



The organizational structure of child welfare: Staff are working hard, but it is hardly working



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ABSTRACT

Child welfare has been overseen, litigated, reviewed, and chastised by those internal to the system and those who have never faced a traumatized child or an abusive parent. The work of child welfare occurs within organizations, generally large, public sector agencies. Literature has paid little attention to the organizational structure or staffing patterns of the agencies mandated to serve vulnerable children and families. This article explores the challenges facing child welfare and ponders the notion that the structure of public child welfare agencies has developed in response to internal and external factors. The resulting organizational structure may not be the best to support the myriad of mandates that child welfare must achieve.

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1. Introduction

Child welfare has been overseen, litigated, reviewed, and chastised by those internal to the system and those who have never faced a traumatized child or an abusive parent. Workers have been blamed, the “system” indicted, administrators fired, and money cut all in the name of improving a system mandated to protect children and serve families. The work of child welfare occurs within organizations, generally large, public sector agencies. Literature has looked at the culture and climate of child welfare organizations (Claiborne et al., 2011; Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998), the role of supervisors (Ausbrooks, 2011; Frey et al., 2012), and the importance of professional staff (Ellett, 2009; Ellett & Leighninger, 2007), but little attention has been paid to the organizational structure or staffing patterns of the agencies mandated to serve vulnerable children and families. This article will explore the challenges facing child welfare and ponder the notion that the structure of public child welfare agencies has developed in response to internal and external factors that have driven organizations to mimic or model other organizations that are seen as successful (Anheier, 2012). The resulting organizational structure may not be the best to support the myriad of mandates that child welfare must achieve.

2. Overview of deprofessionalization and resulting organizational structures

Public sector child welfare in the United States has its origins in the Social Security Act (SSA) of 1935, which both defined the work and funded social work education for child welfare professionals. With affirmation emanating from the influential United States Children's

Bureau (founded in 1912), social work education became regarded as a prerequisite for competent practice, and the Master of Social Work (MSW) became the preferred degree. A 1952 edition of the Social Security Bulletin reports that 60% of employees working primarily in child welfare had some study in social work with 46% of supervisory staff holding a master's in social work (Sauber & Wiener, 1952). To put the figures in context Sauber and Wiener write:

But social work as a profession is very young. Throughout the entire field of social work, only 16 out of every 100 persons had had 2 years or more of study at a graduate school of social work. Public child welfare therefore has a greater proportion of persons with full professional training (20 percent) than the field of social work as a whole (1952, p. 8).

In contrast, more recent surveys show that about 18% of all child welfare workers have an MSW (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickinson, 2008). This falls far short of the recommendations of national organizations such as the Child Welfare League of America and the National Association of Social Workers, which call for direct service workers to have, at a minimum, a BSW and their supervisors and child welfare administrators to have earned an MSW (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, & DePanfilis, 2009). A recent survey of states' educational qualifications and salaries for child welfare positions identified only four states that required at least a social work baccalaureate with no substitutions. Many jurisdictions express a preference for social work education, and in county administered states, some counties

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require social work education. However, the great majority of states allow for substitutions of related degrees with at least 18 allowing entry for those with any bachelor's degree if accompanied by social services experience. At least three states accept any degree with no experience requirement (Casey Family Programs, 2013).

The loss of status in child welfare, generally referred to within the field as “deprofessionalization,” may be traced to changes that occurred at the federal level during the 1960s and in federal legislation through the ensuing decades of the 20th century. First, the U.S. Children's Bureau was subsumed into the public assistance programs administered by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services), which had historically placed less emphasis on professional education for its staff. This led to a loss of status and influence of the Children's Bureau (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007). Subsequently, the passage of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 required states to enact abuse and neglect reporting laws. These triggered an unforeseen avalanche of reports which states and counties were ill prepared to manage. Jurisdictions quickly eliminated educational requirements in order to recruit the number of staff needed to respond to reports. This and subsequent legislation during the 1980s and 1990s attempted to improve child welfare primarily through increased regulation and monitoring rather than through specifying minimum qualifications for staff (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007; Steib & Blome, 2003; Steib & Blome, 2004).

