Child Welfare Agency Climate: Congruence with Practice Model Beliefs

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Child Welfare Agency Climate: Congruence with Practice Model Beliefs

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This exploratory analysis considers the extent to which child welfare staff members’ perceptions of organizational climate impact congruence with core beliefs for a specific practice model. The results suggest that measures of organizational climate may be associated with child welfare staff members’ endorsement of specific practice model beliefs involving safety. As agencies implement and develop specific best practice approaches or more comprehensive practice models, administrators and managers can use these results to consider how to assess and respond to the influence of climate on the process.

KEYWORDS organizational climate, children’s services, child welfare, practice model

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Leaders in child welfare organizations have the capacity to influence the development and implementation of a practice model that can substantively achieve improvements in outcomes for children, when they give consideration and attention to the impact of organizational climate. Assessment of the climate that exists in a given organization is critical in order to determine readiness for practice change, as well as to identify areas needing further attention to ensure effective implementation.

This exploratory analysis considers the extent to which child welfare staff members’ perceptions of organizational climate impact congruence with core beliefs for a specific practice model. The current study focuses on the efforts of one northeastern state to assess organizational climate using a Readiness for Change Survey. The study was undertaken to assess staff perceptions of various domains, including organizational climate and congruence between agency staff beliefs and organizational philosophy. This study examines three specific research questions:

- How do child welfare agency staff assess organizational climate?
- To what degree is there congruence in child welfare agency staff beliefs and agency philosophy regarding a practice model?
- Are child welfare agency staff assessments of climate in an organization related to belief congruence with an espoused model of practice?

ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

Organizational climate and organizational culture can impact the quality and type of care that children receive in child welfare settings. This analysis examines climate within one child welfare organization; however, the general literature suggests that both climate and culture within organizations are associated with process and outcomes within social service agencies (Williams & Glisson, 2014). Organizational culture has been defined as the shared norms and beliefs within an agency, including the types of interactions that occur between workers and clients (Hemmelgarn, Glisson, & James, 2006). Culture can be inferred from the way business is conducted and can be influenced by organizational goals and values (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). It is the practice that has evolved over time and reflects the values, norms, and behaviors that are accepted and recognized as contributing to achieving the mission and vision of the agency.

Organizational climate, which is the focus of this analysis, is more of a subjective assessment related to how individuals feel about working in a specific organization. The psychological climate in an organization may impact how individual employees perceive the impact of the work environment on their wellbeing (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). An organizational climate may also
develop in which there are shared perceptions of the work environment among employees (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). Shared staff attitudes and perceptions contribute to this organizational climate and can directly influence motivation to work, employee satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). Recent findings suggest that culture within an organization may actually be an antecedent to the development of agency climate, which in turn can affect outcomes for youth within child welfare settings (Williams & Glisson, 2014).

Existing research has suggested that a positive organizational culture and climate can be associated with improved outcomes for youth in child welfare and juvenile justice settings (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). Child welfare workers in agencies with healthy organizational climates and cultures report more job satisfaction and commitment to their agencies (Glisson, Green, & Williams, 2012). Profiles of the best organizational social contexts within child welfare agencies suggest that functional agencies with engaged climates lead to positive attitudes among staff (Glisson et al., 2012).

Additionally, researchers have suggested that culture and climate within agencies are related to how best practices are implemented (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006). These findings suggest the importance of considering culture and climate when child welfare agencies are providing training in best practice approaches, as well as in assessing longer-term fidelity to a practice. The current study examined organizational climate in relation to implementation of a specific model of child welfare practice.

