



**Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development**

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# Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

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There is a national, ongoing concern for a variety of workforce problems in public child welfare. Important among these are: a) high rates of employee turnover that dilute investments in training new staff and disrupt the quality, continuity, and equity of services to children and families (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003); b) high caseloads in most states; c) lack of quality assurance and accountability [e.g., failure of state child welfare agencies to meet broad, national Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSR) standards (USDHHS, 2003; USGAO, 2004)]; d) a need to improve child welfare employee education, certification, recruitment, selection, compensation, and career options; and e) the need to enhance the quality of supportive supervision. Many of these workforce problems and attendant issues are embedded within the larger, complex, social/political context in which child welfare agencies and employees must operate. These are typically beyond the reach and influence of everyday practitioners and are not amenable to practitioner input and change. Reducing high caseloads for example, is highly contingent upon developing and mandating compliance with new policies and providing the concomitant human, technical and financial resources to put new policies into practice. Addressing these kinds of macro level problems is largely beyond the responsibilities of child welfare staff as they carry out their professional, job-related duties in everyday practice.

Some states have begun shifting responsibility for delivery of core child welfare services to the private sector, but minimal research has been conducted regarding how this contrast with public

service delivery (Quality Improvement Center on the Privatization of Child Welfare Services, 2006a). A preliminary study of states that have privatized some child welfare services suggests that many if private child welfare agencies struggle with the same recruitment, selection, compensation, retention and supervision issues in their workforce. In some states, compensation in the private sector is lower than the public although tremendous variability exists, and benefits such as retirement and insurance, and what the agency may appear to offer in terms of security may seem less attractive. In addition, private agencies' ability to restrict caseload is typically dependent on their contract with the public agency (QIC PCW, 2006b).

On the other hand, emerging research suggests that there are things (at the more micro level) that can be done in everyday practice to enhance employee retention and to improve the quality of services to children and families. Private child welfare agencies may have more ability to be flexible and creative in such strategies outside the bureaucratic structure (QIC PCW, 2006b), and public systems may do well to adapt to the lessons of the private sector. An important key to changing and improving child welfare practices is the work of supervisors who have the most enduring contacts with frontline staff. While the importance of the work of child welfare supervisors is well documented in the literature (e.g., Diwan, Berger, & Ivy, 1996; Gregoire, Propp, & Poertner, 1998; Rushton & Nathan, 1996; Rycraft, 1994), we believe the findings from recent, large-scale, theory-based research studies linking personal and

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## Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

organizational factors to organizational outcomes in child welfare have implications for further explicating the important role that supervisors can play in mentoring and sustaining professional efforts of frontline child welfare staff, and in enhancing the quality of organizational outcomes as well.

### Purpose

The purpose of this article is to describe findings from recent research focused on personal and organizational factors related to organizational outcomes in child welfare and to discuss the implications of these findings for the supervision and continuing professional development of child welfare staff. All of these studies were completed within public child welfare settings, and consideration should be given to how they may relate to the private sector.

### A Continuing Line of Inquiry: Review and Synthesis of Recent Studies

During the past decade, several large-scale studies designed to examine linkages between sets of organizational and worker personal variables and organizational outcomes in public child welfare have been completed. Most of these have used quantitative measures that tap staff perceptions of characteristics of the work environment (e.g., work morale, elements of professional culture, evidence-based practices, quality of supervision) and personal characteristics (e.g., self- and collective efficacy beliefs, elements of human caring, education levels, job satisfaction, and work experience), and some have used qualitative methods as well. Important in these studies has been the development, adoption, or adaptation of a variety of theory-based measures that can be used in future research. In addition, and importantly given the focus of this article, these measures and the results they yield have implications for strengthening supportive supervision, everyday child welfare practice, and enhancing organizational outcomes as well. In one way or another, each of these studies has attempted to link

personal and organizational variables with organizational outcomes of importance with the goals of better understanding the complexity of, and improving the effectiveness of child welfare organizations.

