



Professional Organizational Culture and Retention in Child welfare: Implications for Continuing Education for Supervision and Professional Development

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Professional Organizational Culture and Retention in Child Welfare: Implications for Continuing Education for Supervision and Professional Development

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The U.S. Government Accounting Office ([USGAO], 1995) found that after funding, staffing is the second most serious issue with which child welfare systems are confronted. Many states are struggling to attract and employ competent staff in their public child welfare agencies due to high employee turnover. Turnover interrupts and results in less than desirable service delivery to our most needy and troubled population (Cyphers, 2001; Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; USGAO, 2003). According to a state job study (Louisiana Work Group, 2000), it takes approximately two years for new child welfare workers to learn their jobs and to acquire the knowledge, skills, abilities and values to work independently. State agencies in general have not attended to the retention of competent employees and researchers have expended little effort to examine why some competent staff remain in this difficult work context with disappointments, heavy work loads, involuntary clients with seemingly intractable problems, pressures from the organization and environment over which they have no control (Ellett & Ellett, 1997; Hopkins, Mudrick, & Rudolph, 1999; Rycus & Hughes, 1994). This area of study and work present for professionals providing continuing professional education to supervisors and workers a rich vein of information to explore in developing, marketing and delivering supportive education.

Focus on Retraining Competent Staff. Numerous studies have focused on understanding factors that contribute to employee stress and burnout (Ellett, 2000; Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001), but they are not as useful as research on organizational factors that serve to increase the holding power of child welfare organizations. Thus, research on

organizational and professional factors that contribute to employees' intentions to remain in child welfare is likely to yield important, additional information. This study builds upon a prior study (Ellett, 1995) and extends a line of inquiry concerned with staff retention in child welfare as an alternative to more traditional studies of child welfare staff burnout and turnover. This article reports a study of professional organizational culture correlates of child welfare staffs' intentions to remain employed (Ellett, 2000), and discusses implications of the findings for supervision and professional development of staff.

Professional Organizational Culture and Employee Retention in Child Welfare. High employee turnover in child welfare is costly from several perspectives. Costs include: a) lost dollars invested in preservice education and on-the-job training newly hired employees and lost expertise of experienced employees (Graef & Hill, 2000); b) considerable lag times between departing workers and their replacements which places additional burdens on existing staff; and c) disruptions in the continuity and quality of services and planning for children and families (Cicero-Reese & Black, 1998; Helfgott, 1991; Ellett, 1995; Pecora, Whittaker, & Maluccio, 1992; Winefield & Barlow, 1995). Clients are sensitive to changes in child welfare staff and experiencing ever-changing workers is confusing and psychologically unsettling to most clients. Given these important costs, it seems that child welfare agencies need to attend to personal and organizational factors that can enhance the retention of competent employees as an important goal to better maximize benefits to clients, staff and the total child welfare organization (Ellett,

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2000; Helfgott, 1991; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; USGAO, 2003).

Professional Organizational Culture in Child Welfare.

Organizational culture has been defined as a pattern of socially constructed basic assumptions, values and beliefs that the group learns that influence artifacts, forms, behaviors, espoused values, and attitudes (Denison, 1996; Rousseau, 1990; Reichers & Schneider, 1990; Schein, 1992; Trice & Beyer, 1993). Research on organizational cultures began to proliferate in the 1980s and this line of inquiry has received considerable attention in the literatures of sociology, psychology, management and education (Schein, 1992). Studies of organizational culture however, have not been prominent or systematically studied in the social work or child welfare context and few have been completed linking elements of professional organizational culture to child welfare staff retention. Why are studies of professional organizational culture in child welfare important?

If Schneider, Goldstein & Smith (1995) are correct about factors contributing to employee retention in organizations, then decisions of organizational heads pertaining to employee qualifications and selection procedures that best meet agency goals can significantly influence the professional culture in CW organizations. Thus, selecting competent, professionally committed employees in child welfare should be a first concern. The value placed on employees' professional credentialing and licensing procedures that symbolize excellence, and personal recognition, tangible rewards, career incentives, professional activities, quality supervision, in-service training, and other organizational supports, are all elements of fostering the development and maintenance of a professional organizational culture (Ellett, 1995; Hopkins, et al., 1999).

