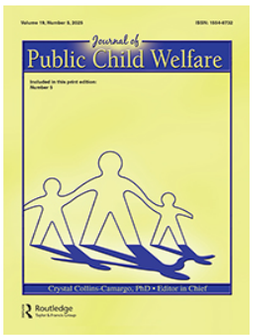

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The mediating role of hope in linking perceived organization support to lower job burnout among child welfare professionals

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ABSTRACT

Job burnout occurs when employees feel exhausted or overwhelmed by workplace demands (Maslach, 2003). Burnout has a negative impact on employees and organizations, contributing to higher turnover and lower service quality (Salvagioni et al., 2017). In child welfare, burnout consistently predicts workforce turnover (Chernesky & Israel, 2008; Kim & Kao, 2014; Leake et al., 2017). Emotional exhaustion is a stable predictor of turnover in this field (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Boyas et al., 2013; Travis et al., 2016). This study examines a three-variable model in which hope mediates burnout, shaped by perceptions of organizational support among child welfare workers.

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Hope theory; child welfare workforce; job burnout; perceived organizational support; well-being

Introduction

Job burnout describes an employee's experience of being exhausted and/or overwhelmed by the demands of their job (Maslach, 2003). Burnout is harmful to both employees and their employers, as burnout has been linked to greater turnover and poorer service delivery across a variety of work settings (Salvagioni et al., 2017). Burnout is of particular concern in the context of child welfare, as burnout has consistently been linked to greater turnover within the child welfare workforce (Chernesky & Israel, 2009; DePanfilis, 2006; H. Kim & Kao, 2014; Leake et al., 2017; Strolin et al., 2006). Additional research indicates that emotional exhaustion, a recognized domain of burnout, is a particularly strong and stable predictor of turnover among child welfare workers (J. Boyas & Wind, 2010; J. F. Boyas et al., 2013; Travis et al., 2016). Due to the negative impact of burnout, understanding how to buffer burnout is an important aim for child welfare organizations seeking to improve both retention and service delivery among effective employees. The current study seeks to test a three-variable model of hope as a mediator of

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burnout, with hope being fostered by perceptions of organizational support (POS) among a sample of child welfare workers.

Job burnout in child welfare

Job burnout is a work-related experience where work-based stressors tax job demands in a way that exceeds the available job resources (Demeroutri et al., 2001). The consistent overtaxing from job demands, coupled with insufficient resources to meet those job demands, is one potential cause of job withdrawal. Job demands are significantly and positively related to burnout (He et al., 2018). Burnout is thought to consist of two dimensions, including emotional exhaustion and work disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001). Studies of child welfare workers demonstrate a link between burnout, job stress, and job satisfaction (J. Boyas & Wind, 2010; J. F. Boyas et al., 2013; Leake et al., 2017, Lushin et al., 2023; Travis et al., 2016). An array of workplace and organizational factors have been associated with child welfare workforce burnout, including supervisory support (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Phillips et al., 2020), time pressures (Phillips et al., 2020), dissatisfaction with workload and professional development (Griffiths et al., 2017), along with the structure (such as supervisory support, caseloads, time pressures), and function (peer relationship and availability of community resources) of the workplaces (He et al., 2018). In their longitudinal study of workplace demands on job burnout, Lizano & Mor Barak (2012) demonstrate that job burnout increases over time for child welfare professionals. As job burnout can threaten job satisfaction, it may also be associated with job performance (Gunlu et al., 2010; Landsman, 2008) and ultimately may be a driver of employee intention to remain employed (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Linzano & Mor Barak, 2015; Mor Barak et al., 2006; Strolin-Goltzman et al., 2007). In their meta-analysis evaluating reasons for turnover, H. Kim and Kao (2014) found that employee stress and burnout had a medium to high influence on turnover.

