

11-21-2011

## Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of the Influence of the Organizational Environment on Permanency Decisions for Families

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, Belinda and Wells-Wilbon, Rhonda (2011) "Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of the Influence of the Organizational Environment on Permanency Decisions for Families," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 11 : Iss. 1 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol11/iss1/30>

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### Acknowledgements

We would like to extend sincere appreciation to Dr. Anna McPhatter, Dean, Professor Yvonne Greene, BSW Department Chair, and Dr. Sandra Chipungu of Morgan State University for their unwavering support.

Across the nation, social workers are faced with job demands that include extensive paperwork, difficult caseloads, multiproblem clients, high staff turnover, and limited supervision (Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). Administrators and caseworkers in public child welfare agencies are faced with similar challenges. Equally challenging for child welfare workers is the expectation that they adhere to the mandates of federal legislation that guide practice decisions. Although child welfare policy guides decision making, child welfare workers do not make decisions in a vacuum. In fact, their decisions must be justified to key stakeholders, including the court system, family members, and others invested in the outcomes. In reality, decision making is a complex responsibility that challenges caseworkers to produce positive and far-reaching consequences for clients (Parada, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007; Smith, 2006; U.S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2003). Many child welfare workers practice in public agencies that are primarily bureaucratic in structure and function. Despite the challenges and competing demands on their time, child welfare workers are expected to make (and most are committed to making) the best possible decisions on behalf of the children and families whom they serve (Smith, 2006).

The life of a case has multiple stages in child welfare practice. Child welfare caseworkers make decisions at various points: (a) deciding to investigate, (b) opening a case, (c) removing and placing in out-of-home care, (d) determining type of placement, and (e) determining permanency outcomes. While each decision point requires the worker to make a comprehensive assessment to inform decisions, permanency outcome decisions are the most difficult because the outcomes are legally binding.

This study is part of a larger exploratory study that examined contextual factors that influence permanency decisions in the public child welfare system. The complexities of working in the field of child welfare practice underscore the need to ensure the presence of a cadre of skilled and highly competent social workers to meet the demands of managing child welfare caseloads in a bureaucratic organizational environment. Greater efforts are needed to support workers in the field. To that end, this study was designed to answer the question: To what extent do contextual factors in the organizational environment impact the decisions made by social workers to reunify or terminate parental rights of children placed in foster care?

### **Trends and Challenges to Achieving Permanency**

In recent years, the child welfare system has seen a decline in the number of children placed in out-of-home care. For example, in 2002, 522,579 children were placed in foster care. According to the 2010 Preliminary AFCARS Report, 408,425 children are currently in foster care (U.S. Administration for Children, Youth, and Families, 2011). These numbers are certainly indicative of the progress made by the child welfare system in preventing children from languishing in foster care. Despite these gains, further inquiry is warranted in order to understand the extent to which the organizational environment in public child welfare agencies influences permanency decisions that child welfare workers make to reunify or to terminate parental rights. In fact, many of the existing studies in the child welfare literature on decision-making have primarily examined investigation and substantiation of child maltreatment and foster care placement decisions upon entry (Sedlak & Schultz, 2005; Wolock, Sherman, Feldman, & Metzger, 2001). Less is known about child welfare workers' permanency decisions regarding children who exit the system from placement in foster care (Smith, 2006).

The public child welfare system has evolved into a complex organizational structure in response to the public's outcry regarding safety, protection, and well-being of children. A major change in child welfare policy occurred in 1997, when the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) of 1997 was passed (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997; Smith, 2006; Zell, 2006). With the passage of ASFA, the timeline for making permanency decisions on behalf of children residing in foster care was reduced. Instead of achieving permanency within 18 months of placement, ASFA established a 12-month limitation. Greater salience was placed on achieving permanency through adoption if family reunification could not be achieved (Semidei, Radel, & Nolan, 2001; Smith, 2006; Wattenberg, Kelley, & Kim, 2001).

Prior to the passage of ASFA, hesitancy to terminate parental rights was the norm. The Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (AACWA) was the major federal policy mandate, with emphasis on family preservation and reunification. To further support the goals of AACWA, the Family Preservation Support Act was passed in 1993 to help stabilize troubled families. As debate emerged during the 1990s among child welfare stakeholders surrounding the competing concerns of *parental rights versus the best interest of the child*, the Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed. Concerted efforts were made to achieve resolution to problems that led to foster care placement (Wattenberg et al., 2001). In most instances, adoption was viewed as the last resort if family

preservation could not be realized (Barth, 2003). With the rising cost of maintaining children in foster care, adoption became a priority. States sought to reduce spending, leading to federal incentives to achieve permanency through adoption.

