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# Correlates of Job Burnout among Human Services Workers: Implications for Workforce Retention

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*Job burnout has impacted workers and negatively transformed the social agency and its clients. This study examined the correlates of job burnout among human service workers in a non-urban setting in Central California. Using a convenience sample, researchers collected responses from 288 participants on a 13 item burnout scale. Findings indicated that workers experienced moderate to high levels of job burnout. Several scale items, including caseload size, age, gender, education, and experience, were significantly correlated with burnout. In addition, regression analyses revealed that caseload size was the most significant predictor of job burnout among human service workers. Implications for workforce retention and policy practice are discussed.*

*Key words: burnout, human service workers, caseload size, workforce retention, policy, practice*

Job burnout rates have been steadily increasing among human service workers in response to their changing work landscape characterized by increasing caseloads, role

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ambiguities, declining wage rates, and limited opportunities for upward mobility, to name a few. Job burnout has been defined as and linked to lower rates of worker productivity, lack of job satisfaction, and attrition (Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004; Koeske & Koeske, 1989). Certain socio-demographic factors, such as age, gender, and marital status, interact with work conditions differentially and are even thought to predispose certain individuals to experiencing job burnout (Angerer, 2003; Maslach, Shaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Sprang, Clark, & Whitt-Woosley, 2007).

Job burnout has been measured in terms of the physical and emotional exhaustion experienced by human service workers as the culmination of job-related stress over the duration of their employment (Rosenberg & Pace, 2006). In addition to person-specific characteristics, current research has pointed to the importance of conceptualizing job burnout as a selective and multidimensional process within an organizational culture that often neglects to promote healthy and supportive methods to cope with work-related stress (Gomez & Michaelis, 1995; Storey & Billingham, 2001). Conceptualizing job burnout as an organizational outcome shifts the action arenas for proper stress regulation away from the individual to the social support structure of an organization and the interaction of organizational features with individual-level variables (Anderson, 2000; Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004). Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the burnout experienced by rural human service workers in the Central Valley of California, where there is a strong presence of socioeconomically-underrepresented minority populations, by exploring the socio-demographic and work-related variables that contribute to job burnout. In addition to identifying the correlates and predictive factors, the burnout measure in this study broadens the conceptual framework mostly from an emotional exhaustion and depersonalization perspective to include a person-environment interactive framework.

## Literature Review

Burnout has been empirically tested among human service workers in child protection agencies (Anderson, 2000; Cahalane & Sites, 2008; Kim & Stoner, 2008; Poulin & Walter,

1993; Schwartz, Tiarniyu, & Dwyer, 2007), among marriage and family therapists (Rosenberg & Pace, 2006), and social service volunteers (Kulik, 2006), in metropolitan cities (Angerer, 2003; Gomez & Michaelis, 1995; Jenaro, Flores, & Arias, 2007; Sprang et al., 2007; Storey & Billingham, 2001), and in rural areas (Kee, Johnson, & Hunt, 2002; Landsman, 2002). Together, these studies indicate that job-related stress is a covariant of organizational structure, organizational supportive measures, and worker coping mechanisms. These studies find that social service workers who feel marginalized and disengaged from both their clients and the organization tend to be highly stressed. On the other hand, social service workers whose organizational structure promotes communication and provides some coping mechanisms tend to be less stressed and have greater rates of productivity.

The focus on individual–agency interactions has led researchers to look at organizational settings in rural and urban areas. Some studies have found that social service workers employed in rural areas are characterized by the same high rates of emotional exhaustion, compounded by low rates of individual achievement on a job burnout inventory scale, as their urban counterparts (Angerer, 2003; Gellis, Kim & Hwang, 2004; Poulin & Walter, 1993; Rohland, 2000). On the other hand, there is research suggesting that rural workers experience higher rates of job burnout compared to their urban counterparts. This association between rural workplace setting and worker burnout presumably stems from increased professional isolation, resource deficits, and environmental influences in rural areas compared to urban locales (Landsman, 2002). It deserves mention that the data for this research were collected from human service agencies in a relatively rural, non-urban setting for the purpose of developing a predictive model that isolates socio-demographic and work-related factors that contribute most to job burnout.