Burnout is often associated with intrinsic work factors, which are the elements of the job itself that are motivating, such as finding meaning and purpose in the work, or individual factors, such as the employee's stress, fatigue, or life events (McFadden et al., 2015). Previous research has focused on the work-based factors that contribute to job burnout, such as high caseloads, role conflicts, supervisory support, and case severity (He et al., 2018; Kothari et al., 2021; Travis et al., 2016). However, more recently, attention has been paid to the personal characteristics and strategies of the individual (Maslach & Leiter, 2016; Radey & Wilke, 2021). Personal characteristics may play a role in one's coping mechanisms. For example, resilience has been observed as a mediating role in job burnout as it directly predicts emotional exhaustion and personal accomplishment, which may reduce internal conflict and stress (McFadden et al., 2015). Burnout is also more prevalent among

individuals with an external locus of control, which is the belief that the future is in the hands of others (Benveniste et al., 2024).

One particularly useful model for understanding job burnout is the Job Demands and Resources Model (JD-R). The JD-R model assumes a dynamic and interrelated relationship between the demands of the job and the impact on the employees' well-being (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). A central component of the JD-R model theory is that all working conditions can be categorized as a demand or a resource. Job demands are the aspects of work that cost energy, such as complex tasks, work conflicts, and workload. Job resources are the aspects of the work that help employees deal with the job demands and help with the achievement of their goals, and they are the motivating factors that provide meaning to employees and meet the employees' basic psychological needs, such as competency or autonomy (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Both job demands and job resources have unique and independent effects on employee well-being, and job resources can buffer the impact of job demands' negative strain. While the JD-R theory focuses on employee well-being, an important goal is to predict employee behavior and organizational outcomes such as productivity, absenteeism, and client satisfaction (Bakker & Demerouti, 2018). Because the JD-R model posits that insufficient workplace support is an important driver of burnout, the JD-R theory also suggests that the antithesis of poor workplace support, i.e., greater organizational support, should be linked to lower burnout (Yanbei et al., 2023). Additionally, the model suggests that personal characteristics such as self-efficacy, optimism adaptability, and flexibility are attributed as job resources (Bakker et al., 2023; Huang et al., 2015). Therefore, the model suggests that the cognitive psychological states such as hope may be a personal characteristic of job resources.

Perceived organizational support

Perceived organizational support (POS) is a construct that describes the expectations employees have developed over time regarding the favorable or unfavorable treatment they receive from the organization for which they are employed (Eisenberger et al., 2020). When employees perceive their organization as fair and generous with human resource support, and organizational leadership is knowledgeable and supportive, overall POS increases (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Eisenberger et al. (2020) describe POS as the avenue through which an organization meets the socioemotional needs of its employees and "indicates the potential benefits of exhibiting greater efforts on the organization's behalf" (p. 103). In explaining the nature of POS, Eisenberger et al. (2020) discussed the extent to which employees tend to personify the organization they are employed by, which means they "view the organization as a living being, having purpose and intention" (p. 102). When this personification of the child welfare administration is strongly aligned with employees'

personal and professional goals, and they report high POS, these employees have a higher likelihood of identifying with the administration's values and maintaining ongoing employment. Moreover, in various employment contexts, research aligns with the JD-R model, as data indicate that when employees' reported positive state (POS) is greater, their reported levels of burnout are lower (Anomneze et al., 2016; Cho & Song, 2017; Johnson, 2015; Yanbei et al., 2023).

In child welfare, the literature consistently indicates that a primary factor contributing to employee turnover intention is a stressful work environment (Hopkins et al., 2010; A. Kim & Mor Barak, 2015; Shim, 2010). Child welfare employees regularly engage in challenging work with the community in the service of their professional role, which can be demanding and stressful even in highly supportive work settings. Still, stress related to the organizational system often impacts POS and burnout for child welfare professionals. These stressors include high caseloads, insufficient support from supervisors or leadership, low wages, and inadequate training (A. Kim & Mor Barak, 2015). This stress translates to the employee's perceived role in the overall organization (Kahn et al., 1964). As the child welfare employees' stress increases due to organizational challenges, their POS decreases, and their turnover intention (desire to leave their position in the child welfare organization) increases (A. Kim & Mor Barak, 2015). Research supports that POS is important in alleviating burnout and decreasing turnover intention in the child welfare workforce. Yet, less is known about the mechanisms that link POS to burnout. One such mechanism may be the psychological state of hopefulness (Snyder et al., 1991).