### **The Structural Context of Child Welfare Decisions: A Review of the Literature**

A review of the literature suggests that, while decision making is a routine aspect of social work practice, there are still gaps in the body of empirical knowledge (Proctor, 2002). Several scholars have noted that child welfare workers experience extreme pressures due to public criticism of their decisions, often resulting from negative media portrayal (Mennen & O'Keefe, 2005; Smith & Donovan, 2003). Child welfare caseworkers are often criticized if they remove children from their homes and place them in foster care; conversely, they are blamed if children are left in homes where their safety and well-being are at risk.

The child welfare system's internal and external organizational environment has a strong influence on the decision-making process. The process is significantly influenced by federal, state, and local policies, as well as by the beliefs and values of key stakeholders in the broader community (Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; Margolin, 2008; Pelton, 1989). Cohen (2003) argued that decision-making is influenced by risk factors in the community such as racism, sexism, and ethnocentrism, which prevail across various service systems. Public child welfare agencies are human service organizations with bureaucratic structures. Cohen suggested that the goals of child welfare agencies derive from the attitudes, values, and beliefs of child welfare workers, positions that may influence decisions to reunify or to terminate parental rights.

Hasenfeld (1992) asserted that the goals of child welfare agencies are derived from certain values, norms, and ideologies that are driven by a goal to ensure the safety and protection of children and based on the societal beliefs that parents should have the authority to rear their children in accordance with their own values and beliefs. Hasenfeld (1992) posited that most decisions made on behalf of children are based on the premise of these values and are instituted as policy legislative mandates that guide decision-making and practice in child welfare. According to Stein (2000), child welfare policies historically have been the foundation for debates and tension because parents' and children's rights often emerge from permanency decisions based on what is considered to be "in the best interest of the child." Stein (2000) argued that child welfare organizations

exist within a chaotic environment that creates challenges to the decision-making process.

Other scholars (Brooks & Webster, 1999; Brown & Etta-Bailey, 1997; Chipungu & Bent-Goodley, 2004; Whipple, Solomon-Jozwiak, Williams-Hecksel, Abrams, & Bates, 2006) have contended that child welfare workers are overburdened by high caseloads and inadequate services due to shrinking resources and families with multiple problems, noting that time pressures and distractions may encourage a mindless, mechanical approach in which decisions are made without due consideration. Gambrill and Sholonsky (2000) claimed that social workers are pressured into conformity, which may lead to making decisions that are based not on what the worker believes to be in the best interest of the child but on what is considered to be in the best interest of the group within the organizational environment.

Several studies conducted during the 1990s on child welfare caseworkers' views of the child welfare system suggest an overall negative perception resulting from limited resources, poor working conditions, inadequate or unsupportive supervision, too much paperwork, and role conflict (Beggs, 1996; Gleeson, O'Donnell, & Bonecutter, 1997; Samantrai, 1992). Zell (2006) examined child welfare case workers' perceptions of the child welfare system related to child welfare caseworkers, clients, agencies, child welfare policies, and variation in caseworker characteristics. The study by Zell (2006) highlights the workers' view that policymakers do not consider the perspectives of caseworkers, perspectives which influence the practice decisions that they make. The findings from this study provide evidence of the daunting challenges that child welfare workers face, including being criticized for their decisions and the overall complexity of child welfare decision making. Without a doubt, child welfare workers are constantly challenged by environmental factors in their efforts to protect children and preserve families; these efforts support the need for empirically grounded studies on decision-making by caseworkers.

As part of the conceptualization of this study, a previous study was reviewed (English, Brummel, Graham, & Coghlan, 2007). In that study, researchers examined the influence of contextual factors within the organizational environment and the decision not to substantiate a case for abuse or neglect. Findings from the study indicated that staff members' perceptions of front-line supervisory support and the significance of stress were factors in the decision-making process as related to child safety and liability issues. Workload was a significant factor in the decision-making process. Findings reported by English et al. (2007) suggest that contextual

factors in the work environment (e.g. workload, stress, agency policy, and the larger community) have a major influence on child welfare workers' decisions to substantiate a case for abuse and/or neglect.

Cohen (2003) and Gambrill and Sholonsky (2000) argued that research is needed to understand factors in the organizational environment and their influence on decision making, particularly related to permanency outcomes. In summary, there is an apparent need for additional studies to examine how child welfare workers perceive the influence of contextual factors in the organizational environment on practice decisions, particularly as children exit the foster care system.

