



### Influence of Workplace Features on Child Welfare Service Quality

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## **Influence of Workplace Features on Child Welfare Service Quality**

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Over half a million children enter state foster care systems each year (AFCARS 2005). In 2004, referrals of abuse and neglect were made regarding approximately 5.5 million children nationwide (HHS, 2006). Child welfare workers serve the needs of children in foster care and provide investigation and prevention services to families who have been referred into the system. Despite the large number of children needing services, the number of caseworkers available to provide services is below recommended standards. Caseworkers average between 24 and 31 children on their caseloads. Caseworkers in some states have reported 100 children on their caseloads (ACF, APHSA, CWLA, 2001). The recommended caseload size by the Child Welfare League of America is between 12 and 17 children per child welfare worker (CWLA, 1999).

Given the demands of managing large caseloads, case worker retention has become an increasingly important issue in child welfare practice. Caseworkers report high administrative burdens, low-salary, low support, and insufficient training as reasons for leaving their positions (GAO, 2003). Caseworkers also face work environments characterized by tension and fear (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). In addition, the high stress related to the job leaves many caseworkers suffering from compassion fatigue and potential burnout (Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006). A survey of social workers in the child welfare field found that only 50% of caseworkers responded that they were not looking to leave their positions (Whitaker, et al., 2004).

Caseworker retention is important in relation to service quality perceptions for two reasons. First, caseworker retention is related to consistent service delivery for children and their families. States that quickly move children into permanent placements have high involvement from caseworkers in

terms of visiting with children and families as well as coordinating services for children. Caseworker visits are also strongly associated with meeting the educational, health, and mental health needs of the child (HHS 2004).

Besides direct service outcomes, caseworker retention is important in that low retention indicates broad organizational problems (Mor Barak et al., 2006; Nissly, et al, 2005). Although extensive work has been done analyzing the impact of organizational variables on worker retention rates, little research has focused on how those organizational variables affect service quality (Yoo, Brooks, & Patti, 2007). Given the fact that child welfare services are crucial to the safety and well-being of the most vulnerable children, it is pertinent that organizational characteristics be examined in relation to service quality to identify workplace features that supervisors can address through increased professional development and training.

In this study, we use data from the Survey of Organizational Excellence to examine the relationship of workplace features and service quality perceptions within Texas' child welfare system. Specifically, we aim to address the following questions:

1. How do worker accommodations, compensation, and organizational climate affect service quality perceptions in child welfare organizations?
2. How does job satisfaction mediate any differences in service quality perceptions based on employee rank?

### **Literature Review**

Very limited research exists that relates workplace features with service quality (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006; Johnson & McIntye, 1998). In a

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study of human service workers, Travis (2006) found links between personal responsibility, service quality perceptions, and extrinsic job satisfaction. While professions such as nursing and education have linked service quality to workplace features, child welfare literature provides little information about how service quality is affected by the workplace (Griffith, 2006; Laschinger, Wong, & Greco, 2006). The scant literature available on this topic attempts to connect individual workplace features with service quality, rather than looking at a broad range of potential predictors.

### ***Compensation/ Worker Accommodations***

Worker accommodations, most notably salary and benefits, are often cited as a reason that child welfare workers choose to leave their jobs (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Zell, 2006). A survey of social workers in child welfare agencies found most were earning between \$30,000 and \$39,000 a year (National Association of Social Workers, 2004). In addition to modest salaries workers report lack of support from the general public and even report receiving threats of bodily harm due to their work (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). Therefore, the literature suggests that worker accommodations may be important to service provision.

### ***Organizational Climate***

Broad components of organizational climate have been examined in terms of service quality. Yoo and Brooks (2005) examined the effects of workplace features on service effectiveness for families receiving family preservation services. They found that organizations that had strong leadership and support were characterized by fewer out of home placements. Workplace features explained 40% of the variance in out of home placements. In another study, Yoo (2002) examined the role that workplace features may have in explaining client outcome variance through an exploratory case study of a child welfare agency. She found that organizational characteristics have the potential to positively influence client outcomes by affecting case managers' attitudes when interacting with clients. Potential negative impacts by case-workers due to negative organizational characteristics seem diluted by organizational buffers such as

co-worker support. Similar results were found by Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998). The authors studied service coordination in Tennessee by measuring child outcomes. They found that organizational climate was a predictor of service quality. Specifically, low conflict, cooperation, role clarity, and personalization had positive impacts on improving children's psychosocial functioning.