Burnout has often been examined as part of stress resulting from work. To many researchers, job burnout is a process that occurs as a result of continuous physical and emotional exhaustion. Oftentimes, it results in negative self-concept, negative job attitudes, and a loss of concern or feeling for clients (Rosenberg & Pace, 2006). The burnout process transforms not only the social agency, but also the client

(Anderson, 2000). According to Maslach et al. (2001), there are three dimensions of burnout, namely: exhaustion, depersonalization, and inefficacy. Exhaustion refers to the emotional pressure of the work environment, which often precludes the service provider's capacity to interact with and address the needs of the client, whereas depersonalization is a conscious effort to create a degree of separation between oneself and the client by disregarding the characteristics that make them unique and engaging people. Similarly, inefficacy refers to a reduction in personal accomplishment from work-related activities, which leaves the worker with a sense of uselessness to the organization and client. Although there are several conceptualizations of job burnout, socio-demographic and work environment factors seem to provide an interactive framework for analyzing the literature on job burnout for the current study.

#### *Socio-Demographic Factors*

Socio-demographic factors such as age, gender, marital status, and ethnicity have been linked to increasing job burnout rate. The demographic characteristic with the most significant impact on job burnout is age. Younger service workers reported a higher rate of burnout compared to workers over the age of 40 years (Maslach et al., 2001). Part of the age effect can be attributed to reduced stress levels as workers become more familiar with role expectations. For example, with increased age and length of tenure, role ambiguity did not impact role performance, indicating that more mature workers who are familiar with workload expectations are less likely to experience burnout compared to their younger counterparts (Acker, 2003; Maslach & Jackson, 1981; Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2008). Similarly, older workers report less absenteeism rates and a higher rate of job satisfaction in federal as well as social service agencies (Schwartz et al., 2007). However, some of the literature notes that older age and longer tenure are more likely to be associated with more burnout (Collings & Murray, 1996; Schulz, Greenley, & Brown, 1995).

The literature indicates that women social service providers overwhelmingly reported higher rates of job burnout, perhaps as a result of increased reports of exhaustion associated with "emotional labor" compared to men in the same line of work (Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Maslach et al., 2001; Sprang

et al., 2007). Women have also reported higher levels of compassion fatigue, which is also a predictor of job burnout. For example, among mental health service providers in a rural setting, females were associated with higher levels of burnout as a result of compassion fatigue which they experienced at a higher rate compared to males (Sprang et al., 2007). Women tend to experience higher rates of worker frustration as well. However, this rate is significantly reduced when structural workplace characteristics are controlled. In other words, gender, although a significant independent variable, also interacts in a statistically significant way with organizational-level variables and other demographic variables such as age and length of tenure in predicting burnout (Houkes, Winants, & Twellaar, 2008; Lewandowski, 2003; Rupert & Kent, 2007; Rupert, Pedja, & Holly, 2009; Shirom et al., 2008). In a similar vein, Kulik (2006) found that among unemployed volunteers in social service agencies, gender alone did not predict the likelihood of burnout, even though their study found gender differences in the employment status of these volunteers.

Some studies have shown that those within the helping professions who have higher levels of education are often charged with greater responsibilities. As a result, those with more years of education experienced higher levels of stress and burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Schwartz et al., 2007). Again, there is some inconsistency in the literature regarding the influence of educational attainment on burnout. For example, Schulz et al. (1995) found that social service workers with more education had considerably greater autonomy at the workplace and hence, reported greater job satisfaction, compared to their less educated co-workers. Similarly, a study of social service employees in a non-urban setting found that more educated workers reported higher levels of job satisfaction than did those who had not completed a college degree (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson, 2008). The inconsistent results may be attributable to a direct versus indirect effect of education on burnout (Schulz et al., 1995).

### *Workplace Environment*

Angerer (2003) reported that organizational structure of the workplace could contribute to employee job stress. Similarly, socio-emotional factors such as personal coping resources,

emotional exhaustion, and role ambiguity in the workplace have also been identified as factors related to job burnout. Issues outside of the worker's sphere of control, such as downsizing, mergers, and budget control measures, have an adverse effect on marriages and families, and ultimately lead to job burnout (Angerer, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001). Jenaro, Flores and Arias (2007) found that coping strategies may be understood as personal resources and are highly important tools in the amelioration and prevention of stress associated with job burnout. This finding is consistent with a study of Child Protective Services that stated the intensity of the job contributes to the syndrome of emotional exhaustion, especially when a lack of coping strategies are in place on behalf of the individual or organization (Anderson, 2000). However, Rosenberg and Pace (2006) speculated that overall, marriage and family therapists have low-to-moderate levels of stress related to job burnout depending on the work setting; private practitioners had less burnout compared to therapists who worked in a community agency.