Quality measurement is fundamental to quality research and to developing evidence-based practices in child welfare. As with many other lines of inquiry, there is a paucity of quality measures in child welfare for many important theoretical constructs and variables of interest. Therefore, most of the studies discussed in this article have attempted to develop quality measurement systems by examining measurement characteristics (e.g., reliability and validity) for the samples used. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain in any detail the developmental processes and statistical characteristics of these measures. The interested reader is referred to the cited sources for this kind of detailed information.

One criterion (outcome) variable in these studies has been employee retention. Studies of employee retention are considered a viable and rich alternative to the continued study of employee turnover and burnout that have historically characterized much of the traditional literature in child welfare. Recent reviews of the child welfare burnout literature have criticized past research for poor conceptualization and measurement, and put forth the view that burnout and subsequent turnover may indeed be a face saving substitute for an individual's inability to do child welfare work (Crolley-Semec & Ellett, 2003). As the argument goes, a better research focus is understanding why child welfare employees *remain employed* in a most difficult and taxing work environment. This focus can yield more useful information for employee selection, supervision, and continuing professional development than understanding why individuals choose to leave employment in child welfare (Ellett, 2000). The conceptual, and methodological difficulty of studying retention and turnover in child welfare and other human services agencies has been previously noted (Mor Barak, Nissly, &

**Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare:  
Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development**

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Levin, 2001) and will not be reiterated here.

However, given the measurement of *intentions* to remain employed in child welfare in several of the studies discussed here, it is important to note that intention to quit or leave is the strongest predictor of actual turnover (Alexander, Lichtenstein, Oh, & Ullman; 1998; Mor Barak, et al., 2001).

We believe retention studies can identify useful, *alterable variables* that can be addressed by supervisors in their work, whereas studies of turnover and burnout fail to yield this kind of information. Demonstrating empirical linkages between employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare and personal variables such as human caring and self-efficacy beliefs, for example, can also provide information important for professional development as well as employee selection (see Ellett, Ellett, Westbrook, & Lerner article in this issue). Similarly, if elements of the work environment and context (e.g., general work morale, professional organizational culture, quality of supervision and support) can be shown to predict employee retention and important organizational outcomes (e.g., time to permanency placement of children) information is at hand to improve supportive supervision for organizational improvement and effectiveness. Brief summaries of major findings of some of these recent studies having relevance for this article are described below. The implications of the findings for supervision and continued professional development are subsequently discussed.

Ellett (1995) completed a statewide, mixed methods study of public child welfare staff in Louisiana that examined relationships between measures of job attitudes/work morale, self- and organizational efficacy beliefs, human caring, general job satisfaction, and factors contributing to employee turnover. *Original measures were developed for each of these variables.* Survey data were collected from 718 professional child welfare staff and focus group interviews were completed with 152 child welfare staff representing all geographical areas and all levels of the state agency. Focus group interviews were also

completed with 20 employees with 10 or more years of employment in child welfare termed the "committed survivors"). The primary results of the Ellett study showed that the highest levels of satisfaction were with supervisors/supervision and that this variable was linked to positive perceptions of the job and employee retention. Approximately 22% of those surveyed stated they were actively seeking other employment. Quality supervision and administrative support experienced during the course of their careers were identified by the committed survivors as the most important factors related to their continued employment *in child welfare*. Dissatisfaction with the job by relatively new employees was associated with lack of supportive supervision (particularly in the field).

Ellett (2000) completed a two-state quantitative study (survey) of child welfare workers in Louisiana (n=562) and Arkansas (n=357). The outcome variable of interest was a new measure of employee intention to remain employed in child welfare. Organizational and personal characteristics variables were measures of human caring, self-efficacy beliefs, and actual and preferred elements of organizational culture. The primary results showed positive, statistically significant, but moderately strong relationships between dimensions of human caring, professional organizational culture, self efficacy beliefs, and the Intent to Remain Employed (IRE) in child welfare measure ( $r = .17$  to  $.38$ ). The relationship between professional sharing and support (an element of quality supervision) and the IRE was  $.27$ .