State and Federal Policy Initiatives

This emphasis on climate within agencies has important implications for systems change efforts and continuous quality improvement systems in state child welfare agencies. Historically, child welfare has been governed by rules and regulations representative of highly bureaucratic organizations. As such, up until recently, child welfare organizations have not attended to parallel process or how organizational climate has influenced and impacted implementation of new strategies and child and family outcomes. There is increasing recognition of the critical role that climate plays in the quality of child welfare service delivery, as evidenced by recent federal instruction to states regarding quality improvement activities. The Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Administration for Children and Families, 2012) stresses the importance of addressing climate within child welfare agencies as a component of continuous quality improvement. This view asserts that organizational climate can support the development of learning within child welfare agencies, particularly if stakeholders at all levels are included in efforts to improve quality (U.S. Administration for Children and Families, 2012).
Practice Models in Child Welfare Agencies

One approach to addressing quality in child welfare agencies can include creation and establishment of models of practice embedded in a core set of beliefs and guiding principles. Practice models are agency principles and approaches that are implemented with the intention of standardizing practice and improving outcomes for families (McCarthy, October 2012). A practice model specifies the foundations for practice, which can include theoretical base, attitudes, knowledge, skills, institutional context, and outcomes (Barbee, Christensen, Antle, Wandersman, & Cahn, 2011; McCarthy, 2012; National Child Welfare Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2008).

Solution-based casework has been identified as one practice model foundation that has been found to lead to reductions in recidivism in child maltreatment (Antle, Barbee, Christensen, & Sullivan, 2009) and enhance family engagement in case planning (Child Welfare Information Gateway/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Existing research suggests that child welfare cases in which there was high fidelity to the solution-based casework practice model had better outcomes in relevant domains, such as child safety, permanency, and well-being (Antle, Christensen, van Zyl, & Barbee, 2012).

Development of State’s Practice Model

New Hampshire in which this analysis was conducted implemented the solution-based casework model of child welfare practice statewide based on evidence supporting this approach (Christensen, Todahl, & Barrett, 1999). Well before this state decided to embark on the development and implementation of a practice model, efforts were made to assess the social context within the organization. This assessment used a socio-technical model, which considers linkages between any technical components of practice (including child welfare casework) and social context factors including culture and climate (Glisson et al., 2012; Rousseau, 1977).

A 2005 workforce environment and employee retention study in this state found that inclusion, fairness, and social support were positively related to high levels of employee commitment to the organization (Wind, 2005). Internal evaluation surveys conducted with child protection field staff in this state between 2007 and 2010 provided important agency feedback regarding cultural diversity perceptions and awareness, perceptions of the training system, and what was important to staff that kept them motivated to do the work. Overall, the findings of this agency’s evaluation surveys indicated that staff felt valued when they understood the mission of the agency, had clear direction and understanding of what was expected of them, and belonged to “a team.”

In 2008, the agency leadership decided that they wanted to create a culture of learning across all levels of the organization and would leverage
the training system to do so. The training unit was renamed the Bureau of Organizational Learning and used the five disciplines of a learning organization: shared vision, team learning, mental models, personal mastery, and systems thinking (Senge, 1990), were used to guide professional and organizational development activities, including core training for new workers, supervisory training and standards, and enhancements to the quality improvement system. Additionally, in October 2008, child protection supervisors from across New Hampshire participated in a leadership and team-building day focused on how the agency could move towards development of a statewide practice model for child welfare services. Discussions with these key administrators, the agency director, and stakeholders set the foundation for initiating the practice model as a means of moving towards standardizing practice statewide. The practice model implementation reflected a commitment on the part of the agency’s child protection supervisors to being able to deliver a clear message to their staff members regarding the agency’s direction.

New Hampshire’s child welfare management team began formal discussions in 2010 about the development of a specific practice model in the context of creating a learning organization within the agency. The National Resource Center on Organization Improvement consulted with the management team in designing and implementing a statewide practice model. Key members of the management team attended a leadership training funded by the Children’s Bureau of the Administration for Children and Families, designed to introduce child welfare directors and managers to implementation science, adaptive leadership, and extended funding opportunities focused on fundamental practice and system changes to improve outcomes. This meeting also provided introduction and information to New Hampshire on the critical role culture and climate play in successful adoption of evidence based practices. New Hampshire’s child welfare agency received funding to assist in the development, establishment, implementation, and evaluation of a statewide practice model.

