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IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA SCRUTINY FOR A CHILD PROTECTION AGENCY

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This study examines media impact on job efficacy in a child protection agency. The research uses inductive, holistic research methods to examine the effect of media scrutiny on changes in management dictates, worker duties and responsibilities, and agency services. Data were collected from media sources, interviews, archival materials, and participant observation, then analyzed via qualitative content analysis, providing a basis for rich ethnographic description of perceptions and behavior of diverse groups of people involved in child protection. The study reveals how contradictions in American national culture generate a need for increased communication, understanding, agreement, and support, between various groups of people who influence child protection.

Keywords: child protection agency, media scrutiny, culture, job efficacy

Introduction

In recent years, the media has become an increasingly important influence in shaping public opinion about many aspects of American culture, including the way public service organizations are administered. One aspect of the culture that is often in the news is how Americans provide protection for their children, a popular topic in newspapers, on news reports, and in homes today. Often the media position on this topic is negative, noting that too many children are harmed, and blaming child protection agencies for not preventing these situations from occurring (i.e., "To save the state money, . . . children are being left in abusive

homes at risk of further harm, according to a judge and a protective services worker . . . ;" " . . . one report . . . revealed that nearly one-third of 62 children who were abused to death . . . died despite making contact with the state CPS system"). Media influence seems to have fostered this sentiment among the general public, which knows little about the organization of agencies responsible for the protection of children, how they operate, make decisions, or cope with their responsibilities, particularly legal ones (Condie et al 1978:47). This general lack of knowledge, coupled with perceptions of many Americans regarding the bureaucratic nature of large agencies, seems to foster public distrust in the ability of a government agency to carry out the function of child protection (Hodges 2002:1).

One common criticism is the bureaucratic nature of public service agencies, often admonished for being overly rule-, regulation-, and authority-oriented, to the point of being impersonal and rigid (Weber 1946). While bureaucratic management is usually recognized as necessary in handling large volumes of activity (Billingsley and Giovannoni 1972), the agencies are also criticized as generators of "red tape" (Nathan 1994:157), a "coercive" deterrent to enthusiasm and job performance of their employees (Weber 1946; Blau 1966; Foner 1995), and adverse to change toward more effective service delivery (Cohen and Austin 1994; Kadushin and Martin 1988).

However, few studies have examined the effect of media scrutiny and criticism on the function of public service agencies and, in particular, of those public social service entities protecting children. This study was designed to investigate media influence on job efficacy in various aspects of the operation of child protection. It explores changes in duties which may be related to media criticism of agency competency. It also examines reactions of social workers to managerial changes induced by media criticism. The agency was selected since it was one of many agencies experiencing intense scrutiny, and it had instituted several changes in operations which seemed to address some aspects of the media criticism.

Background

The purpose of a child protection agency is first, to ensure children protection from harm induced by a person responsible

for their well-being and second, to provide help for parents in learning to take responsibility for their children (PS Services Manual 2004:1). Agencies providing child protection are responsible for responding to and evaluating every complaint for credible evidence of abuse, neglect, exploitation, maltreatment, or improper custody of a child. In recent years, they have also been responsible for showing evidence of "reasonable efforts" to facilitate continued in-home placement for maltreated children, through services designed to strengthen and stabilize families. Where safety is a concern, provision for out-of-home placement must be made, taking the best interests of the child into consideration in all decisions (PS Services Manual 2004:1).

Preventing unnecessary removal of children from their homes, or providing for prompt return or placement with relatives where possible constitute recent efforts at reform designed to curtail the numbers of children who became "lost" in the foster care system. Forms of family preservation programs, designed to provide "intensive professional assistance to families in crisis . . . restoring adequate family functioning, and . . . averting the need for the removal of children" are one example of such efforts (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2004:3). These programs provide aid in resolving stressful family situations, instruction in parenting skills and conflict resolution, in-home protection for at-risk children, and assistance to parents in using support systems for those families in need (Center for the Study of Social Policy 2004:3). Despite media controversy, such programs have been preserved, expanded, and have become primary tools of child protection agencies.