Landsman (2001) used structural equation modeling to estimate a causal model of *organizational/occupational* commitment and intention to remain employed in the organization using a statewide sample of 990 public child welfare employees in a mid-western state. The study included concern for job stressors, professional identification, and structural conditions of the workplace (e.g., autonomy, supervisory support). The study results showed that supervisory support was a positive correlate of job

## Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

satisfaction ( $r=.30$ ) which in turn was linked to occupational and organizational commitment and intent to remain employed in child welfare.

Organizational commitment was the strongest predictor of intent to stay in the (child welfare) organization. Commitment to the occupation (of child welfare) was the strongest correlate of intent to stay in the occupation. Supervisor support was identified as a key variable related to employee retention in child welfare.

Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt (2003) completed the largest known statewide study of employee turnover and retention using survey ( $n=1423$ ) and focus group interview ( $n=385$ ) methods with child welfare staff at all levels of the state agency in Georgia. The lengthy survey (198 items) included measures of employee work morale, professional organizational culture, human caring, self- and collective efficacy beliefs, efficacy expectations, general job satisfaction, and factors contributing to the decision to either remain or leave employment in child welfare. The IRE (Ellett, 2000) was also included in this survey. Given the results of prior studies, the most important finding in this study was a rather strong, statistically significant, positive correlation between employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare and their *professional commitment*, a dimension of the measure of human caring. Professional support (a dimension of work morale) and the quality of supervision and leadership (a dimension of organizational culture) were positively correlated with the IRE ( $r=.36$  and  $r=.33$ ). Selected dimensions of employees' self-efficacy beliefs (e.g., effort and persistence in carrying out work tasks) and a measure of efficacy expectations were also positively correlated with employees' intentions to remain employed (in child welfare) ( $r=.22$  and  $r=.27$ ). Three dimensions of general job satisfaction (organizational structure, client responsibilities, coworker/supervisor relations) were also positively correlated with the IRE measure ( $r=.41$ ,  $r=.40$ ,  $r=.22$ ). Satisfaction with salary, job benefits, and promotional opportunities

was positively correlated with multiple dimensions of work morale ( $r=.28$  to  $.50$ ) and professional organizational culture ( $r=.26$  to  $.45$ ) as well.

In the Ellett, et al. study (2003), the results of focus group interviews clearly identified professional support and guidance received from supervisors as important factors related to strengthening self-efficacy beliefs about accomplishing child welfare tasks and strengthening intentions to remain employed in child welfare (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, in press). As found in the Ellett (1995) study, focus group interviews with sub groups (urban and rural) of *committed survivors* provided additional corroboration for the importance of supportive supervision to quality services and the retention of employees in child welfare (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, in press).

Ellis, Ellett, & DeWeaver (in press) reported on a complex, multi-dimensional, self report measure of human caring based upon the conceptualizations and work of Noddings (1996; 1999; 2003) in a study of 786 child welfare workers in Georgia developed by Ellis (2005). The criterion-related validity of this human caring measure was explored by correlating its measurement dimensions with the same IRE measure used in the Ellett (2000) and the Ellett, et al. (2003) studies. The results showed that *professional commitment* of the human caring measure was the strongest correlate with the IRE ( $r=.45$ ), which generally replicated previous research findings in the Ellett, et al. (2003) study. The findings from the Ellis, et al. study also showed positive relationships between the IRE and five other dimensions of human caring ranging from  $.34$  (receptivity to the needs and feelings of others) and  $.10$  (respect for clients). A subsequent regression analysis showed that a four-variable human caring model accounted for 28% of the total variation in employees' intentions to remain employed in child welfare (IRE). These findings continue to document the importance of human caring among child welfare staff and rather strong, replicable, positive relationships between dimensions of human caring

## Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

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(particularly professional commitment) and intent to remain employed in child welfare.