Given the limited data on the influence of the organizational environment, this research seeks to advance the body of knowledge on decision making in the field of child welfare practice.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was guided by two theoretical frameworks: decision-making theory and the ecological perspective. Decision-making theory was used to understand contextual factors that influence organizational behavior and its effect on child welfare workers' practice decisions. The ecological perspective was useful because it provided a lens to examine the micro-, mezzo-, and macro-level factors that influence child welfare workers' permanency decisions (Smith, 2006). It also provided a conceptual framework to examine the major variables in this study related to the organizational environment in which child welfare case workers are employed. To that end, the selected theoretical perspectives offer a lens to understand the extent to which decision outcomes may be influenced by contextual factors such as: (a) bureaucratic distraction, (b) role conflict, and (c) supervisory adequacy.

### **Method**

#### **Sampling Strategies**

Study participants were recruited using a purposive sampling method. The rationale was to limit the sample to child welfare workers with foster care caseloads rather than Child Protective Services (CPS) or adoption services caseloads. The agencies included in the study were selected because their offices were located within proximity to the investigator. The willingness of the agencies' administrators to allow their workers to participate in the study was also a contributing factor to using a purposive sample.

To be considered for this study, a child welfare worker met the following criteria: (a) was employed as a child welfare worker with an

active foster care caseload, (b) was at least 21 years old, (c) had obtained a minimum of a bachelor's degree, (d) was employed full-time by a public child welfare agency, and (e) was willing to participate voluntarily.

### **Study Participants**

The study sample consisted of 95 child welfare workers. The majority of the participants were female (80%). The mean age of the participants was 40 years (range 22 to 67 years). Nearly two-thirds (63%) of the participants were African American, 30% were Caucasian, 2% were Hispanic/Latino, and 5% represented various ethnic groups, including West Indian, Ethiopian, Caribbean, and African. The majority (64%) of the participants self-identified as social workers, 24% as caseworkers, and 12% as holding other titles, such as social work associate or caseworker specialist. A similar majority (68%) held a master's degree in social work, 8% had a bachelor's degree in social work, and the remaining 24% had non-social work degrees.

The licensure level of the participants varied widely. About a fifth (18%) of the social workers were licensed at the advanced clinical level. The majority (52%) was licensed at the Licensed Graduate Social Worker (LGSW) level. Another 20% reported other types of licenses, including the bachelor's degree-level Licensed Social Work Associate (LSWA). Slightly more than one-fourth (27%) reported having no license.

The number of years participants had been employed in their respective positions ranged from 1 to 22 years ( $M = 5$ ,  $SD = 5.17$ ). Experience in child welfare practice ranged from 1 to 30 years ( $M = 7.9$ ,  $SD = 6.94$ ). Thus, the average child welfare worker participating in the study had nearly 8 years experience in the field of child welfare practice. Demographics of the participants are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Child Welfare Workers' Sociodemographic Characteristics (N = 95)*

Characteristic and category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	19	20
Female	76	80
Age (years; <i>M</i> = 40)		
22-27	15	16
28-33	10	11
34-39	17	18
40-45	13	14
46-51	17	18
52-57	9	9
58-63	3	3
64 or over	2	2
No response	8	9
Race/ethnicity		
African American	60	63
Caucasian	28	30
Hispanic/Latino	2	2
Other	5	5
Job title		
Social worker	61	64
Caseworker	23	24
Other	11	12
Education		
Master of Social Work	65	68
Master of Art	3	3
Master of Science	4	4
Bachelor of Social Work	8	8
Bachelor of Science	7	8
Bachelor of Art	8	9

License		
LICSW	12	16
LCSW-C	6	9
LCSW	2	3
LGSW	36	52
Other	14	20

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### **Instrument and Measures**

The survey questionnaire for this study was modified from the English et al. (2007) instrument *Factors That Influence the Decision Not to Substantiate a Child Protective Service (CPS) Referral*. Permission to use the instrument was granted. Subsequently, the title of the questionnaire was changed to *Factors That Influence Permanency Decisions in Child Welfare Practice*. The prevalent difference between the English et al. instrument and the modified version used in this study was that the latter examined child welfare workers' hypothetical decisions pertaining to children who exit the foster care system through reunification with their birthparent(s) or termination of parental rights. A 7-point Likert-type scale was used to examine factors that influenced child welfare workers' decisions. These factors included workers' characteristics, bureaucratic distractions, role conflict, supervisory adequacy, job factors, values and beliefs, and job stress. The child welfare workers were asked to indicate the frequency that an event occurred: 1-3 = *seldom happens*, 4-5 = *sometimes happens*, and 6-7 = *frequently happens*. Participants were also asked open-ended questions.