Burnout research also points to the importance of role ambiguity as a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion and burnout (Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004). On the other hand, however, the organization's cultural responses to workers who experience stress resulting from role ambiguity greatly influence the likelihood of an employee adopting positive coping strategies for lowering or controlling stress-related burnout. Complete organizational acceptance of stress and stress-reducing methods is associated with lower rates of stress-related job burnout, whereas a rejection or suppression of stress coping methodology may result in lower productivity and inadequate services provided to the client.

Some researchers have focused their attention on the impact of caseload size. Koeske and Koeske (1989) found in their study on workload and burnout that, under certain conditions, demanding workloads were connected with employee burnout. These researchers argued that support within the organization between co-workers and their superior(s) could override the stress associated with a challenging workload, forestalling social worker burnout in a social service setting. Furthermore, studies among Title IV-E educated individuals

and public child welfare employees showed that after fulfilling their legal work commitment, some left their agency due to dissatisfaction with the job. These workers indicated that they perceived limited opportunities to utilize their skills and abilities, had minimal latitude to make their own judgment, and received little recognition for their efforts, especially when working with difficult caseloads (Cahalane & Sites, 2008).

Poulin and Walter (1993) also suggested that agency culture, client, and personal factors all contribute to burnout. Furthermore, Gomez and Michaelis (1995) found that merely shifting paperwork duties to clerical staff could result in all of the following: decrease in stress levels, enhanced organizational effectiveness, increase in worker personal accomplishment, and, potentially, lower job burnout rates. Storey and Billingham (2001) also suggested that team building communication fostered support for the social worker from upper level staff, decreased stress levels, and promoted job satisfaction.

Given prior research on the importance of job burnout among human service workers, the underlying influence of employee turnover and organizational stress, it is important to explore sociodemographic variations and factors that predict job burnout among rural human service workers. This study may be justified on several grounds. Literature review indicates that there is a dearth of studies on the burnout experienced by rural human service workers. Furthermore, most of the existing research in this area has focused on mental health workers. Additionally, most available instruments are long inventories on burnout with a heavy focus on factors related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. This study can be distinguished from other studies by its conceptualization of burnout as a broad construct that includes agency, work and client-related factors. Whereas previous scales measured burnout mostly from an emotional exhaustion and depersonalization perspective, this scale provides a person-environment interactive framework that includes organizational and client-related items. It is anticipated that the study and its findings will add to the existing knowledge by providing a more nuanced understanding and measurement of burnout.

In view of this, the current study identifies socio-demographic and work-related factors that contribute most to job burnout among human service workers, examines the

correlation between socio-demographic factors and job burnout rate, and identifies predictive factors of job burnout among human service workers. In particular, the study explores correlation between caseload size and several individual and work-related items. Similarly, absenteeism (days off from work) has also been correlated with individual and client-related items. The two main research questions addressed in the current study include: What are the demographic correlates of job burnout among human service workers? and How do agency-level variables impact the rate of job burnout? Specifically, the research addresses the following questions for rural human service providers: Is there any correlation between age, experience, income and the job burnout rate among human service workers? Do human service workers with higher caseloads experience higher rates of burnout at their jobs? Do male and female workers significantly differ in their job burnout rates? and, What are the predictive factors of job burnout?

## Methodology

A convenience sampling method and the selection of the sample group was based on participants' willingness to complete a two-page questionnaire, which resulted in two hundred eighty-eight human service workers from California's Central Valley participating in this study. The research protocol was approved by the Human Subject Review Board of the university prior to the commencement of the data collection phase. Data were collected using a self-reported questionnaire. These questionnaires were distributed and collected by coordinators during March 2010. Participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form, complete the questionnaire, place it in an envelope and return it to the coordinator.

