dillenburger, 2004; Faller et al., 2009; Westbrook et al., 2008). This is another aspect related to poor retention, as many child welfare social worker lack supervision required for licensure; therefore, limiting their ability to promote (Beehr et al., 2010).

Many social workers who choose to work within the child welfare system acknowledge the most satisfying aspect of working in child welfare is the direct client contact and communicating with children. Direct client practice has become rushed and
the interaction between the child welfare social worker has taken a backseat as the worker is too overload with caseload expectations (Beehr et al., 2010; Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Dillenburger, 2004; Mazzola et al., 2011). The combination of compassion fatigue and burnout can create adverse psychological and physiological reactions within the child welfare social worker. This is in conjunction with the occupational stress described, as higher levels of job demands, unclear job expectations, limited support from management, and lack of control over the nature of the work increase the degree of turnover experiences by an organization (Faller et al., 2009; Rafferty, Friend & Landbergis, 2001; Westbrook et al., 2008). McGowan et al. (2009) discuss the interaction between retention and turnover can best be explained through the interaction of organizational support and personal variables.

**Agency Support**

A review of the literature indicates that agency support can be explored on multiple dimensions. When discussing the role of supervisors and perceived agency support, it is important to define what is meant by quality supervision. This definition is crucial in understanding social support received from an organization, as a review of the literature indicates the concept of agency support has lacked inconsistency, been vague, and even been contradictory at times (Beehr et al., 2010). The definition of quality supervision can be described as having a keen understanding of the responsibilities, expectations and demands of child welfare (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2008). In addition, a child welfare supervisor needs to distribute casework equitably,
remain flexible and available, and convey realistic expectations while offering suggestions for improving aptitude and performance. Furthermore, a child welfare supervisor needs to possess good listening skills, convey respect, provide praise for a job well done and be instrumental in providing emotional support (Faller et al., 2009; Westbrook et al., 2008).

Agency support received from supervisors can be seen as a form of self-care as supervisors can offer validation, a means of support through self exploration, and by providing their own experiences in direct practice. Child welfare social workers need supervision not only to discuss current cases but also to emotionally process difficult client circumstances and restore emotional reserves. In addition, supervision can be used to teach the child welfare social worker how to gain other professional support from the child welfare community (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2008). Support received from supervisors is associated with decreased emotional fatigue and depersonalization, as supervision provides an outlet for child welfare social workers to not only process the professional demands of the job but also the emotional experience of the social worker and any perceived issues relating to counter transference (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Rafferty et al., 2001).

Supportive supervision has been found to improve job satisfaction by lowering levels of burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress. A positive relationship with a supervisor not only improves one’s desire to remain employed, but it increases the morale of the work environment (Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Chen & Scannapieco, 2009;
Westbrook et al., 2008). When a child welfare social worker feels supported, the culture of the organization is strengthened as the perception of the agency and expected workload demands increases. A positive supportive supervisor and work environment is correlated with increased retention and a desire to remain employed in child welfare (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2008).

In child welfare, the social worker and organization must continually remain adaptive in order to meet the changing needs of the family and system. One key element in an organization’s adaptability is its leadership (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Ellett, 2008). Research show clinical supervision, clear job expectations, clear measures of success, size of caseloads, and adequate training are supports an agency can provide in addressing burnout, compassion fatigue, and occupational stress. Agency support also provides a sense of cohesiveness among an organization’s members (Beehr et al., 2010; Berzoff & Kita, 2010; Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; McGowan et al., 2009).

**El Dorado County**

A child welfare agency with two offices located in El Dorado County was used exclusively for our data collection. El Dorado County is a county lying between Sacramento, California and the state of Nevada. Although it has a growing population, in 2010 there were 106 people per square mile as compared to 239.1 people per square mile in the state of California (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). While some areas of El Dorado are considered urban such as El Dorado Hills and Cameron Park, there are also rural areas such as Placerville and South Lake Tahoe which experience the challenges commonly
associated with rural communities, such as limited transportation, limited resources, and geographic isolation. El Dorado County human service agencies have suffered budget deficits and funding cuts in the private and public sector since 2007. In spite of the cuts the need for services has stayed constant, leaving the social workers with a higher workload and less resources (California State Association of Counties, 2008; Long, 2011).

This specific child welfare agency was chosen for this study because of its unique situation in regard to social worker turnover rates. This agency has two office locations in El Dorado County. For the purposes of this study the offices will be referred to as Office A and Office B. Both offices are in the same county, and have the same management, policies, and procedures. However, Office A has an incredibly high turnover rate while Office B has very little. By examining the similarities and differences between these two child welfare offices, information can be gained regarding best practices for retention of social workers.

**Conclusion**

The literature shows how pervasive the problems of burnout, occupational stress and compassion fatigue are among child welfare workers. When social workers are experiencing these issues, they struggle with symptoms such as depression, anxiety, high stress, and altered judgment. This contributes to the chronically high turnover rate of social workers within child welfare, which negatively impacts the clients, the community, the social workers, and the organization. Burnout, and, therefore turnover, can be
prevented through personal factors such as regular self-care, reaching out to community resources such as counseling, or by support offered by the organization such as effective supervision. Offering support to social workers within the organization is crucial for rural communities to understand because rural communities typically have less supportive community resources to which social workers can reach out. In addition, the effects of secondary traumatic stress and occupational stress are amplified for social workers in rural communities because of their isolation and unavoidable dual relationships.

