Role Stress as a Contributor to Burnout in Child Care Professionals

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**ABSTRACT:** This study was designed to determine whether role ambiguity or role conflict best explained the variance in the level of burnout experienced by 85 full-time, employed child care professionals. Results showed that role conflict was the strongest predictor of a sense of personal accomplishment, while role ambiguity was the strongest predictor of a sense of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Interpretations and recommendations for research and practice are included.

Although the child care profession has made advances in its pursuit of increased professional status, it continues to be plagued with a high degree of turnover among experienced caregivers. Low retention of those employed in the field is considered to be a serious problem and is seen as one indicator of employee burnout (Maslach & Pines, 1977; Seiderman, 1978; Jorde, 1982; Mattingly, 1986). While burnout has been identified as a serious concern in the child care profession (Jorde, 1982), less empirical attention has been given to identifying its possible causes (Maslach & Pines, 1977; Whitebook & Howes, 1980). Three categories of factors have been suggested as contributors to employee burnout: (a) involvement with people, (b) one's personal characteristics, and (c) the job setting or organizational climate (Maslach, 1982). More recently, Jorde-Bloom (1986) hypothesized an interactional model where personal characteristics and the organizational climate work together to influence the satisfaction experienced by an individual.

Focusing on the organizational climate as a source of burnout provides the most constructive avenue for understanding its antecedents and developing effective prevention and intervention strategies for eliminating burnout. Attention to impersonal structures or policies may facilitate intervention because it reduces the self blame often associated with burnout. Here individuals have an opportunity to identify external contributors which can foster feeling empowered to make changes and

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increase one's job satisfaction. Too, Jorde (1982) suggests that some organizational contributors to burnout are inherent in the profession (unclear methods of evaluation for individual performance, the demanding scope of teacher's responsibilities, and limited administrative training of directors).

Early investigations have (a) identified certain organizational factors as sources of stress and burnout such as participation in decision making, unclear methods of performance evaluation and non-specific job descriptions (Maslach & Pines, 1977; Whitebook & Howes, 1980), and (b) examined the relationship between organizational factors and burnout in other professions (Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982; Stout & Posner, 1984; Brookings, Bolton, Brown & McEvoy, 1984). Yet, the relationship between organizational factors and burnout has not been the focus of research within the child care profession. Thus, the present study was undertaken. Here, we examine one set of organizational factors to determine whether a relationship exists between these factors and employee burnout in a sample of child care professionals. Specifically, we examine the relationship between role stress and burnout to identify whether role ambiguity or role conflict is the better predictor of level of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and personal accomplishment, the three primary components of burnout (Perlman & Hartman, 1982).

Conceptual Framework

One way of conceptualizing the organizational climate is suggested by role theory. Role stress is said to exist when members in the work setting experience either one or both of its components: role ambiguity or role conflict. **Role ambiguity** has been defined as "the degree to which clear information is lacking regarding (a) the expectations associated with a role, (b) the methods for fulfilling known role expectations, and/or (c) the consequences of role performance" (VanSell, Brief & Schuler, 1981, p. 44). When roles are not clearly articulated in terms of behaviors or expected performance levels, role ambiguity is said to exist (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn & Snoek, 1964). **Role conflict** occurs when an individual is required to assume two or more conflicting roles or when expectations about a role from various sources differ.

These two concepts suggest that, when pressure exerted by coworkers or supervisors is ambiguous or conflicts with other pressures, role stress results. Role stress is likely to lessen job satisfaction and ineffective coping mechanisms develop (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). In this case, burnout is the hypothesized reflection of lowered job satisfaction and ineffective coping with chronic stress. As such, both lowered