Hemmelgarn et al. (2006) explained that the social context of the organizational environment, comprised of organizational culture and climate, has been associated with staff turnover, service quality, and outcomes. Organizational culture is "the set of behavioral norms and expectations that exist within an organization" into which new employees are socialized and taught "how things are done around here" (p. 75). Organizational climate focuses on role conflict, role overload, depersonalization, and emotional exhaustion. It has been closely linked with job satisfaction and organizational commitment. If workers perceive their work environment favorably, they are more likely to have the energy and motivation to work toward positive outcomes. Organizations that have healthy climates and cultures are ones whose workers are encouraged to make decisions in the best interest of children (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006).

Work group support, a component of organizational climate, includes such features as supervisory relationships, team effectiveness, and diversity. These elements have also been examined as contributors to positive work environments. Support from supervisors has been shown to be important for worker retention (Drake & Yadama, 1996; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007). In addition, supervisor behavior has been directly linked to consumer outcomes in various social service settings. Supervisors with good interpersonal skills who are proactive tend to have more effective work groups and, thus, better client outcomes (Poertner, 2006).

### ***Job Satisfaction***

Low job satisfaction is strongly associated with poor organizational climate, work support and worker accommodations (Ellett, Ellis, West-

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brook, & Dews, 2007; Johnson & McIntye, 1998). Low job satisfaction ultimately impacts a case-worker's decision to stay with or leave an agency. Employees who are not satisfied with their work are not committed to their organization's goals (Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006).

Johnson and McIntye (1998) studied "quality culture" in a government service agency and found that all 19 aspects of quality culture (existence of quality management principles and practices) and organizational climate (aspects of the work environment purported to support the implementation of quality management principles and practices) were significantly and positively correlated with job satisfaction. Thus, improved organizational climate promotes greater job satisfaction, which in turn, has been empirically linked with customer satisfaction and organizational productivity (Johnson & McIntye, 1998).

Wagner et al. (2001) conducted a qualitative study of three children's welfare agencies in Australia over a 12-month period by asking workers to keep journals that identified internal and external events, critical incidents and relationships that impacted their job satisfaction, morale in the organization, and the likelihood of their remaining in the job. The study found that job satisfaction for workers was most often tied to achieving outcomes for their clients. Dissatisfaction was linked with organizational constraints, such as being forced to make decisions about who to help based on resources rather than on need. These negative organizational constraints were lessened by workers feeling supported by their co-workers within their work teams. Workers identified the following factors that have the most impact on their satisfaction and morale: workload, manager/team relationships, supervision, training, organizational cultures, resources, policies, and procedures (Wagner, van, & Spence, 2001). This study raises the important point that workers intrinsically want to help their clients, and that they achieve most of their job satisfaction from this success. Understanding that job satisfaction comes from being able to do one's job effectively and by being supported by one's organization and co-workers, lends further weight to the idea that in order to improve child outcomes, more attention is needed to understand how organ-

izational characteristics influence job satisfaction, thereby reducing turnover and improving service quality. Supervisors who are aware of the impact of these organizational characteristics are essential to providing a supportive environment for workers.

### *Empowerment Theory*

Given the stressful demands of working within child welfare systems and its closed organizational system that relies heavily on rules and regulations, workers can become disempowered. Disempowerment takes the following forms among social workers: "limited decision-making power, low occupational status, unmanageable caseload sizes, minimal institutional support for professional development and extreme stress" (Turner & Shera, 2005, p. 82). Although the authors were describing social work employment in general, the organizational climate of child welfare organizations is often characterized by these dismal qualities. Empowerment theory asserts that if workers feel that they have control over their work and have the resources and support available to do their work effectively they are more likely to be able to effectively assist their clients (Wallach and Mueller, 2006). On the flip side, disempowered workers who withdraw from their work are less able to help their clients (Hasenfeld, 1987; Turner & Shera, 2005). Stated succinctly, individuals who feel a sense of empowerment will accomplish the goals of an agency while those who feel disempowered will be less committed to the goals of the agency (Kanter, 1977).