Research in education and psychology has identified professional organizational culture as instrumental to affecting meaningful organizational change (Cavanagh, 1997; Fullan, 1993; Reichers & Schneider, 1990). Thus, personal as well as organizational beliefs, norms and values (culture) have powerful influences on individual and organization-

al behavior which makes professional culture an important and rich variable to explore as a correlate of employee retention in public child welfare agencies. As used in this study, *professional organizational culture* refers to the norms (both formal and informal), values, interests, and beliefs shared among members of an organization that emanate from established professional ethics and standards that guide individual and collective behavior of organizational members. Professional culture frames organizational members' sense of *who we are as professionals and what we do around here*.

The Importance of Understanding Retention in Child Welfare.

Little is known about why individuals choose to remain employed in child welfare (Cicero-Reese & Black, 1997; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, 2000; Ellett, et al., 2003; Helfgott, 1991; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991). Individuals who desire to remain employed in child welfare make a personal determination to persist in child welfare. They value the career benefits centered on professional growth and self actualization, professional purpose and mission, professional needs gratification, and the importance of their work, more than other job factors such as financial incentives, characteristics of the general work environment and associated work tensions and frustrations.

Purpose

The general purpose of this study was to explore linkages between child welfare staff's intentions to remain employed in child welfare and their perceptions of multiple dimensions of professional organizational culture. The working hypothesis of the study was that elements of professional organizational culture are positively related to child welfare employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare.

Methodology

Sample

All professional level public child welfare staff (direct services workers, supervisors, administra-

tors) in the states of Arkansas and Louisiana (N=2,140) were surveyed. The sample available for analysis included usable survey responses received from 941 child welfare staff at all levels of the organization.

Study Measures

A survey was constructed to measure child welfare staff's intentions to remain employed in child welfare, and to measure professional organizational culture as part of a larger study (Ellett, 2000). Each of the two measures is briefly described below.

At the time of this study, there was no existing measure of child welfare employee's intentions to remain employed in child welfare. Therefore, the Intent to Remain Employed-Child Welfare (IRE-CW) measure was specifically developed for this study. The IRE-CW consists of 9 items to which child welfare employees respond using a four-point, forced-choice Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree. For the total measure, possible scores range from 9 to 36. Item numbers 3, 5, and 7 asked respondents about their *intentions to leave employment in child welfare* and these items were reverse coded for subsequent data analyses.

The Professional Organizational Culture Questionnaire-Social Work (POCQ-SW) is an adaptation and extended version of a measure originally developed by Bobbett, Olivier, Ellett, Rugutt, & Cavanagh (1998) for use in schools. The POCQ-SW consisted of 34 items designed to measure elements of professional organizational culture in the child welfare context. Each POCQ-SW item is assessed using a four-point, forced choice Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 4=Strongly Agree. Respondents are asked to make two judgments about their perception of each POCQ-SW item: (a) how they *actually view their work culture* (Actual Scale); and (b) how they *would prefer their work culture to be* (Preferred Scale). The three measurement dimensions (originally identified by Bobbett, et al., and the number of items comprising the POCQ-SW dimensions

were as follows: (a) *Vision/Leadership* (15); (b) *Collegial Teaching and Learning* (10); and (c) *Professional Commitment* (9). Given the response format, the POCQ-SW yields three different scores: (a) *actual* perceptions; (b) *preferred* perceptions; and (c) *cultural deprivation* perceptions (difference between preferred and actual perceptions). The major emphasis on this study was given to child welfare employees' actual responses.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for the study were collected in Louisiana and Arkansas using standard mail survey procedures during the early spring of 2000. A survey packet was developed for each respondent that included a cover letter requesting voluntary participation and other key IRB information, a letter of endorsement soliciting participation from the state child welfare agency head, an electronically scannable survey packet, and a stamped, return mail envelope. To facilitate response rates, two follow-up emails requesting participation were sent to each individual surveyed at two-week intervals after mailing the initial survey.

Data Analysis Procedures

Several data analysis procedures were completed on the survey data. These analyses included: (a) descriptive statistics for all survey items and for demographic information provided by respondents; (b) extensive principal components analyses of the IRE-CW and POCQ-SW measures; (c) reliability estimates for the empirically derived subscales of the study measures; and (d) bivariate correlations between the IRE-CW measure and the subscales of the POCQ-SW.

Results

Completed surveys were received from 946 participants yielding 941 usable surveys, for a 44.2 percent return rate. It is beyond the scope of this article to describe all of these results in detail. Thus, only those considered of particular interest in this article are noted here. More detailed results can be found in Ellett (2000).