The researchers examined several existing instruments and scales as part of the literature review. While several of the available scales were validated, we found that they did not adequately include several items in the current research, particularly related to various social, emotional, environmental, agency and work-related factors of job burnout among rural human service workers. For example, this scale has a few items that are not commonly found in other instruments, such as

"co-workers lack competence," "frequently encountering crisis situations," "lack of respect from clients and colleagues," "feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values," and "lack of on-the-job training." As mentioned earlier, this instrument broadens the conceptualization of burnout from emotional exhaustion to include a person–environment interactive framework. Additionally, we thought that a scale on this area would add to the diversity of existing instruments and thus advance the knowledge in this area. In this study, job burnout was measured by a 13-item composite scale created by the authors (see Table 1 for items). Each item in the scale reflected what had been identified in the literature as an independent variable influencing job burnout among human service workers. The reliability coefficient of the 13-item composite scale in this study was 0.88. Participants were asked to evaluate each item in terms of the extent to which that statement accurately contributed to their own job burnout. Responses to the statements were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "very low" (1), to "very high" (5). Also, data about demographic variables was gathered.

## Results

### *Demographic Characteristics*

The study participants' age ranged from 20 to 69 years, with a mean age of 40.13 years ( $SD = 10.89$ ). More than two-thirds (69.1%) of study participants were females and the rest were males (30.9%). With respect to their ethnicity, 45.1% were White, 23.3% Latino/Hispanic, 12.8% African Americans, 10.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 3.8% Native American, and 4.5% Others. In terms of their education, half of the respondents (50%) reported a bachelor's degree, followed by master's degree (21.9%), high school diploma/GED (13.2%), associate's degree (12.5%), and other (2.4%). While 54.5% were married, 30.9% were single, and 12.5% were divorced. Their years of experience ranged from under one year to 45 years, with a mean number of 11.98 years ( $SD = 9.24$ ). While more than a third of the participants (38.9%) worked in a Social Services agency, about a quarter (23.2%) worked in a mental health agency and less than a fifth (16.5%) worked in health care settings. The remaining (11.4%) worked in various other agencies.

Table 1. Mean Score Analysis of Job Burnout Scale

Factors of job burnout	Mean	SD
Lack of time to complete job tasks and feeling pressured	3.43	1.35
Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted due to workload	3.14	1.28
Feeling frustrated and disappointed about the job	2.89	1.31
Frequently encountering crisis situations at work	2.82	1.31
A lack of recognition at work	2.63	1.34
Lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff	2.62	1.42
Having no input in deciding on matters that affect my work	2.60	1.27
Co-workers lack competence	2.51	1.29
Lack of respect from clients and colleagues	2.50	1.23
Lack of on the job training	2.38	1.16
Feeling trapped in my current job (e.g. Feel like I am stuck in my position)	2.25	1.35
Feeling that I do not have a positive impact on the clients I work with	2.15	1.15
Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values	2.12	1.17
Overall	2.61	0.83

### *Level of Job Burnout*

Mean scores were calculated to determine the level of burnout experienced by the respondents (see Table 1). The overall rating for each item of the job burnout scale ranged from 1.0 to 4.5, with a mean rating of 2.61 (SD = 0.83). Among the burnout factors, the item rated as the most likely to contribute to burnout was, "Lack of time to complete job tasks and feeling pressured," and the item rated as least likely to contribute to job burnout was, "Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values." This may mean that many human service workers often find themselves caught up in a conflict between

what they believe to be good for their clients and the limiting program guidelines and policy regulations that constrain them from doing what is best for their clients. For example, families receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) are terminated from the program due to term limits, even though they do not have guaranteed employment income. Another example could be leaving a child in an abusive home because there are no foster alternatives. Such situations often lead to conflict between work duties and personal values. The item rated the 2nd highest was, "Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted due to workload" (Mean = 3.14, SD = 1.28). Similarly, the item rated the 2nd lowest was, "Feeling that I do not have a positive impact on the clients I work with" (Mean = 2.15, SD = 1.15).