Empowerment of workers in organizational contexts has been conceptualized in various ways. Thomas and Velthouse (1990) defined empowerment as comprising four dimensions: meaning, competence, self-determination, and impact. Spreitzer (1996) looked at how workers' low role ambiguity, working for a boss who has a wide span of control, sociopolitical support, access to information, access to resources, and a participative unit climate positively affect these four dimensions. Wallach and Mueller (2006) describe psychological empowerment as "the extent to which individuals believe in their capacity to per-

form tasks with skill, execute choices that matter, influence administrative outcomes, and derive meaning from their work” (p. 98). The Worker Empowerment Scale measures worker empowerment with sub-scales that assess self-efficacy in work performance, power and control over resources, how authority is perceived and the impact of interactive relationships on work outcomes (Leslie, Holzhalb, and Holland, 1998). Consideration of these conceptualizations of empowerment makes apparent that empowerment plays an important role in workers’ ability to achieve successful outcomes.

Many features of the organizational environment have been found to impact human service workers’ sense of empowerment within the organization. Various job characteristics support feelings of empowerment, including participation in decision making, supportive relationships with supervisors, peer support, and low levels of role overload and role ambiguity (Wallach and Mueller, 2006). Leadership, opportunity role structure, social support, and a group-based belief system were identified as being important for the development of psychological empowerment (Peterson & Speer, 2000). Thus, aspects of the overall organizational climate that promote workers’ ability to be involved in decision-making, have a sense of control over their work, receive support from supervisors and peers, and feel that they can positively impact their clients is believed to contribute to positive service delivery. Thus, the extent to which the organization can empower its workers through improvement of workplace features, the more likely it will be able to improve the quality of its services (Turner & Shera, 2005).

In this study, we assume that workers’ sense of empowerment can be derived from many workplace features, including worker accommodations, compensation, organizational climate, and job satisfaction. We assert that child welfare workers must possess a sense of empowerment in their work in order to provide high levels of service quality.

### **Current Study**

Given the limited evidence regarding how and which workplace features influence service qual-

ity, it is crucial that this link continue to be explored. While previous studies have provided a starting point for understanding how these variables may be related, there are limitations in these studies.

Previous studies have looked specifically at child outcomes as a measure of service quality. While child outcomes are important, they are an inevitably flawed measure in child welfare research. Measuring the best outcome for children receiving child welfare services means defining what the best outcome would be for a child. In many cases, that “best outcome” is a subjective decision made by a child welfare worker and the child’s extended family. Because of this dilemma, it is difficult to draw conclusions across studies because different outcome measures were examined based on the specific program evaluated. Service quality, whether perceived by the worker or the client, is a more standard and comparable measure. Service quality is also a measure that the organization has the most power to change; outcomes, despite workers’ best efforts, are the result of many different forces.

In addition, previous studies have had either small samples (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998; Yoo, 2002) or they examined features of only one program within a child welfare agency (Yoo & Brooks, 2005). Given the variety of programs that child welfare agencies must offer, more information is needed to provide evidence that workplace features affect services across agency programs. In addition, we examine the predictive ability of three different workplace features, as mediated by job satisfaction, rather than focusing on one main feature, e.g., organizational climate.

This study will build upon current literature by using data from a large, statewide survey of child welfare workers to examine the link between workplace features and service quality perceptions. We hypothesize that worker accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation will be positively associated with service quality perceptions. Furthermore, we hypothesize that increased job satisfaction will account for the differences in service quality perceptions based on workplace features.

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### Methodology

#### Data

Data are from the Survey of Organizational Excellence. The Survey of Organizational Excellence is administered by the Organizational Excellence Group at the University of Texas at Austin. The survey is administered biannually to staff at state agencies in Texas in order to assess workplace features and human resources. Surveys are administered to employees anonymously through on-line services. All current employees of the agency are surveyed. Specific questions in the study relate to constructs regarding work groups, accommodations, workplace features, information, and personal issues. Responses to questions are measured on a Likert scale from one to five. Responses of four or higher on the scale indicate areas of substantial strength for the organization while scores of two or lower on an item indicate significant sources of concern for the organization.