Research Questions

This paper is a product of a year-long study examining agency reaction to media-induced public opinion. The literature shows that Americans display considerable distrust of large bureaucratic organizations, and lack confidence in government functions, resulting in increased scrutiny of productivity in government agencies (Hodges 2002:1, Nathan 1994:157, Blau 1966:103). Media scrutiny likely brings demand for more public input into the function of child protection agencies. What is the bureaucratic response to involvement of external environmental forces? Is it beneficial or detrimental to the agency, the workers and the

children the agency serves? Theoretical assumptions of the research hold that media-induced public opinion generates a chain reaction which influences the entire system of child protection from management to professional staff, and ultimately, to services for children and families. Such reaction has the potential to be either beneficial or detrimental to the delivery of child protection services. This paper examines these consequences.

Methods

Setting

This research took place in an office inside a warehouse-shaped building which houses multiple staffs who perform the many tasks related to providing services for people in need. In the lobby, there were bolted-down multi-color, plastic chairs, a reception counter for forms and information, and a guard to ensure that no one goes beyond the lobby unless accompanied by a social worker. Often the guard was asleep, and recipients walked right past him. Inside, peripheral offices and conference facilities surround rows of cubicles and areas reserved for workers to see clients. Larger supervisor offices were in the midst of worker cubicles, with walls that go to the ceiling, and personnel with higher status were in the peripheral offices.

Media Data

Interviews with informants identified media themes as threats to their work. Subsequent content analysis underscored the influential role of the media in adverse reactions of management to media scrutiny. Data collection targeted media sources (i.e., newspapers, and television documentaries on the child protection system). The media material consisted of seventy-six articles, taken from three newspapers which served a portion of the large metropolitan area and included the area of study, collected over a period of time dating from 1989 to 1997. Content analysis was employed to analyze newspaper data, which focused on statements of politicians, judges, professionals (i.e., police, doctors, social workers), and letters to the editor from concerned citizens. The statements were coded into categories which summarized media themes (i.e., Protection, Accountability, and Resources).

Media data incorporated another component which consisted of documentaries aired on the Public Broadcasting System over a period of three months (January–March 1995). These documentaries examined the child protection “system,” in the area where this study was conducted. They included information on foster care and adoption because of the close relationship between child abuse/neglect and these situations, but only subject matter relevant to this research was included in the data analyzed for this study. Documentary material also included statistical information concerning focal subjects of this study, changes over the past decade, agency reaction to those changes, and system problems involving workers and service provision. Content analysis was again applied, and statements were coded into the same categories as those of the newspapers.

Formal Interviews and Participant Observation

A second data set targeted a staff of child protection workers within the organization. The author engaged thirteen informants in interviews lasting from one to two hours in length. The interview schedule consisted of thirteen open-ended questions regarding the subject’s specific job responsibilities, perceptions of and feelings about those responsibilities, internal and external influences on responsibilities and perceptions, and whether those perceptions, feelings or influences affected job performance. All workers held a college degree (BA to MSW), in areas related to child welfare (i.e., psychology, sociology). Twelve respondents had worked for the agency in various capacities for five or more years, but only three were veteran child protection workers. The objective of the interviews was to assess changes which had taken place in the agency just prior to, and during the period of the research, and which were controversial both to media sources and to workers. In order to obtain historical perspective (i.e., a comparison between the way things were done at present with the way they had been done in the past), three former child protection workers were also interviewed. Their qualifications matched those of current workers, except that none held an MSW and all were veteran workers (at least ten years, with over five years in child protection). Four managers who directly influenced child protection were formally interviewed. All were veteran agency

workers, and it was their longevity coupled with advanced degrees that qualified them for managerial positions. Not all of them had performed child protection. The sample for this study was small, as the goal was to examine feelings, perceptions, behaviors and attitudes toward media reports with some depth, within a complete staff of child protection workers and their managers.

In addition to formal interviews, many other agency personnel contributed to the participant observation data, in fieldnotes collected over a period of time lasting nearly thirteen months. These included non-PS managers, social workers, and some of the clerical staff. Statements of some agency clients were also included in these data.

Archival Material

Also collected were archival materials, which illustrated the job from the managerial viewpoint and explained the organizational objectives of the agency, gave the investigator a sense for organizational culture. These included hundreds of pages of policy directives, manuals and statistical reports.

Results

Content Analysis

Data were analyzed using content analysis (see Holsti 1968; Nachmias & Nachmias 1976; Briody 1989) which entails identification and coding of themes that emerge from the data. Use of the data sources led to creation of data sets representing interacting groups internal and external to the agency (i.e., Public/Media, Management Focus, Employee Behavior, and Service Delivery). Each of the four data sources was coded separately. Subsequently, each individual statement from each of the sources was assumed to represent an independent observation and coded separately. From these statements, data themes were then created as groups of statements that clustered around a similar theme (i.e., "Protection," "Resources," "Accountability"). The data flow from sources to sets to themes is depicted in Table 1 below.