### **Reliability and Validity of Study Instruments**

Reliability analysis was conducted for the items used to measure the indicators of contextual factors: (a) agency policy, (b) bureaucratic distractions, (c) role conflict, (d) supervisory adequacy, (e) job factors, (f) values and beliefs, and (g) job stress. With the exception of job stress, these items were measured using Likert-type scale items ranging from 1 (*disagree or never happens*) to 7 (*strongly agree or frequently happens*).

An inter-reliability analysis was conducted to establish reliability of the measures used in this study and to determine which items should be eliminated or maintained from the scale due to the strength of the correlations. Cronbach alpha was used to estimate internal consistency among the constructs. The reliability coefficient for the six items used to

measure the indicators of child welfare workers' knowledge of *agency policy* was .55, indicating a low level of internal consistency. This suggests the scale did not adequately measure workers' understanding of their agency policy. Conversely, eleven items were used to measure *bureaucratic distractions* and the alpha value was .84, which implies the scale is a reliable measurement to assess workers' perception of competing priorities in the work environment. Similarly, twelve items were used to measure *role conflict*, yielding an alpha coefficient of .80 also suggesting the constructs were useful measures to examine conflicting demands expected of child welfare workers. Seven items were used to measure *supervisory adequacy*; with the inter-item correlations on this scale ranging from .75 to .91. The reliability coefficient alpha was .95, suggesting a high level of internal consistency. There were only two constructs used to measure *job factors*, which may have contributed to the low reliability score of .41. Although eight items were used to measure *values and beliefs*, the reliability analysis resulted in an unacceptable coefficient alpha score of .50. Additionally, thirteen items were used to measure *job stress*, which also had a weak correlation of .33. Given the average value of .50 for agency policy, values and beliefs, job factors and job stress, these scales were eliminated. Bureaucratic distraction, role conflict, and supervisory adequacy were the three scales maintained based on their strong alpha correlation values that ranged from .80 to .94 (Smith, 2006).

### **Data Analysis**

The dependent variable—permanency decisions—was a dichotomous variable, operationalized as reunification or termination of parental rights. Data analysis began with an analysis of the univariate distributions to estimate central tendencies (mean, median, and mode) and variability (standard deviation). Study variables are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Study Variables*

Variable	Definition	Questions	Measure	Type
Knowledge of Agency Policy	Written guidelines	1-6	Interval	Independent
Bureaucratic Distractions	Competing priorities	7-18	Interval	Independent
Role Conflict	Internal and external conflicts in the organizational environment	19-30	Interval	Independent
Supervisory Adequacy	Quality of supervision	31-37	Interval	Independent
Job Factors Values and Beliefs	Workload Workers' perceptions of their work and how their values influence their decisions	38- 40 41-49	Interval Interval	Independent Independent
Job Stress	Frustration and anxiety related to child welfare workers' experience and job responsibilities	50-53	Interval	Independent
Child Welfare Workers' Characteristics	Gender, age, race, job title, child welfare experience, length of time in current job, education, and licensure level	1-8	Nominal and Ratio	Independent

*Bureaucratic distraction* was the first of three variables used to measure contextual factors. Due to the chaotic work environment of public child welfare agencies, child welfare workers are often faced with managing competing priorities resulting from unexpected events that may occur during their workday. The distracting activities that workers reported as happening frequently were as follows: (a) 48% indicated that frequently so much work is assigned that, even working overtime, they could not get it done, (b) 59% reported that efforts to obtain resources were frequently impeded, (c) 58% reported that the large number of cases was frequently a barrier to doing a good job, (d) 58% reported that their most serious efforts to help clients frequently did not succeed because the system did not work, and (e) 51% reported that there was frequently insufficient time to complete paperwork properly. Only 30%, however, reported that long conferences or meetings frequently prevented them from doing needed work.