#### Background on Texas' Child Welfare System

The Child Protective Services division oversees the state's child welfare system. Services provided through the division include child abuse investigations, family based services, foster care services, and adoption services. In 2005, approximately 160,000 cases of child abuse and neglect were investigated, and over 32,000 children were in the state's foster care system (DFPS, 2005).

Child Protective Services came under intense scrutiny in 2003 and 2004 due to high profile cases of child deaths related to flawed investigations and inadequate foster care placements (DFPS, 2005). As a result, the Texas legislature passed a series of sweeping reforms in 2005 that increased funding for Child Protective Services. The agency was provided enough funding to hire over 2,500 additional workers over a two year period. New workers were intended to provide additional technical support and to reduce high caseloads of staff directly working with clients. At the same time, changes in 2005 called for massive

privatization of child welfare services, which raised speculation that thousands of Child Protective Services workers would lose their jobs. Although these efforts at privatization have since stalled, this survey was conducted at a time when Child Protective Services was beginning to address sweeping changes and possible employee lay offs.

#### Sample

In this study, we used 2005 data from the Child Protective Services division within the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Data were collected during February and March 2005. The survey was administered to all 7,647 employees of the Department of Family and Protective Services. There was a 67% response rate to the survey resulting in 5,119 respondents. Of those surveys completed, 1,791 participants were excluded because they did not work within the division of Child Protective Services (n=3316). An additional 93 participants were excluded from the sample because they reported working in the state office. These participants were excluded to ensure that our sample included only those individuals working in field offices or the statewide abuse hotline. In addition, we excluded six employees who worked part-time only and 26 employees who had missing data for their salary. The final sample consisted of 3,191 participants.

Table 1: Summary of variable constructs

	Number of items	Mean	SD	Alpha
Service quality perceptions	4	3.27	0.81	0.78
Organizational climate	5	3.35	0.84	0.85
Worker accommodations	14	3.24	0.68	0.89
Compensation	16	3.11	0.61	0.89
Job satisfaction	7	2.93	0.87	0.88

#### Measures

The dependent variable in the analysis is service quality perceptions. A variety of measures was used to derive the perceptions of service

quality. Respondents were presented with statements concerning the quality of services the agency provides ( $\alpha = .783$ ). Participants responded based on a five-point Likert scale indicating whether they strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree. Higher scores indicate greater service quality perceptions. Examples of statements regarding service quality perception included the following: "We are known for the quality of services we provide" and "We produce high quality work that has a low rate of error."

Three independent variables were included in the analysis: worker accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation. For each measure, respondents answered based on a five-point Likert scale indicating whether they strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree. Higher scores indicate more positive perceptions of worker accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation. Worker accommodations ( $\alpha = .916$ ) assesses the degree to which employees have equipment and resources needed to perform their job. Statements measuring worker accommodations included the following: "We have adequate computer resources" and "training is made available to us so we can do our jobs better." The variable organizational climate ( $\alpha = .904$ ) provides information about the general work environment of the agency. Statements used to measure organizational climate include the following: "The work atmosphere encourages open and honest communication" and "Within my workplace, there is a feeling of community." Compensation ( $\alpha = .853$ ) assesses the degree to which workers are satisfied with their overall compensation package including vacation time, health insurance, and salaries. Statements designed to measure compensation include the following: "People are paid fairly for the work they do" and "I am satisfied with my medical insurance."

Job satisfaction is used as a mediating variable in the analysis. Job satisfaction was derived from a series of statements asking respondents about the pace and intensity of their work, the ability to balance life and family, and degree of pride they feel in their job ( $\alpha = .876$ ). Statements include the following: "My job meets my expectations" and

"The environment supports a balance between work and personal life." For each measure, respondents answered based on a five-point Likert scale indicating whether they strongly disagree, disagree, are neutral, agree, or strongly agree. Higher scores indicate increased job satisfaction.

Employee rank is used as a moderating variable. Employee rank is derived from information based on reported salary. Low-salary employees are categorized as earning less than \$25,000 per year. Mid-salary employees earn between \$25,001 and \$45,000. High-salary employees earn \$45,001 or more a year. These categories were derived based on public information on salary ranges available through public job postings for Child Protective Services. Based on the salary rankings, low-salary employees are most likely to be individuals providing technical support, mid-salary employees represent actual caseworkers, and high-salary employees represent unit supervisors.