There were gender variations in overall mean scores on the burnout scale. Female respondents showed a mean rating of 2.35 (SD = 0.84) while male respondents reported a mean rating of 2.75 (SD = 0.80), which indicated that males experienced significantly more job burnout compared to females ( $t = -2.011$ ,  $df = 278$ ,  $p < .05$ ). This finding contradicts previous research (Maslach et al., 2001; Sprang et al., 2007) which reports that female social service workers are prone to higher levels of job burnout than male workers. This may be due to the unique experiences of male social workers in rural areas where there are limited possibilities for promotion and they may perhaps feel a sense of professional isolation. In particular, item analysis on the job burnout scale found that male respondents experienced more job burnout than female respondents with regard to "Lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff" and "Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values" (see Table 2). Although "feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values" scored the lowest overall, it can be important to some groups under certain circumstances, as shown by the findings above.

Table 3 contains data on the type of agency setting and the overall job burnout composite variable. In terms of overall job burnout score, respondents who worked in Social Services agencies (Mean = 2.75, SD = 0.79) experienced the highest job burnout compared to those in Mental Health (Mean = 2.67, SD = 0.84) and Health Care agencies (Mean = 2.54, SD = 0.87). However, item analysis showed that respondents who

worked in Mental Health agencies (Mean = 3.13, SD = 1.27) experienced the most job burnout in terms of "Frequently encountering crisis situations at work," as compared to those in Social Service (Mean = 2.99, SD = 1.37) and Health Care agencies (Mean = 2.48, SD = 1.12). In addition, respondents who worked in Health Care agencies (Mean = 2.91, SD = 1.27) experienced the most job burnout in terms of "Lack of recognition at work," as compared to those in Social Service (Mean = 2.76, SD = 1.37) and Mental Health agencies (Mean = 2.77, SD = 1.12).

Table 2. Differences Between Male Respondents (n=89) and Female Respondents (n=199) in the Level of Job Burnout

Factors	Mean	t-value	Sig.
Lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff		-2.547	.011*
Male	2.95		
Female	2.49		
Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values		-2.464	.014*
Male	2.38		
Female	2.01		
Total mean score on job burnout		-2.011	.045*
Male	2.75		
Female	2.35		

Note: \*Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

#### *Correlations Between Demographic and Work-related Variables and Job Burnout*

Table 4 contains data about the relationship between the level of burnout and some selected demographic and work-related variables such as age, years of experience, education, and caseload size. The data indicated that there is a statistically significant relationship between the overall job burnout score and education ( $r = .119, p < .05$ ), and caseload size ( $r = .169, p < .01$ ). The more educated respondents and those with larger caseloads experienced higher job burnout rates.

Table 3. Differences Among Social Service Agencies in the Level of Job Burnout

Factors	N	Mean	F-value	Sig.
Lack of time to complete tasks and feeling pressured			2.995	.001**
Human Services/Social Services/Welfare agency	111	3.83		
Mental Health agency	66	3.34		
Health Care agency	47	2.97		
Feeling frustrated and disappointed about the job			2.176	.019*
Human Services/Social Services/Welfare agency	111	3.18		
Mental Health agency	66	3.03		
Health Care agency	47	2.44		
Lack of recognition at work			2.087	.026*
Health Care agency	47	2.91		
Mental Health agency	66	2.77		
Human Services/Social Services/Welfare agency	111	2.76		
Frequently encountering crisis situations at work			2.087	.026*
Mental Health agency	66	3.13		
Human Services/Social Services/Welfare agency	111	2.99		
Health Care agency	47	2.48		
Total mean score on job burnout			1.917	.043*
Human Services/Social Services/Welfare agency	111	2.75		
Mental Health agency	66	2.67		
Health Care agency	47	2.54		

Note: \*Difference is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\*Difference is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed).

Table 4. Correlations Between Demographic and Work Related Variables and Items of Job Burnout

Variables	<i>r</i>	Sig.
<i>Age</i>		
Lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff	.134*	.024
<i>Years of Experience</i>		
Lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff	.130*	.027
<i>Days Off From Work</i>		
Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values	.148*	.024
Feeling that I do not have a positive impact on clients I work with	.131*	.047
<i>Level of Education</i>		
Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted due to workload	.161**	.006
Frequently encountering crisis situations	.144*	.014
Feeling frustrated and disappointed about the job	.143*	.015
Lack of time to complete job tasks and feeling pressured	.137*	.020
Feeling trapped in my current job	.134*	.023
Feeling that I do not have a positive impact on clients I work with	.133*	.024
<i>Caseload Size</i>		
Feeling physically and emotionally exhausted due to workload	.286**	.000
Lack of time to complete job tasks and feeling pressured	.273**	.000
Frequently encountering crisis situations	.172**	.004
Lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff	.146*	.014
Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values	.122*	.040