Public/Media Data

The category "Public/Media," was derived from multiple chronicles that were often negatively inclined toward services of

Table 1
Data Flow

	<i>Data Sets</i>			
	Public/ Media	Mgmt Focus	Empl Beh	Service Delivery
<i>Data Sources</i>				
Newspaper	X	X		X
Field Notes		X	X	X
Informal Interview		X		X
Formal Interviews		X	X	X
Documentary	X	X		X
Archives		X		
↓				↓
<i>Themes</i>				
Protection	X	X	X	X
Resources	X	X	X	X
Accountability	X	X	X	X
Communication	X	X	X	X
Action/Revenge	X			
Consequences			X	X
Duties		X		
Defense		X		

welfare agencies. There were 331 statements taken from media sources, which were collapsed into 5 themes: Protection, Resources, Accountability, Action/Revenge and Communication. The media called, first and foremost for "Protection" (116, 36%) and expressed concerns that the agency protect all children at all times, remove all abused children from their biological parents and never return them to abusive homes. It also blamed the agency, often referring to it as being in a state of "crisis," for its failures (i.e., "the child protection system is in crisis [and] virtually under collapse . . ."). "Resources" (108, 33%), included demands for increases in the child protection budget, staffing levels, training, programs, respect for worker authority, and a

decrease in workload (i.e., "public and private programs for the prevention of child abuse/neglect are understaffed and underfunded"). The "Accountability" (60, 18%), theme showed that the public was concerned with policies requiring confidentiality, which interferes with public scrutiny of the agency. There were many questions about agency honesty, sincerity, and assumption of responsibility for protecting children (i.e., ". . . based on the department's policy about disclosure of the documents, it is unlikely they will be providing . . . a true picture of what happened" "Action/Revenge" (30, 9%) statements called for some dramatic reforms including amending the constitution, changing laws to hasten the adoption process, establishing a separate child protection department, prosecuting workers, and firing agency directors (i.e., "major changes are obviously necessary, starting with the replacement of [the agency] director . . ."). Two smaller themes in these data comprised less than 5% of the data and suggested communication of agency limitations, protection of workers from media interrogation, and revealed an emerging public concern with falling numbers of child protection reports which were accepted for services.

Management Focus Data

A second data set called "Management Focus" materialized with a total of 878 statements which came from all data bases (newspaper, documentary, fieldnotes, archival materials, and interviews). Themes of Accountability, Resources, Defense, Protection, Duties, and Communication emerged from this data set. Most prevalent in this data were comments regarding "Accountability" (395, 45%), which incorporated "SDM" (Structured Decision Making—an objective decision-making instrument), a "statistical orientation," worker authority, management support of workers, and monitoring of worker time (time studies, time clock and voice mail). Managers and trainers described the program as "the cutting edge" and said it was "designed to give [workers] tools which would enhance [their] judgment." "Resources" (230, 26%) included comments about the family preservation program, funding and support for adoption and foster care, an agency ombudsman, a shortage of workers, and program cuts. One supervisor when queried on how to "prevent cases from

falling through the cracks," said "we would probably have to have 25% more workers . . ." The "Defensive" (118, 13%) category showed that management did make attempts to defend workers and agency policies, and also accepted responsibility for some problems, while suggesting societal responsibility for others. In response to contentions that "child protection is in a state of crisis," one supervisor stated "the [media] focused on a small number of children who died and not on the bigger number of children who were saved by the protection system."

"Protection" (64, 7%) in the management category, concerned workload, paperwork, substantiation rate for allegations of maltreatment, types of cases accepted, standards of promptness in response to agency referrals, and bogus reports (i.e., managers and trainers described the standard as "the clock starts running when the referral comes in . . ."). Management also discussed their "Duties" (49, 6%), as they pertained to workers, including personnel, hiring, orientation, and evaluation concerns, as well as office festivities and management admonitions. "Communication" (22, 3%), was the smallest theme in the management category and it addressed perpetrator notification, education of the public, cultural awareness, and rules for interviewing children.