We use ten control variables in the analysis. Basic demographic items include sex, race, age, and education. Race is measured as black, Hispanic, white, Asian and multiracial/other. Age is grouped into five categories: 16 to 19, 30 to 39, 40 to 49, 50 to 59, and 60 years and over. Education is measured as less than high school, high school or equivalent, some college, associate degree, bachelor degree, master degree, and doctorate.

An additional set of control variables relates to workplace issues. Years of service at the agency is categorized as less than two; 2 to 10; and more than 10 years. Finally, four dichotomous variables asked respondents questions about their work history with the organization. Each question was measured by a "yes" or "no" response. Respondents were asked if they were in a supervisory position, if they received a promotion in the past two years, if they received a merit increase in the past two years, and whether they planned to work at the agency in the next two years.

### **Analysis**

The purpose of this analysis is to examine whether worker accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation affect service quality

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**Table 2: Sample percentages for control variables based on employee rank**

	Low-salary employees N=478	Mid-salary employees N=2214	High-salary employees N=299
<b>Sex</b>			
Female	95.20	84.70	76.60
Male	4.00	15.00	21.70
<b>Race</b>			
Black	24.50	23.10	23.40
Hispanic	36.60	21.60	17.70
White	36.80	51.40	55.20
Asian	0.60	1.40	0.70
Multiracial/other	1.00	2.00	2.30
<b>Age</b>			
16-29	14.20	27.80	3.70
30-39	23.20	31.60	21.10
40-49	28.20	22.70	34.40
50-59	27.60	14.90	36.80
60 and over	6.50	2.30	3.70
<b>Education</b>			
Less than high school	0.20	0.10	0.00
High school or equivalent	28.70	1.80	0.00
some college	46.70	5.70	2.30
Associate degree	14.00	1.70	0.70
Bachelor degree	9.60	70.50	49.80
Master degree	0.60	19.70	44.50
Doctorate	0.00	0.40	2.30
In a supervisory position	0.40	17.30	72.60
Received promotion in past two years	9.20	28.40	46.20
Received merit increase in past two years	23.80	23.70	44.80
Plans to work at agency for two more years	88.30	80.60	88.30
<b>Years of service at agency</b>			
less than two	28.50	39.40	7.36
2 to 10	28.70	37.20	16.10
10 or more	41.60	22.70	74.90

perceptions, and whether any differences in service quality perceptions are due to job satisfaction. Only Child Protective Services employees working in field offices or the statewide abuse hotline are included in this analysis.

We first analyze the variables to ensure that the assumptions of the regression analysis are met. The variable education is slightly skewed, but no variable transformations corrected the problem with skewness. Otherwise, all assumptions for



**Table 3: Sample means based on employee rank**

	Low-salary employees N=478		Mid-salary employees N=2214		High-salary employees N=299	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Service quality perceptions	3.50	0.77	3.22	0.81	3.33	0.87
Organizational climate	3.36	0.90	3.36	0.83	3.36	0.86
Worker accommodations	3.35	0.74	3.25	0.68	3.18	0.67
Compensation	3.14	0.65	3.15	0.60	3.24	0.58
Job satisfaction	3.34	0.83	2.85	0.86	2.89	0.82

\*Higher scores indicate more positive responses

the regression analysis are met.

Three ordinary least squares regression analyses are used to examine the effect of worker’s accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation on service quality perceptions. One least squares regression analysis is used for each level of employee rank: low-salary, mid-salary, and high-salary employees. Within each separate analysis, the first model estimates the main effects of the independent variables (worker accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation) and the dependent variable, service quality perceptions. The second model adds controls for sex, race, age, education, supervisor role, promotion status, merit increase status, years of service at the agency, and whether the employee planned to work at the agency in the next two years. In model three, job satisfaction, a potential mediator, is added to the analysis to examine how its inclusion affects the dependent variable.

