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A Quantitative Analysis of Perceived Leadership Practices in Child Welfare Organizations

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This quantitative study contributes to leadership knowledge in the field of child welfare organizations by investigating the perceived leadership in the Division of Child and Family Services. Findings indicated significant difference in leadership practice ratings between caseworkers and administrators and also that perceptions of all five leadership practices were different between caseworkers and organizational leaders. The greatest difference between leaders and followers was in the perception of encouraging the heart. Encouraging the heart also presented the greatest variability among caseworkers, indicating a wide variance in how encouragement is experienced and perceived by caseworkers. These findings contribute to implications for social work education and child welfare practice.

KEYWORDS   child welfare, leadership practices, caseworkers, leadership practices inventory

Conceptualizing and understanding the role of leadership in the social work profession is increasingly important to a changing profession influenced by social, cultural, economic, political, and demographic factors that impact human service delivery systems (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). Societal changes and conditions of ambiguity with evolving definitions of effective leadership place a strain on a profession engaged in preserving professional identification. Social work authors (Austin, 1989; Brilliant, 1986; Glisson, 1989; Rank & Hutchison, 2000) have witnessed the decline of leadership education and development in the profession, its diminishing emphasis within practice and

training, and disregard for its potential influence on organizational factors. The diminished emphasis on leadership in social work has recently given way to increased leadership education initiatives supported by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), leadership development needs to both internal and external to social work education (Sheafor, 2006). This paradigm shift in education is dually noticed in the field of child welfare where recent trends indicate that quality and support of supervisory leaders contributes to retaining a high-quality, professional, child-welfare workforce (Ellett, Collins-Camargo, & Ellett, 2007; Ellett & Millar, 2004; US GAO, 2004; Kleinpeter, Pasztor, & Telles-Rogers, 2003).

More specifically, child welfare systems continue to be under political and public scrutiny as they ricochet through controversy, disputes, and social and political pressure. Service provision, delivery methods, and the quality and quantity of services, are continually evolving to meet diverse and growing child and family needs, while straining to maintain compliance with legislative regulations. In response to regulations and emerging class action suits, child welfare organizations have initiated major infrastructure and systemic changes, development, and training to better address the complexities of social and systemic challenges. In light of advancing legislative initiatives, federal regulations, and advocacy movements in child welfare, continued attention needs to be directed to identify varying features of organizational indicators that contribute to positive service outcomes (Hoagwood, 1997). Indicators linked to organizational outcomes often take the form of organizational culture and leadership. These organizational indicators are frequently overlooked by researchers and overshadowed by intense focus on elements of practice models and clinical program evaluation. This study begins with a broad theoretical background on the role of leadership in social services, followed by a specific definition and contextualization of leadership in child welfare. The theoretical background and operational variables are then connected to the research question.

BACKGROUND

Leadership in Human Services

Factors that impact organizational performance are complex and multifaceted. In the same respect, social workers leading organizations are often commissioned to impact organizational performance by motivating employees and leading the operations of a given organization. Early organizational studies (McClelland, 1975; McClelland & Boyatzis, 1982) indicated a positive relationship between subordinate attitudes and effective leadership practices. Authors exploring organizational culture discovered that it is the role and responsibility of leaders to create positive organizational cultures (Schein,

1985). Human service leadership studies that followed (Brilliant, 1986; Glisson, 1989; Patti, 1987) concluded that the primary purpose of leadership was to impact the organizational climate in order to empower, engage, and inspire workers to the vision and mission of their organization. This research, however, also depicts the vocation of human services as neglecting or nearly abandoning the construct of leadership and its key role in establishing the foundation and direction of the profession.

The distinction and complexity of leadership in nonprofit and governmental human service organizations has been consistently reviewed, described, and analyzed by Austin (1983, 1989). The emerging characteristics of the non-profit leader are shaped and reflective of not only the organizational characteristics shared amongst multiple types of formal organizations, but also by the distinct elements that compose the attributes of human service organizations. The parallel resemblance between the human service executive and the public administrator is found in the implementation of policy, organizational continuity and a bottom line performance of "breaking even." As the public administrator, the human service leader does not have a personal monetary investment in the financial performance of the organization. The key element that Austin found in distinguishing the human service executive from the corporate executive or the public administrator is that an "important yardstick for judging executive performance in a human service organization is the quality of the services actually produced by the organization" (Patti, 1987, p. 23). The distinction is further expanded by the human service executive duties of leading the balance between two widely diverse social structures that provide service and the overall organization of human service production.

Throughout his search and analysis of the human service executive, Austin (1989) found the position to be influenced by the interactive and adaptive process between the individual and structural context. Different environments within similar organizations also impacted and shaped the executive position requiring a strategic blend of approaches that would fit the organization, situation and circumstance. These findings led Austin to believe that the executive role or definition is not universal and one executive style does not produce similar performance across multiple settings and situations.

