Children and Youth Services Review 38 (2014) 123–132

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Children and Youth Services Review

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/childyouth

Organizational responsiveness to children and families: Findings from a national survey of nonprofit child welfare agencies

Bowen McBeath [a,*], Mónica Pérez Jolles [b], Emmeline Chuang [c], Alicia C. Bunger [d], Crystal Collins-Camargo [e]

[a] *Portland State University School of Social Work and Hatfield School of Government, PO Box 751, Portland, OR 97207, United States*
[b] *University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health, Department of Health Policy and Management, United States*
[c] *University of California-Los Angeles Fielding School of Public Health, Department of Health Policy and Management, United States*
[d] *The Ohio State University College of Social Work, United States*
[e] *University of Louisville Kent School of Social Work, United States*

ARTICLE INFO

Available online 31 January 2014

Keywords:
Consumers
Children and families
Nonprofit organizations
Child welfare agencies
Interorganizational competition

ABSTRACT

Although child welfare practice at the frontline, organizational, and systemic levels is predicated on responsiveness to children and families, research has not determined why some child welfare agencies are more responsive to consumers than others. This study examines the influence of children and families on agency operations ("consumer-centricity") among a national sample of nonprofit child welfare agencies. In testing for external and internal determinants of consumer-centricity, we find that agencies reported a high level of consumer-centricity overall. Multivariate analyses indicate that interorganizational competition was the principal predictor of consumer-centricity; in contrast, internal agency attributes such as administrative infrastructural supports and accreditation status, service technology, agency leadership, and structural characteristics were not associated with consumer-centricity. We propose three areas for continuing child welfare research on consumer-centricity and identify direct and indirect strategies that child welfare policymakers and practitioners may use to promote consumer-centricity among nonprofit child welfare agencies.

1. Introduction

Attending to the needs of children and families is a central consideration in the design and delivery of child welfare programs. At the frontline level, case managers and clinicians are expected to tailor services and permanency plans to the unique needs of youth and their families (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & DePanfilis, 2009). Child welfare managers have been increasingly required to develop integrated databases and performance dashboards (Carnochan, Samples, Lawson, & Austin, 2013) and use case-based information to shape program improvement strategies (Collins-Camargo, Sullivan, & Murphy, 2011). Child welfare agency mission statements are commonly framed around the value of caring for at-risk children and attending to their safety, permanency, and wellbeing needs. At the policy level, the Child and Family Service Reviews are predicated on enhancing the responsiveness of child welfare systems to the benefit of state and federal child welfare systems (Testa & Poertner, 2010). At each of these levels of organization, practices and routines are developed in anticipation of or in response to the changing circumstances of children and families.

This paper investigates consumer-centricity in child welfare agency settings, defined as the extent to which organizations act in response to or are affected by the needs, behaviors, and/or preferences of child welfare-involved children and families. Child welfare innovations increasingly seek to incorporate child and family input under the assumption that consumer-centricity may enhance organizational effectiveness in improving child and family outcomes. Through the use of demonstration projects, the Children's Bureau has supported the involvement of youth and families in child welfare system redesign (Mitchell et al., 2012; Williamson & Gray, 2011). Attention to consumer-centricity also reflects growing advocacy efforts by foster care alumni to expand the role of children and families in child welfare policymaking and systems (Casey Family Programs, 2008; Nybell, 2013).

These efforts are intended to enhance public accountability and system effectiveness by strengthening direct and indirect consumer participation in organizational decision-making. Indirect approaches for incorporating consumers into agency governance involve agency directors, staff, and community members representing the interests of children and families in board deliberations and decision-making. Direct mechanisms range from formal consumer participation on boards, panels, and workgroups to informal, often ad hoc consumer input through surveys and frontline partnerships in service planning and delivery (Bryan, Collins-Camargo, & Jones, 2011; Collins-Camargo, Jones, & Krusich, 2009; LeRoux, 2009a).

At the program level, children and families may also be involved in service delivery and planning. Agency leaders may elicit consumer input in implementing and monitoring evidence-based practices (Aarons, Hurlburt, & Horwitz, 2011; Marty, Rapp, McHugo, & Whitley, 2007) and in performance measurement and program evaluation

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: mcbeath@pdx.edu (B. McBeath).

0190-7409/$ – see front matter © 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.01.018

(Hatry, 2007). Additionally, agencies may use family engagement models (e.g., team decision-making, family group decision meetings) to systematically increase opportunities for child and family involvement via family–caseworker collaboration in assessment and service planning (Crea, Crampton, Knight, & Paine-Wells, 2011; Weigensberg, Barth, & Guo, 2009).

Whether focused on governance or programming, these methods sensitize agency staff and leaders to consumer perspectives for the purpose of enhancing service quality and promoting a learning organizational culture (Schein, 1986). They are also premised on the expectation that consumers should have some control over how they are treated within human service systems (Smith, 2010). As a result, consumer-centricity may promote the development of more positive relationships between agency staff and consumers by operationalizing the principles of inclusivity and de-stigmatization (Halvorsen, 2003; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Kissane, 2010); it may also improve decision-making and services through collaborative engagement in program improvement (Smith, 2010; Yang & Pandey, 2011).