If child welfare agencies in rural communities could understand how to better support their social workers with their own resources, the rate of burnout and turnover would improve. In turn, job satisfaction for the social workers and stability within the agency would increase, and the clients could be served more effectively. This would lead to safer communities and improved relationships between child welfare offices and other agencies. This study explored the perspectives of social workers living in rural communities in relation to burnout and occupational stress with the goal of establishing best practices for retention of child welfare social workers in rural agencies.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine the perspectives of child welfare social workers in a rural community with regard to burnout and occupational stress with the goal of gaining a greater understanding of effective retention practices. This study sought the perspectives of social workers living and working in rural communities so as to understand how agencies can provide greater support in the midst of the limited resources available in rural counties. The purpose of this study was to identify the differences regarding burnout and occupational stress between two child welfare offices in El Dorado County. The two office locations were chosen for this study because they are in the same rural county, have the same policies and management, but have drastically different rates of burnout and retention. The similarities and differences between the two offices studied should provide insight into how child welfare agencies in rural areas can best provide support for their social workers to improve retention rates.

This is a qualitative ethnographic study because it seeks to understand the shared common culture of a group of people (Leedy & Ormrod, 2010). This study specifically aimed to understand the culture and perspectives of the social workers in the targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County. This study used interviews to explore the perspectives of child welfare social workers regarding occupational stress and burnout as they relate to the rural community of El Dorado County, and analyzed emerging themes
specific to effective retention strategies. This type of research is best suited for the purposes of the study because the researchers gained an understanding of the organizational structure, norms, and cultures of the agency. It also allowed the researchers to understand what challenges the social workers faced due to being in their rural community, integral to understanding the burnout among child welfare workers.

**Sampling Procedures**

The participants of this research study were social workers who were either current or past employees of a targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County. The participants were considered experts on this subject matter due to their professional experience and employment with the target agency. As the key informants, their perspectives of burnout and occupational stress during the course of their employment at this agency served as the qualitative data for the study. For the purpose of this study participants were recruited through the purposive sampling method with the help of the snowball strategy. The only criterion for inclusion in the study was that the participant was a past or present employee of the targeted agency. The study aimed to recruit 10 participants. During February and March 2012, a total of 12 participants were recruited resulting in 12 completed interview

**Data Collection Procedures**

The data for this study was collected via a semi-structured interview consisting of open- and closed-ended questions, assessing the participants’ perspectives of burnout, occupational stress, and agency support as they relate to their experience as employees in
the targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County. Each participant was asked every question on the interview guide and in the same order. However, using a semi-structured format instead of a structured format allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions when needed. This technique was used to increase the researcher’s understanding of the dynamics being explained by the participants. Each participant was interviewed by one of the researchers at an off-site location to ensure the participants felt comfortable and confidentiality was upheld.

The researcher started the interview by explaining the purpose of the study. The participants were told the researchers were interviewing social workers from the target agency with regard to their perceptions of burnout, occupational stress, and agency support, with the goal of determining best practices for agencies in rural communities in order to increase retention rates. The researcher also went over the contents of the consent form with each participant while specifically highlighting the confidentiality and right to withdraw sections and answering any questions the participant had. If at that point, the participant signed the consent form and reported a willingness to participate, the interview questions were asked. At the end of the interviews, all participants were thanked for their time and their willingness to share their perspectives.

The researchers documented the interview via manual notes. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes, with the first five minutes being dedicated to discussing informed consent and obtaining the participants signature on the informed consent form (see Appendix). Participation in this study was offered to a majority of the employees
from the targeted child welfare agency using purposive sampling with snowball strategies. This method allowed employees to be recruited using word of mouth from among participants interviewed. All willing participants were interviewed using this process. Participation in the interview was voluntary and participants were able to choose to either discontinue their participation or decline to answer any question according to their comfort level during the interview process. All data collected was kept confidential and only the researchers had access to the names of the participants and any other identifying information. To further protect the anonymity and minimize risk to the participants of this study, the agency discussed, and the towns in which the offices are located are not named.

**Instruments**

The interview guide consisted of 13 closed- and open-ended questions with five follow-up questions, for a total of 18 possible questions. The topics for the questions were chosen based on the purpose of the study, as the researchers desired to focus on burnout, occupational stress, and agency support. The questions were further developed based on the literature, as the researchers asked the participants about documented effects and causes of the above-mentioned dynamics. The questions were designed to gain a better understanding of the social workers’ perceptions of burnout and occupational stress as they relate to their experiences as employees of the targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County. Some questions asked the participants’ perspectives on the turnover rate in their office and what they thought might contribute to it. Other questions asked the
participants to identify ways their agency effectively supported its employees and ways it could support the employees better. Ultimately, the answers to the questions provided a guide for how rural counties can effectively support their social workers, and, therefore increase retention rates. The list of questions included in the interview guide is included below. Every participant was asked the following questions; however, the semi-structured format allowed the researchers to ask additional follow-up questions if further discussion was needed for the researcher to fully understand the dynamics being described by the participants.

**Interview Questions**

1. What is your educational background?

2. How many years of experience do you have as a social worker?

3. How long have you worked as a social worker in El Dorado County?

4. What is the location of your office in El Dorado County?

5. What is your perception of how burnout affects social workers?
   
   a. Do you think social workers experiencing burnout could be characterized by the following: high stress, emotional exhaustion, and lowered job satisfaction?