The practice model was established to ensure that families receiving services would encounter the same standard of practice throughout New Hampshire. The state identified three areas of emphasis (activities) to drive the practice model. These included safety/assessment, family engagement, and culture/climate. To support those areas of emphasis, New Hampshire developed seven practice model core beliefs. These included:

- **Safety**: Children and youth should be safe.
- **Belonging**: All children belong with their family.
- **Permanency**: All children need and deserve permanency.
- **Prevention**: Prevention reduces child abuse and neglect.
- **Respect**: Everyone deserves to be treated with respect.
- **Strengths**: All families have strengths.
- **Well-being**: All children, youth, and families deserve a life of well-being.
Leadership within the New Hampshire child welfare agency, including the director and administration, was consistent throughout the implementation of the practice model. This multi-stage process lasted several years, beginning in 2010 with initial implementation steps, with complete statewide implementation in February 2013.

In the spring of 2013, state child welfare administrators, with support from university partners, administered an agency-wide survey with an emphasis on staff readiness to adapt to the practice model beliefs. The survey was designed to explore staff readiness for change in agency practice and investment in the practice model, with the intention of supporting the overall implementation of evidence-based practices within the agency (Fixsen, Blase, Metz, & Van Dyke, 2013). The survey emphasized adoption of beliefs related to safety, family engagement, and agency climate.

Current Study

The purpose of this research was to examine results from this agency-wide survey to assess organizational climate, as well as congruence with practice model beliefs. Much of the literature reviewed on statewide initiatives to assess climate has not directly explored how organizational context impacts beliefs related to a model of practice. The research questions for the present study were:

- How do child welfare agency staff assess organizational climate?
- To what degree is there congruence in child welfare agency staff beliefs and agency philosophy regarding a practice model?
- Are child welfare agency staff assessments of organizational climate related to belief congruence with an espoused model of practice?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

All staff were invited to participate in the web-based survey. There were 194 completed surveys and 50 partial surveys from a potential 376 employees who received the survey (response rate of 65%). Partial completions were eliminated from this analysis. An analysis of the incomplete survey responses did not suggest any obvious themes or trends, although the majority of incomplete responses appeared to terminate the survey approximately midway through the survey. The University of New Hampshire (UNH) Survey Center collected data using SNAP survey software. University partners analyzed the de-identified anonymous data and shared results with child welfare organization staff.
Measures

The survey consisted of 145 Likert-scale questions and a section of demographic questions. The purpose of the survey was “to assess staff members’ readiness for change and implementation of the practice model.” The current analysis examines demographic characteristics and three research questions related to staff assessment of climate; congruence in agency philosophy and staff perceptions; and associations between these staff assessment of climate and practice model beliefs.

Demographic characteristics

Demographic characteristics were collected from web-based survey respondents. These included the nature of their position, their age, years in the current position, and highest level of education.

Staff assessment of agency climate

The survey assessed climate in office and other domains related to agency function, including management, job satisfaction, and related constructs. This analysis examined the specific domain climate in office, which included seven questions adopted from the University of Washington School of Social Work’s solution-based casework practice model evaluation (Lyons, Courtney, Newby, & Lee, 2009). Original reliability information on these measures is not readily available (Lyons et al., 2009), although the reliability of the seven-item scale with this agency’s data was .887.

The seven questions from the climate in office domain are examined here:

- The climate in this office is encouraging and supportive;
- The climate in this district office or Bureau is distrustful and suspicious (reverse coded);
- The climate in this office is relaxed and comfortable,
- The climate in this district office or Bureau is rigid and rule-based (reverse coded);
- People in this office are sensitive to differences in their coworkers’ cultural beliefs, values, and practices,
- You appreciate belonging in this office, and
- Your office is successful at problem solving.