**Results**

The primary purpose of this analysis is to examine the effects of worker accommodations, organizational climate, and work-group support on service quality perceptions. In addition, we examine the effect of job satisfaction in explaining the differences in service quality perceptions.

Table two shows the sample percentages by

employee rank. The results of table two confirm differences across employee rank. Across ranks, female employees are more prevalent. In terms of race, low-salary employees appear to have fairly even proportions of black, Hispanic, and white employees. However, white employees are the majority racial group for mid-salary and high-salary ranks. Education levels increase across job ranks. Low-salary employees are most likely to have some college education while roughly 70% of mid-salary employees have a bachelor degree. Of the high-salary employees, approximately 50% have a bachelor degree, and over 44% have a master's degree. A high-salary employee is most likely to be in a supervisory position, to have received a promotion in the past two years, and to have worked at the agency for the longest time period. Mid-salary employees are the least likely to report that they will be working for the agency within the next two years and the least likely to have worked for the agency for more than two years.

In terms of service quality perceptions, low-salary employees have the highest perception of service quality. Mid-salary employees, who are most likely working directly with clients, have the lowest perception of service quality. Mid-salary employees also report the lowest job satisfaction amongst the groups. Organizational climate ap-

**Table 4: Results of regression analyses: Perception of service quality**

	Low-salary employees N=478	Mid-salary employees N=2214	High-salary employees N=299
Organizational climate	0.04	0.15 **	0.24 *
Compensation	0.09	0.01	-0.06
Worker accommodations	0.15	0.16 **	0.16
Job satisfaction	0.45 *	0.39 **	0.42 **
R Square (significance of r-square change noted)	0.52 **	0.47 **	0.48 **

Source: Survey of Organizational Excellence  
 \*\*  $p \leq .01$ . \*  $p \leq .05$ .

pears to be similar across ranks. However, positive perception of worker accommodations appears to decrease with employee rank. High-salary employees rate the accommodations least favorably compared to the other ranks. Finally, compensation also increases with rank. Understandably, high-salary employees report being more satisfied with their compensation packages than mid and low-salary employees.

**Low-Salary Employees**

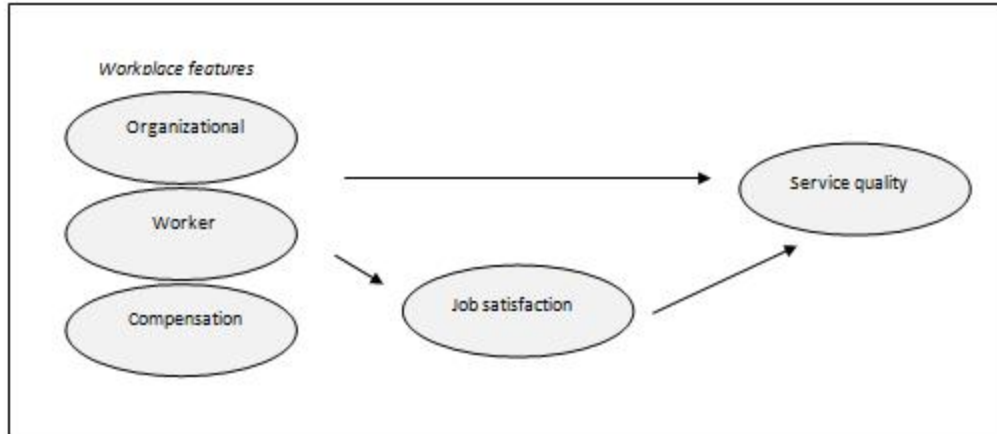
The first regression analysis examines service quality perception among low-salary employees. The first model reveals a strong association between service quality perceptions and the set of workplace features: worker accommodations, organizational climate, and compensation. Over 44% of the variance in service quality perceptions is explained by this set of variables. Both compensation and worker accommodations were positively associated with service quality perceptions. The second model adds control variables into the analysis. After inclusion of the control variables, the strong association still exists between the workplace features and service quality perceptions. Finally, the third model includes all workplace features variables, control variables, and job satisfaction the mediating variable. The strong association between workplace features and service qual-

ity perceptions remains. However, worker accommodation is no longer a predictor of service quality perceptions. Inclusion of job satisfaction into the model results in over 50% of the variance in service quality perceptions explained by workplace features. Job satisfaction is the greatest predictor of service quality perceptions. Compensation is also a significant predictor of service quality perceptions. Employees in this rank, who are more highly compensated, perceive better service quality. In addition, employees with a master's degree perceive less service quality.