Note: \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed). \*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Furthermore, item analysis indicated that caseload was correlated with several scale items, such as lack of time to complete the job ( $r = .273, p < .001$ ), lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff ( $r = .146, p < .05$ ), feeling physically and emotionally exhausted ( $r = .286, p < .001$ ), frequently encountering crisis situations ( $r = .172, p < .01$ ) and feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values ( $r = .122, p < .05$ ). In addition, the number of days off from work is significantly correlated with "Lack of on the job training" ( $r = .157, p < 0.05$ ); "Feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values" ( $r = .148, p < 0.05$ ); and "Feeling that I do not have a positive impact on clients I work with" ( $r = .131, p < 0.05$ ).

#### *Predictors of Job Burnout*

A multiple regression analysis was conducted to evaluate how well job-related variables and some demographic variables predicted the level of job burnout (See Table 5). The regression matrix in our study included age, years of experience, education, and caseload size. The criterion variable was the level of job burnout. The linear combination of the predictor variables was significantly related to the job burnout,  $R^2 = .074$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .060$ ,  $F(4, 275) = 5.489, p < .001$  (See Table 5). The simple multiple correlation coefficient was .27, indicating that approximately 7% of the variance of the criterion variable in the sample can be accounted for by the linear combination of the predictor variables. Among the four predictor variables, caseload size was found to be the most significant predictor in determining job burnout.

Table 5. Multiple Regression Results on Predictors of Job Burnout

Predictors	B	SE	$\beta$	T	Sig.
Years of Experience	-.138	.094	-.114	-1.474	.142
Education	1.791	.666	.156	2.688	.008
Caseload size	3.554	1.036	.200	3.429	.001
Age	.187	.081	.180	2.317	.021

Note:  $F(4, 275) = 5.489, p < .001$ , Multiple  $R = .272^a$ ,  $R^2 = .074$ , adjusted  $R^2 = .060$

## Discussion

Rural human service workers experience several problems associated with job-related burnout in their workplace. The mean score analysis showed that workers in this predominantly rural area experienced moderate to high levels of burnout rates, although there were significant variations among certain individual items. Items that contributed most to burnout included "lack of time to complete job tasks and feeling pressured" and "feeling physically and emotionally exhausted due to workload." These findings resonated with previous research that had similarly identified lack of time to complete job tasks (Baker, O'Brien, & Salahuddin, 2007; Lloyd & King, 2004), physical fatigue due to workload (Andersen, 2000; Angerer, 2003), and emotional exhaustion (Devereux, Hastings, & Noone, 2009) as significant factors contributing to job burnout. Undoubtedly, these findings imply that continuous emotional exhaustion results in emotional overload, which reduces vital emotional resources needed to effectively perform job-related tasks both independently and interactively.

Contrary to expectations, this study found that "feeling a conflict between work duties and personal values" is least likely to contribute to job burnout. Similarly, "feeling that I do not have a positive impact on clients I work with" also does not seem to have an impact on burnout. This finding is consistent with other research on social workers' experiences in rural areas that suggests that in non-urban areas, burnout does not result from an absence of personal support factors (Kee et al., 2002; Landsman, 2002; Sullivan, 1993).

Consistent with the literature, this study also shows significant gender variations in terms of job burnout. While some researchers find that female social service workers are prone to higher levels of job burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Sprang et al., 2007), our study reveals that male social service workers experienced a higher level of job burnout compared to their female counterparts. This may result from the unique experiences of non-urban social workers. It is likely that in these areas, social workers have limited opportunities for upward mobility and a greater degree of professional isolation, which may differentially impact men more than women, although this remains to

be verified by future studies. On the other hand, women may be buffered against burnout by the influence of more personal factors operating in rural areas, such as informal communication styles and a slower-paced lifestyle (Gumpert, Galtman, & Sauer-Jones, 2000). The literature suggests that in the presence of a supportive working environment, women experience reduced burnout rates compared to a workplace where there are no such support structures (Baker et al., 2007; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Rupert & Kent, 2007).

