Authors of accountability: Paperwork and social work in contemporary child welfare practice

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This analysis drew from a study in which child welfare professionals were interviewed about their definitions of "well-being" and the barriers and facilitators to promoting well-being in their daily practices. Participants consistently identified an unfortunate irony: that the practices they consider essential to promoting well-being are often constrained by system-wide efforts to ensure compliance with child welfare mandates, including the well-being mandate. The systems' need for data on accountability and compliance was often viewed as anti-thetical to practices of well-being for children and families. During in-depth interviews with 28 child welfare professionals in a large Midwestern city, casework was described as having two key dimensions: social work and paperwork. "Social work" was characterized as the work of building strengths-based relationships with clients. "Paperwork" was characterized as requirements to document practices to ensure compliance with institutional mandates. The latter form of work was often described as diverting time and attention away from the former. However, poignant counterpoints to this characterization of paperwork were provided, illustrating ways that it might facilitate social work. We propose a set of essential questions for future research in the role of paperwork in child welfare practice, including an exploration of what kinds of accountability paperwork enables and how these forms of bureaucratic authorship relate to other forms of communication and relationality in contemporary child welfare systems.

1. Introduction

In 2012, the Administration for Children, Youth and Families released an information memorandum to all child welfare systems across the U.S. (U.S. D.H.H.S., 2012). This document proposed integrating a multidimensional framework of social and emotional well-being into assessments, services, and workforce training. It was also a federal call for a cultural shift in child welfare systems to expand beyond exclusively system-level outcome measures of success (e.g., size of system population, rates of permanent placements through reunification/adoption) to include child and family-level indicators of wellness (e.g., improved child development outcomes and increased social-emotional functioning of children and families). In the simplest terms, it outlined and justified a need within the field for an explicit focus on demonstrating changes in well-being, and on improving the social and emotional health of children and families. Findings from this study

indicated that the expectation that the practices and outcomes related to this third mandate be documented has introduced the potential to add to the existing array of paperwork and accountability measures that inundate child welfare systems and those working within them.

This points to a long-standing tension in child welfare systems: they are, in the words of Hasenfeld (1972, 1983), designed to be both "people-processing" and "people-changing.[1]" Child welfare systems are people-changing in that they are legally and socially charged with creating changes in the lives of children and families through various interventions to improve family functioning and (or) ensure child safety and stability. At the same time, child welfare systems are legally accountable for *processing* these children and families as they move through the system. Youth and families are classified, monitored, and assessed based on data gathered about them through various bureaucratic, legal and diagnostic practices. Professionals within these systems are also monitored and assessed to ensure the processing elements of

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[1] Hasenfeld defines "people-processing" organizations as those that are designed "not to change the behavior of people directly but to process them and confer public statuses on them" (1972, p. 256). While the term "people-changing" may have more humanistic connotations than "people-processing" in other settings, in Hasenfeld's work, neither are necessarily or universally positive or negative social phenomena. In child welfare, both people-processing and people-changing methods can be highly controlling, ethnocentric, classist, and disruptive to child and family well-being (e.g., Dickson, 2009; Pelton, 2016; Roberts, 2001).

the system's work are completed. Tensions and confluences between these two institutional aims—people-processing and people-changing—have been noted and studied by scholars of bureaucracy (Brodkin, 2008; Watkins-Hayes, 2009) and of social work and child welfare casework practice (Parton, 2006; Roberts, 2001; Smith & Donovan, 2003). These tensions are critical but understudied elements of professional child welfare practice (McBeath et al., 2014).

This paper used data from interviews that explored how child welfare professionals conceptualized and attempted to promote child well-being in their work. Our analysis centers on an unexpected theme that emerged in these interviews—tensions between paperwork and "social work"—as professionals discussed what they believe to be barriers and facilitators to well-being.

1.1. Significance

In the street-level bureaucracy literature on casework, frontline practice is studied as a type of labor carried out by workers who have certain levels of discretion which are continually attenuated by managerial attempts at ensuring accountability to policy goals (Lipsky, 2010). These scholars treat casework as the specialized domain of the caseworker, analyzing how resources and constraints in the institutional environment influence the kind of casework these workers are able to do, and in turn, whether and to what extent they are involved in people-processing or people-changing.

Within social work literature, the profession that was historically associated with child welfare work (Blome & Steib, 2014), conceptions of casework have mirrored associated changes in how policy defines and funds the child welfare workforce over time. As early as the 1950s, reports indicated that 60% of child welfare employees had social work degrees (Sauber & Wiener, 1952). Despite enduring recommendations by prominent national child welfare organizations for child welfare workers to hold credentials in social work (Blome & Steib, 2014), today, only 18% of caseworkers have an MSW (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman & Dickinson, 2008). This "de-professionalization" of child welfare work has spanned the 1970s through present day. Modern casework became case management: people-processing work that outsourced clinical or advocacy work through referrals (Blome & Steib, 2014).