**Mid-Salary Employees**

The second regression analysis examines service quality perception amongst mid-salary employees. The first model reveals a strong association between service quality perceptions and the set of workplace features. Over 39 % of the variance in service quality perceptions is explained by this set of variables. Both organizational climate and worker accommodations are positively associated with service quality perceptions. The second model adds control variables into the analysis. After inclusion of the control variables, the strong association still exists between the workplace features and service quality perceptions. Finally, the third model includes all workplace features variables, control variables and job

Figure 1. Model of workplace factors influencing service quality



satisfaction. The strong association between workplace features and service quality perceptions remains. Inclusion of job satisfaction into the model results in over 54 % of the variance in service quality perceptions explained by workplace features. Job satisfaction is the strongest predictor of service quality perceptions. Worker accommodations and organizational climate are also positively associated with service quality perceptions. Better accommodations and a more positive climate lead to higher quality of services for this rank. Certain age groups are positively correlated with service quality perceptions. Workers ages 40 and over perceive more quality services. However, in looking at the sample percentages (Table Two), the majority of employees in this rank are between the ages of 30 and 39. Another significant variable in this final model is future plans with the agency. Those employees who do not plan to work for the agency in the next two years perceive less service quality. Because mid-salary employees are most likely caseworkers, this particular variable is important in understanding frequent turnover at the child welfare agencies.

**High-Salary Employees**

The third regression analysis examines service quality perception among high-salary employees. The first model reveals a moderate association between service quality perceptions and the set of

workplace features. Over 33% of the variance in service quality perceptions is explained by this set of variables. Organizational climate and worker accommodations are positively associated with service quality perceptions. The second model adds control variables into the analysis. After inclusion of the control variables, the association between service quality perceptions and workplace features remains significant. In the third model, both controls and job satisfaction are included. The association between service quality perceptions and workplace features remains significant. In this final model, over 48% of the variance in service quality perceptions is explained by this set of variables. Organizational climate remains positively associated with service quality perceptions. Job satisfaction is also positively associated with service quality perceptions, and it is the highest predictor of service quality perception. More satisfied employees report better services. For this rank, education appears to play a role in service quality perception. All levels of education are positively associated with service quality perceptions. Those employees with only some college education are the most likely to report better service quality perceptions while those with a doctoral degree are less likely to report high service quality perceptions.

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### Discussion

The purpose of our analysis is to examine the effect workplace features have on service quality perceptions and the impact of job satisfaction in explaining a portion of that relationship. Results show there are differences between employee ranks in reports of service quality perceptions and the importance of various workplace characteristics in influencing these perceptions. However, there were striking similarities across the groups as well.

Across employee ranks, there are moderate to strong relationships between workplace features and service quality perceptions indicating that the work environment does, in fact, play a significant role in the quality of services clients receive. In addition, job satisfaction is the most significant predictor of service quality perceptions in every employee rank. Employees who are more satisfied with their work report higher service quality perceptions. This relationship is most likely reciprocal in nature. Employees who are more satisfied produce better services. However, it is also likely that employees able to produce quality services will report greater job satisfaction. Given the emotional intensity of child welfare work, employees report that they feel the need to “make a difference” through their work (Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey, & Wright, 2007). Stalker et al. (2007) found that employees who reported high job satisfaction despite their job burnout were more likely to report that they felt their work was their commitment to the broader issue of child welfare. Based on this previous work, the importance of job satisfaction may rest upon the employees’ feeling of making a difference in families’ lives by providing high quality services.

Despite similarities across the groups, some specific differences exist in terms of what workplace features are most important in service quality perceptions between varying employee ranks. Those who are more highly compensated report higher service quality perceptions. Low-salary employees report compensation as being a significant factor in their service quality perceptions. While these employees are not likely to be working directly with clients, they provide crucial support to workers in the field by transporting clients,

processing health insurance, and providing other vital information for children entering the system. These employees are the lowest paid group based on their rank. Increased compensation may improve their views of service provision because those employees who are better paid are more invested in the agency.

