

A Mixed-method Study of Psychological Empowerment in Child Protection Practitioners

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Abstract : Child protection practitioners are a vital part of systems designed to protect children from abuse and neglect. Reforms in Anglo-American systems have shown a trend towards compliance-culture that reduces practitioner autonomy and empowerment, increasing staff turnover and negatively impacting outcomes for children. This explanatory mixed-methods study examined psychological empowerment in a national sample of child protection practitioners in Australia (n=109) using the Psychological Empowerment Instrument followed by semi-structured interviews (n=19). The results show that practitioners experience the sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment differently, perceiving themselves to have high levels of competence and satisfaction in their work but limited opportunities for self-determination and low levels of impact on decision-making in their organizations. The qualitative data revealed that practitioners do not trust systemic reforms and have experienced them as ineffective, politically driven, and bureaucratic. The increased compliance demanded from these reforms has left practitioners feeling that their expertise is not valued, leading many to leave their organizations. The practitioners who remain employed in child protection identified their use of advocacy, curiosity, and child-centered values as ways of protecting their psychological empowerment. The findings highlight the ways psychological empowerment can be promoted within child protection systems, improving staff retention and building expertise.

Keywords : child protection, implementation, psychological empowerment, systems theory

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