Testing a theory of organizational culture, climate and youth outcomes in child welfare systems: A United States national study☆

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A B S T R A C T

Theories of organizational culture and climate (OCC) applied to child welfare systems hypothesize that strategic dimensions of organizational culture influence organizational climate and that OCC explains system variance in youth outcomes. This study provides the first structural test of the direct and indirect effects of culture and climate on youth outcomes in a national sample of child welfare systems and isolates specific culture and climate dimensions most associated with youth outcomes. The study applies multilevel path analysis (ML-PA) to a U.S. nationwide sample of 2,380 youth in 73 child welfare systems participating in the second National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being. Youths were selected in a national, two-stage, stratified random sample design. Youths' psychosocial functioning was assessed by caregivers' responses to the Child Behavior Checklist at intake and at 18-month follow-up. OCC was assessed by front-line caseworkers' ($N = 1,740$) aggregated responses to the Organizational Social Context measure. Comparison of the a priori and subsequent trimmed models confirmed a reduced model that excluded rigid organizational culture and explained 70% of the system variance in youth outcomes. Controlling for youth- and system-level covariates, systems with more proficient and less resistant organizational cultures exhibited more functional, more engaged, and less stressful climates. Systems with more proficient cultures and more engaged, more functional, and more stressful climates exhibited superior youth outcomes. Findings suggest child welfare administrators can support service effectiveness with interventions that improve specific dimensions of culture and climate.

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The mission and legal mandate of child welfare systems in each state are to promote the safety and well-being of children who are suspected victims of abuse or neglect. Evidence indicates these systems vary greatly in their effectiveness and many systems experience limited success (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Although a number of factors may explain between-system variance in youth outcomes, growing evidence suggests that the work environments created for caseworkers by child welfare agencies are associated with youth outcomes (Glisson & Green, 2006, 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Schoenwald, Sheidow, Letourneau, & Liao, 2003; Yoo & Brooks, 2005).

Decades of empirical studies from the organizational research literature indicate that facets of organizational social context such as organizational culture (i.e., shared behavioral norms and expectations) and organizational climate (i.e., the psychological impact of the work environment on employees' well-being) are two of the most important dimensions of work environments for employee performance and behavior across a range of settings and outcomes (Aarons & Sawitzky,

2006; Carr, Schmidt, Ford, & DeShon, 2003; Hartnell, Ou, & Kinicki, 2011; James et al., 2008; Sackmann, 2011). These studies indicate that organizations can improve their effectiveness by developing specific, strategically-focused organizational cultures and climates that encourage targeted behavior from an organization's members and contribute to organizational success (Schneider, Macey, Lee, & Young, 2009). Researchers have extended this work into child welfare and youth mental health settings with positive preliminary results (Glisson & Green, 2006, 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Glisson, Hemmelgarn, Green, & Williams, 2013; Yoo & Brooks, 2005). These studies suggest that child welfare administrators and caseworkers may be able to improve outcomes for youth by transforming the cultures and climates of child welfare work environments.

Models of organizational culture and climate in child welfare settings hypothesize that strategic dimensions of organizational culture (i.e., proficiency, rigidity, resistance) produce organizational climates (i.e., engagement, functionality, stress) that explain system variance in youth outcomes (Glisson, Green, & Williams, 2012). These models provide administrators with targets for change efforts by describing the relationships linking behavioral norms and expectations in the work environment (i.e., culture), the psychological impact of the work environment on caseworkers (i.e., climate), and positive youth outcomes.

Although promising, organizational culture and climate theories describing the full set of direct and indirect relationships between culture, climate, and youth outcomes have yet to be tested in a national sample of child welfare systems. Previous studies of organizational culture and climate in child welfare settings have relied on limited samples, incorporated a restricted number of culture or climate dimensions, and failed to test the complete set of structural relationships (Glisson & Green, 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Glisson & James, 2002; Yoo & Brooks, 2005). These gaps limit efforts to improve child welfare systems because it is unclear which dimensions of organizational culture and climate may be most critical to youth outcomes and which dimensions of these two facets of organizational social context are related to each other.

Characterizing the organizational social contexts of child welfare agencies

Organizational researchers have studied how characteristics of work environments impact employee and organizational performance since the 1950s (Argyris, 1958; Fleishman, 1953). This body of empirical and theoretical literature confirms that organizational social context can be meaningfully described along two key dimensions—organizational culture and organizational climate—that describe unique aspects of the organization's social context and relate differentially and significantly to organizational and individual performance and outcomes (Hartnell et al., 2011; Sackmann, 2011; Schneider, Ehrhart, & Macey, 2011; Verbeke, Volgering, & Hessels, 1998).

Organizational culture describes the shared behavioral expectations and norms that characterize and direct behavior in a work environment (Cooke & Szumal, 1993; Verbeke et al., 1998). These expectations are modeled for new employees and reinforced through formal and informal sanctions as employees adjust to the social milieu of the agency or work unit (Glisson, Green, et al., 2012). Organizational culture is important because of its influence on how employees prioritize and execute job tasks, how they make sense of events in their work setting, and how they experience the psychological impact of the work environment on their personal well-being. In child welfare agencies, cultural norms are associated with how caseworkers view and relate to clients, their level of availability and responsiveness to clients, the types of relationships they are able to form with children and families, and the specific practice models they employ to achieve child safety, permanency, and well-being (Glisson & James, 2002).

Organizational climate is an aggregate construct comprised of shared employee perceptions regarding how their work environment impacts their own psychological well-being and functioning (Glisson, Green, et al., 2012). Individual employee perceptions regarding the impact of the work environment on their personal well-being are referred to as *psychological* climate and these individual perceptions form the basis for understanding *organizational* climate (James et al., 2008). When individuals in a work unit share similar psychological climate perceptions, these individual perceptions can be aggregated to characterize the work unit (i.e., define its organizational climate; James et al., 2008). Theory and empirical research support the aggregation of psychological climate perceptions to the organizational level and a number of studies have demonstrated the importance of organizational climate to organizational and individual outcomes (Carr et al., 2003; Patterson et al., 2005). Organizational climate is important to outcomes in child welfare systems because of its effects on employee motivation and work attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment, all of which are associated with individuals' performance in the organization (James et al., 2008; Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001).

Empirical and theoretical development of the organizational culture and climate constructs have resulted in the identification of strategic dimensions of culture and climate that affect targeted employee behavior and outcome criteria (Schneider et al., 2011). For example, researchers have studied *safety culture* in industrial settings, linking behavioral expectations for the use of safety equipment to decreased rates of workplace accidents (Zohar, 2000). Similarly, scholars working in the area of customer service have generated robust evidence that an organization's *service climate* impacts customer service outcomes and organizational profitability (Schneider et al., 2009). Strategic dimensions of organizational culture and climate contribute to organizational outcomes by signaling to employees what behaviors are expected and rewarded and by creating a work environment in which those behaviors are supported both materially (i.e., through policies, procedures, and reward structures) and psychologically (Schneider et al., 2011).

Recent theoretical and empirical work in child welfare agencies has built on the notion of strategic culture and climate dimensions to develop and confirm a conceptual model of organizational culture and climate for child welfare agencies