*Role conflict* was the second variable used to measure contextual factors. To understand the perceptions that child welfare workers had regarding their job, a 7-point Likert-type scale with 12 items was used to examine the extent to which workers agreed or disagreed with the statements presented. The findings regarding advocacy were consistent with the national study conducted by the National Association of Social Workers (Center for Workforce Studies, 2006), wherein respondents reported that within the previous two years there had been a change in service delivery that limited the client's ability to obtain needed services. The majority of the workers strongly agreed that advocacy is necessary. In addition, 74% strongly agreed that they had to advocate for their clients to obtain needed services, 50% strongly agreed that they received assignments without adequate resources and materials to execute them, 42% strongly agreed that they worked with two or more groups that operated quite differently, and 41% strongly agreed that they performed tasks that might be accepted by one person but not accepted by another. The majority of the workers neither agreed nor disagreed with the questions pertaining to role conflict. For example, 62% neither agreed nor disagreed that they have to do things one way that should be done another way, 52% neither agreed nor disagreed that inadequate policies and guidelines existed to help them, 50% neither agreed nor disagreed but 43% strongly agreed that they are expected to make decisions without appropriate resources, 51% neither agreed nor disagreed that they received unrelated requests from two or more groups with whom they work, 55% neither agreed nor disagreed that they do things that may be accepted from two or more people, 53% neither agreed nor disagreed that

they worked on unnecessary things, 59% neither agreed nor disagreed that they worked under vague directions or orders, and 47% neither agreed nor disagreed that they received simultaneous conflicting job responsibilities or assignments.

*Supervisory adequacy* was the third variable used to measure contextual factors. Supervision is clearly an important aspect of child welfare practice where a large part of the work is legally focused. The findings indicated that the majority of the workers reported positive perceptions about the adequacy of their supervisor. More than half (53%) strongly agreed that their supervisor provided emotional support, 60% strongly agreed that they were able to get advice from their supervisor, 74% strongly agreed that their supervisor valued them as a worker, 56% strongly agreed that the supervisor provided adequate quality and quantity supervision, 52% strongly agreed that their supervisor was knowledgeable and possessed adequate conflict resolution skills, 66% strongly agreed that their supervisor was competent and knowledgeable about matters of permanency planning and decision making, and 55% strongly agreed that their supervisor was a competent teacher and trainer. Overall, the open-ended questions generated positive comments from the workers regarding their supervisor. However, some workers did express concerns regarding agency factors that impact their supervisors' ability to provide adequate supervision. In fact, 33% of the workers reported that there are inadequate policies and guidelines. Another concern reported is the ambiguity of the policies that impact their work. Additionally, consistent themes emerged in the open-ended questions regarding concerns over the lack of supervisory training and incongruent interpretation of policies.

### **Discussion and Implications**

The research hypothesis predicted a relationship between contextual factors and child welfare workers' decisions to reunify families or terminate parental rights. The three contextual factors—bureaucratic distraction, role conflict, and supervisory adequacy—were found to have no observable, statistically significant effect on permanency outcome decisions. By contrast, the descriptive data provided useful explanations for the challenges that child welfare workers encounter in their work on the frontlines. The results from this study and reported in the professional literature suggest that child welfare workers view high caseloads and excessive paperwork as a major issue in their work (Child Welfare League of America, 2002; English et al., 2002). An important finding of this study was that most of the participants surveyed provided positive feedback

about their supervisors, particularly in response to the open-ended questions.

Notably, permanency decisions are not made in an intellectual, legal, or clinical vacuum, and certainly traditional aspects of the bureaucratic structure do not affect decision making. However, this study underscores the importance of understanding child welfare caseworkers' perceptions of factors that influence their decisions. The findings can help child welfare administrators and key stakeholders develop increased awareness that most child welfare workers, while committed to their work, need additional support to ensure that they are able to make the best possible decisions on behalf of children and families whom they serve. Lessons learned magnify the importance of including the perspectives and concerns of child welfare caseworkers in the development of policies that guide practice and programs to deliver needed services. Increased funding from policymakers should be appropriated to Title IV-E Child Welfare Training Programs to ensure there are highly competent BSW- and MSW-prepared social workers.

Despite the limitations of this study, due to a small sample size and its examination of the decision to reunify or terminate parental rights, the study illustrates the need to increase the body of empirical studies to understand child welfare decision making. Child welfare workers are critical to the field of child welfare practice and the decisions that they make have far-reaching consequences on the lives of children and families who come to the attention of the public child welfare system. Given the multiple problems many families served by the child welfare system face, additional studies are needed to understand the influence of case factors on decision making. To that end, future research should include trying to relate permanency outcomes to the ecological pattern of relationships between biological family caregivers, foster caregivers, and agency staff as well as some measure of the agency leadership's commitment to family-centered practice.

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