The human service executive position involves an inclusive but wide-ranging responsibility to leading multiple systems involving management as it relates to personnel motivation, production and productivity, resource mobilization, planning and organizational development, and multiple facets that are led and influenced by the human service organizational culture. In an attempt to explore leadership influence on the creation of organizational culture and performance, Glisson (1989) examined leadership among 47 workgroups of 319 individuals in 22 human service organizations. The intent of the study was to identify leadership dimensions that affect worker attitudes linked to promoting successful human service organizational efforts. The

relationship of three leadership dimensions with job satisfaction and organizational commitment of workers in human service organizations was investigated through varying questionnaires measuring leadership and worker attitudes of organizational commitment, job satisfaction, role conflict and ambiguity, and additional scales to measure skill variety, task significance, and task identity. A strong relationship was discovered between commitment and leader power and maturity. Significant positive relationships were also found between each of the three leadership dimensions and job satisfaction. After controlling for organization, job, and worker characteristics, only the relationship with leader maturity remained significant. A major conclusion from this study in conceptualizing leadership ability as linked to a collection of traits is that a leader is able to impact follower belief and identification with organizational goals and values, influence followers to implement extensive effort for the organization, and engage followers with methods that enhance commitment and membership to the organization.

Several authors (Austin, 1997; Cooke, Reid, & Edwards, 1997; Ginsberg & Keys, 1995) have increased attention to leadership roles in human service organizations. In a further attempt to explore social, cultural, economic, political, and demographic transformations occurring on both state and national levels, researchers and direct practitioners have begun to investigate how these factors are changing the complexity of human service delivery systems and organizations. Cooke, Reid, and Edwards (1997) describe several key leadership skills expected of social work managers as they lead agencies into the complexities of the near future. Although Cooke, Reid, and Edwards primarily explored early leadership indicators of traits, skills and abilities, future developments and direction within social work will be reliant upon leaders who have the ability to effectively manage and maintain the image and direction of the agency, the skill to network and collaborate, build coalitions, and work with multiple stakeholders while balancing hostile and unpredictable environments (Rank & Hutchison, 2000).

To better understand the development of leadership expectations within the field of social work, Rank and Hutchison (2000) examined perceived leadership behavior and philosophy of social workers through the lens of those who lead the profession. The main intent of their exploratory study was to investigate how social work leaders within the CSWE and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) perceived social work leadership. A random sample of 75 deans from several hundred social work programs and 75 executive directors and presidents were selected to participate in an open-ended questionnaire.

Qualitative findings from interviewing higher education administrators represented five emerging common themes that define the concept of leadership within the profession of social work. These five indicators of human services leadership represent (1) proaction; (2) values and ethics; (3) empowerment; (4) vision; and (5) communication. The second question probing the

perceived leadership differences across disciplines revealed that 77% of the respondents perceive human services leadership as distinct and specific to the profession (Rank & Hutchison, 2000). Rank and Hutchison conclude their findings by clearly indicating that leadership development is a key component to the growth of the profession. A general reoccurring and concluding theme was the sense that leadership is a neglected area of emphasis within the profession and that further investigation is needed to explore outcomes of social work leaders and how leadership styles relate to organizational performance. These findings were further complemented by studies that explored the role of supervisors as position leaders contributing to job satisfaction and retention in an increasingly complex profession (Ellett, 2001; Ellett & Millar, 2004; Ellis, Ellett, & DeWeaver, 2006; Kelly, 2001; Smith, 2005; Strand & Bosco-Ruggiero, 2010).

Leadership Definition

The progression of leadership theory has evolved from the early days of identifying attributes (Stogdill, 1948) to recognizing the role of leadership behaviors (Stogdill & Coons, 1957), to exploring leadership in situations and transaction process (Fiedler, 1967), and to most current complex intersection between personal and organizational transformation (Burns, 1978; Bass, 1985). A pivotal aspect of Yukl's (2006) definition of contemporary leadership focuses on change or transformation and that a leader's objective is less about *leading* and more about ensuring *transformation*. This underlying principle has resulted in researchers taking two major approaches within leadership research to date. Firstly, leadership is a *role*, requiring a specific set of attributes/traits attributable to particular behaviors, as demonstrated by the work of researchers Fleishman (1953) and Yukl, Gordon, and Taber (2002). Secondly, leadership is an *influence process or power* within a social setting, as demonstrated by the work of Kotter (1985) and Bono and Judge (2003). However, there are also researchers (Kerr & Jermier, 1978; Vecchio, 1987) who assert that the *context*, the essence of *contingency theories*, is the overriding determinate of leadership. All of these perspectives are important in isolation, yet significant gains in leadership understanding can occur when one begins to integrate all of these ideas.

The integration of these concepts has led to what is commonly referred to as *transformational leadership*. Bass (1985) adapted the construct and verb of transforming leadership, earlier coined by Burns (1978), to represent an adjective suggesting that leadership is a process and that transformational leaders transform follower's self-interest and elevate personal expectations (Wren, 1995). The true test of transformational leadership as conceptualized by Bass (1985) comes from leadership goals and "performance beyond expectations" (p. 45) that require a setting whereby followers realize goals that exceed past performance and activate higher order needs (Yukl, 2006).

