



Measuring organizational health in child welfare agencies



Cathryn C. Potter^{a,*}, Robin Leake^b, Laricia Longworth-Reed^b, Inna Altschul^b, Shauna Rienks^b

^a Rutgers University School of Social Work, United States

^b Erma and Brad Butler Institute for Families, University of Denver, United States

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, federal funds have been directed toward programs to improve the organizational health and functioning of public and tribal child welfare agencies. This study introduces a battery of instruments aimed at holistic measurement of organizational health factors in public, private, and tribal child welfare agencies. The Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) was designed as part of a federally funded grant to aid development of organizational interventions in child welfare settings. Assessment results are used diagnostically to identify strengths and challenges and to guide the development of targeted systems-change interventions and to track change over time. This study describes the iterative process of developing and testing the measurement tools, including results from exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses. The final, revised set of measures includes 20 scales and 3 indices measuring aspects of individual, work unit, and organizational functioning.

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1. Introduction

Public human service agencies such as child welfare organizations must constantly change and adapt their practices to effectively meet the needs of the families they serve and to adhere to a complex and ever-shifting web of state and federal laws and policies. The challenges that these agencies face include workforce concerns, limited resources, changing technology, regulatory changes, political forces, and most importantly, the complexity of cases that demand better cross-systems service delivery to meet the needs of families effectively and efficiently (Golden, 2009).

A skilled and effective workforce is critical for the success of child welfare agencies in meeting these challenges and providing effective services to children and families. One of the greatest challenges facing public and private child welfare agencies is recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce as turnover rates remain consistently high nationwide, estimated to average between 20 and 30% (Levine, 2004; Madden, Scannapieco, & Painter, 2014). Numerous studies have documented the deleterious effects of high staff turnover in agencies (e.g., Drake & Yadama, 1996; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005), linking staff retention to client outcomes, and job satisfaction to quality service delivery (McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin-Goltzman, 2009). Research has focused in recent years on understanding reasons for leaving and for staying. Many studies relate retention of staff to characteristics of staff members, such as job commitment, job satisfaction, education level, and burnout, and to organizational variables, such as quality of supervision, caseload size, and benefits (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Landsman,

2007; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2003; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2006; Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & McDermott Lane, 2005). The conclusion of many such investigations is that the “turnover problem” is most likely an interaction between a number of individual and agency factors (McGowan et al., 2009).

Retention of staff is not the only strategy for ensuring quality case-work; many other individual-level and agency-level factors play a role in the healthy functioning of a workforce (Glisson & Green, 2011; Williams & Glisson, 2013). There is a need for continued development of comprehensive measures of organizational functioning that include both individual and organizational level factors and can be used both diagnostically with child welfare systems and to assess change over time in the context of organizational interventions. The measure of organizational functioning described in this article, the Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment (COHA) was developed to assess individual, work unit, and organizational factors that may influence the quality of child welfare services. The COHA was developed as part of a five-year demonstration project funded by the Children’s Bureau to develop and evaluate an organizational intervention in three western child welfare systems.

1.1. Organizational assessment in child welfare

Long before the “turnover problem” was addressed by child welfare research, social psychologists such as Kurt Lewin (1947) described optimal conditions under which organizations function and the importance of social context in supporting worker performance. The term “organizational culture” is typically used to describe the behavioral expectations and norms of the agency, or “the way things are done here,” while “organizational climate” commonly refers to the shared

* Corresponding author at: Rutgers University School of Social Work 536 George St. New Brunswick, NJ 08901.

perception of the social environment of the agency (Glisson, Dukes, & Green, 2006; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006; Moran & Volkwein, 1992). The difference between culture and climate has proven to be challenging to articulate and operationalize, and even more difficult to measure as distinct constructs (Denison, 1996; Shim, 2010; Cooke & Szumal, 1993, 2000; Glisson & James, 2002; Verbeke, Volgering, & Hessels, 1998). Despite these challenges, these terms are frequently used in conjunction with one another or interchangeably as part of a common vernacular to refer to how the organizational context influences employees' attitudes and job performance (Verbeke et al., 1998; Westbrook, Ellett, & Asberg, 2012). Several measurement instruments, which are described below, attempt to assess either organizational culture, organizational climate, or both.

The *Organizational Social Context* (OSC) measure is one of the few measures that has been used in multiple child welfare settings and in a national context (Glisson et al., 2006; Glisson, Green, & Williams, 2012). The OSC includes three domains of organizational context: organizational culture, organizational climate, and work attitudes. Organizational culture is assessed through three scales that focus on expectations of rigidity, proficiency, and resistance; while organizational climate is assessed with three scales focusing on stress, functionality, and engagement. The work attitudes domain includes measures of job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which, according to the developers, captures agency morale (Glisson & Durick, 1988). Glisson, Green, and Williams (2012) validated the OSC measurement model using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) and hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) with a nationwide sample of 1740 caseworkers across 81 child welfare systems, finding good fit for hypothesized scales and acceptable to high reliabilities. The organizational climate measures of the OSC have recently been used to show that maltreated youth who are part of child welfare systems that demonstrate more engaged organizational climates have better outcomes, including better psychosocial functioning over time (Glisson, 2009; Glisson & Green, 2011). However, the OSC is a proprietary measure, allowing limited access to individual items; and until recently, limited access to psychometric information, making it difficult for others to assess the conceptual links between items and constructs. In addition, use agreements may pose financial obstacles to agencies and sometimes limit agency access to data. This lack of ease in using data at the agency level can limit the tool's practical diagnostic utility.

