

Methodology development

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to examine the factors contributing to the high turnover rates of child welfare workers in the State of Louisiana Child Welfare agencies. According to a study by Stole (2016), high turnover rates are common within the United States. However, considering the case of Louisiana, there has been a steady increase in turnover rates. This study drew on the experiences of 12 social workers, with a Master's of Social Work, who are currently, or had been, employed in a Louisiana state child welfare agency. These social workers contributed to the research by taking part in interviews conducted for the purpose of identifying contributing factors of the high turnover rates.. During these interviews, they provided information on their role within the welfare industry, the duration they have been working in the field, the type of training they received to be competent in their role, their views on the rates of turnover, challenges experienced while working, relationships with the agency and co-workers, and recommendations on how to improve the child welfare working conditions. These discussions uncovered both personal and agency factors that lead employees to decide to leave work and also led to the discovery of recommendations to reduce, and if possible, eliminate the high turnover rates within the state.

Research Design

A participatory action research (PAR) approach was employed to examine the factors contributing to the turnover rates within Louisiana child welfare agencies. PAR was chosen for this study since it encompasses identification of a problem and a collaborative effort, on the part of the researcher and the participants, to establish an action plan for mitigating the issue being examined (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The study participants in the research were given the opportunity, through individual interviews, to share their opinions and experiences regarding high turnover rates in the Louisiana child welfare profession.

A qualitative research design was employed to analyze the data from the individual interviews, along with archival, and research field journal data. The use of these three data sources allowed for data triangulation to support the validity of findings, as recommended by Craig (2009). These research tools also assisted in providing insight into the answer for the study's overarching question: "what workplace supports are needed to improve child welfare social worker retention rates within Louisiana state child welfare organizations?"

The interviews were carried out in a public place or else utilizing an electronic meeting format. The use of open-ended questions fostered the sense of free conversation which has been found to be effective in encouraging participants to be at ease and elaborative in nature due the data collection procedure (Craig, 2009). The setting of the interviews provided the participants with the freedom to spontaneously express themselves without fearing retribution (Craig, 2009).

Target Population and Participant Selection

The participant population targeted for this study was Master's level social workers who are currently, or had been, employed in a Louisiana state child welfare agency. for a period of at least one year while providing direct practice to families. Recruitment of participants was achieved using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Following recruitment procedures, those interested in participating were asked additional questions for determining their appropriateness for the study or rather, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied.

Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria consisted of two conditions:

- Only professionals who had previously been, or were currently, employed with a child welfare agency in Louisiana for at least one full year providing direct practice to families were selected
- Participants had to have earned a Master's of Social Work degree from an accredited university

Exclusion criteria

- Being presently considered, or previously having been considered, not in good standing with a Louisiana child welfare agency

Since the study's recruitment target was 12 participants, the names of all potential participants were put in a container and 12 names were drawn. The remaining potential participants were notified that their names would be kept and considered for alternates should the need arise, though utilizing an alternate was not necessary. The selected participants were emailed the consent forms and requested to sign and return them in person at the interviews.

Despite that the chosen sample was small, the information gathered was rich and meaningful. Mason and Evans (2019) stated that saturation is a guiding factor in knowing the number of persons is sufficient to conclude the study. Since there were many similarities between the responses provided by the different participants, the sample could be ascertained to have been sufficient, as it attained saturation. Saturation is met when common themes are found among all research participants' responses. Going beyond this point might be, what Mason and Evans refer to as, "the point of diminishing return" (2019, p. 2).

Procedures

After having received dissertation topic approval and approval of the dissertation research plan, the study was conducted with the permission of the Capella University Institutional Review Board. The first major procedure was recruitment and selection of the participant sample.

Recruitment of participants was completed using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. First, purposive sampling was employed whereby past and current child welfare co-workers, known by the researcher, were provided a flyer, in person, containing key points of the study, purpose of the research, and researcher contact information. The second phase of recruitment relied on snowball sampling to allow potential participants, contacted through purposive sampling, to refer other potential participants by sharing the researcher's contact information.

Interested participants, after initially contacting the researcher, were followed up with via email, receiving consent forms and explanations about the purpose of the study, the data collection method, and to what end the data were to be used. They were provided the opportunity to ask any questions pertaining to the study. All potential participants were given one week to consider the study and to contact the researcher with their decision about being further considered for the study.

After acknowledging interest in being considered for the study, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied and any participants not meeting the inclusion criteria were eliminated. A total of 20 individuals indicated interest in participating in the individual interview process. Three of those individuals were excluded due to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, leaving 17 potential participants. Since the recruitment target was 12 participants, the 17 names of those interested, and who met inclusion criteria, were placed in a container and 12 were selected for interviews. The others were notified that, although not currently chosen as an interviewee, their names would be held aside as potential alternates if needed. Thereafter, arrangements were made for the interviews.