Few studies on transformational leadership have emerged in the social work literature (Fisher, 2009). Gellis (2001) found a positive correlation between transformational leadership factors and willingness of social workers to engage in requested activities, satisfaction and perception of leader effectiveness. Before Gellis, Arches (1997) discovered that effective social service supervisors were practicing transformational leadership principles regardless of their intentionality to theoretically ground their practices. Despite the lack of a nominal definitions or limited empirical evidence of transformational leadership in the field of social work, Packard (2003) emphasizes the shared conceptual principles between transformational leadership and the field of social work. Principles of valuing and empowering individuals let alone the interest to explore the active and invaluable role of followers as much as leaders and organizations are closely shared in both perspectives. More specifically to child welfare, recent findings by Westbrook, Ellis, and Ellett (2006) showed that committed longevity survivors in the public child welfare settings were sustained by local office administrators that created an organizational climate and professional culture that centered on many positive experiences that strengthened self-efficacy beliefs of being able to do the difficult work (Bandura, 1997).

Various attempts have been made to operationalize and measure transformational leadership practices. Through in-depth interviews and written case studies from personal-best leadership experiences, Posner and Kouzes (1988) explored the culminating interchange of diverse leadership principles, behaviors, influences, and contexts to conceptualize five practices of exemplary leaders. Challenging the process, encouraging the heart, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, and modeling the way represent the five factors constructed after comprehensive interviews and a battery of surveys. The five factors closely align with the transformational leadership premise of activating higher order needs of followers and confidence to exceed past performance. Field and Herold (1997) closely investigated whether the broad dimensions of transformational leadership can be inferred from subordinate reports of leadership behavior collected using the scale created by Posner and Kouzes (1988). Their findings showed that subordinate assessments made using the Leadership Practices Inventory (LPI) can be used to measure transformational leadership. The LPI also provides 360-degree feedback that informs a leader's performance from a personal perspective and the perspective of others. The scale allows the leader to evaluate their own leadership practices, while the caseworker evaluates the same leader from their own perspective. This circular process represents a 360-degree evaluation loop that informs the leader about their leadership practices, as perceived by them and their followers. This information contributes to professional development and ongoing monitoring of one's own practice in supervising, collaborating with peers, and cultivating opportunities for staff development in meeting the complex demands of their social service indus-

try (Richardson, 2010). Additionally, Richardson suggests that a 360-degree feedback process allows both leader and observer to evaluate perceived leadership practices, which invariably contributes to depth and richness of content and evaluation from two vantage points. This feedback loop creates an engaged participatory work environment that further contributes to mutual professional development and allows the leader to demonstrate support and personal investment in a participatory process. Most importantly leadership, self-evaluation, and a participatory work environment reflect social work values crafted by the NASW (2011) and the National Network for Social Work Managers (2011). The study reported here integrated theoretical foundations found in transformational leadership, empirically conceptualized by Posner and Kouzes (1988) and grounded in social work values.

Focus of the Study

The role of perceived leadership practices and their impact on job attitudes in child welfare was recently examined by Popa and Andenoro (2009) through a qualitative study that explored perceived relationship between leadership practices and caseworker job attitudes. This earlier qualitative study implemented three heterogeneous focus groups; one focus group with regional and state-wide supervisors and administrations, and two focus groups with caseworkers representing both urban and rural regions in one Mountain West State. Qualitative themes indicated divergent perceptions of leadership practices between caseworkers and administrators. Additionally, findings illuminated that caseworkers expressed stronger work morale in settings where supervisors embraced frontline involvement in decision-making as it provides opportunities for professional growth and understanding of macro policy functions. Additionally, "mentorship was perceived as a vital leadership practice contributing to increase of professional knowledge, confidence, professional growth, worker retention, and casework efficacy. Mentorship provided opportunities to validate caseworker skills and develop weak areas of practice" (p. 17). These findings confirmed a larger California Social Work Education Center (Cal SWEC) study that found knowledge and personal support to be the most essential indicators valued by line workers (Clark et al., 2008).

Given most current trends and findings highlighting the role of organizational and leadership factors as impacting employee retention and professional development (Wagner, Van Reyk, & Spence. 2001; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006), the objective of this study was to build on earlier findings and investigate perceived leadership practices through a valid and reliable leadership scale. The research question investigated in this study was:

> How are leadership practices in the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) in one State perceived by frontline and administrative staff?

METHODOLOGY

A cross-sectional survey research design was appropriate to achieve the objective of the study when describing self-reported beliefs or behaviors (Neuman, 2006) and given the early stages of knowledge development exploring transformational leadership principles in child welfare.

Sample

A convenience sampling approach was used with two separate populations in the Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) in a Mountain West State. The overall DCFS frontline worker and leadership population was 550 employees, with 400 caseworkers and 150 administrators. Participants recruited for this study were employees in leadership and frontline positions at DCFS. Participant selection was made through a specific DCFS intranet website that distributed the leadership scale and hosted the collection of data at the Department of Human Services (DHS). An intranet e-mail of (1) invitation and description of the study, (2) informed consent, and (3) link to LPI-Self or LPI-Observer was sent to all DCFS frontline workers and administrators to explain the study and request voluntary participation. The informed consent addressed in greater detail the purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits of the study and explained issues of confidentiality and consent. Consent was implied by completion of the scale. The study included all volunteering frontline or leader respondents.