Hope as a mediator between burnout and perceived organizational support

Hope was selected for this study because recent research suggests hope is an important buffer of burnout among child welfare workers (Pharris et al., 2022). Although research on hope among child welfare professionals is relatively new, the recognition of the importance of hope to well-being has a long history (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). One of the most well-researched theories of hope is that of Snyder et al. (1991), who defined hope as a "positive motivational state that is based on an interactively derived sense of successful (a) agency (goal-directed energy), and (b) pathways (planning to meet goals)" (Snyder et al., 1991, p. 287). Snyder (2000) contends that hope offers a distinct and succinct two-component construct that describes a mind-set that drives goal-directed action in the face of adversity. Research using scales that measure individual differences in hope has shown that hope is positively linked to an array of variables associated with positive well-being, such as life satisfaction and positive emotions (Ong et al., 2018). In the workplace, hope has been positively correlated with higher performance and job satisfaction (Reichard

et al., 2013) and negatively associated with stress and burnout (Reichard et al., 2013).

Research has consistently demonstrated the benefits of hope in a variety of settings, including a number of studies examining the value of hope in the workplace (Passmore et al., 2020). Recent research suggests that hope is an important variable within the workforce environment, as it has been positively linked to greater job satisfaction (Wang & Lei, 2021), affective commitment, and citizenship behaviors such as helping others, involvement in organizational life, and preventing conflicts (Chernyak- Hai et al., 2023). Hope is also negatively correlated with burnout among child welfare workers (Pharris et al., 2022). As a result, hope is ripe for further exploration in organizational settings, particularly among child welfare workers, because additional research has shown that hope is positively influenced by social support and connection (Merolla et al., 2021). Indeed, in the work context, a supportive organizational climate has been shown to positively influence employees' levels of hope (e.g., Luthans et al., 2008).

The current study

The current study extends a line of research that examines the impact of a supportive work environment on job performance (Côté et al., 2021, Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Gaudet & Tremblay, 2017). We seek to better understand the potential link between POS and lower burnout by testing hope as a hypothesized mediator between the two states among a sample of child welfare employees. Should the data fit the proposed model, the results may illuminate our understanding of how POS can be better used to reduce burnout among child welfare workers.

Methods

Participants and procedure

To assess the link between POS and lower burnout by testing hope as a mediator, we surveyed the child welfare employees of the state of Oklahoma. Surveys were distributed to all the state child welfare services division employees in partnership with the State of Oklahoma Human Services as part of their annual employee engagement survey. Surveys were distributed to approximately 2,500 employees, of which $N' = 1{,}641$ responses were received. The survey utilized established psychometric scales, described below, that measure hope, job burnout, and perceived organizational support. The anonymous survey was administered via Qualtrics Survey and provided to participants via e-mail from the child welfare agency as part of their annual engagement survey. IRB approval was obtained from both the State of

Table 1. Sample workforce demographics (N = 1641).

	Raw Total	% of Total (rounded)
How long have you worked in child welfare services?		
Less than a year	216	13%
1–5 years	420	26%
6–10 years	328	20%
11–15 years	265	16%
16+ years	412	25%
Are you a supervisor?		
Yes	1288	22%
No	353	78%
Please select your job level within child welfare services		
Level I	70	11%
Level II	255	40%
Level III	93	15%
Level IV	87	14%
District Director/Field Manager	15	03%
Other	119	19%

Oklahoma IRB and the University. The employment characteristics of the sample are included in Table 1. No race or gender data was collected as part of this study.

Instruments

Survey of perceived organizational support

The Survey of Perceived Organizational Support (SPOS) was used to measure individual differences in POS among a sample of child welfare employees. We utilized the 8-item version of the SPOS (Eisenberger et al., 1986). Each item in the SPOS is scored based on a 7-point Likert scale (0 = Strongly Disagree; 6 = Strongly Agree). The SPOS is unidimensional, with the scores summed to produce total POS scores ranging from 0 to 48. Higher scores indicate greater perceptions of organizational support. An example of a SPOS item is, "This organization cares about my general satisfaction at work" (Eisenberger et al., 1986).