Participant interviews began in December 30th, 2018 and were completed in January 6th, 2019. The individual interviews were carried out in one of two formats: face-to-face or GoToMeeting video conferencing, depending on the need of the participant. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a local library, utilizing a study room for privacy, within the locality of the participant's residence. The participant interviews were informal and unstructured. The interviews were guided by seven open ended questions (Appendix A) that were posed in a manner that allowed room for additional questions by both the participants and the researcher.

Questions asked during the interview consisted of leading questions, recall questions, and probing questions. The participants were encouraged to share their perceptions, beliefs, experiences, and ideas regarding the high turnover rates within child welfare agencies in Louisiana. Additionally, they were allowed to provide suggestions on how to improve the working conditions for the purposes of lowering the rates of employee turnover. The interviews, lasting for a period of 60-90 minutes each, were digitally recorded and then transcribed.

The use of interviews was suitable for this study as the interview has been found to be an integral tool for social workers. Stringer & Dwyer (2015) stated that interviews are an important and common facet among social workers since they use interviews in the course of developing case materials, formulating

assessments, and planning interventions. While preserving the identity of the interviewees, it was necessary to ensure their responses could be differentiated. Consequently, the interview participants were recorded as participant A, B, C, . . . and L., codes which were used in the analysis and reporting phases.

Transcripts of interviews were sent to participants for member checking via email. Brit, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016), report that member checking entails the process of allowing the participants to review their responses or rather, data, that will be analyzed to ascertain that the reports of their experiences are accurately recorded and are nothing far from what they reported. Participants were given the chance to notify the researcher, via email, if there was any data that required clarification or correction. However, no participant saw a need for amendment to the transcribed data.

You need to make a statement or two about the analysis—thematic analysis?? Also mention how you achieved triangulation of the data.

At the study's completion, participants were contacted via email with the research findings. They were then asked to review the findings for respondent validation and were instructed to email any needed corrections back to the researcher. Data analysis was continuous from December 30th, 2018 through DAY OF PRESENTING DATA.

Instruments

The primary source of qualitative data were individual interviews. Before beginning the data collection process, the interview questionnaire (see Appendix A) was submitted for review by three field testers who are social workers in the field of child welfare:

- Fielder tester 1: Family case manager, 7 years' experience in child welfare and social work
- Field tester 2: Behavioral counselor with Doctorate's in Behavioral Psychology and 15 years' experience in child cases
- Field tester 3: Social service assistant with 5 years' experience in child welfare and family conflict

These reviewers provided constructive feedback by assisting the researcher to develop the most effective questions for collecting appropriate data for the research questions. The seven interview questions were as follows:

1. What is your role in the child welfare industry and how long have you held that position?
2. What type of training did you receive that you considered to be adequate in providing you with the knowledge to be successful in the field? What did you appreciate most about the training? What was lacking from that training?
3. What do you perceive the turnover rate to be at your agency, and how do you think it could be improved?
4. Describe a time when you thought about leaving, or attempted to leave, your position. What are the top 3 things that keep you working at this position?

5. What are some of the unrealistic expectations set for you as a frontline worker?
6. How would you describe the support you received from coworkers, supervisors, or administrators? If you do not receive support, what do you need from these three systems at your agency?
7. Are there any supports that would make this position easier to manage? If yes, what are they?

Interviews were conducted either in person at a local library near the participant's residence or via GoToMeeting video conferencing, lasting 60-90 minutes. After being transcribed, transcriptions were sent to the participants via email for member checking. After returning the transcripts to the researcher, any needed corrections were made. The interview data were thematically analyzed.

Field journals were also used as another source of qualitative data while conducting the study. The field journal was employed to record observational and planning notes, reflective thought processes, and concerns regarding the research process (Craig, 2009). Moreover, they were used as a point of reference as questions came up and the researcher drew answers from the journals that had been collected over time. Information within the field journals was also significant as it provided additional richness and meaning to the interview data. Meyer (2001) describes the field journals as a valuable and highly readable method used in research where the researcher has the freedom to acknowledge important findings in research. This study's field journals were employed to show the common themes developed in the research questions, nonverbal observations not captured in the audio recordings, and additional comments developed by the structured interview questions. The analysis process incorporated these comments as rejoinders to the interview responses to perpetuate the progression of the findings.

The third type of qualitative data for the study was drawn from archival data that was retrieved from Louisiana state records, such as Louisiana Department of Children & Family Services information. This information was used to assist in putting child welfare worker turnover, and the consequences of turnover, into context, such as how the change in workers has affected the children and families served over time. The data also provided historical information to which there would be no other access. Child welfare agency annual reports for the last two years, websites with information specific to the last three years, and information from staff turnover and retention workgroups completed in odd years were all archived informational sources that were examined as well.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The overarching research question for this study was, "what workplace supports are needed to improve child welfare social worker retention rates within Louisiana state child welfare organizations?" The goal of this research was to identify factors leading to high turnover rates among Louisiana child welfare workers and to identify methods by which these factors might be reduced so that children and families receive consistent and adequate services.