Westbrook (2006), extending prior work by Ellett (2000), Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt (2003), and Ellett & Millar (2005), completed a statewide study in Georgia of multiple dimensions of organizational culture as perceived by 1,033 child welfare staff representing all levels of the state agency and relationships between these perceptions and employees' intentions to remain employed in *child welfare* as measured by the IRE. The primary results of this study showed that the strongest single organizational culture correlate of intent to remain employed in child welfare was a measure of *supervisory support* ( $r=.45$ ) followed closely by *administrative support* ( $r=.43$ ) and *organizational ethos* ( $r=.36$ ). A four-variable regression model that included these three organizational culture variables and a measure of cultural *professionalism* accounted for 26% of the total variation in these child welfare employees' intentions to remain employed (IRE scores)

Collins-Camargo (2005) recently completed a study of linkages between supervision, organizational culture promoting evidence-based practice, self-efficacy, and public child welfare outcomes with 876 child welfare workers and supervisors in a Midwestern state. The study was based on the theoretical assumption that perceptions of effective supervision in public child welfare would be related to perceptions of an organizational culture promoting evidence-based practice. This was supported in that an ANCOVA revealed a significant main effect on organizational culture when adjusting for the significant impact of length of service. In fact, 53% of the culture variance promoting evidence-based practice was explained by the effectiveness of the supervision. The study further looked at the extent to which effective supervision was a correlate of worker self-efficacy beliefs in child welfare tasks. The strongest relationship was for those employees with two years of experience or less, who may be most amenable to developing self-efficacy in work-related tasks. In addition, there

was a significant difference for workers regardless of years of service in efficacy expectations, or the extent to which workers believed that work tasks were likely to result in desired outcomes (such as the ability to effect positive change in clients), based on the perceived effectiveness of supervision. These findings suggest that the role of the supervisor in creating an organizational culture that is focused on achieving positive outcomes, and in maintaining a sense of hope within staff that their efforts can make a difference, is a critical one.

Of particular interest in this study (Collins-Camargo, 2005) was an attempt to link these personal and organizational variables to child welfare outcomes as specified by CFSR child welfare outcomes (e.g., recurrence of substantiated reports of child abuse/neglect). The details of these findings are complex and beyond the scope of this article. However, the major findings of this study, given the focus of this article, were that regression analyses demonstrated that effective supervision and professional organizational culture were significant predictors of some case outcome indicators, and in some cases at a similar magnitude of the predictive strength of larger community indicators such as poverty, although the magnitude of this relationship between poverty and some case outcomes was generally strong. However, outcomes such as the achievement of child welfare practice standards are impacted by factors too numerous to mention here. The fact that the organizational factors of interest in this study are significant at all, suggests the importance of further study in which the multi-level aspects of such data (individual and organizational) can be considered to assess relative impacts of each level.

### Discussion and Implications

The findings from these recent large-scale, empirical studies of linkages between personal and organizational variables public child welfare employees' intentions to remain employed, and even achievement of practice indicators and case

## Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

outcomes have implications for the supervision and continuing professional development of public child welfare professionals and for future research. For example, if public child welfare systems want to understand how they can retain competent and committed staff, promote high quality practice, create an environment in which practice is outcomes-focused and evidence-based, and achieve desired outcomes for the families and children they serve — and it is our premise that in general they do — they would do well to consider the findings of the studies cited here and how they choose to focus their enhancement efforts with typically limited resources. In the studies cited here, the quality of child welfare supervision has been demonstrated to be closely linked to these desirable outcomes — perhaps even the most distal outcomes. While it seems likely that many of these findings may also be relevant to the private child welfare setting, further research should be done to examine this, and the extent to which private agencies may be different in some ways, both in how the dynamics manifest, and how the agency may be able to respond.