The *Parker Psychological Climate Survey* (Parker et al., 2003) has been used as an organizational climate measure in the context of organizational interventions in child welfare by researchers at the University of Albany and Yeshiva University (Claiborne et al., 2011; Auerbach, Schudrich, Lawrence, Claiborne, & McGowan, 2014). The Parker instrument consists of 48 items comprising 12 scales across four dimensions (Role: ambiguity, conflict, and overload; Job: importance, autonomy, and challenge; Organization: innovation, justice, and support; and Supervisor: trust, support, goal emphasis, and work facilitation). While the instrument has been used in various SEM models relating the individual scales to job retention and to agency investment, the basic organizational climate measurement model has not been confirmed with a child welfare sample, nor are established reliabilities available in the literature.

The *Professional Organizational Culture Questionnaire* was developed by Ellett and her colleagues as a way to predict turnover in public child welfare agencies (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003). Building on the turnover research, the team developed the *Child Welfare Organizational Culture Inventory* (Westbrook, Ellett, & Deweaver, 2009) to measure seven dimensions of organizational culture, including: supervisor support, administration support, professionalism, collegiality, autonomy, organizational ethos, and beliefs about parents of children in the system. This 84-item measure was found to predict 26% of the variance in staff intent to leave their state's public child welfare agency. In another study, a 64-item adapted version of the *Organizational Culture Inventory*

was used to predict staff turnover in one state child welfare office (Westbrook et al., 2012).

1.2. Individual-level factors associated with child welfare workforce health

Some demographic factors are consistently linked to *intentions to leave* the child welfare job and to actual turnover, including education level, competency level, and tenure in the job (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006; National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015). Staff who have a Bachelor's or Master's degree in social work are more likely to stay in their jobs compared to staff without degrees (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007; Rosenthal & Waters, 2006). One recent study of BSW and MSW graduates found that those who reported higher child welfare competency indicated more intention to stay in their jobs compared to graduates reporting less child welfare competency (National Child Welfare Workforce Institute, 2015). Not surprisingly, education and job tenure are highly associated variables, since education and experience often lead to greater job competency and self-efficacy (Williams, Nichols, Kirk, & Wilson, 2011). In general, staff members who feel competent, prepared, and able to do the job, are more likely to stay than are staff without professional social work degrees and job experience (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001; Zlotnik et al., 2005).

Many studies find job satisfaction to be highly correlated with retention (Auerbach, McGowan, Ausberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; Dickinson & Perry, 2002). Typically, employees who are satisfied with their job are more likely to work collaboratively with others, build relationships, show more commitment to their jobs, have less absenteeism, and generally perform at a higher level (Sypniewska, 2014). Individual factors that jeopardize job satisfaction include job stress that results from high workloads and feeling time pressure to get too much done in too little time (Ellett et al., 2007; Landsman, 2007; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007; Williams et al., 2011). Another source of stress for frontline workers results from the vicarious trauma of working with families who are experiencing acute trauma themselves and the socio-emotional and behavioral symptoms of secondary traumatic stress that arise from vicarious trauma (Baird & Jenkins, 2003; Figley, 1999; Middleton, 2011). Employees who are able to cope with stressful job situations are more likely to experience job satisfaction and stay in the organization (Cunningham, 2006; Lee, Forster, & Rehner, 2011).

1.3. Work unit-level factors related to workforce health

Employees' experience of the work environment can be categorized by factors related to their particular work unit or team as well as those associated with the larger organizational environment. Important unit-level factors that shape employees' experience of their job include supervision, team cohesion, professional sharing and support, and a shared vision of the agency among team members (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). A number of quantitative and qualitative studies have documented the importance of supervision—particularly supervisor support—in staff performance, job satisfaction, and retention (Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2008; Potter, Comstock, Brittain, & Hanna, 2009; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). Support from a supervisor can buffer the stress of the job for child welfare staff, while a lack of support, or negative relationships with one's supervisor, can add to the stress of the job (Collins-Camargo, 2006; Ellett, 2009; Ellett et al., 2007; Juby & Scannapieco, 2007). Other studies have found that support from colleagues helps employees cope with job stress and work collaboratively to do their jobs more effectively, and that a sense of cohesion and shared vision among unit or team members improves individual job performance and leads to greater job satisfaction (Ellett et al., 2007; Mor Barak et al., 2006). One study found that professional sharing and support predicted over 50% of the variance in child welfare staff's intentions to stay in their jobs (Ellett et al., 2003).

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