Employee Behavior Data

There were a total of 1,011 statements in the "Employee Behavior" data taken from formal interviews of workers and field-notes. Themes in this data set included Protection, Consequences, Communication, Relations, Resources, and Accountability. Like the media, employees described "Protection" (243, 24%) as their largest concern, and it was here that workers described what constituted the most important aspects of the job to them; duties involved in protecting children, job difficulties (i.e., dangers, stress, tragedies), decision-making, authority and workload. Many workers said they chose the job of child protection because they "wanted to help kids," "wanted to make sure kids are safe," or "wanted to protect children." Workers also revealed what they believed the "Consequences" (238, 24%) of workplace difficulties might be for their ability to keep children safe, and described the overload which sometimes resulted in "case dumping" (redirecting cases to other workers), as well as their morale, coping

behavior, and turnover. One said "It's too stressful—we do all aspects, intake, oncall, ongoing, court—it over-extends us." Another said "we're too stressed out—there's too much time spent socializing because frustration prevents us from working." Still another added "you can't even take a vacation on this job." Under "Communication" (234, 23%), workers described their attitudes about the job, their clients, the public, and ways in which they coped. Typical comments in this area included "people talk about newspaper accounts [but] they inform the public improperly and incompletely," "media coverage has caused more stress because of the negative impact, they always show what we didn't do rather than what we did do—there's never any blame on the family . . . responsibility has shifted from family to agency" and "media coverage is sensationalized . . . it makes it more difficult for workers to effectively do the job . . ." Another theme called "Relations" (163, 16%), covered relations between workers and management, including statements about worker attitudes and feelings toward bureaucratic management, supervision, harassment, and anger. One poignant comment was "now [we have] less responsibility for decisions because that has been taken away . . . there's no skill involved anymore . . . I feel anyone could do the job." Worker discussion of "Resources" (82, 8%) was in relation to qualifications for the job, remuneration and benefits, training, new programs, and lack of resources to help their clients. To these workers "Accountability" (51, 5%) simply meant time studies and other forms of managerial monitoring of what they did.

Service Delivery Data

There were a total of 1,733 statements in the "Service Delivery" data, and although these statements came from all five data sets, the largest number (810) was found in the fieldnote data. Although clients per se were not included in the data collection, there are remarks from some of them in the fieldnotes. Prominent themes in this data set included Protection, Resources, Communication, Consequences, and Accountability.

There were two main themes which comprised most of this data set. "Protection" was the largest (786, 45%), describing the effect that increased workload, difficulties performing the job, and failures and tragedies had on service delivery (i.e., "[the agency]

is bogged down," there is an "inadequate number of services for prevention," "reports [have] increased [and] the types of cases have changed . . . in severity"). In addition, it was noted that "one emergency could take all day or several days [and] each referral could involve up to 10 children"). The category "Resources" (778, 45%), was sub-divided into training, programs, service availability, type, and relevance. Some comments in this area included "[we need] shelters—especially for young mothers . . . we need better housing," "we should provide transportation—[another agency] furnishes bus tokens, we don't." Instead, it was noted that "[SDM] reduces [the clients] and their problems to numbers on a checklist—most of which they really do not fit very well?" "Communication" (115, 6%) concerned education of the public, suggestions for agency change, confidentiality, and worker feelings toward clients. Workers suggested that "better education of the public about what to report . . . and the limitations of the agency in protecting children would be beneficial." Two very small themes comprised the remainder of the data in this set: "Consequences" (52, 3%), describing potential social "consequences" of agency problems, and "Accountability," (2, >1%) which simply showed how little significance this issue carried for service delivery.

Potential Strategies for Change

A Vicious Circle

The data show that the public is very interested in protecting children. The data also show that everyone (i.e., media, workers, clients) seems to put this aspect first in their concerns, except agency management. Management seems to have more of a concern with showing accountability than it does with protecting children. Primary constraints seem to entail a negative, hypercritical media, a secretive agency management, a social work staff that is frustrated, bewildered and at a loss, both in areas of resources and in service availability, and maltreated children who are going unprotected.