6. Do you perceive burnout as a common factor in the turnover rate in your office?
   
   a. If so, what do you think are the most common reasons for people leaving? What contributes to the amount of burnout or people leaving the agency?
   
   b. If not, what do you think are the most significant reasons why people stay?
7. In your opinion what, if any, occupational stress is common in your office including high case loads, secondary trauma, a high conflict work environment, and/or inadequate supervision?

8. In your opinion how severely affected are the employees in your office by the effects of secondary trauma or occupational stress such as depression, anxiety, sleep or diet disturbances, compassion fatigue, or stressful social or personal relationships?

9. In your opinion what, if any, support does your agency offer to help reduce the effects of occupational stress on the employees such as effective supervision, the ability to process a crisis situation immediately after the event, a supportive work environment, flexibility and/or counseling?
   a. What is the most significant way that employees are supported?
   b. What could the agency do to more effectively support the employees?

10. In your opinion, how does the turnover rate in your office compare with the turnover rate in the other CPS office in El Dorado County?

11. In your opinion what factors, if any, contribute to the difference in turnover rates between the two offices?

12. If you were allowed to change your current work environment, what would you change to promote retention among fellow co-workers?

13. Is there anything else that you would be willing to share regarding these topics?
Data Analysis Approaches

In this qualitative study, the data gained from the 12 interviews were reviewed by the researchers who extracted common themes with the purpose of defining similarities and differences between the two office locations. Since each interview was conducted by only one of the researchers, the researcher who conducted the interview was responsible for documenting the direct quotes from the participant and summarizing the answer to each question. Then the notes for every interview were reviewed by each researcher independently of the other and each researcher organized the data into emerging themes. Then, using the comparison method, the researchers compared the themes created by each researcher individually.

The use of the comparison method was to identify the themes presented from both interview groups. This allowed the researchers to become aware of emergent themes and how those themes presented during the interview and from the interview material. This method also allowed the researchers to compare the usage of certain words as descriptors of themes. The use of this method was helpful as it allowed the researcher to become acutely aware of the themes from her interview group. The constant comparison method was also used, which was helpful in limiting bias from the researchers who may be more keenly aware of themes specific to their interview group. Using the constant comparison method, each researcher compared various themes together from each interview group to generate final themes from the data. The most prevalent themes identified were chosen and categorized into final themes, then compared to existing findings in the research
literature. The comparison method was used to increase the inter-rater reliability for the study. In addition, the researchers used the quantitative method to compare how frequently themes were discussed between the two offices to generate an overall percentage of a specific theme. Furthermore, the quantitative method was used to determine the distribution of the years of experience for the social workers in each office.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

All participation in this research was voluntary and refusal to participate involved no penalty. Participants were able to withdraw their participation at any time during the interview. Participants’ names were confidential. All identifying information is not directly associated with any information obtained from the participant. The agency and office locations are not named in an effort to further protect the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. A master list of participants was kept under lock and key and only available to the researchers during the processes of data collection and data analysis. This mater list was destroyed after the data analysis was complete.

All participants were given the above information via consent form and were given the opportunity to raise any concerns or questions to the researchers. All participants agreed to the terms of the study and signed the consent form prior to the interview. The protocol for the protection of human subjects was submitted and approved by the Office of Research Administration of California State University, Sacramento as minimal risk on December 1, 2011.
Chapter 4

STUDY FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The researchers examined the perspectives of social workers regarding burnout and occupational stress with the goal of establishing best practices for retention of child welfare social workers in rural agencies. Current and past social workers from the targeted child welfare agency in El Dorado County were interviewed. The study included participants from both office locations in the child welfare agency, which were Office A and Office B. The interviewers asked participants about their perception of burnout, what occupational stress might contribute to the rate of turnover in this agency, and what agency support is available to promote retention of social workers.

Demographics of the Participants

The study consisted of a total of 12 participants who took part in a semi-structured interview process. Of the 12 participants, 11 were female and one was male. The majority of the participants were Masters level social workers: six participants had a Masters of Social Work, three participants had a Master’s degree in a related field, and three had a Bachelor’s degree in social work or a related field. The participants reflected a variety of years of experience in the social work field, in a range of 3-23 years. The average number of years of experience as a social worker was 12.44 years.

To better assess the turnover rate specific to the agency, participants were also asked how many years of experience they had working in Office A and Office B. From Office A, seven social workers participated in the study. Their years of experience
working for the agency ranged from six months to seven years; the average number of years was 3.48 years. In Office B, five social workers participated in the study. Their years of experience ranged from three years to 19 years; the average numbers of years was 8.25 years. Refer to Table 1 for the distribution of the participants’ years of experience in Office A. Refer to Table 2 for the distribution of the participants’ years of experience in Office B.

Table 1

*Distribution of Participants’ Years of Experience in the Office A*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Total Years of Experience as a Social Worker</th>
<th>Years of Experience as a Social Worker in the targeted agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>18 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>16 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>1 year, 8 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>6 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>9 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>7 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td><strong>11.63 years</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.48 years</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Distribution of Participants’ Years of Experience in Office B

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Total Years of Experience as a Social Worker</th>
<th>Years of Experience as a Social Worker in the targeted agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>13.25</td>
<td>8.25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of their employment with the agency, all the participants were considered to be working within a rural community and exposed to challenges commonly found in rural areas. Of specific concern to the social workers of the targeted agency were the challenges of dual roles in the community, geographic isolation, and limited resources, which could have interfered with their ability to process burnout and occupational stress. This study increases the understanding of turnover and retention and promotes knowledge about best practices to improve retention of social workers in rural communities.