A reliability generalization study of SPOS has demonstrated that the SPOS has consistently produced adequate internal consistency across a variety of samples (Hellman et al., 2013). Results from a variety of studies have also supported the validity of the SPOS (Caesens et al., 2019; Shore & Tetrick, 1991). For this sample, Cronbach's Alpha was .94.

Dispositional hope scale

Hope was measured using the Dispositional Hope Scale (DHS; Snyder et al., 1991). The DHS contains 12 items scored with an 8-point Likert response format (1 = Definitely False; 8 = Definitely True). The DHS measures hope across the two dimensions of agency and pathways thinking, with four items operating as filler (Snyder et al., 1991). An individual's total hope scores are

obtained by summing the items, with higher scores indicating greater hope. An example DHS item is, "Even when others get discouraged, I know I can find a way to solve the problem" (Snyder et al., 1991).

A reliability generalization study of the DHS indicates that the measure has consistently produced good internal consistency across many samples (Hellman et al., 2013). The DHS has also shown good validity, with DHS scores negatively correlating with an array of variables associated with dysphoria, and positively correlating with an array of other variables associated with greater well-being (Munoz et al., 2017; Munoz et al., 2017; Ong et al., 2018), including with lower burnout among child welfare workers (Pharris et al., 2022). For this sample, Cronbach's Alpha was .87.

Oldenburg burnout inventory

Individual differences in burnout were measured using the 16-item Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). The OLBI is a two-dimensional scale, with the first dimension measuring work disengagement and the second measuring work exhaustion (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008). OLBI items are scored using a 5-point Likert scale, with higher total scores on each respective dimension reflecting greater overall work disengagement and greater work exhaustion. An example of an OLBI item is, "Over time, one can become disconnected from this type of work" (Demerouti & Bakker, 2008).

OLBI scores have demonstrated good internal consistency (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005; Tipa et al., 2019) and good validity, having been negatively correlated with relevant variables such as meaning in work (Passmore et al., 2020) and work engagement (Poulsen et al., 2015). For this sample, Cronbach's Alpha was .90.

Data analysis

We used Covariance-Based Structural Equation Modeling (CB-SEM) as the data analysis technique. SEM allowed us to model the variables as latent, allowing for the estimation of measurement error for each variable (Bollen, 1989). The model's latent variables were modeled using the reference variable approach, which involves assigning an unstandardized coefficient on each latent variable to the value of one. This process allows for the estimation of the values of the latent variables in the model (Bollen, 1989).

All CB-SEM calculations were performed with maximum likelihood (ML) estimations using AMOS 26 (Arbuckle, 2010). Comparisons of the relative strength of variable relationships were conducted using standardized beta coefficients. Standardized beta coefficients express all variable relationships in standard deviation units ranging from 0 to 1. Standardized beta units allow for assessments of the relative strength of variable relationships because they

are unaffected by differences in the units of measurement for each respective variable (Kline, 2016).

The quality of the proposed theoretical model was judged according to multiple fit criteria. First, we employed the Confirmatory Fit Index (CFI) with a threshold of ≥0.90 as an indicator of acceptable fit, with scores approaching 0.95 considered superior fit (Bentler, 1992; Hu & Bentler, 2009). Second, the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) was used with a threshold of ≤0.10 as a cutoff, with scores approaching 0.06 indicating superior fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Hu & Bentler, 2009). Third, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) was used with a threshold of ≤0.08, indicating acceptable fit, with a score approaching 0.05 indicating superior fit (Hu & Bentler, 2009). Finally, a $\chi 2$ analysis was used with a threshold of $p > .05$ indicating acceptable fit. However, it is well known that the $\chi 2$ is sensitive to larger sample sizes and frequently exhibits a $p < .05$ for models with samples over 200, even when such models produce a good fit according to other indices (Kline, 2016).

Missing data

The missing data rate for the respective variables was as follows: 1.) for burnout, 10% of responses were missing; 2.) for hope, 9% of responses were missing; and 3.) for POS, 8% of responses were missing. Thus, no variable had more than 10% of data missing, a threshold that has been referenced as a cutoff over which the missing data can bias parameter estimates (Bennett, 2001). However, although the rate of missing data was low, to increase the power of the model to detect population effects, full information maximum likelihood analysis (FIML) was used to estimate the missing values. FIML is considered an effective tool for generating non-biased estimations of the values of missing data (Enders & Bandalos, 2001; Graham, 2009). Once FIML was performed, the sample rose to an $N' = 1641$.