The deprofessionalization which continued in the 1970s begat the conceptualization of the child welfare worker as a “case manager” (i.e., service broker) whose chief duty was to refer clients to external providers of services, rather than as a professional social worker with multifaceted responsibilities, including direct provision of services. This played out in the 1980s and 90s in increased regulation and regimentation as agencies attempted to reduce the complexity of the work through added structure in order to allow people with less knowledge and fewer skills to perform adequately. These efforts led to segmentation of the service continuum into individual “programs” such as child protection investigation, in-home services, and out of home care; increased outsourcing of clinical services; greater reliance on tools to support critical decisions; and step-by-step policies and training curricula to compensate for a workforce lacking in comprehensive child welfare knowledge and clinical skills (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007). This arrangement resulted in families being subjected to arbitrary changes in case managers as they move through the service continuum. Referrals to external services that were formerly offered by caseworkers are now outsourced and may be waitlisted even as the clock ticks on service delivery timelines in laws and policies (Blome & Steib, 2004).

Work in child welfare became characterized by a focus on accountability and documentation, workloads that limited client contact, a lack of emphasis on casework and clinical skills, and lowered autonomy and decision-making authority resulting in child welfare professionals experiencing fewer rewards in their work even as they continued to amass greater responsibility (Malm, Bess, Leos-Urbell, Geen, & Markowitz, 2001). As Schorr (2000) observed, “...regulations descended on local agencies in an ungentle snow, and administrators and supervisors became more prescriptive in more and more detail. The line worker's job became...stultifying” (p. 127). Increased regulation and outsourcing of clinical services, however, did not provide families with a skilled and knowledgeable primary point of contact with whom they could build trust and turn for immediate needs. The caseworker is responsible for completing safety and risk assessments that require clinical competence (Hughes & Rycus, 2007) and ongoing monitoring of a family's progress in attaining case goals. This person often has the least relevant experience, knowledge, and skills and may feel disempowered by, and even fearful of, the courts (Ellett & Steib, 2005; Malm et al., 2001; Smith & Donovan, 2003; Steib & Blome, 2004) and subservient to the reports generated by service providers.

Professionalization is further hampered by public personnel systems that may enforce policies based more on providing citizens an

opportunity for public sector employment than on the public's right to good quality services. In Indiana, for example, Folaron and Hostetter (2007) noted that attempts to institute a degree requirement for child welfare case managers were resisted by both the labor union and the state agency.

3. Organizational structure and supporting theory

Theories of organizations have dominated business literature for many years. The application of organizational perspectives is more recent in social services, but no less necessary if the workings of the primary mechanism through which services are delivered is to be understood.

3.1. Traditional views of organizations

Organizational theory has long debated the relationship between organizational structure and the task environment trying to determine the best way to configure an organization given its purpose (Anheier, 2012). The rational systems perspective, including modern bureaucracy theory, as individually espoused by Max Weber and Frederick Taylor, stressed the need for jobs to be arranged in a hierarchy with an identifiable pattern of formal communication, technical competence as the basis for hiring staff, written rules to guide tasks, and records of decisions made and activities completed (Scott & Davis, 2007). The human relations theory, part of the natural systems perspective, challenged the rational structure purported by Weber and Taylor. While not denying the need for organizational efficiency and effectiveness so important to their predecessors, Elton Mayo and other natural system theorists acknowledged the dominance of informal structures within organizations. Recognizing that employees bring their full range of experiences and expectations to the workplace, the human relations approach suggested that broader motivations like self-fulfillment, social needs, and autonomy must be addressed within the organization (Anheier, 2012). More recently, the rational and natural theoretical approaches to organizations have been joined by the open system theories. Again, the emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness is maintained and informal structures are acknowledged, but the impact of the environment is added to the mix. No longer is the question, what is the best organizational structure? Now the query is broader as in, what is the best organizational structure to match the demands and needs of the environment? Contingency theory takes the social work adage “person-in-environment” to the next level by looking at the “organization-in-environment” (Mulroy, 2004). If there is no one best way to structure an organization, then organizations must be flexible to meet the requirements of competing agendas and fluid expectations. In complex organizations, technology and the demands of the environment breed uncertainty, making coping with ambiguity a vital problem for the organization (Thompson, 1967). Contingency theory recognizes that different external conditions require different organizational characteristics and “...the effectiveness of the organization is contingent upon the amount of congruence or goodness of fit between structural and environmental variables” (Shenhar, 2001, p. 395).

3.2. Current applications of theory

No one theoretical approach is comprehensive; none are right or wrong (Cameron & Quinn, 2011). The Competing Values Framework (CVF) builds on traditional rational, natural, and open system theories and further recognizes that how managers think about their organizations will determine what they perceive must be changed (Cawsey, Deszca, & Ingols, 2012).

The (CVF) framework comprises two dimensions that express the tensions or competing values that characterize all organizations. One axis represents the continuum between flexibility or adaptability juxtaposed by stability or control. The other axis articulates the continuum between efficient internal processes, such as human

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