**Data Analysis**

In this qualitative study, the data gained from the 12 interviews were reviewed by the researchers and common themes were extracted with the purpose of defining
similarities and differences between the two office locations. This process was done by each researcher independent of the other researcher. Each researcher organized the data to find patterns in themes. Using the comparison method, each researcher compared various themes together to generate final themes from the data. The comparison method was used to increase the inter-rater reliability for the study. In addition, the researchers used the quantitative method to compare how frequently themes were discussed between the two offices to generate an overall percentage of a specific theme. Furthermore, statistical summary was used to describe the years of experience for the social workers in each office.

**Study Findings**

The data analysis demonstrated multiple themes in regard to the social workers’ perceptions of burnout, occupational stress, and agency support. Across both Office A and Office B, burnout and occupational stress were perceived similarly and are discussed together. However, in regard to agency support and causes of turnover versus retention, themes were similar within the offices but different between the two office locations. Therefore, these themes are discussed in relation to the specific office location.

**Perception of Burnout**

The emergent theme regarding burnout was that it was perceived as emotional exhaustion. Specifically, the participants described feelings of ineffectiveness, a loss of ability to have an empathetic understanding with their clients, and feelings of helplessness. In describing emotional exhaustion within the work environment, one
participant reported, “that there is no support among co-workers and you find people getting angry with each other over the small stuff because we cannot regulate our own emotions.” Another respondent reported, “that you get so use to the high stress and emotional turmoil that this chaotic environment becomes the new norm and becomes a learned response.”

The participants related that feelings of ineffectiveness were caused by unrealistic job expectations and a punitive management style. One participant reported feelings of burnout were associated with “lack of clear guidance.” One participant also reported, “that the lack of clear expectations sets you up for feeling emotionally exhausted and then you feel like you cannot do your job.” Furthermore, one participant reflected on his current work environment and reported, “there is no morale enhancement or appreciation for the work that I do.” This caused the social workers to operate under high levels of stress as they struggled to meet impractical deadlines and had a constant fear of the inevitable consequence they would endure.

The participants reported a perception that when the social workers suffered from a loss of empathetic understanding, it stemmed from an inability to become emotionally vulnerable due to the incredibly high stress and high-conflict work environment. The inability to be engaged in empathetic understanding interferes with the social worker’s ability to build a positive therapeutic alliance with their clients, which is often the catalyst for change. One participant reported feeling “unable to connect with their clients.”
Another participant reported, “you get to a point where you cannot put yourself out there anymore as you just move from one crisis to the next and you don’t have time to cope.”

The participants also reported that as the work load in these offices are so high, the social workers felt directed by their management to focus more on paperwork and deadlines as opposed to effectively working with children and families. One participant reported, “the overload of cases is so great that you cannot do quality social work.” This incongruency created a sense of helplessness and ineffectiveness because social workers felt pressured to meet the needs of the agency to the detriment of their clients. This created a sense of disillusionment in the social workers as most social workers enter the field of social work with a desire to serve their clients and communities, not their agency.

In these offices, the development of burnout among the workers is possibly a reaction to the negative work environment rather than the high stress nature of the job. One participant reported that caseloads are so high “they feel they cannot catch their breath.” Another participant reported, “there were not enough social worker to do the work as you want to do all the work but cannot and then you feel helpless.” These research findings are in many ways consistent with the social work literature, indicating burnout is characterized by emotional exhaustion and commonly caused by dysfunctional work environments, similar to the occupational stress described by the participants (Maslach, 2003; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2009).
Table 3

*Themes Regarding Burnout According to Office Location*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes regarding burnout</th>
<th>Office A</th>
<th>Office B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Burnout perceived as emotional exhaustion</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Burnout perceived as feelings of ineffectiveness</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Burnout perceived as a loss of empathetic understanding</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Burnout perceived as feelings of helplessness</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perception of Occupational Stress

**High caseloads.** The occupational stress in the agency was perceived as high caseloads, inadequate supervision and training, and a high-conflict work environment, specifically a punitive management style. The participants recognized that high caseloads are systemic in child welfare; however, these participants believed the occupational stress and high turnover rate specific to the agency made their high caseloads more difficult to manage. Specifically, their caseloads were not stable due to turnover. Every time a social worker left the agency, the workload was distributed among the remaining workers. Once a new social worker was hired, caseloads shifted again. Considering the average length of employment for participants in Office A was less than 3.5 years, the constant shift in cases in conjunction with the high caseload negatively affected the agency, the social workers, and the clients served. For example,
one participant expressed feelings of helplessness regarding a home visit with a teenage male who greeted her with “I see a new social worker every time” and proceeded to list the names of at least six other social workers he had had. This situation negatively affects the reputation the agency has in the community because it is viewed as ineffective, unstable, and uncaring. In addition, the social worker and the client feel undervalued as people, and their ability to develop rapport is greatly hindered every time a case is transferred.

**Quality of supervision.** As mentioned above, high caseloads and high stress are systemic problems in Child Welfare. The literature indicates quality supervision can mitigate these negative factors and provide a supportive work environment. For supervision to be considered quality, the supervisor must have an understanding of the expectations and demands of child welfare in addition to providing the social worker with clinical perspectives of the case, debriefing crisis situations, and addressing the emotional wellbeing of the social worker (Chen & Scannapieco, 2009; Westbrook et al., 2008). A predominate theme found in this study was a general lack of supervision. The participants indicated the supervision they did receive was inadequate because the supervisors solely focused on what happened, what to do next, and what the social worker failed to do. There was no sense of support and the interaction was described as a punitive process instead of a strengths-based process. As an example, one participant in Office A reported, “supervision is abusive and makes you feel inferior.” This lack of
supportive, helpful supervision further perpetuates feelings of ineffectiveness, helplessness, and burnout among the social workers.