Each question had ordinal response categories of never (1), seldom (2), sometimes (3), often (4), or always/almost always (5). For bivariate analyses, these five ordinal categories were dichotomized to reflect always/almost always as compared to all other responses for bivariate analyses. The two reverse coded items were recoded to reflect “never/seldom” responses versus others.
Belief in practice model

As noted previously, this state developed seven practice model core beliefs, which were built into the staff survey instrument. The seven state-developed practice model core beliefs included:

- Safety: Children and youth should be safe (5 questions)
- Belonging: All children belong with their family (3 questions)
- Permanency: All children need and deserve permanency (6 questions)
- Prevention: Prevention reduces child abuse and neglect (3 questions)
- Respect: Everyone deserves to be treated with respect (5 questions)
- Strengths: All families have strengths (4 questions)
- Well-being: All children, youth, and families deserve a life of well-being (4 questions).

To address these seven core beliefs, workers answered 30 practice model questions, which were based on the University of Washington School of Social Work’s solution-based casework practice model evaluation. The survey tool asked staff to rate both their own belief in each of the practice model items, as well as their perceptions of how the New Hampshire child welfare agency would respond as an organization. For example, for the statement “Parents are responsible for the safety of their children,” workers were asked to rate both what “I believe” and then immediately asked what the “Agency believes.” The state instrument included answer categories that asked workers to rate “I” and then “Agency” agreement in practice beliefs using categories of never (1), occasionally (2), neutral (3), frequently (4), and always (5) for each pair of items. Raw scores for each subset of question items were averaged to create scales for the seven core practice model beliefs. For example, the five questions related to the Safety practice model core belief were averaged together to create a safety scale.

Congruence between worker and agency perceptions

An important consideration for this agency was whether staff rated their own beliefs as congruent with their view of the agency’s beliefs. For this analysis, workers’ responses to these scales were examined for congruence in workers’ perceptions of their own and the agency’s belief in the practice model core beliefs. Summary scale responses for I beliefs and agency beliefs were coded so that cases in which the average scale score for workers’ I beliefs matched the average scale score for workers Agency beliefs were labeled congruent. For example, if the worker’s average scale score was identical for both the “I believe” and “Agency believes,” scale, that item was coded as congruent beliefs, whereas cases where the “I believe” was either higher or lower than that of the “Agency believes” were coded as not congruent beliefs.
SAFETY PRACTICE MODELS BELIEFS AND CONGRUENCE WITH PRACTICE MODEL

The core practice model belief scale for safety—children and youth should be safe—is considered an essential tenant of this agency’s practice model and was therefore examined in relation to the climate and culture variables in this analysis. The five safety scale items were related to:

- Parental responsibility for children’s safety,
- Partnerships with parents to ensure safety,
- Use of risk and safety assessments,
- Value and consideration of children and families’ voices in decision making, and
- Children's removal from home only when necessary.

Data Collection Procedures

This study utilized a cross-sectional, web-based, online survey. Through a series of email messages to all child welfare organization employees, the Director encouraged participation in the survey. In the first email there was an introduction to the survey and instructions about how to participate in the survey via an online link managed by the UNH Survey Center. Two additional reminder emails to participate in the survey went out during the following three weeks. All child welfare agency staff members, including administration and supervisors, were asked to complete the survey.

Data Analyses

IMB SPSS Statistics software was used to conduct descriptive analyses of key items from the Readiness for Change survey (IBM SPSS Statistics, 2011). Paired samples t test compared core belief items with “I believe” and “Agency believes” as pairs for scales on the seven core belief items. Chi-square analyses were used to assess the relationship between organizational climate items and the congruence with Core practice model beliefs. Analyses included examination of univariate frequencies and bivariate cross-tabulations.

RESULTS

These results present the demographic characteristics of this sample of child welfare staff. Additionally, the results address the research questions related to staff assessment of organizational climate and congruence in staff ratings of their own beliefs and those of the agency on key practice model concepts. Lastly, the results include bivariate comparisons of organizational climate and congruence to one specific practice model concept.
Characteristics of Child Welfare Staff

The sample of child welfare staff members consisted largely of field workers (73%) with others working in management or other child welfare positions (Table 1). More than 50% of the staff were older than age 40 years and had worked in the agency for 5 years or more. Approximately one-third (37%) held a graduate degree; highest degree completed was social work for 36% and criminal justice for 7%, and the remainder reported another discipline of study. Analyses were conducted to assess whether employees with social work degrees had different responses from other employees. There were essentially no differences across discipline in terms of the descriptive findings.