Social work has enshrined the importance of human relationships as a core value of the profession and a critical element of any change process (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008). This professional ethic draws upon a well-established literature in clinical practice that has long identified establishing positive relationships with clients—a working alliance—as a critical component to achieving positive change outcomes (Halstead, Wagner, Vivero, & Ferkol, 2002; Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011; Lambert & Cattani-Thompson, 1996; Rogers, 1959; Zilcha-Mano, 2017). Social work research on casework also treats relationship-based practice as a key element of—if not synonymous with—social work practice (Dybicz, 2012; Longhofer, Kubek, & Floersch, 2010; Oliver & Charles, 2015; Roose, Roets, Van Houte, Vandenhole, & Reynaert, 2013). A small body of literature on relational casework takes the worker's recognition of the dignity and humanity of those served, and the power of collaborative and relational methods, as foundational to effective and ethical practice promoting client well-being (Horvath et al., 2011; Longhofer et al., 2010). This can be a critical element of the work of collaboratively engaging clients around processes of change, especially in the context of involuntary and highly coercive systems (Cheng & Lo, 2016).

At the same time, it is well established that paperwork saturates casework practice, so much so that in some instances it becomes a taken-for-granted element synonymous with the job itself (Taylor, 2013). In their ethnography of nursing practices, Sharp, Mcallister, and Broadbent (2017) spelled out the irony of paperwork's negative effects: "the very documentation designed to promote individualized care appear[s] to detract from it" (2016, p. 4). They hypothesized that this is perhaps due to paperwork's dual function as a conveyor of information

about clients and as an institutionally legitimized index of the quality of professionals' work. For this reason, it is often treated as a necessary evil in discourses about bureaucratic reform across disciplines (Golob Jr, Como, & Claridge, 2016; Heuer, Parrott, Percival, & Kacmarek, 2016; McGregor-Lowndes & Ryan, 2009; Thompson, Wojciak, & Cooley, 2015). Our findings suggested that these attitudes exist within child welfare bureaucracies as well, as workers expressed that the very paperwork designed to ensure that well-being is promoted takes their time and energy away from the practices they think of as promoting well-being.

What is less known is *what* paperwork does in child welfare practice, how it does it, and under what circumstances. What kind(s) of accountability does paperwork enable? What kinds of relationality does paperwork enable? The method of using paperwork to hold caseworkers accountable and ensure client compliance rests on the assumption that paperwork helps people communicate information and serves as an accurate document of one's work. Interviews with child welfare professionals complicated these notions of paperwork as a mere tool for accountability, challenging us to consider moments, especially during investigations, when the process of completing paperwork can be a form of social work. Analyzing our participants' insights about the relationship between paperwork, social work and well-being thus allows us to bridge research on bureaucratic accountability and research on relationship-based casework, resisting the assumption in both of these literatures that "relationships" consist solely of human interactions (Hanssen, Hutchinson, Lyngstad, & Sandvin, 2015; Latour, 2007). This paper provides a detailed account of these insights from participants and then considers their research and practice implications.

1.2. Background

The U.S. child welfare system has three key tenets—to ensure the safety, permanence and well-being of children who come into contact with the system. Two of these—safety and permanence—have a long history in child welfare policy and practice (Barth, 1999). In the last twenty years, promoting "well-being" has been emphasized as a third way in which the state should serve children in contact with the system. This most prominently began with the federal Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 but was made a more explicit policy goal through the information memorandum released in 2012 by the Administration of Children and Families. Though there is broad consensus that children in state custody should be well in all domains of their lives, debates continue regarding the extent to which ensuring safety and permanence is equivalent to—or falls short of—ensuring well-being (Jones, LaLiberte, & Piescher, 2015). The uncertainties of this phase of policy implementation provide useful insights into the various ways policies are interpreted. Such ambiguities also call into question the effects of accountability measures created to limit the range of interpretations among frontline workers in an attempt to produce a uniform policy product.

1.2.1. Street-level bureaucracy and accountability

Accountability in casework is a perpetual challenge in bureaucracies. As Lipsky writes, "Accountability is the link between bureaucracy and democracy. Modern democracy depends on the accountability of bureaucracies to carry out declared policy and otherwise administer the ongoing structures of governmentally determined opportunity and regulation" (2010, p. 160). Bureaucracies were long imagined to be institutions in which policies that had been established by policymakers could, through the right managerial maneuverings, be implemented in their pure form by street-level bureaucrats. But as Lipsky (2010) and other implementation scholars have shown, tensions persist between the need to implement policies as their creators intend them to be implemented, and the discretion of people who have direct contact with the populations served (Brodkin, 2008; Rice, 2012). This scholarship suggests reforms have failed to stamp out bureaucratic