For high-salary employees, only job satisfaction and organizational climate have significant relationship with service quality perceptions in the final model. Those who report more positive organizational climate also report higher quality services. While organizational climate is also a significant predictor of service quality perceptions for mid-salary employees, it is a much stronger predictor for high-salary employees. High-salary employees are most likely to be directly supervising caseworkers. They are also more highly educated and most likely to have been working with the agency over ten years. Their length of employment coupled with their supervisory position and educational background afford them a unique opportunity to understand the intricacies of the organizational climate and its role in producing quality services.

Perhaps the most important findings relate to mid-salary employees since these are the employees most likely to be caseworkers in contact with families and children. Caseworkers have come under intense scrutiny due to low retention rates. Our analysis provides some insight into how workplace features account for low retention rates. These mid-salary employees report that more positive organizational climate, worker accommodations, and job satisfaction are related to higher service quality perceptions. This group is also the least likely to report that they are satisfied with their jobs and the most likely to report that they will not be working with the agency in the next two years. In our regression analysis, the likelihood of not working for the agency in the next two years was associated with lower service quality perceptions. These results indicate that caseworkers who are feeling less satisfied and report that they are ready to leave their position perceive low quality service provision.

### ***Limitations***

While this study provides insight into the influence of workplace features on service quality perceptions, there are limitations to note. First, the relationship between workplace features and service quality perceptions may not be causal due to the possibility of omitted variable bias. In addition, the sample of child welfare employees used is not necessarily generalizable to other child welfare agencies. While similarities among child welfare agencies exist, Texas has a unique system. At the time this survey was administered, the child welfare system was undergoing intense legislative scrutiny, which may have increased organizational problems. Another limitation relates to the possibility of response bias with the survey. While the response rate was high at 67%, we do not have a means to compare respondents and non-respondents. A final limitation relates to the measurement instruments we used to develop our constructs. Due to limitations in using existing data, these constructs may not incorporate the entire spectrum of workplace features. In addition, we relied on service quality perceptions rather than other measures of service quality. Other measures of service quality that were not used include the client's perception of service quality and other standardized outcome measures, such as the type of placement or the length of time before the placement. However, in this type of research, perceptions of quality serve as a suitable indicator of quality.

### ***Policy and Practice Implications***

Despite these limitations, our findings provide strong evidence supporting the idea that positive workplace environments contribute to quality service delivery. In terms of practice, supervisors must utilize methods to allow their employees the opportunities to provide better services, including practices that give workers feelings of empowerment. Policy makers must enact legislation that supports positive work environments for child welfare workers. In particular, funding may provide extra-organizational support to improve the ability of caseworkers to feel that they are making a difference in the lives of families. Reduction of caseloads, more technical support, and a smaller

supervisor-to-supervisee ratio would increase the amount of time caseworkers could spend working directly with clients. Caseworkers who feel more satisfied with their jobs, their accommodations, and their workplace environment are more likely to provide high quality services to these vulnerable populations.

However, absent significant funding increases, periodic examination of workplace features can help create higher quality organizations and promote better child welfare service delivery. As is done in Texas with results of the Survey of Organizational Excellence, child welfare agencies should obtain regular feedback about organizational functioning. As part of regular internal training, the organizations should be assisted in interpreting the data and encouraged to form employee task groups aimed at improving conditions that can improve workplace features, thereby increasing workers' sense of empowerment, a feeling that they can provide the best services to children and their families.

In particular, organizational climate is an important part of job satisfaction and needs to be incorporated into training with supervisors. Supervisors may not be aware of how much of an impact organizational climate can have on workers' performance and job satisfaction. Training with child welfare supervisors around workplace features that influence workers is not well documented in the research literature. Further, there are few empirical studies evaluating the effectiveness of any kind of training with child welfare supervisors. Preston (2005) notes the lack of pedagogical models of managerial work being applied in child welfare management training. In an era focused on documenting the effectiveness of social work practices in service delivery, more research is needed to understand the best and most effective training for child welfare managers. The results of this study suggest that an area ripe for attention would be to understand the impact of training with supervisors on the role of workplace features for workers' service delivery.

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