It is perhaps in the work unit and under the purview of frontline supervisors that the most important elements of the culture of the child welfare organization are developed, strengthened and interpreted, and the ability of staff to strive toward effective practice is either supported or thwarted. Within the subculture of the child welfare work unit, the way modes of practice and work task emphases play out has been suggested in the organizational literature for some time (i.e. Martin & Siehl, 1983), and may be of particular importance in typically hierarchical and bureaucratic public child welfare settings (Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988; Thomas, 1990). The role of the supervisor in organizational performance has been theoretically established outside the social work literature within classical thought such as Burke and Litwin's (1992) causal chain of organizational performance and change. The relevance of quality supervision to child welfare has certainly been supported in many

of the recent child welfare research studies described here (Ellett, Ellett, & Rugutt, 2003; Collins-Camargo, 2005; Westbrook, 2006).

Brager and Holloway (1992) suggested that research in organizational practice should integrate three levels of analysis — individual, group and organization — to understand the associated complexities of organizations. In the child welfare organization, supervision would seem to be the lynchpin between the frontline worker and all three of Brager and Holloway's levels. Each of the studies reviewed in this article provides support for the importance of the supervisor in the child welfare organization. Considered collectively, the results of these studies show that:

- through interactions between worker and supervisor, and among members of a work unit, competent practice can be promoted;
- it is possible for the worker to make a positive difference and persist despite the difficulty of the work at hand can be maintained; and
- an environment can be created in which competent workers will remain in spite of difficult work tasks, clients served, unpredictability and stress of the daily work environment, and the many challenges that must be faced.

Each of the recent studies reviewed in this article provides support for the value the frontline supervisor has in increasing the *holding power* of the organization for its employees (enhancing employee retention) and organizational outcomes as well (see for example, Collins-Camargo, 2005).

These recent studies also suggest that it is important for supervisors to understand and value the *translation of theory into practice* as they work with frontline staff. The measures of worker personal characteristics in these studies (e.g., self-efficacy beliefs, human caring) have a rich grounding in theory. Thus the measures can be used in future theory-based research as this general line of inquiry moves forward. As well, the theories in which the measures are grounded have direct implications for supervisory practices. For example, Bandura's (1997) theory of

**Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare:  
Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development**

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self-efficacy beliefs identifies, and a host of empirical studies of self-efficacy support as well, four key sources of developing and strengthening self-efficacy beliefs: (a) enactive mastery experiences; (b) vicarious learning (modeling); (c) verbal persuasion; and (d) physiological and affective states. Each of these sources can be translated into supervisory practices in child welfare. When supervisors provide staff with tasks that fit their experiences and capabilities that lead to success (enactive mastery experiences), self-efficacy beliefs are strengthened. Conversely, repeated failures at work tasks serve to weaken self-efficacy beliefs. Thus it is important, particularly for new, inexperienced staff, that supervisors (and administrators) not overload these employees with large numbers of cases or with difficult tasks that are typically assigned to more experienced and capable staff.

Vicarious experiences are another source of developing and strengthening self-efficacy beliefs. Thus, when supervisors model best practices for staff, they serve as an important learning resource and also strengthen self-efficacy beliefs of staff. This theory into practice concept suggests that supervisors can strengthen self-efficacy beliefs by modeling (demonstrating) best practices in the field either personally, or perhaps by assigning experienced, competent staff to work closely in the field to mentor new staff.

Verbal persuasion, a third theory-based source of self-efficacy beliefs, is important for supervisors to incorporate into daily practices. The vast majority of interactions between supervisors and staff are verbal. Therefore, many opportunities and forms of verbal persuasion are available and can be easily used. For example, supervisors' comments to staff that motivate efforts, encourage persistence, and that recognize successes, are all forms of verbal persuasion that translate theory into practice in a manner that strengthens self-efficacy beliefs.