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample. Of the total respondents, 83 percent were female and 16.7 percent were male. By ethnicity, percentages of responses were as follows: 65.3 percent white; 31.9 percent African American; and 2.8 percent Other. Percentages of responses by age were 16.7 percent 30 years or younger, 25.0 percent between 31 and 40, and 58.2 percent older than 40 years of age. Respondents' educational levels included 3 percent with less than a college degree, the vast majority, 68.8 percent, with a baccalaureate degree, and 27.7 percent with a master's degree. The bachelor of social work represented the most often reported undergraduate degree type (29.8 percent), with sociology second (15.4 percent), then psychology (13.5 percent). The remaining 41.3 percent had other undergraduate degrees, and 67.9 percent of those who reported a master's degree held MSWs. Length of employment for the total sample was as follows: 1-3 years = 27.0 percent; 4-9 years = 24.6 percent; 10-19 years = 22.6 percent; and 20 + years = 22.3 percent.

Descriptive Statistics for Survey Measures. For the IRE-CW measure for the total sample (n=941) the highest item mean score was 3.10 for item # 5 (not actively seeking other employment), and the lowest mean score was 2.30 for item # 2 (remain even if offered position outside child welfare with higher salary). The actual and preferred means, standard deviations and mean difference scores (preferred mean minus actual mean) for each item of POCQ-SW for the total sample were computed. For all items the preferred score was greater than the actual score. Additionally, standard deviations for the preferred scores were smaller for every item, indicating greater cohesiveness among respondents' in their perceptions of preferred elements of professional organizational culture than among their actual perceptions.

The highest actual POCQ-SW mean score was 3.25 for item # 30 (In this office child welfare staff believe working in child welfare is important to children, families and communities served). The lowest POCQ-SW actual mean score was 2.19 for item # 16 (In this office child welfare staff cooperatively participate with administrators in developing

new programs and policies). For the preferred POCQ-SW scores, the highest mean score was for item # 2 (In this office child welfare staff find that supervisors/administrators are willing to help child welfare staff when problems arise).

Analyses of the Study Measures

Data for each of the measures used in the study were analyzed in a series of principal components analysis (PCA) procedures to identify the nature of the latent constructs measured. Since each of the measures was designed for the study or adapted from measures originally used in non-social work contexts, a series of exploratory analyses was completed for the total sample of respondents (n=941) using PCA procedures and orthogonal rotation of components. The sections that follow provide a brief summary of the findings from the PCA procedures. A complete description of the PCA methodology used can be found in Ellett (2000).

Intent to Remain Employed-Child Welfare (IRE-CW) Measure. All nine of the IRE-CW items were retained in a one-component solution (see Appendix). The item/component loadings (correlations) ranged from .54 (Item #9) to .76 (Item #'s 1 and 5). Loadings for six of the nine items approached or exceeded .70. This one-factor solution accounted for 48.46 percent of the total item variance. No additional component was identified in a subsequent two-factor solution. Thus, the IRE-CW measure was used in all subsequent analyses as a single dimension measure of child welfare employee's intentions to remain employed in CW.

Professional Organizational Culture Questionnaire-Social Work (POCQ-SW) Measure. A three-component PCA solution was considered most representative of the data and best operationalized the professional organizational culture constructs. This solution accounted for 52.51 percent of the total POCQ-SW item variance. The first component extracted, Administrative Support (ADMS), was defined by 11 items that loaded from .52 (item # 12) to .79 (item # 10). The second component, Professional Sharing and Support (PSS), was operationalized by 7 items with loadings ranging from .56 (item # 24) to .75 (item # 27). A third component,

Vision/Professionalism/Commitment (VPC), consisted of 8 items with loadings ranging from .50 (item # 14) to .65 (item #5). Though the principal components identified in these analyses were extracted using orthogonal rotation procedures, intercorrelations among the factors were as follows: ADMS/PSS ($r=.64$), ADMS/VPC ($r=.68$), and PSS/VPC ($r=.70$).

Reliability Analyses

Cronbach Alpha reliability coefficients were computed for each empirically identified dimension of the IRE-CW and POCQ-SW measures using the entire sample of respondents ($n=941$). For the total sample, these coefficients were as follows: IRE-CW measure, .86; POCQ-SW ADMS, .92; PSS, .88; VPC, .83. Alpha coefficients were also separately computed for each of the two states. These coefficients showed little or no variation from those computed for the total sample.