Sub-questions for this study included:

- What do social workers perceive as the reason(s) for worker turnover?
 - a. To determine the main reason social workers give as the basis for high turnover rates
 - b. To assess the influence of work conditions on the occurrence of turnover
- What do the workers perceive as necessary workplace supports to increase their well-being, job satisfaction, and length of stay in their position?
 - a. To determine the presence of necessary supports for workers towards the reduction of turnover
 - b. To identify the possible forms of supports that can effectively reduce employee turnover in this context

Data Analysis

Following transcription of the interviews, winnowing was used to identify suitable data for inclusion. In order to validate the reliability of the gathered data, coding, sorting and sifting was employed. The researcher used thematic analysis, as it was found to be the most suitable technique. First, initial codes were generated by systematically collecting data to fit into perspective data sets. The next phase involved the grouping of the codes according to their similarities, allowing the consequent gathering of data in the form of potential themes. After all the data had been grouped, the themes were reviewed to ensure that they fit as intended in the context of the whole data set and thematic map. The themes were then named and included in the ongoing analysis for purposes of refining the specifics of themes and the overall story that the themes were intended to tell. This phase also helped in generating a clear definition for each theme. The last phase of interview data analysis incorporated producing the final report based on the themes. The data was securely stored in a locked box to keep them confidential. The raw notes from the initial interviews and the completed transcripts were all organized and secured.

Data from the field notes were used to triangulate the interview data and validate the data from alternative sources, such as the state records. Firsthand encounters with participants generated data through informal interviews, conversations, field notes, etc. The field notes described information not recorded in the audio. Non-observed items included nonverbal communications, facial expressions, and emotions noted as reactions to the interview questions. The data from the field journals were organized, managed, and analyzed through the same process as the data gathered from the interviews. During this study, the field journals, when not in use, were securely stored in a locked box for confidentiality. initial interviews and the completed transcripts were all organized and secured.

Archival data completed the triangulation of data for this project. All archival data was taken at face value and was not used outside of the context from which they were generated and gathered. Instead of being analyzed, the data was applied toward deepening the understanding of the phenomenon being studied. Archival data from Louisiana child welfare agencies was retrieved from different venues and in

varying formats. For instance, electronic data was retrieved from websites. Hard-copy data was retrieved from active files, and files in archive, from current and past organizational reports and documents pertaining to employer/employee concerns, the reassignment of cases, and other organizational issues. Archival data was significant in shedding light on the problem of turnover and related consequences, as well as assisting in setting the context for the study and its potential ramifications.

Ethical Considerations

There are typical ethical issues that manifest in the course of research, which may also be pertinent to the current study. Researchers should consider issues of confidentiality, security, and participant voluntary consent. Confidentiality requires that the researcher protects the identity of the participant, especially where their involvement could have negative implications for them (Mason & Evans, 2019). At the same time, the security of the participant and the data is important. Respondents to interviews should be protected from harm that could emanate from their location of interviewing or the choice time for the process. The researcher should also protect the data from harm in the course of storage and transfer. Finally, it is also important that the respondent understands the intent of the study and that they have no obligation to participate. This is alongside provisions for their right to withdraw from the research (Mason & Evans, 2019).

This study was low risk for harm and did not cause injury by physical, social, financial, or psychological factors to the participants. The researcher also ensured that participants were provided with all of the necessary information regarding the study in their informed consent, such as information on the study goals, research design, and expectations, in order to assist them in making an informed decision regarding their participation in the study. Also, anonymity and confidentiality were other key issues. The researcher guaranteed that the identity of the participants remained anonymous throughout the study by removing all personal identifiers in the course of data collection and data transcription.

Since the research was voluntary, the researcher had to seek consent from the participants. The consent form provided the participants with an understanding that their responses to interview questions would only be used for research purposes. The researcher also avoided any form of deceptive practice and there was no coercion for potential participants to volunteer. The participants were also given the right to withdraw at any time without any consequences.

Based on the researcher's position within the study, the researcher was considered as both an outsider in collaboration with insiders and, due to previous employment with a Louisiana child welfare agency, an insider. As a previous child welfare worker, the researcher had maintained relationships, resources, and connections with social workers who are insiders and who were considered potential interviewees. Instead of causing an ethical issue, the researcher's position in the study was used to put

at ease. By understanding the work stressors, through first-hand experience, potentially resulting in turnover, or as a consequence of turnover, the researcher had the ability to empathize with those being interviewed.

Expected Findings

The expected findings from this research included the occurrence of challenges that are specific to the profession of child welfare, as well as the general context of service provision, such as worker turnover. Therefore, it was expected that issues relating to burnout would appear in the interviews, as would challenges such as the distribution of cases and resources. The results were also expected to offer suggestions for improvement of these working conditions.