Based on the number of inventory responses, a second e-mail followed to remind additional participants of the study and due date of survey completion. A third e-mail was sent out several days prior to disabling the intranet host website. The intranet system hosting the scale was accessible for approximately 1 month, after which the site was disabled for copyright agreements. Responses accumulated on an Access database hosted at DHS headquarters.

Measures

Several demographic dimensions were gathered exclusively from caseworkers but not administrators since they represent a smaller and more identifiable population in the DCFS. Caseworker demographics were gathered in order to develop a contextual understanding of the caseworker population in this given State. The following demographic and contextual data was gathered from caseworkers: sex, age, salary, caseload, and education.

The LPI (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) was completed by both leader and frontline workers. The leaders completed the LPI-Self and rated their own personal leadership practices. Frontline workers completed the LPI-Observers

and evaluated the leadership behavior of upper level management. Both LPI-Self and -Observer have identical content and scale items. The LPI scales completed by employees in leadership positions and frontline workers contributed to ratings of five leadership dimensions: (1) challenging the process, (2) inspiring a shared vision, (3) enabling others to act, (4) modeling the way, and (5) encouraging the heart.

The LPI was designed by Posner and Kouzes (1988) on the basis of extensive and repetitious feedback from more than 2,876 managers and subordinates from both public and private sector organizations. Through in-depth interviews and written case studies from personal-best leadership experiences, Posner and Kouzes (1988) conceptualized five practices of exemplary leadership. The five factors closely align with the transformational leadership premise of activating higher order needs of followers and confidence to exceed past performance. Given the shared commonality between transformational leadership and the measure developed by Posner and Kouzes, subsequently Field and Herold (1997) investigated whether the broad dimensions of transformational leadership can be inferred from subordinate reports of leadership behavior collected using instruments not specifically designed for this purpose (p. 569). Their findings showed that subordinate assessments made using the LPI (Posner & Kouzes, 1988) can be used to measure transformational leadership and that subordinates distinguished between these concepts when describing leadership behavior using a scale that was not initially designed to separate transformational types of leadership actions (p. 576).

The LPI has 30 statements with six statements measuring each of the five leadership practices of exemplar leaders. Responses are marked on a 10-point scale, with behavioral anchors, high scores representing often-practiced behavior and low scores indicating seldom or rarely practiced leadership behavior. A higher value represents more frequent use of a leadership behavior. For example: (1) Almost never do what is described in the statement; (2) Rarely; (3) Seldom; (4) Once in a while; (5) Occasionally; (6) Sometimes; (7) Fairly Often; (8) Usually; (9) Very Frequently; and (10) Almost always do what is described in the statement. The LPI is scored by each individual factor, rendering a high sum of 60, which represents more frequent use of a leadership behavior whereas a low sum of six represents lowest frequency of use. Respondent ratings lend to an overall score for each dimension rather than an aggregate score for the entire scale. Internal reliability of the LPI-Self and LPI-Observer ranges from .81 to .91, with strong reliability over time (Kouzes & Posner, 1995). In a meta-analysis of studies using the LPI, Posner and Kouzes (1988) also found the LPI-Self to have a reliability range between .75 and .87, and the LPI-Observer between .88 and .92. There was also no significant detection of social desirability effects and the scale has yielded consistently high reliabilities and sound face validity (Posner & Kouzes, 1988).

Participants were instructed to rate the perceived frequency of leadership practices of each leadership dimension on a 10-point Likert scale:

Challenge: Challenge is marked by innovation behaviors such as seeking ways to make change and being eager to take risks and experiment.

Inspiring: Inspiring is the ability to communicate a vision of the future that is both contagious for those around and hopeful.

Enabling: Enabling is the energy that comes with mutual trust between leaders and followers. It is the achieved through collaboration and decision making processes.

Modeling: Modeling occurs when leaders enact their own values and beliefs as they work toward progress. The methods of work and achievement enacted by leaders are expected in followers.

Encouraging: Encouraging involves recognition. It is the pride communicated through celebrating accomplishments and milestones of individuals and teams toward common goals.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were computed for frequencies, percentages, means, medians, and standard deviations for caseworker demographics. Caseworker demographics were reported for the purpose of providing a contextual representation of participants rating leadership in the DCFS. Demographic data for leaders or for the supervisory relationship with caseworkers was not gathered in order to adhere to the agreement established with the DCFS of protecting the identity of leaders and sensitive information about leadership practices. Additionally, the agreement with DCFS specified that leadership ratings from both frontline worker and leaders would be reported in aggregate form, representing only the variance between caseworker and leadership impressions. This agreement minimized exploration of stratified categories and whether leaders were immediate supervisors of front-line staff or upper level administrators. An independent-samples t test was employed to compare the mean scores in observer and self-leadership ratings among administrators and caseworkers. Alpha reliability coefficients were computed for both caseworkers and administrators for each of the five LPI subscales.