Power analysis

To determine the power of the model to detect population effects, we used the estimation tables of MacCallum et al. (1996) For the current model with degrees of freedom (df) of 131 and a sample size of $N' = 1641$, the model well exceeded the standard threshold (>.80) for adequate power (Cohen, 1988).

Mediation

In addition to the goodness-of-fit indices noted above, mediation analysis was also used to evaluate the quality of the theorized structural model in explaining the data. Mediation analysis examines how large an indirect effect an exogenous variable exerts on an endogenous variable through a mediator(s) (Hayes,

2013). Mediation testing is often used to evaluate the causal theories of the relationships between variables (Hayes, 2013).

We specified a three-variable path model of hope as a mediator of the relationship between POS and lower burnout based on the a priori theory outlined above. Theory, as outlined above, suggests that POS is an antecedent of hope that influences lower burnout. However, we do theorize that hope is not the only link, i.e., mediator, between POS and lower burnout. Thus, complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010) is the model most consistent with theory.

Per best practices in CB-SEM path modeling (Danner et al., 2015), the statistical significance of the proposed model's direct and indirect effects was tested with bias-corrected (BCa) bootstrap resampling (Efron & Tibshirani, 1986; Hayes, 2013). With bootstrapping, repeated subsamples are randomly drawn, with replacement, from the initial sample. This resampling process is repeated many times, with an $N = 5000$ referenced as an adequate number of subsamples (Hair et al., 2014).

The bootstrap subsamples allow for the derivation of standard errors that are used to generate confidence intervals (CI) for the model's direct and indirect effects found in the population. When the 95% CIs of the parameter estimates generated by bootstrapping do not contain the number 0, the parameter is considered statistically significant (Hayes, 2013).

To classify and understand the different types of mediation, we utilized the proposed typology and interpretation of Zhao et al. (2010). Indirect effect only mediation (Zhao et al., 2010) exists when only the indirect effects of the model are statistically significant, a circumstance that has also been called "full" mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010) exists when both indirect and direct effects are statistically significant and point in the same direction, a circumstance that has also been referred to as partial mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986).

Squared multiple correlations. CB-SEM models can produce adequate fit yet only account for only minimal variance in their respective dependent variables (Bollen, 1989). Thus, an examination of the ability of a model to account for variance in the model's dependent variables helps to evaluate the model's practical value. In the current study, squared multiple correlations (R^2) were used to assess the power of hope, POS, and burnout.

Results

Sample characteristics

Most child welfare employees in the sample have been employed in the child welfare agency for over 5 years, with 20% employed for 6–10 years, 16%

employed 11–15 years, and 25% employed for more than 16 years in child welfare work. Those who had worked for less than 1 year were the smallest sample in the group (13%). The state agency classifies employees based on work-related tasks and education into different level systems. Level 1 child welfare workers are often in their probationary period of employment or are non-college degree case aids. Level II employees are front-line case managers in any program area (investigation and permanency are the primary roles). Level III is the case worker with a partial or specialized case load and provides support to supervisors/mentorship to employees on a team, and Level IV is the front-line supervisor. In this sample, most respondents are Level II, meaning they carry a full client caseload, or Level III, with a partial caseload and mentorship responsibility (15%). Most of the sample had direct contact with clients, as only 3% were in director roles or other positions (19%).

Prior to evaluating the merits of the structural model, we tested the assumptions of ML analysis. The results indicated that all items had skewness values <|3| and kurtosis values <|5|. Both results suggest a normal distribution for each item sufficient to support the usage of ML estimations (Kline, 2016). Moreover, the internal consistency, e.g. Cronbach's alpha scores, of all the scales exceeded established thresholds (>.70). For instance, SPOS scores exhibited an $\alpha = .941$, DHS scores exhibited an $\alpha = .865$, and OLBI scores demonstrated an $\alpha = .898$. The zero order correlations of the values of the respective variables are included in Table 2.