Bivariate Correlations Among Factored Dimensions of the Study Measures

Pearson product moment correlation coefficients were computed among all dimensions of the study measures to examine interrelationships among the subscales, and to test the working hypothesis framing the study. The bivariate correlations between the IRE-CW measure (conceptualized as a dependent variable) and the factored subscales of the POCQ-SW measure (perceptions of the actual professional organizational culture) for all ($n=941$) respondents were as follows: ADMS with IRE ($r=.34$); PSS with IRE ($r=.26$), and VPC with IRE (.26). These correlations were all positive, in the predicted direction, and statistically significant ($p<.0001$). When similar correlations were computed for a sample of only direct services workers, each of these correlations increased slightly in magnitude. Interestingly, when these same correlations were computed for a sub-sample of employees with three years or less employment in child welfare ($n=337$), the strongest correlate of the IRE-CW measure was the POCQ-SW dimension of Vision/Professionalism/Commitment (VPC) ($r=.32$,

$p<.001$). These correlation findings provide rather strong support for the working hypothesis framing the study.

Discussion and Implications for Professional Development and Practice

This study was developed to better understand professional organizational culture correlates of child welfare *employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare*. It is the first known, large-scale study in child welfare to examine the working hypothesis that *child welfare employees' perceptions of dimensions of professional organizational culture are positively related to their expressed intents to remain employed in child welfare*.

After refinement of the study measures, subsequent analyses of the data were completed to: (a) examine descriptive statistical findings from this rather large sample of child welfare professionals ($n=941$); and (b) to test the working hypothesis framing the study. The results of the descriptive statistical analyses showed several findings of interest. For example, these child welfare employees *viewed most positively:*

their organization's child safety assessment and permanency planning activities and beliefs in the importance of child welfare work to the children, families and communities served.

They viewed somewhat negatively:

the extent to which leadership roles were shared by staff and administrators, the concern shown by administrators for staff as professionals, and the extent to which administrators involved them in developing agency programs and policies.

Survey respondents were also asked to assess elements of professional organizational culture as they actually are in contrast to how they would prefer them to be (what we termed an index of *cultural deprivation*). The results showed the largest differences (preferred minus actual mean scores) for:

the extent to which administrators showed a genuine concern for them as professionals in their work, their participation with administra-

tors in developing new agency programs and policies, support by administrators for their innovations and ideas, and empathy shown by administrators for their work related problems and difficulties.

The findings of this study show that establishing and maintaining a professional organizational culture that includes adequate administrative support, professional sharing and support among colleagues, and a culture with clear vision, professionalism, and commitment are important elements of strengthening organizational holding power, and in turn, employee retention in child welfare. This seems particularly the case for new employees given the high national turnover rates among this group (Cyphers, 2001; Ellett, 1995; USGAO, 2003).

Administrative support in child welfare organizations is an important factor related to employee retention. Such support is evidenced in many ways. Our findings clearly show, from child welfare staffs' *preferred culture* perspectives, that administrators need to strengthen professional organizational culture through a variety of means. These include:

1. demonstrating a willingness to help and assist staff when problems arise;
2. providing assistance to enhance the quality of case decisions and services to clients;
3. demonstrating empathy and personal concern for staff as professionals;
4. encouraging staff to fully actualize their potential, and
5. encouraging and providing support for staff to continue their social work education and to participate in continuing professional development activities.

Thus, our findings suggest that administrative leadership in child welfare that is sensitive to the difficulties of the work context and to the personal concerns of staff, and that encourages self-actualization of staff through continuing education, can strengthen professional organizational culture, and in turn, employee retention.

Even though positive perspectives of administrative support in this study were related to employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare, it should be noted that the lowest score for the three dimensions of professional organizational culture measured was for the Administrative Support dimension. In addition, the largest *cultural deprivation* score in both states (difference between preferred and actual perceptions of the work environment) was for the Administrative Support measure. These findings suggest that this dimension of professional organizational culture should perhaps be given priority in organizational development efforts designed to retain child welfare employees. Most public child welfare organizations expend the vast amount of their training/professional development budgets and time on new worker training, perhaps at the expense of continuing professional development for supervisors and administrators who play critical roles in strengthening professional culture and enhancing employee retention.

The Role of Professional Development and Continuing Education in the Retention of Child Welfare Staff

Professional development and continuing education for administrators and supervisors in child welfare are often non-existent, overlooked, or not viewed as priorities. Our findings suggest such efforts are needed to develop and sustain professional culture within child welfare organizations. Each of these core findings, could be used to frame objectives and learning activities for new and/or experienced administrators in their attempts to strengthen elements of professional organizational culture now known to be related to employee retention. With this goal in view, a professional development program for administrators, for example, might include a strong focus on identifying ways in which administrators and/or supervisors can develop organizational structures and procedures to assist employees as problems arise in difficult cases, or in continuing their professional development and learning.