RESULTS

Demographics

The agreement established with the Department of Human Services required that caseworkers provide general impressions about the overall leadership

of DCFS and not specific to a supervisor or regional administration. Additionally, the agreement allowed only for caseworker demographic data and not for leaders who represented a smaller percentage of the overall organization. This procedural safeguard protected local and regional supervisors, especially those from small and remote rural areas from being identified in the study. Convenience sampling generated 101 leadership respondents, representing supervisors, community service managers, associate regional directors, regional directors, and state executive director. The response rate for leadership was 67%. Convenience sampling also generated 83 DCFS caseworker respondents. There were 54 female (65%) and 29 male (35%) respondents. The respondents represented frontline caseworkers in child protection, home-based services, foster care services, support to foster care and custody evaluation from all five regions within the Mountain West State. The response rate for caseworkers completing the LPI-Observer was 21%. A lower caseworker response rate may have been a reflection of discomfort in offering feedback about the performance of a superior, or as a result of balancing work obligations with time required to complete an online survey. Caseworkers were primarily asked to provide demographic information that corresponded to personal characteristics. The ages of 83 respondents ranged from 20 to 69 years. The largest representation of respondents, 38.6% were in the 20–29 age range followed by 31.3% of the respondents in the age range of 30 to 39 years. The sample included predominantly by married White caseworkers.

Caseworkers were asked to describe personal characteristics relating to their job status, experience at DCFS, their current salary, and current client caseload in order to gain a more holistic understanding of the sample. A majority of caseworkers were full time employees with primarily less than four years of experience. Salaries ranged between $19,999 and $49,999. The largest representation of caseworkers earned a salary within the range of $20,000 to $29,999. Caseworkers carried a caseload that ranged between 0 to 5 to more than 26 cases. More than half of the respondents carried a caseload number that varied between 11 to 20 cases.

Caseworkers were asked to identify their level of formal education and amount trainings attended within 1 year in order to explore a general understanding of opportunities for professional development and how it is represented in the current sample. Nearly all caseworkers had a college degree. Approximately 70% had bachelor degrees whereas 25% had master level degrees. More than half of the respondents attended seven or more trainings per year. Training content represented the performance plans and varies in curriculum focusing on skills for direct practice, comprehensive family assessments, individualized service planning, community resource development, and other areas representing the practice model.

Caseworker and Administrative Perceptions of Leadership Behavior

Caseworkers were asked to assess the frequency of leadership practices of administrators in DCFS using the LPI-Observer (Kouzes & Posner, 2003). Administrators were also asked to assess the frequency with which they engaged in varying leadership practices using the LPI-Self. Table 1 includes descriptive statistics, alpha reliabilities, mean difference scores, *t*-test values and *p* values for each of the five LPI subscales for caseworkers and supervisors. The LPI-Self completed by administrators had a relatively strong consistency, with Cronbach alpha coefficients ranging from .82 to .86. The LPI-Observer completed by caseworkers had strong internal consistency, with Cronbach alpha coefficients ranging from .92 to .94.

In addition to the goal of exploring perceptions of leadership practices, a second tier goal was to explore if there was a statistical difference between caseworkers and administrators perceived frequency of DCFS leadership practices. A *t* test for independent samples was used to compare mean score differences in leadership perceptions for the two groups. Statistically significant results indicated that perceptions of all five leadership practices were different between caseworkers and organizational leaders at the *p* < .001 level. Administrative scores exceeded workers scores on all five leadership practices. The greatest difference was in the perception of the practice of encouraging the heart and the smallest difference was in the practice of inspiring a shared vision. DCFS caseworkers on the average rated the frequency of DCFS leadership practices lower than the ratings given by DCFS administrators. Lastly, standard deviations show much less variability among administrator ratings than ratings among caseworks.

TABLE 1 Comparison of the Leadership Perceptions of Caseworkers and Administrators

Measure	Caseworkers (N = 83)			Administrators (N = 101)			Mean difference	t	df score	p scores
	M	SD	α	M	SD	α				
Encourage the heart	31.15	12.66	.92	48.29	5.906	.82	17.14	10.75	94.75	.001
Model the way	34.99	10.53	.94	47.62	5.353	.83	12.63	9.41	98.92	.001
Enable others to act	38.56	11.36	.92	50.84	4.501	.82	12.28	8.76	88.45	.001
Challenge the process	33.38	11.05	.93	44.21	7.465	.86	10.83	7.26	118.1	.001
Inspire a shared vision	32.77	10.47	.94	43.10	7.340	.86	10.33	7.24	121.2	.001

Note. α = alpha reliability coefficient.

