

**Organizational Factors affecting
Job Satisfaction and Burnout among Forensic Interviewers**

Executive Summary

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Burnout and job satisfaction have been studied extensively among child welfare workers and other human services professionals. Yet, there is a paucity of research in this area focused on forensic interviewers. The key indicators of burnout used in this study were worker exhaustion and disengagement (Demerouti, Bakker, Vardakou, & Kantas, 2003). Job satisfaction was defined as the attitude employees have about their jobs and related facets (Spector, 1997). The purpose of the research was to understand how organizational factors are associated with burnout and job satisfaction among forensic interviewers.

Methodology

An electronic survey was used to gather information from forensic interviewers in the northeast region of the United States as defined by the National Children's Alliance (NCA). The criterion for selection in this study was any individuals identified as employees, contractors, or other affiliated personnel authorized to conduct forensic interviews at NCA-member Children's Advocacy Centers (CAC) (accredited and associate/developing) in the region.

Multiple points of contact were made with CAC directors/coordinators to develop the first comprehensive list of forensic interviewers in the region. Multiple points of contact with forensic interviewers resulted in a 75% response rate, of which 67% of the responses were usable. The survey responses were used to measure variables in eight hypotheses and an overall moderated mediation model. Descriptive statistics and statistical analyses, including independent-samples t-tests, one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests, and multivariate regression, were computed utilizing Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative responses were analyzed for themes.

Discussion of the Findings

Forensic interviewers in this study represent all nine states in the Northeast region, with a majority affiliated with NCA-accredited CACs. Primarily middle-aged Caucasian females who hold a graduate degree, they are a homogenous group. While a third of forensic interviewers are employees of CACs, half are employees of law enforcement, prosecution, and child protective services agencies. Forensic interviewers have practiced in this specialized field for an average of five years, working with their current CAC for an average of four years, and in the child abuse/child welfare field for an average of nine years.

This study found only 13% of forensic interviewers conduct interviews in languages other than English. Considering that the research was conducted in the Northeast region of the United States, an area with cities populated with non-English speaking residents, concern is raised as to whether there is limited support in CACs for children and families who do not speak English. The limited number of bi-lingual interviewers also raises concern regarding the degree to which there is greater demand placed on forensic interviewers who conduct interviews in other languages.

The average number of interviews conducted being just under four per week was lower than expected. This seems like a reasonable number of interviews per week for employees who only function as forensic interviewers. For forensic interviewers who hold additional roles, such as law enforcement investigator or child protective services worker, having as many as four forensic interviews per week in addition to other responsibilities related to each case is overwhelming (Atkinson-Tovar, 2002). Quantitative and qualitative findings in this study indicate that holding multiple roles within the organization is a contributor to burnout. Law

enforcement and public child welfare administrators, especially, should take this into consideration when assigning child abuse cases.

Forensic interviewers provide a range of court testimony on protocols used to conduct forensic interviews as well as the facts of the cases. Yet, less than half of forensic interviewers are declared expert witnesses in their jurisdiction. The findings indicate that forensic interviewers are highly educated and well-trained in specific forensic interviewing techniques and the dynamics of child abuse. Not being declared an expert in court limits the value of forensic interviewers when their testimony is considered on the same level as a lay person.

Findings also indicate that all CACs in the region still do not video record interviews. Forensic interviewers conducting non-recorded interviews are burdened with the additional stress of having to make note of specific details of children's disclosures, while at the same time maintaining a supportive focus on the children. A video recording preserves children's statements verbatim, allows interviewers to review cases in preparation for legal proceedings, and can be shown in court. Prosecutors who are afraid of "bad interviews" need more education on the benefits of using trained forensic interviewers. Resources should be put into educating MultiDisciplinary Teams (MDT) members, especially those with decision-making abilities in the judicial system, about the benefits of video recording and the expertise of forensic interviewers.

Job Satisfaction

Despite the potential for burnout, 88% of forensic interviewers positively responded to being satisfied with their work, with qualitative responses supporting the quantitative findings. A number of forensic interviewers began the open-ended response by stating "I love my work as a forensic interviewer," some emphasizing the word love in capital letters. Forensic interviewers

describe a passion and belief in the work, recognizing the importance and necessity of forensic interviewers in child abuse investigations.

When forensic interviewers are supported by the organization to take care of their emotional needs, they experience more job satisfaction. Significantly higher job satisfaction was found among forensic interviewers who take days off when emotionally affected by an interview. Kuhnel, Sonnentag, and Westman (2009) suggest short respites, two to four days, from work encourage recovery and increase job engagement upon return to work. This kind of relief reduces the likelihood that workers will seek other employment.

Forensic interviewers who only conduct forensic interviews on-site at the CACs have higher job satisfaction. When conducting interviews at the CACs forensic interviewers are familiar with the setting and equipment; there is comfort in knowing your surroundings and having control of the environment. Child abuse protocols should designate the use of CACs as the primary location to conduct forensic interviews, with the caveat that alternative locations be used when deemed necessary.

Forensic interviewers who report support from the MDT they work with most frequently also report higher job satisfaction. Working with MDTs that bring together a range of skills for the benefit of abused children enhances one's sense of professionalism and expertise both within the group and within the community. Therefore, it seems intuitive that feeling supported by the MDT will lead to job satisfaction as these are forensic interviewers' peers.