It was interesting to note in this study that the strongest correlate of intention to remain employed

for those in their *first three years of employment* was the dimension of Vision/Professionalism/Commitment, rather than Administrative Support. New employees in child welfare apparently value clear communications within the organization about the difficulties of the job and the vision that is articulated to accomplish difficult work tasks. Professionalism within the organization and understanding a professional vision of what is expected and valued by colleagues, supervisors, and administrators are also seen as important by new employees.

Professional sharing and support was also identified in our study as an important element of professional organizational culture linked to employee retention in child welfare. Child welfare staff in our study saw more congruence between actual and preferred elements of professional organizational culture related to interpersonal relationships, than congruence related to administrative support. They viewed the following interpersonal elements of culture as related to their intentions to remain employed in child welfare:

1. willingness to provide support and assistance among staff when problems arise;
2. mentoring new employees;
3. sharing work experiences (among staff) to improve the effectiveness of client services;
4. encouragement among staff to exercise professional judgment when making client-related decisions; and
5. accepting the need for support from their colleagues and feeling comfortable with the assistance they receive from colleagues to enhance the quality of their work.

These results suggest that the emphasis given to strengthening interpersonal relationships among child welfare staff through mentoring, supportive supervision, allowing time for professional reflection, professional sharing and communicative interchanges, and encouraging staff to assist one another, strengthens professional organizational culture and enhances employee retention.

The importance of mentoring and support to

both competent practice and employee retention has been recognized in many professions (Collins, 1994; Kelly, 2001; Kelly & Lauderdale, 1999; 2001). Within child welfare organizations, there are many opportunities to strengthen this dimension of professional organizational culture. Some examples are: (a) assigning competent workers or supervisors to make home visits with new workers; (b) designating time for new workers to dialogue with coworkers about their cases; (c) providing opportunities for new workers to observe experienced workers in court hearings and other settings; and (d) having worker groups analyze and discuss case plans and make risk assessments.

Vision/Professionalism/Commitment was identified as a third, important element of professional organizational culture linked to employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare. This linkage was strongest for a sub-sample of employees with three years or less work experience. Our findings showed that positive perceptions of the following organizational characteristics were linked to employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare:

1. priority is given to child safety and permanence above all other organizational goals and activities;
2. staff take pride in working in child welfare;
3. staff believe they can have a positive impact on the lives of their clients;
4. staff clearly understand the agency's vision for child welfare programs; and
5. staff are committed to continuous professional development.

Thus, a child welfare organization in which a clear vision, grounded in the norms of social work professionalism, and a commitment to child welfare programs are visible, articulated, and emphasized, is likely to strengthen employee retention.

Developing this dimension of professional organizational culture can be enhanced through supportive supervision and ongoing professional development opportunities. For example, supervisors and administrators who (a) recognize employee's efforts

and successes in achieving child safety and permanence; (b) demonstrate and communicate pride in their work in child welfare; (c) encourage staff that they can have a positive impact on the lives of their clients; and (d) provide opportunities for continuous professional development, strengthen professional organizational culture and employee retention.

Our results show that approximately 11.6 percent of the variance in child welfare employees' intentions to remain employed was accounted for by elements of professional organizational culture, particularly administrative support. While this may not appear to be a particularly strong finding, it is considered important and rather statistically robust when considering a host of other factors impacting intentions to remain employed. For example, financial, personal/social and professional incentives, geographic location, the need to live near relatives/family, general levels of satisfaction and dissatisfaction with the community in which one lives, and a host of other factors also undoubtedly con-

tribute to child welfare employee's intentions to remain employed. From this perspective, our findings document the important role that strengthening professional organizational culture through supportive administration and supervision and continuous professional development can play in retaining child welfare employees.

Finally, in this large, two-state study, employees at all levels of the organization (caseworkers, supervisors, administrators) perceived professional organizational culture as an important factor related to their decisions to remain employed in child welfare. Given the national turnover rate of 20 to 40 percent among child welfare employees (Cyphers, 2001; USGAO, 2003), strengthening professional organizational culture through administrative support and leadership, supportive supervision, and opportunities for continuing professional development are needed, to not only retain child welfare professionals, but ultimately to improve professional services to children and families.

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