DISCUSSION

This study described caseworker and administrative perceptions of DCFS leadership practices. Transformational leadership theory conceptualized by Bass (1985) and further operationalized by Posner and Kouzes (1988) was explored and applied in this study because it is often identified as a practice that elevates "performance beyond expectations" in a setting whereby followers realize goals that exceed past performance and activate higher order needs (Yukl & Van Fleet, 1992, p. 156). Additionally, transformational leadership is associated with organizational performance (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1993) and is closely aligned with values shared by the social work profession (Packard, 2003). Transformational leadership theory was conceptualized through five leadership practices extensively explored and developed by Kouzes and Posner (2002). The practices were explored and described within the context of current caseloads and professional developments conditions of caseworkers. Current organizational conditions in child welfare organizations are reflective of low employee salaries, unpredictable risk of violence to caseworkers, staff shortages, high caseloads, administrative burdens, inadequate supervision, limited opportunities for professional growth and additional limitations that impact organizational performance (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994; McGowan & Meezan, 1983; Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howee, 2002; Vinokur-Kaplan, 1991).

To impact professional development and performance, organizations need to rely on leadership practices that inspire and motivate workers toward goal achievement and self-actualization (Schein, 1992). Schein found that thriving organizations develop a fit between organization, worker attitudes, and existing layers of influence. This premise informed the intent of this study and supported the importance of exploring perceived DCFS leadership practices.

Frontline and Administrative Perceptions of DCFS Leadership Practices

Rank and Hutchison (2000) explored the construct of leadership within the profession of social work by surveying leaders associated with the CSWE and NASW by gathering perceptions of effective leadership in human service organizations. Various leadership themes emerged from conversations with deans, directors of social work programs, and university presidents. NASW leaders and professional social work educators described social work leadership as a "proactive process that empowers individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities" (p. 11). Social work leaders, in comparison to leaders of other professions, were characterized as committed to: (1) the NASW code of ethics, (2) a systemic perspective, (3) a participatory leadership style, (4) altruism, and (5) concern that the professional image accurately

and respectfully distinguished itself from other disciplines. Their conclusion was that leadership development is a key component to the growth and direction of the profession.

On face value, NASW principles of participatory leadership and altruism are constructs embedded in transformational leadership practices of elevating personal performance (Bass, 1985) and further contextualized by authors such as Kouzes and Posner (2002) in leadership practices of "enabling others to act" and "encouraging the heart" (p. 315). Results from this study showed a significant discrepancy between caseworker and administrative perceptions of leadership practices in DCFS across all five leadership practices conceptualized by Kouzes and Posner. Additionally, caseworkers vary widely in their ratings of leadership practices, whereas administrators rate themselves higher on leadership practices and with less variability across all five leadership practices. This indicates that leaders think more highly of themselves than perceived by caseworkers and are more cohesive in their impressions of their personal leadership practices.

DCFS caseworkers rated all five practices of the LPI significantly lower than administrators. The greatest difference in the perceived frequency of leadership practices between caseworkers and administrators was in the practice of *encouraging the heart*. This deviation conveys that caseworkers and administrators are most different in perceiving how leaders encourage and recognize the DCFS workforce. This variable also had the largest standard deviation value for caseworkers, indicating wide variability in how encouragement is experienced and perceived by caseworkers. Encouraging involves recognition; it is the pride communicated through celebrating accomplishments and milestones of individuals and teams toward common goals (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Administrators perceived that they recognize contributions, maintain hope and determination, and celebrate accomplishments more often than caseworkers' perceptions of these administrative practices. In addition, administrators attested that they provided more mentorship and opportunities for growth, unraveled bureaucracy, and created standards of excellence by setting examples than caseworkers. Although these are impressions of administrators, Clark et al. (2008) discovered that line workers rated knowledge and personal support as most essential of leaders in supervisory roles. In exploring personal and organizational factors related to retention among *committed survivors* in public child welfare Westbrook et al. (2006) learned through in-depth focus groups that personal support and acknowledgement from supervisors and local administrators contributed to caseworkers feeling cared for and trusted during routine or difficult caseloads.

Caseworker ratings also indicated a lower frequency of collaborating and developing cooperative teams, creating organizational culture around respect, trust and dignity, and the process of empowering caseworkers. Lastly, caseworkers and administrators also differed in the frequency of

their perceptions of *challenging the process* and inspiring a shared vision. These ratings further show the importance of how supervisors demonstrate trust and confidence in caseworkers and that treating case managers and supervisors as competent employees contributes to "self efficacy beliefs, job related skills, and practice judgment and decisions" (Westbrook et al., 2006). The importance of self efficacy beliefs was also noted by Popa and Andenoro (2009) who found that frontline workers felt disengaged from the vision and objectives of the agency when removed from policy and procedural developments, decision making or direction of a given policy or operations of a given office. These trends further confirm the factor of enabling (Kouzes & Posner, 2002) and that mutual trust and collaboration between leaders and followers contribute to "committed survivors" (Westbrook et al., 2006, p. 43).