The data show that media sources are usually very critical of agencies that are responsible for protecting children, often implying that they are not accountable. In attempts to correct this image,

agency management react with restrictions on the one thing that they have control over in the agency—the employees. Many of the changes and restrictions do little toward accountability, and merely undermine the authority and integrity of the employees who are directly responsible for the well-being of at-risk children. As a result, these employees, bogged down with new restrictions and increased culpability, become less able to perform their duties and more frustrated with their situation. As the increased efforts at accountability take time away from provision of services to agency clients (in this case, at-risk children), more children are placed in jeopardy and some suffer dire consequences as a result. This whole scenario sets up a situation in which no one benefits—management is frantically trying to correct a bad image, employees are angry and frustrated over what they cannot manage to do for their clients, the clients are not receiving services that might correct their dire situations, and the media sensationalize every new case that comes to their attention. The vicious circle is lamented repeatedly in the media, with only detrimental rather than beneficial consequences for the protection of children.

Breaking the Vicious Circle

Agreement vs. Adversity. There has never been more of a need for the public and child protection agencies to agree on what is important to keep children safe from harm. Assessing blame in every case of maltreatment should not take top priority over correcting the larger societal problem of what needs to be set in place to prevent such poor treatment of children. Surely, a compromise can be devised to stop this defeatist chain and allow agencies to return to the important business of protecting children. The agencies should issue an immediate educational and official Press Release in response to every accusation or negative depiction in the media, and they should have someone designated with the official capacity to manage this activity—either an employee or a consultant.

Communication vs. Confidentiality. Because child protection agencies are increasingly under public scrutiny, and the media is a fast, effective means of criticizing what they do, there is a need for increased communication between agencies and both the public

they serve and the media information conduit. Agencies must stop hiding behind a veil of confidentiality, and be more forthright in explanations of what they can do, what they cannot do, and what they really need in order to do a better job. Everyone would be better served through explanations of why the program runs the way it does, which has a lot to do with being a bureaucracy, but it also faces problems in resources, public support, and authority. Negative media reports only serve to exacerbate these problems, while a less biased portrayal of the agency, utilizing facts rather than sensationalism, might increase public support and funding for programs, so this information should be made available to both the public as a whole and the media. Perhaps, if the public knew what the job entailed and understood the challenges these workers face, they might be more willing to ensure better funding of services. Media, in the role of an unbiased forum for this communication, would benefit all involved, especially the children.

Accusations vs. Understanding. Better relations might convince news reporters and other media members to aid the cause through a more impartial portrayal of child protection agencies. The negative and accusatory tone of the media material prompts agency management to react by rearranging or modifying policies and procedures in attempts to satisfy media demands and alleviate incriminations. The first step in stopping this spiral of adversity might entail a meeting of media representatives, top level administrators, and child protection agency management designed to increase understanding of the challenges inherent to the field of child protection and child welfare work. If agencies did, as suggested above, lift the long-standing and overrated cloak of confidentiality, and allow workers to talk with media reporters, social work agencies could offer informational/educational forums for members of the press to become informed regarding the programs about which they write. All cases should have comprehensive documentation of all efforts to address the situation which initially brought them to the attention of child protection, and these should be available to the media who cover any case where a child is harmed. Bringing everyone to the same level of understanding might facilitate mutual insight to problems the agency faces in implementing its programs. Then, perhaps, these

problems could be presented to the public in a less accusing and more understandable format.

Support vs. Blame. Increased verbal support of workers by administrators and sufficient funding to realize the stated objectives of various programs would accomplish more toward advancing the quality of service than the current superfluous zeal with which we concern ourselves toward assessing blame. A more favorable depiction of the agency in its sincere concern with keeping children safe might find a public that is more favorably inclined to work toward some alleviation of resource problems with either an increase or a reallocation of tax revenue. Not portraying the agency as "the problem" in media reports, might serve to increase public sympathy and support for agency programs. The media could also promote a more positive atmosphere for child protection by amplification of the public role in keeping children safe from harm, and clarification of the difficulties child protection workers, who care about children, face in their day-to-day work.

In the meantime, if managers could transcend a bureaucratic reaction to every problem, resolution of some of the real problems confronting the agency could be addressed—and these have little to do with worker complacency, and much more to do with contrived, ineffective attempts at accountability. One major problem is overabundance of (often frivolous) paperwork. Management could better spend time refocusing on child (rather than job) protection and devise new, more creative ways of solving the real problems both they and their workers face. Restoration of worker authority would enable those who witness a situation firsthand, to resolve the problems that prevent children from returning to their homes. Time, energy and money spent on solving problems of victims (and perpetrators) of child abuse would go much further toward meeting public, agency, worker and service expectations.

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