**Quality of training.** Although training was not discussed by Office B participants in relation to occupational stress, participants from Office A discussed a lack of adequate training to orient new social workers. This could have been discussed primarily in this office because the perceived turnover rate is higher, which makes the lack of orientation training more apparent. For example, while discussing the high turnover rate in Office A, one participant reported, “I stopped counting at 106,” this was in reference to the amount of workers leaving. The overall theme discussed in regard to training was a lack of consistent training material, such as policy and procedural manuals, resource guides for the community, and guidance regarding how to best manage a caseload in which a new social worker was just introduced. For example, many participants discussed that new employees were introduced into a work environment without the basic tools to complete their job, such as a resource binder, computer or phone access, and password access to client databases. One participant relayed a drastically different experience in another county where the social workers were given regulations and policies to study prior to ever being assigned a case. In the targeted agency, it was not uncommon for a social worker to be considered the primary worker on a case her very first day on the job. This lack of guidance combined with a punitive management style can further increase the social workers’ feelings of ineffectiveness and helplessness.
**Management style.** The most significant theme discussed regarding occupational stress was a punitive management style. Ninety-two percent (n=11) of participants in both offices described the culture of the agency as punitive or fear-based as opposed to strengths-based. Some of the quotes from participants were “I’ve never seen management who hate their workers so much,” “it’s learned, if you go to the supervisor for help it gets used against you in the future,” “when there is a problem everyone wants to be involved but no one wants to do the work and they demand that the social worker gets the work done in their time frame and when it does not get done you get criticized for it,” and “we’re just warm bodies in a chair.” Seventy-five percent (n=9) of the participants specifically reported they had never received praised from management. This is an example of a high-conflict work environment as participants expressed the conflict is not among their clients or peers; it lies within the interactions between line staff and management.

The literature reflects that organizational culture influences the social workers’ intentions to remain employed in the agency (Ellett, 2008; Faller et al., 2009; Kenny & Cooper, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the social workers in Office A report a negative relationship with the agency. With this said, the participants from Office B reported the same negative relationship with management style even though there is a significantly lower turnover rate. This study found the participants perceived occupational stress as the main factor influencing the high turnover rate of Office A rather than feelings of burnout.
Table 4

*Themes Regarding Occupational Stress According to Office Location*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes regarding occupational stress</th>
<th>Office A</th>
<th>Office B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Occupational stress perceived as high case loads</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Occupational stress perceived as ineffective supervision</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Occupational stress perceived as ineffective training</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Occupational stress perceived as resulting from management style</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Agency support.** Agency support was perceived differently between the offices. In both offices, the participants reported the most significant source of support was peer support. The general feeling reported was that co-workers took time to provide emotional and practical support regardless of their own job pressures and responsibilities. The participants made the distinction that the support felt between the co-workers was produced solely by the social workers themselves and in no way was facilitated or encouraged by the agency. When asked what type of agency support was offered, the majority of participants simply responded with “none.” Upon further exploration of the topic, 58% of participants reported the agency offered an Employee Assistance program. However, most of those participants reported negative feelings associated toward it. For example, it was described as ineffective, not confidential from management, and used as
a punishment instead of a support. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, this program was not considered to be perceived as a positive support by the social workers.

There was one difference reported between the two office locations in regard to perceived agency support. In Office A, the only support mentioned was the peer support offered through co-workers. However, the majority of the participants from Office B reported feeling supported by their immediate supervisor. The participants described the supervisor as being readily available, valuing the employees, and providing emotional support. This supervisor was not described as punitive or as directive focused, which were the only descriptions given to the supervisors in Office A.
Table 5

*Themes Regarding Agency Support According to Office Location*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes regarding agency support</th>
<th>Office A</th>
<th>Office B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Agency support perceived as peer support</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Agency support perceived as an EAP program</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Agency support perceived as an emotionally supportive supervisor</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Turnover as Discussed by Office Location**

In regard to what contributes to turnover in the offices, the responses were different depending on the office location. The participants from Office A reported people leave the agency because of the high-conflict work environment and because there are better job opportunities in surrounding areas. For example, neighboring counties pay more than the agency. Office B participants reported people also leave because of the high-conflict work environment, but most people stay because the pay and benefits are better than other opportunities. This could be due to the geographic isolation of Office B because it limits the social workers from pursuing employment in neighboring counties. Instead, most of the other social work opportunities in Office B are in non-profit work, and the participants reported the lower pay and loss of benefits are reasons why people stay employed by the county. Many of the participants from Office B discussed the good benefit program through the county as a reason for continued employment regardless of
pay. This was not discussed at all by social workers in Office A. This might be attributed to the fact that Office A social workers have access to other government job opportunities because of their proximity to neighboring counties, which often recognize the same benefit program as the agency.

Participants in both offices reported the geographical distance between the two office locations creates a buffer for Office B social workers. Eighty-five percent of the management positions in the target agency are located in Office A. This creates a top-down leadership style in which social workers feel micromanaged and placed in a rigid structure due to the higher percentage of management positions. The participants in both offices reported the social workers in Office B have less dealings with management, which decreases how affected they are by the high conflict interactions.