Model fit

The next step was to test the fit of a path model of 1.) POS as a driver of 2.) greater hope that leads to 3.) lower burnout among child welfare professionals. Such a mediation model was specified based on the theory outlined above, that an employee's hope level is in part a product of POS, and that both serve to reduce burnout.

Turning to the results of fit testing, the fit indices indicated that the theory specified path model exhibited good fit ($\chi^2 = 1550.1$; $df = 132$; $p = <.001$; RMSEA = .081 [90% CI: .077, .085]; CFI = .924; SRMR = .043). The factor loadings for each respective factor were all > .50 and statistically significant. Moreover, an examination of the model's structural relationships, as measured by standardized beta values, indicated that DHS scores had a moderate (Cohen, 1988) positive relationship ($\beta = .36$, $p < .001$) with POS and

Table 2. = zero order correlations ($N = 1641$).

Variables	1	2	3
(1) Perceived Organizational Support (POS)	31.4 (10.1)		
(1) Hope	.321*	54.1 (6.34)	
(1) Job Burnout (JB)	−.626*	−.524*	36.3 (8.89)

*$p < .001$.
Means and standard deviations are posted along the diagonal.

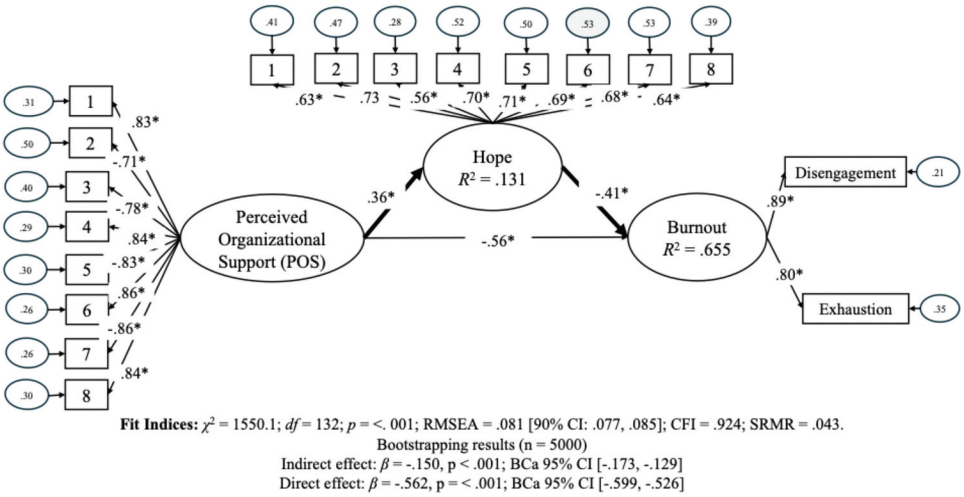

Figure 1. Theory based path model among child welfare employees using standardized values (N' = 1641). Items 1–8 indicate each question in the measure for POS and AHS, respectively.

a moderate negative relationship ($\beta = -.41$, $p < .001$) with burnout. This indicates a statistically significant "indirect effect" via hope as a mediator. The model also exhibited a statistically significant "direct effect" between POS and burnout ($\beta = -.56$, $p < .001$), which combined with the significant indirect effect via hope as a mediator, indicates a complementary form of mediation (Zhao et al., 2010).

An examination of the squared multiple correlations (R^2) of the model also indicated the full model accounted for robust variance in both hope ($R^2 = .131$) and burnout ($R^2 = .655$). An additional f^2 test indicated that the inclusion of hope as a mediator accounted for "large" ($f^2 = .438$; Cohen, 1988) variance in burnout over POS alone. See Figure 1 for the empirical values of the full mediation model.

To further validate the role of hope as a mediator between POS and lower burnout, we tested the indirect effects of the model via bootstrapping. The results of bootstrapping ($N = 5000$) indicated the indirect effect of POS and burnout via hope as a mediator was statistically significant ($\beta = -.150$, $p < .001$; BCa 95% CI [−.173, −.129]). The results also indicated that the direct effect of POS on burnout was also statistically significant ($\beta = -.562$, $p = < .001$; BCa 95% CI [−.599, −.526]),

Discussion

The current study sought to test a theory-based model of hope as a mediator of the established relationship of POS to lower burnout. The results of the testing indicated that the proposed mediation model fit the data, providing empirical support for the assertion that hope promotion may be an important goal for

child welfare administrators seeking to reduce burnout among child welfare employees.