Social work was the most common highest degree among forensic interviewers and supervisors of forensic interviewers. The findings indicate that forensic interviewers whose highest degree is in social work are more satisfied. Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, and Dickinson (2008) suggest social workers have a commitment to the values of the profession and

a greater understanding of the complexities of child abuse and child welfare policies as a result of their education.

Burnout

A third of forensic interviewers self-reported that they are experiencing burnout as a result of their work. Qualitative findings support this discovery, as one forensic interviewer states, “I know that if I remain in this unit burnout is an inevitable consequence.” Even those who did not acknowledge any personal experience with burnout stated they could understand why forensic interviewers experienced burnout.

Forensic interviewers who receive health insurance and paid time off through their employers experience more burnout. While this finding does not indicate that health insurance and paid time off are causes of burnout, it may be indicative of the difference in burnout between full-time employees, who typically receive such benefits through their employers, and part-time or contract employees, who typically do not receive benefits. Full-time forensic interviewers conduct more interviews and workers who hold multiple roles within organizations have more job responsibilities which in turn lead to more burnout.

Forensic interviewers who report a lack of support and satisfaction, as well as, stress from the MDTs they work with most frequently experience burnout. These findings indicate the relationships between forensic interviewers and MDT members are an important factor in the development of burnout. Steps should be taken to develop MDTs as functional teams that work to support each other in addition to abused children. These steps may involve trainings specific to the functions of MDT agencies and child abuse protocols, invitations to attend events of partner agencies, and informal gatherings such as meals together. Training focused on the

dynamics of team-building and conflict resolution, in addition to strategies for case review, are other avenues for team development.

Policy and Practice Implications

Control

Findings in this study indicate that the more control forensic interviewers have the higher their job satisfaction. Forensic interviewers need the ability to develop their skills, be creative, and have a variety of things to do on the job. As the people with the most direct experience in the actual conduct of the work, they should be empowered to “speak truth to power” in making recommendations to supervisors about things that may improve the quality of the work. In turn, such control will lead to being more satisfied with the job.

Organizational policies and resources related to ongoing training are necessary for forensic interviewers to maintain the high level of skill required for the position. Policies should be put into place to make resources consistently available for forensic interviewers to attend advanced training. Training grants, such as the one offered through the NCA, can help alleviate the financial burden associated with training.

Forensic interviewers need the authority to make decisions related to their work without fear of repercussion from CAC administrators or MDT members. Forensic interviewers should be given the ability to use their judgment and expertise during interviews to make modifications in the best interest of the child. Forensic interviewers should be in control of the interview process including the length of the interview and the questions asked, with input from the MDT. Recognizing that each jurisdiction has specific procedures agreed upon by the MDT, the forensic interviewer should act within the limits of local child abuse investigation protocols. Supportive

policies allow forensic interviewers to apply their specialized knowledge in an effort to best serve abused children.

Support

Supervisor support. Supervision plays a significant role in support for forensic interviewers; therefore, the supportive nature of supervision is as important as having access to supervision. Supervisors must be aware of the potential perception of lack of support or isolation especially when there is only one forensic interviewer in the organization. Barth and associates (2008) suggest a minimum of two hours of supportive supervision per week in the child welfare field, especially in urban settings. Regularly scheduled supportive supervision portrays respect and value within the organization. The use of reflective supervision is gaining support as an avenue to prevent burnout in the child welfare field (Lietz, 2010; Osofsky, 2009). Other organizational support mechanisms can be put into place to prevent burnout, including regularly scheduled vacations, promotion of self-care through exercise and healthy eating, and education on recognizing and addressing feelings of burnout.

Coworker support. Coworker support is also beneficial for forensic interviewers in terms of reducing burnout. Engaging workers in celebrations is a way to build relationships; informal celebrations can include personal recognitions, birthdays, and community holidays. Coworker support is especially important for forensic interviewers in isolated positions in rural communities or small organizations with few staff who have similar job responsibilities.

External support. External job support from family, friends, clients, the public, and other professionals also reduces burnout. Forensic interviewers should be encouraged to maintain relationships with family and friends. Given that half of the forensic interviewers in this study have children under the age of 18 years old, policies supportive of work-life balance

are necessary. Providing family-supportive policies and benefits, such as flextime for appointments and events related to employees' children and discount passes to family-oriented activities, are examples of ways to encourage a healthy work-life balance.

Forensic interviewers provide a unique service to children and families when there are allegations of abuse. CAC administrators should actively promote the forensic interviewer position among clients, the public, and with other professionals. Provide non-offending caregivers with information about what forensic interviewers do and how they care for children will help dispel any uncertainty about the role of the interviewer. Educate the public and other professionals about the service forensic interviewers provide and the benefits of utilizing the CAC model. Establish relationships with local news networks as a cost effective way to disseminate information through press releases and local programming (see Stevens, 2008 for an example).

Conclusion

Due to the nature of their work, forensic interviewers are experiencing burnout, yet feel a great deal of satisfaction in their work. The suggested policy and practice implications will enhance organizational support, increase job satisfaction, and reduce burnout which will in turn lead to a stronger workforce. Such implications impact children – and in the largest sense, society as a whole – as forensic interviewers will be more effective.

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