**Discussions**

The interviews shed light on the dynamics of burnout, occupational stress, and agency support as they relate to the turnover rate in rural communities. The themes presented in the interviews of social workers from Office A and Office B were that burnout is perceived as mostly emotional exhaustion, occupational stress is perceived as being mostly caused by high caseloads and a high-conflict work environment, and the perceived agency support is little to none.

**Differences Between Office Locations**

There were some themes that highlighted differences between the two office locations, including the perception of occupational stress, the perception of agency
support offered, and the incentives to stay employed with the county. For specific findings, please refer to Tables 3-5. With regard to occupational stress, the social workers in both offices agreed the geographical distance between Office B and most of the managers served as a protective factor for Office B social workers because they were exposed to the punitiveness of their leaders less often. As for agency support, the social workers from Office B reported feeling supported, valued, and understood by their immediate supervisor. This supportive relationship with a middle management figure seemed to mitigate some of the negativity felt by the social workers regarding the upper management. Finally, the social workers in Office B perceived fewer job opportunities in their area that would provide them with comparable pay and benefits, which also decreased their desire to quit. In summary, the decreased exposure to punitive leadership styles, the addition of a supportive leadership role, and limited job opportunities were the emergent themes regarding why Office B has been able to sustain a stable work force in the midst of such a high-conflict work environment and high levels of burnout across the county.

**Importance of Leadership and Management Style**

The themes relating to management style and leadership are also significant to the field of social work, as the change process is often linked with individual values, beliefs, and the organization in which they practice (Morgan, 1996). The high conflict work environment can stem from a discrepancy in personal and organizational values. Direct management style and business knowledge is correlated with societal changes and social
practices. The primary change in organizational culture took place through the development of Max Weber's bureaucracy theory outlining that management needs to have a distinctive structure and method for applying rules to organizations (Chan & Clegg, 2002). A reemergence of this theory became popular in the 1970s as this theory discussed establishing an organizational culture that valued hierarchy in offices, clear specified job functions, and rules governing decisions and actions. One primary limitation for this theory is its ineffectiveness due to mismanagement as an organization is built upon people, not upon rules. The theory did not emphasize the value of people who comprised the workforce, rather the value was placed on the product and value of leadership in high ranks (Chan & Clegg, 2002).

The Human Relations Theory was the next shift in organizational culture as the focus shifted from the company to its workers. Value was placed back on the employees as it was recognized managers need to encourage good communication with workers and establish a connection with their workers. When this occurred productivity increased as the value shifted to the person. When an organization values its workers, it was found they worked harder to produce optimal output and change as there is an emotional investment in the outcome and the agency (Olsen, 2008).

**Organizational Culture**

The next change in organizational culture came from the views of Tom Peters and Robert Waterman who wanted to prove how crucial people were to business success in their publication "In Search of Excellence" (Olsen, 2008). The essential part of their
message was that people, customers, and action are the driving forces for organization, and management needs to place high value on these elements. Furthermore, change within society and organizations is a natural process and is the best way to serve economic change (Olsen, 2008). Organizations do not need to be afraid of change but instead view change as a positive and natural process that allows the organization to serve its workers and the community. These theories are key to understanding organizational culture and management style as these concepts are fluid. Although these theories are generated out of business models, the key elements are filled with social work values.

The findings from the interviews suggest an incongruity in organizational culture and management style in the targeted agency due to a shift in value systems. For the agency to have a truly positive shift, the leadership and front line staff need to reach homeostasis and continuity in values. With a positive change in organizational culture and a reemergence in values placed on the workers, the affects of burnout and occupational stress may be lessened. Furthermore, the agency would be better equipped to provide support to social workers as it would truly understand what type of support is needed and most valued.

**Rural Communities**

One challenge often discussed in relation to rural communities is the need for social workers to play more than one professional role. This can be seen as a challenge in the sense that it may increase job demands and create a need for further training and guidance for the social worker. However, this can also be viewed as a strength because it
allows social workers to have more diverse caseloads which can decrease feelings of monotony. It also provides opportunities for professional growth that might not be offered as readily in urban settings (Bourke, Humphreys, Wakeman, & Taylor, 2010).

Another strength of rural communities is that the community members and other community service organizations are typically very involved in the well-being of the population (Bourke et al., 2010). This creates opportunities for community organizing focusing on a shared sense of obligation toward the community members. Finally, rural communities are full of opportunities to gain and use social capital (Bourke et al.; Gillespie, 2009). These extra layers of support and sense of shared purpose can assist social workers in managing burnout and occupational stress in healthy ways to promote retention.

**Summary**

In summary, the findings suggest the social workers in both agency locations suffer from burnout and occupational stress. However, Office B social workers benefit from a supportive immediate supervisor and geographical distance from upper management. These dynamics serve as a protective factor, which lessens the impact of occupational stress. This is in congruence with the perception among social workers who report Office B has a decreased turnover rate.

These findings are significant to the field of social work in general because high turnover rates will negatively impact any human service agency (Anderson, 2000), and information regarding how to increase the rate of retention among social workers can be
applied in many different areas. However, these findings will specifically assist rural agencies in knowing how they can best support their social workers regardless of the rural challenges they face. In fact, although there are many challenges unique to rural communities, there are also strengths that can be drawn upon to further support social workers as they work through feelings of burnout and occupational stress so as to ultimately increase the rate of retention. For example, in rural communities, social workers tend to work with clients and families for longer periods of time (Bourke et al., 2010). By allowing one social worker to work with a family for a long period of time, there is a greater opportunity to build positive rapport with the clients, fully understand their challenges, learn how to best work with them, and stay involved long enough to celebrate positive change. Through this study, participants reported that constantly fluctuating caseloads contributed to their feelings of burnout and perception of occupational stress. However, if the inherent strength of rural communities to allow lengthy relationships between social workers and families was harnessed and used as a strength within rural agencies, it could assist in mitigating the effects of burnout and occupational stress.
This research project examined the perceptions of social workers regarding social worker burnout and occupational stress in rural communities. The purpose of the study was to establish best practices for rural agencies to promote retention among social workers. For the purposes of this study, social workers from two office locations in the targeted agency were interviewed about their perceptions of burnout, occupational stress, agency support, and the turnover rate in their office. The study findings were unique to this county; however, they can be generalized to other rural human service agencies.