Although all LPI inventory factors were perceived differently ($p < .001$) between caseworkers and leaders, *modeling the way* is another notable factor found in previous social work and child welfare literatures. Kouzes and Posner (2002) define modeling the way as a practice that occurs when leaders enact their own values and beliefs as they work towards progress. Psychosocial support through mentoring relationships was the most noteworthy finding discovered by Burnside and Bond (2002) when evaluating a mentoring program in a child welfare agency. In yet another study that explored the relationship between leadership practices and job attitudes, mentorship was perceived as vital in contributing to professional knowledge, efficacy, professional development, and retention (Popa & Andenoro, 2009). Most recently, Strand and Bosco-Ruggiero (2010) evaluated a mentoring program in a public child welfare agency targeting supervisors and seasoned workers. They found that mentees participating in a formal child welfare mentoring program, in comparison to those not in the program, indicated more confidence, increased networks, and greater investment in their jobs and agency. Additionally, mentors showed to have increased personal satisfaction and renewed sense of purpose from their role of mentor.

It is important to recognize that although findings of this study are mostly descriptive and represent a means to continue a discussion about the role of leadership in child welfare, perceived leadership practices assessed in this study are similar to the fundamental philosophy and practices envisioned by the NASW and CSWE social work professionals. Rank and Hutchison (2002) found that policy and social work education leaders believe effective leadership in human service organizations is proactive and ethical, empowering workers through vision and communication. Findings in this study indicated that although NASW values and CSWE principles are present in the leadership of Division of Child and Family Services, the perception of leadership practices varies considerably between caseworkers and administrators. Although the large agency offers opportunity to implement a systemic and inclusive perspective to develop and guide agency operations, time, legislation, class

action suits, other constraints challenge opportunities for shared visioning and decision making.

IMPLICATIONS

The need to study and explore leadership practices in child welfare organizations is gaining more attention as studies and reports reveal that leaders develop organizations, inspire the workforce, and shape agency culture towards sustainability and performance. This study explored perceptions of leadership practices by caseworkers and administrators in DCFS organizations. Perceptions of Leadership practices were significantly different ($p < .001$) across all practices variables with administrator ratings exceeding caseworker ratings on all five LPI scales. The largest difference between caseworkers and DCFS administrators was the perception of leading by *encouraging the heart*.

Implications for Education

The CSWE has funded initiatives exploring the presence of leadership education in social work programs. As a senior scholar at CSWE, Lazzari (2007) investigated ways to further develop leadership in social work education and more broadly across the profession. Lazzari analyzed course syllabi of baccalaureate, master, and doctoral CSWE members that focused on leadership or leadership in practice. Although only 35 of the 639 U.S. accredited social work programs responded to the call, results indicated that syllabi focused primarily on pragmatic skill of budgeting, grant writing, managing staff, policy advocacy, resources development and program design and implementation. Most of the leadership theories taught are covered in one or two class sessions and as an implied part of a manager, administrator, or supervisor's duties and responsibilities. Courses that had a more in depth emphasis on leadership explored motivational approaches, visioning, a call to leadership, or direct link between leadership practices with values and ethics of the profession. Some of these trends in social work education demonstrate the current training and readiness levels of social work students to lead and transform organizations while still connecting and developing a workforce that sustains the viability and efficacy of services. This current study did indicate that more emphasis is needed in social work education curriculum on leadership theories and practices that contribute to transforming organizations and leadership practices that contribute to the relationship between leader and follower.

Some of the gaps in knowledge or practice highlighted by Lazzari (2007) are further contextualized by Ginsberg's (2008) recent text focusing on a number of human service managerial skills, practices, and issues targeting

both current managers and students preparing for management roles. Gings-berg's text is introduced by Rino Patti (1987), spotlighting concern over social workers' general lack of knowledge and competencies in administrative skills and practices, leaving the door open to students from other disciplines to lead human service organizations. Social work educators and CSWE leaders might consider exploring leadership development initiatives, programs, and curriculum that match current needs and changing complexities of human service organizations and clientele. Additionally, as discovered in the current study, educational curriculum might also emphasize the development of holistic leadership approaches that further connect frontline workers with po-sitional leaders steering human service organizations. Conceptual principles of transformational leadership and social work values of empowering and developing individuals (Packard, 2003) have shown to contribute to case-worker retention and a professional climate that strengthens caseworker's self-efficacy beliefs in doing difficult work (Westbrook et al., 2006).

Implications for Practice

Effective leadership in child welfare organizations consists of leaders that inspire and motivate employees toward improved performance (Glisson, 1989). Enlisting caseworkers in a common vision requires that DCFS ad-ministrators understand the needs of caseworkers and that caseworkers be-lieve administrators have their best interests at heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Forging a unity of purpose and organizational direction can only be accomplished through having intimate knowledge of the vision, values and capacities shared by caseworkers. Relationships with peers, supervisors, and executives remain one of the strongest predictors of commitment to an organization (Ulrich, Zenger, & Smallwood, 1999).