Yet while the field recognizes the importance of adjusting governance and programming in response to consumer needs and input, reforming these structures may be difficult in practice. Whether mandated by law (as in the case of citizen review boards and panels) or initiated voluntarily, agency barriers to consumer-centricity may include: lack of external incentives or pressures; policy/fiscal prohibitions against altering governance and management practices; insufficient agency resources and staff supports; lack of leadership promoting a culture of consumer responsiveness and supporting consumer-centered initiatives; and ineffective procedures for requesting and incorporating feedback (Bryan, Jones, Allen, & Collins-Camargo, 2007; Bryan, Jones, & Lawson, 2010; Collins-Camargo et al., 2009). In addition, children and families may have little authority over service and governance reforms. In child welfare as in other human service fields, children and families are the primary consumers of child welfare services but are rarely the direct payers for them and so may have little ability to negotiate service options in the face of Medicaid regulations and other federal and state funding restrictions. Also, the services received by children and families may be court-ordered rather than voluntary, adding an additional layer of complexity reflecting the authority and preferences of family court officials in service delivery (Fluke & Oppenheim, 2010).

Thus, in making programmatic decisions, child welfare agencies must balance the needs of children and families with their commitments to other constituencies, including funders, regulatory bodies, consumer groups, community partners, and their own staff and directors (Hasenfeld, 1982; Provan & Milward, 2002). The question becomes how agencies address the needs of consumers in light of their obligations to others. This topic becomes particularly important when child welfare agencies face competing demands from key groups, as it highlights the importance of identifying the conditions under which agencies prioritize the needs of children and families.

These challenges associated with consumer-centricity may be felt acutely by nonprofit child welfare agencies. Nonprofit agencies have generalized ownership structures wherein funders, agency staff, community members, and program participants may claim ownership (Frumkin, 2002). The influence of these stakeholders on nonprofit agencies generally depends on the extent of their contribution to agency mission and fiscal sustainment. Because nonprofit child welfare agencies are often dependent on revenues generated through service contracts with public agencies (McBeath, Collins-Camargo, & Chuang, 2012), they may face economic pressures favoring consumer-centricity when external mandates and contract provisions require responsiveness to child and family needs. However, the priorities of funders and public child welfare agencies may not always reflect these local concerns raising the question of under what conditions agencies adjust their operations in response to consumer needs.

In general, research has described how child welfare agencies promote consumer participation but not the impact of these strategies for stimulating consumer-driven organizational change. LeRoux (2009a, 2009b) found that nonprofit agencies provide greater opportunities for consumer governance when funded more by public contracts as opposed to private, charitable giving; when led by female and/or culturally diverse directors; when board composition mirrors the overall demographics of consumers and when boards include consumers; and when agencies are small. In contrast, there has been no empirical attention to the influence of consumer feedback and needs on core interorganizational, programmatic, and staffing domains.

This paper uses data from the National Survey of Private Child and Family Serving Agencies (McBeath et al., 2012) to examine the perceived influence of children and families on nonprofit organizational behavior across the domains of initiating new services, managing existing programming, forming interorganizational relationships, and staff development. Multivariate models are used to identify the influence of external and internal factors associated with the likelihood of consumer-centricity in these domains of organizational and management practice.

2. External and internal determinants of consumer-centricity

Fundamentally, adapting organizational structures and processes to be more consumer-focused involves organizational innovation and change. Hasenfeld (1982) suggests that organizational innovation refers to the adoption of processes, technologies, and patterns of human relations previously unfamiliar to the organization whereas organizational change involves the redistribution of resources and power supporting agency sustainment. Because organizations generally seek to align their internal operations with the demands and opportunities present in their external environment, innovation and change that reflect consumer input may be motivated by external and internal factors.

In particular, nonprofit child welfare agencies may become consumer-centric in response to interorganizational competition and features of the local agency environment as well as internal organizational factors including administrative infrastructure and strategic attributes, the form and flexibility of agency service technology, and overall agency structure (Hasenfeld, 1982; Scott, 2008). Even when these change conditions are present, however, agency engagement in innovative, consumer-focused behavior may be shaped as much by larger institutional pressures as by intraorganizational conditions (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). We review the literature supporting these arguments in this section.

2.1. External factors

Interorganizational competition may create pressures and incentives for agencies to attend to consumers and secure other scarce and contested resources. Literature over the past two decades suggests that competition is rising in the nonprofit human service sector due to the reliance on shrinking public funding, common service technology, shared clientele, and the movement of for-profit firms and other organizations into markets traditionally populated by nonprofit providers (Smith, 2012; Tuckman, 1998; Young, Salamon, & Grinsfelder, 2012). At the sector level, competition has resulted in greater interaction between and consolidation of providers, increased efforts to secure funding from traditional and new sources, and managerial pressure to enhance overall agency performance (Garrow, 2011; LeRoux & Goerdel, 2009; Romzek, LeRoux, & Blackmar, 2012; Romzek, LeRoux, Johnston, Kempf, & Piatak, 2013).

The extent and consequences of competition among nonprofit child welfare agencies have not yet been established, although arguments can be made to suggest that competition can have positive and negative effects on consumer-centricity. On the one hand, competition may push nonprofit agencies to be more market-oriented and commercialized, and thus more consumer-centric. This argument, which reflects the New Public Management orientation to privatization and managed competition (Meier & O'Toole, 2009) as well as population ecology