The study findings suggest that although child welfare is plagued with burnout and occupational stress, the support within the agency can mitigate the inevitable affects of burnout and occupational stress from leading to turnover. Office B showed a significant increase in total years of experiences within the agency and a decrease rate in turnover. The only significant difference found in this study between the two office locations is the direct emotional support from an immediate supervisor. The emotional support received in Office B were words of encouragement from the immediate supervisor reinforcing a feeling the social workers were valued and doing a job well done. This single act of encouragement was not expressed from Office A social workers. In direct contrast to the experience reported by Office B social workers, Office A social workers reported they received no agency support. Due to the fact that no agency support
was received by these social workers, the findings reflect the type of support they would like to receive.

The requested support from Office A social workers was quality supervision in the form of clinical supervision. It was expressed by Office A social workers that they would like to receive emotional support from management through debriefing and processing of feelings felt by the social workers in relation to experiences in the field rather than receiving a list of what to do next. In addition, Office A social workers expressed an increase in trainings and training material for new employees. This could be due to the fact that Office A experienced a significant amount of turnover.

According to a review of the literature, the field of child welfare is no stranger to systemic high turnover rate and feelings related to burnout and occupational stress (Anderson, 2000; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003). With this said, these concepts may be a common theme for child welfare, but they are amplified in rural communities due to the lack of resources, geographic isolation, and unavoidable dual relationships (Catalano, 1997; Gumpert & Saltman, 1999). The study findings indicate that although social workers in rural communities may have fewer resources outside their agency, support offered within the agency can be sufficient to alleviate the effects of burnout and occupational stress, therefore increasing retention rates. Based on this finding, the recommendation for rural agencies who desire to increase retention rates is to provide emotional and clinical support to address the needs of the social workers on a consistent basis.
The second recommendation addresses the need for an organizational culture reflecting a bottom-up management style. This refers to a management style that values and encourages input from all levels within an organization, especially the line workers. Not only would the social workers provide input about the standards of practice with clients and the community, but they would also provide input into the inner workings of the agency itself. For example, the social workers would even have influence over what agency support was provided to the social workers. The benefit of this type of management style became apparent through this study by the fact that the majority of the social workers interviewed knew what needed to change in the organization to increase retention but felt this information was falling onto deaf ears.

The participants reported during this study they needed more quality supervision and a change in management style toward a more strengths-based model. In this specific agency, if the management was able to effectively elicit this feedback from the social workers on what was needed to improve retention among fellow workers and effectively implement these specific changes, the overall retention may have improved. These recommendations speak to the larger goal of placing value back on the social workers so they become an appreciated integral force within the agency. It also recognizes that, in general, people know what they need. If an organization wants to change something within the agency, the best place to start is by listening to the staff. Although these findings are specific to only one rural county, the simple recommendation of eliciting
information and feedback from the social workers themselves can be generalized to other rural communities.

It is important to note that support from an effective immediate supervisor and eliciting feedback from social workers can be generalized to both rural and urban settings. It is important to distinguish that these two elements are of significant importance to rural communities. Due to geographic isolation and the increased rate of dual relationships, rural social workers have a limited ability and opportunity to seek out support or consultation outside their rural community. Due to geographic isolation, community resources such as counseling services are with the same community providers with whom social workers collaborate to jointly serve clients. This creates a situation where you seek out advice from a therapist based on case consultation and personal consultation; therefore, a dual relationship is established. Furthermore, due to geographic isolation, the opportunity to seek counseling from neighboring communities is limited. In addition, the severe weather conditions add another component to isolation. This creates a situation in which the social worker is unable to seek out therapeutic consultation due to either having a pre-established professional relationship with the service provider or due to the distance between home of residence and location of business. Therefore, the only source of support received and the only opportunity to seek consultation is from an immediate supervisor.
Implications for Social Work

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers suggest best practice for promoting retention among rural child welfare agencies should be providing emotional support, quality supervision, and a bottom-up management style. A bottom-up management style would include an organizational culture in which the social workers were empowered to be involved in the development of the agency’s vision, structure, and standards of practice. This type of involvement from the social workers allows for a mirroring effect between the organization’s culture created through leadership and the culture formed within the agency by the social workers. For this to occur, the agency must provide the social workers with a platform from which to voice their opinions, and the social workers need to feel safe and supported while doing it. Decisions should be made in a democratic fashion whenever possible, allowing the social workers to feel ownership of the agency and its mission, thereby encouraging them to use their practice wisdom, training, and desire to succeed in a way that will ultimately benefit the agency as a whole.