Respondents in this study reported differential levels of burnout based on agency type. Workers in social service agencies, including child protective services, reported the highest job burnout rate compared to workers in mental health and healthcare agencies. These workers consistently reported that they did not have the time they needed to complete the job and experienced more frustrations and disappointments compared to social workers in other agencies. This may have resulted from the emotional work component of child protective services, where workers handle cases of child abuse and neglect and have to manage this emotionally exhaustive work under conditions of increasing job demands.

In terms of item analysis of the burnout scale, this study found that older workers tend to experience lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff more than younger workers. This trend is also reflected in the length of their work experience: workers with more experience also report lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff. Perhaps with age and experience, many workers become jaded, indifferent and critical of supervisors, which may result in reduced support from management. Additionally, the management style in many of these agencies tends to be more bureaucratic, mechanistic and hierarchical in structure, which often does not promote a free flow of vertical and horizontal communication and support for workers.

Research also documents the relationship between absence from work (absenteeism) and job burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2008; Schwartz et al., 2007). In this regard, this study identified several scale items related to frequent absence from work. For example, workers who take more time off from work are more likely to experience conflict between work duties and personal

values and feel that they do not make a positive impact on their clients. Additionally, unmanageable caseload was correlated with several scale items, such as lack of time to complete the job, lack of support from supervisory and managerial staff, feeling physically and emotionally exhausted, and feeling trapped in the current job. These findings are found to be consistent with the existing literature (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Yamatani, Engel, & Spjeldnes, 2009).

Previous research has attempted to identify the predictive factors of job burnout. In this regard, role ambiguity was found to be a significant predictor of emotional exhaustion (Kirk-Brown & Wallace, 2004). Similarly, high levels of time pressure and low levels of self-efficacy were also identified as predictors of emotional exhaustion (Baker et al., 2007). In this study, results from regression analysis identified caseload size as the most significant predictor in determining the level of job burnout. Clearly, this points to the need for establishing manageable caseloads for rural human service workers. Realistic and manageable caseloads for human service workers are likely to contribute positively toward workforce retention, which has been a serious challenge for many human service agencies.

### *Limitations*

Although the findings of this study added to the existing literature, there were some limitations. The study employed a convenience sample of human service workers employed in several agencies in the Central Valley in California. Such a sampling method did not assure random representation from the population of all human services workers, which in turn limited generalization beyond the study population. Furthermore, considering the nature and size of the human services sector, our sample size was relatively small, and was drawn from a broad array of human services organizations primarily consisting of social service agencies, child welfare agencies, mental health agencies, health care agencies, foster care agencies, probation services, etc. The source of burnout experienced by workers in these agencies may be different from program to program, limiting the study's ability to draw conclusions about any one particular agency. Using the same instrument to collect information from various agencies may

not be the most ideal. Another concern is that most of the data for this study are collected from rural Central Valley areas in California, and therefore our findings may have limited applications to other areas. The demographic composition of the sampled area is quite unique and diverse, with a strong presence of Hispanics/Latinos. These factors serve as external threats to the generalizability of the study's findings to other settings.

### Implications and Conclusion

The findings of the study suggest several intervention strategies that can be used by managers, administrators, human service advocates and policy makers. This research indicates the need for administrators and policy makers in the human services sector to design creative ways of managing workload pressure, emotional exhaustion and frustrations on the job. During the recent economic downturn between 2007 and 2010, the welfare caseload in California grew 27%, compared to only 13% in the rest of the nation (Danielson, 2012; Social Work Policy Institute, 2010). These statistics underscore the need to advocate for policy changes and legislative actions that can establish manageable caseloads for human service workers in this area.

Our findings also revealed that a supportive workplace environment is extremely important in preventing burnout. To counter this threat, management may design and implement proactive intervention strategies which include team building activities, support groups, short breaks for relaxation, flexible work schedules, time management skills, resource gain activities, etc. In this regard, Conservation of Resources theory (COR) has the potential to provide a conceptual guide in maximizing resource gain (Vinokur-Kaplan, 2009, p. 228). This theory also suggests that managers must consider employees' actual and perceived resources when developing and assigning job roles and tasks. If work assignments can be done based on the perceived types of resources available for workers, it may reduce job burnout. These findings and their implications will likely add to the increasing body of literature that highlights the importance of effectively handling job burnout among human service workers, particularly in non-urban, rural areas.

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