One of the most important aspects of high POS is the positive social exchange or reciprocity, in which employees put forth greater effort toward the organization's goals due to their positive feelings about the organization's support for them (Eisenberger et al., 2020). While POS has long been linked to lower burnout (Anomneze et al., 2016; Cho & Song, 2017; Johnson, 2015; Yanbei et al., 2023), the mechanisms of that link may not be fully understood. The current model suggests that POS may positively impact employee's hope, which itself is an established antecedent of lower burnout (Pharris et al., 2022). Such a result may provide insight to administrators as to how best to shape organizational support initiatives.

Hope as an organizing theory for POS

Given that the specified model of POS that leads to hope that leads to lower burnout fits the data, it may be that child welfare administrators' organization support efforts that increase child welfare workers' hope levels may also reduce burnout. One way that child welfare administrators could employ hope theory in providing organizational support is to strive to promote the dimensions of child welfare workers' agency and pathways. For instance, child welfare administrators could seek to provide "pathways" (Snyder et al., 1991) for their employees to achieve their own professional and personal goals. This could include hosting open discussions with staff, particularly frontline staff, to explore barriers they believe are hindering them from being able to achieve shared organizational goals. Administrators could then work with employees to identify blockages that prevent the workforce's ability to navigate pathways to their goals. Per hope theory, such efforts of organizational support could also boost an employee's sense of agency, which would contribute to rises in employees' hope levels. The path model tested in the current study suggests that such an emphasis by the organization on promoting employees' agency and pathways may yield the added benefit of lowering burnout. Such a conclusion also validates earlier studies linking higher hope to lower burnout among child welfare workers (Pharris et al., 2022). While future research on organizational support initiatives is needed to understand better how hope may be fostered in the child welfare workspace, the current results provide a foundation for such studies.

Limitations

While the current study holds promise for advancing our understanding of the relationship between POS and lower burnout, potential limitations exist. First, the model was tested with a sample of child welfare workers in a single state of

the US. As a result, uncertainty remains as to the true parent population from which the sample was drawn. While theory does not suggest that variables such as residence in a particular state would moderate the relationship between POS, hope, and burnout, further research from more states is needed to test this assumption. Moreover, different scales that measure the chosen variables in a different way, such as different measures of burnout (Maslach et al., 1997), may produce different variable correlations. Additional research with different measures of the variables is needed to test this theory.

It is also important to note that while the hypothesized model provided good fit, such a result does not mean that alternative models would not also provide good fit. This is particularly true since the model exhibited complementary mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). While complimentary mediation provides empirical support for the proposed theoretical specification of a mediation model, in this case, POS as an antecedent of hope leading to lower burnout among child welfare workers, the presence of complementary mediation suggests that hope may only be one of several mediators between POS and burnout that coexist in the parent population of child welfare workers (Zhao et al., 2010). Consequently, future research is needed to test alternative models that include additional proposed mediators linking POS to lower burnout. Finally, the state agency with which we collected the data did not collect key demographics within the survey. As a result, we could not perform a multi-group analysis to test for measurement invariance across racial and gender groups. While theory does not suggest that the fit of the model would be different across these groups, future research is needed to test this assumption.

While the study has potential limitations, it is also notable that we followed the best practices of the path model by specifying a model a priori to be tested (Hayes, 2013). Such an approach increases the likelihood that the tested model is an adequate estimation of reality.

Conclusion

Despite potential limitations, the current study provides insight on the established link between POS and lower burnout. Because of the negative impact of burnout on child welfare workers (Chernesky & Israel, 2009; DePanfilis, 2006; H. Kim & Kao, 2014; Leake et al., 2017; Strolin et al., 2006), understanding how to mitigate burnout among child welfare employees is an important task. The current study sheds light on how, among a large sample of child welfare workers, POS is linked to lower burnout through hope as a mediator. By identifying hope as a mediator between the POS and lower burnout, the current study provides a direction for future research into how child welfare administrators can provide organizational support in a manner that maximizes hope promotion.

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