This approach to management embodies the strengths perspective as both management and social workers are asked to find strengths within the agency's mission and within themselves. This can serve as an acknowledgement that organizations are in a continuous state of development as the agency needs to appropriately respond to the climate of the community just as social workers need to respond to the needs of their clients. With this said, the agency needs to pay particular attention to the working
environment as reflected by the actions and behaviors of the social workers. In utilizing a bottom-up management style, the agency is creating a shared value system and a sense of shared organizational culture. The newly created professional culture reflects both personal and organizational characteristics, therefore, influencing a social workers intention to remain employed with an agency. While these aspects would be helpful for agencies regardless of their rural or urban settings, they become increasingly significant to agencies in rural areas as the social workers do not have avenues aside from their own agency from which they might receive support. Therefore, rural agencies are challenged with being the sole provider of support, encouragement, and guidance to their social workers, which will promote retention rates if done effectively.

These recommendations on how to improve retention rates among social workers in rural areas has significant implications for the social work field in general, even beyond child welfare. Social workers in all human service agencies work with various degrees of secondary trauma, frequent crisis situations, and limited funding. Burnout and occupational stress are common stressors that find their way into these agencies and can diminish the empathic understanding social workers strive to have. If the strategies for promoting retention found through this study were utilized in any human service agency, the end result would be a balanced value system between the agency, the social workers, and the community they serve. A human service agency with a bottom-up management style, filled with passionate, supported social workers creates the best scenario for the agency to effectively meet the needs of the community.
Evaluation and Conclusion

One beneficial element to this research was the data collection process. A semi-structured interview was used as opposed to the more common data collection tool, a survey questionnaire. The interview process allowed the social workers to elaborate on the emotional concepts discussed, such as burnout, occupational stress, and agency support. This created a unique opportunity in which the researchers were able to ask follow-up questions. This process allowed the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ perceptions, which would not have been possible through a questionnaire format. Additionally, this format was conducive to generating more in-depth recommendations on how the social workers themselves would address retention in their own agency, given the chance.

These research findings are significant to increasing the retention of social workers throughout the field; however, more research is needed in this area. The researchers suggest future studies on retention utilize a larger sample of social workers. Furthermore, a larger sample size would elicit social workers from neighboring rural counties. A larger sample size may generate more themes relevant to burnout, occupational stress, and agency support that were not discussed in this research study. Furthermore, a comparison to urban county retention methods is needed to determine what, if any, differences are contributed to rural characteristics.

This study did not differentiate between educational levels of the social workers interviewed. In review of the data, the researchers became aware of a noticeable
difference in the language used and the insight provided to describe concepts and feelings from the social workers dependent on their level of education. Participants with a Masters in Social Work consistently referred to strength-based approaches and acknowledged the importance of quality supervision. Furthermore, these participants differentiated case supervision from clinical supervision. Although this was seen consistently among all Masters level social workers, the participants with Bachelor’s level degrees or degrees in related fields did not use similar language and did not understand the benefits from having quality clinical supervision. In future studies, the researchers recommend categorizing participants according to their educational background. This is needed to promote continuity among the participants and future research findings. Future research topics could include further exploration into the dynamics between rural characteristics and the need for more effective training, supervision, and management of caseload distribution. A larger sample size from surrounding rural child welfare agencies could shed light on why these common child welfare issues are impacted by rural characteristics.
APPENDIX

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

A Rural County’s Best Practice to Address Burnout and Occupational Stress Among Child Welfare Workers

I, ________________________________ have been asked to participate in a thesis research study conducted by Malinda Juhl and Megan Ciampa.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to determine social workers perspectives and emerging themes associated with best practices for Burnout and Occupational Stress in rural communities.

Duration and Location: The participant understands the study will take about 60 minutes and the location will be at the discretion of the participant in order to increase anonymity and comfort.

Procedures: The participant will be asked to answer questions about their perception of social and psychological well-being and employment expectations of child welfare social workers. The participant will also be asked to submit to an audio recording during the interview process; this submission is dependent on the participants level of comfort.

Risks/Discomforts: There should be minimal risk or discomfort to the participant as the nature of the questions are eliciting opinion, perception, and perspectives of the participant. Furthermore, the participant's response and level of comfort when asked to submit to the audio recording will be documented. If any discomfort is experienced by the participant, they will be referred to El Dorado County Mental Health, locations at 1900 Lake Tahoe Boulevard; South Lake Tahoe, Ca 96150, (530) 573-3251 or 670 Placerville Drive, Suite 1B Placerville, CA 95667, (530) 621-6290. If an out of county referral is preferred, participants will be referred to Adults Systems of Care, 101 Cirby Hills Drive, Roseville, Ca 95678, (916) 787-8800.

Benefits: The Participant understands that the benefits from participating in this study may help researchers and those involved in social work better understand the best practices for promoting well-being, reducing burn out and mitigating occupational stress.

Confidentiality: The Participant understands that a code number will be used to identify all responses from those of other participants and that the name, address, and any other identifying information will not be directly associated with any information obtained from the participant. All collected data will be treated as confidential information and
will be kept under lock and key. Incentives: The Participant will be given a $5.00 gift card as a token of appreciation of their time and cooperation.

Right to Withdraw: The Participant understands that they do not have to take part in this study and they can refuse to answer any of the questions. The Participant may withdraw from the study at any time with no questions asked.

Signatures: I have read this consent form and understand my rights as a research subject. I acknowledge that my participation in this research is voluntary. I have been informed that I will receive a copy of this consent form should questions arise and I may contact the researchers at [redacted] or their thesis advisor Dr. Yuen at California State University, Sacramento (916) 278-7182.

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Research Subject             Date

____________________________________  ______________________
Signature of Researcher                  Date
REFERENCES


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