The fourth source of self-efficacy (physiological and affective states) suggests that as staff members become excited about and involved in their work, and as this excitement and involvement is recog-

nized and shared by supervisors, self-efficacy beliefs are strengthened. Thus, responding to staff accomplishments and efforts with social recognition, verbal comments suggesting pleasure and/or excitement about accomplishments of staff, and demonstrating non-verbal behaviors suggesting empathy, understanding, pleasure, fulfillment, elation and so on, serve to strengthen self-efficacy beliefs. The supervisor who demonstrates positive emotional involvement and affective investment in the work of staff is a key source of enhancing self-efficacy beliefs. In turn, and as shown in several of the studies reviewed in this article, strengthened self-efficacy beliefs are positively related to intentions to remain employed in child welfare.

As well, supervisors need to maintain vigilance over experienced staff members who may reach a point in their careers when self-efficacy beliefs are diminished by lack of success with children and families, which in turn yields reduced effort and persistence in accomplishing case outcomes. It may be important, especially given the national concern for high child welfare employee turnover rates, to assign these individuals cases with high probabilities of success to provide some respite with the goal of again strengthening their self-efficacy beliefs. Continuing professional development programs might also be developed around the core constructs (e.g., human agency) in which self-efficacy theory is grounded.

Each of the studies cited above has involved the adaptation/adoption and/or development of high quality measures. Each of these measures has been developed using traditionally endorsed validation procedures, and each has demonstrated reasonable reliability for the samples studied. They offer a rich resource for future studies seeking to link quality supervision to personal and organizational characteristics, and organizational outcomes in child welfare.

In order to enable supervisors to be effective in their work, child welfare agencies must support and provide training grounded in how to promote a positive organizational culture. Efforts to promote



## Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare: Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

desired staff retention should include investment in supervisory enhancement. This includes promoting an evidence-based and outcomes-focused approach to the work that responds to the qualities of human caring and desired self-efficacy in work tasks that bring many workers to child welfare in the first place, and were shown to be important in several of the studies reviewed here (e.g., Ellis, Ellett, & DeWeaver, in press; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, in press; Collins-Camargo, 2005).

As public child welfare agencies strive to improve client outcomes tracked in the Child and Family Services Review process, they must make choices. They may focus their efforts on traditional classroom training of best practice models, but the impact of such has been questioned in the literature (Hartley, 2000; Holton & Baldwin, 2000). The transfer of learning into the practice environment has been shown to be significantly impacted by the nature of the organizational culture, and the extent to which such learning is realistic within the real life work context (Austin, et. al., 2006; Awoniyi, Griego & Morgan, 2002). It makes sense that regardless of the practice advancements being taught, the role of the supervisor in helping the worker effectively in the real world would be important. If evidence-based practices in child welfare are identified, it would seem that the role of the frontline supervisor is clear in encouraging and making their use possible and desired (Collins-

Camargo, in press). The recent exploratory work that shows a positive relationship between effective supervision, the achievement of practice standards and client outcomes (Collins-Camargo, 2005) should be seen as a first step in a line of inquiry that links quality supervision to organizational factors such (e.g., organizational culture) and to personal characteristics of staff (e.g., human caring, self-efficacy, work morale) and to important organizational outcomes (e.g. CFSR variables). These organizational and personal characteristics are considered *alterable variables* that are amenable to a variety of influences within the child welfare agency, and in turn, influence organizational outcomes (e.g., strengthened employee retention) and outcomes for children and families as well. The studies reviewed in this article show that within the child welfare system, the connection between frontline supervisory practice, organizational culture and professional commitment, worker professional development and self-efficacy, retention of quality staff, evidence-based practice with families and client outcomes themselves, should be viewed as an interconnected web which needs to be reinforced in a comprehensive way if agencies want to achieve the outcomes they seek. The studies reviewed here and their implications provide a foundation for future research and practice in supervision in child welfare and important workforce issues.

**Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare:  
Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development**

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**Personal and Organizational Correlates of Outcomes in Child Welfare:  
Implications for Supervision and Continuing Professional Development**

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