   Social affiliation, achievement, ego, and self-actualization are only a few of the needs studied by motivational theorists as having an impact on organizational culture and job attitudes (Alderfer, 1972; Herzberg, 1959; Maslow & Kaplan, 1998; McClelland, 1962). The basic shared premise among motivational theories is that individuals are motivated by a set of needs. While some needs are more basic than others, administrators and supervisors need to foster opportunities to learn about how caseworkers operate at different levels of needs and to take that in consideration in their leadership practices (Lewis, Lewis, Packard, & Souflee, 2001). Extrinsic conditions such as low salary, status, agency procedures, quality of interpersonal relation-ships, and working conditions are connected to the job context and result in dissatisfaction, whereas intrinsic conditions such as achievement, recog-nition, responsibility, professional growth, and advancement in the agency build strong levels of motivation that can result in positive job performance (Herzberg, 1959; Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002; Lewis et al., 2001). It seems important for supervisors and regional and state administrators to understand

that maintaining hygiene factors of salary, job security, agency procedures, and working conditions contributes to a state of "no dissatisfaction," whereas leadership practices that foster opportunities for professional development, growth, achievement and recognition mobilize caseworkers towards commitment and higher levels of performance (Westbrook et al., 2006, p. 52).

Given that child welfare leaders have more difficulty providing hygiene factors due to federal or state budget restrictions and high caseloads (Fisher, 2009), it seems important for leaders to creatively explore leadership practices and opportunities that may lead to opportunities for caseworker job enrichment. Leadership practices according to Ashforth, Kreiner, and Fugate (2000), need to contribute to an organizational culture that fosters psychological growth through job challenge, achievement, responsibility, and autonomy to make decisions. Job enrichment becomes possible through direct changes in jobs and engages the caseworker in exercising greater discretion in feedback, new learning, scheduling, uniqueness, control over resources, and personal accountability. Creating a climate where caseworkers are involved, feel valued, and have a sense of autonomy is at the heart of strengthening others, according to Kouzes and Posner (2002). *Enabling others to act* was a leadership practice perceived to be demonstrated in the operations of the Division of Child and Family Services, but caseworkers rated the frequency of collaborating towards cooperative goals, building trust, and sharing power and discretion lower than administrators. This study enumerated *enabling others to act*, which showed the existence of this leadership practice in DCFS, but the narrative behind disparity in scores between caseworkers and administrators requires further investigation.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Organizations are reliant on leadership practices that inspire and motivate their workforce towards performance and advancement (Schein, 1992). Transformational leadership was explored in this study because it is identified in the literature as a required practice to navigate complex organizations by mobilizing motivation of followers (Bass, 1985; Conger & Kanugo, 1988; Tichy & Devanna, 1986) and performance (Ivancevich & Matteson, 2002). Scales offered through the online method were convenient for both researcher and respondents although online surveys are also prone to threaten validity. Yukl (2002) found that leader behavior descriptions are typically influenced by attributions, stereotypes, and implied theories about leadership and contribute to rater bias among people rating the same leader. This dynamic contributes to a general design limitation related to the construct of leadership is that caseworkers in this study were asked to rate overall DCFS leadership practices rather than defined leaders, such as office supervisors, regional supervisors and administrators. This means that caseworkers

provided a generalized impression of DCFS leadership rather than a more refined impression related to their own proximity of reference. As with any self-ratings, impressions of DCFS leadership are moderated by individual perspectives and experiences with organizational leadership. Biased responses may have impacted external validity and minimized the generalizability of these findings to other settings. This limitation was anticipated given the contractual agreement drawn with DCFS in attempt to protect smaller and more identifiable rural offices.

This study is limited by its short-term descriptive approach to explore leadership perceptions in the workplace. Future research might implement longitudinal approaches to study leadership processes that evolve over time and to assess the delayed effect that leadership has on caseworkers and efficacy of service delivery (Yukl, 2002). Yukl suggests that longitudinal approaches may develop field settings that allow researchers to observe leadership and potentially investigate causality. Measurement over a longer period of time will also allow opportunities to consider mediating processes or situations, control for extraneous variables, and allow for more efficacious measurement of leadership impact on job attitudes and correlation of caseworker job attitudes with client outcomes.

Methodological limitations of this study reflect the sampling process and use of a scale to objectively measure a complex construct. This study used a convenience sample to solicit DCFS caseworker and leader volunteers. A convenience sample makes it more difficult to identify the effects of extraneous variables that are confounded with the sample (Yukl, 2002, p. 438). Results are primarily representative of caseworkers and leaders that were motivated to complete a leadership scale. This study did not capture mediating variables that motivated participants to complete this scale and how their results may have varied from caseworkers and leaders who did not participate.

SUMMARY

The need to study and explore leadership practices in child welfare organizations is gaining more attention as studies and reports reveal that leaders develop organizations, inspire the workforce, and shape agency culture towards sustainability and performance. This study described perceptions of DCFS leadership practices by administrators and caseworkers.

This study contributed two overarching points. First, administrators consistently rated themselves on the LPI higher than caseworkers. Secondly, the largest difference was in the leadership practice of encouraging the heart. Caseworkers on average rated the frequency of DCFS leadership practices lower than the ratings given by DCFS administrators. Literature in the field of leadership and organizational studies shows that leadership is an important

catalyst to organizational cohesion that directly translates to effectiveness of service delivery. These findings lead to sensible practice implications that engage child welfare professionals to consider the role and perceived impact of leadership practices on caseworkers and service delivery.

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