Child Welfare Agency Staff Assessment of Organizational Climate

Child welfare staff tended to rate climate factors as positive, with the highest rated item being “You appreciate belonging in this office” with 41% of staff endorsing that this factor is always the case in their work unit (Table 2). The lowest rated climate item was “Climate in this office is relaxed and comfortable” with 9% of staff stating that this factor is always the case.

Child Welfare Staff Beliefs in Core Practice Model Concepts

The core practice model belief items were recoded to assess congruence between what the workers believe and their perceptions of agency beliefs (Table 3). Congruence among these items essentially suggests that staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1. Demographic Characteristics of Child Welfare Staff (N = 194)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Characteristic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Field worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other child welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 and under</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years in position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five years or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest level of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline of highest degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Criminal Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate variables</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support: Climate in this office is encouraging and supportive (Missing 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust (reverse coded): Climate is distrustful and suspicious (Missing 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort: Climate in this office is relaxed and comfortable (Missing 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid (reverse coded): Climate is rigid and rule-based (Missing 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity: People in this office are sensitive to differences (Missing 3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciated: You appreciate belonging in this office (Missing 2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving: Your office is successful at problem solving (Missing 2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
perceived that their own beliefs were in harmony with those of the child welfare agency. Congruence was highest for the belonging scale, with 75% of staff reporting that their own beliefs were congruent with agency beliefs. Core belief scales for permanency and prevention had the least congruence, with 56% of staff reporting that their beliefs were congruent with those of the agency.

Mean ratings for core practice model belief scales were also examined for all workers to assess congruence between what staff reported as “I believe” and “Agency believes.” While these means are not displayed here, it should be noted that average scores for all items fell between frequently (4) and always (5), suggesting that staff rate their own and the agency’s beliefs as generally in agreement with the core practice model beliefs. In all pairs, the mean rating on core beliefs was higher for the “Agency believes” than for the “I believe” item. Bivariate correlations using the raw average scale scores for the “I” and “Agency” belief scales are included in Table 3. These correlations suggest that there is generally a high correlation between ratings of self and agency.

**Organizational Climate and Congruence with Core Practice Model Beliefs**

As noted previously, the safety scale—children and youth should be safe—is of particular practice importance for this child welfare agency. Therefore, this

**TABLE 3. Core Practice Model Beliefs: Congruence Between Worker’s Ratings and Perceptions of Agency (N = 194 completed)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief scale</th>
<th>Congruence in practice model beliefs (I = agency)</th>
<th>Not congruent beliefs</th>
<th>Correlation between I and agency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety Scale: Children and youth should be safe (Missing 0)</td>
<td>62% (120)</td>
<td>38%(74)</td>
<td>.824***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belonging Scale: All Children/youth belong with their family (Missing 2)</td>
<td>75% (145)</td>
<td>24% (47)</td>
<td>.675***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanency Scale: All children/youth need and deserve permanency (Missing 2)</td>
<td>56% (109)</td>
<td>43%(83)</td>
<td>.77***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevention Scale: Prevention reduces child abuse and neglect (Missing 4)</td>
<td>56% (109)</td>
<td>42%(81)</td>
<td>.640***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Respect Scale: Everyone deserves to be treated with courtesy and respect (Missing 4)</td>
<td>59% (114)</td>
<td>39%(76)</td>
<td>.774***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strengths Scale: All families have strengths (Missing 4)</td>
<td>74% (144)</td>
<td>24%(46)</td>
<td>.776***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-being Scale: All children, youth and families deserve a life of well-being (Missing 3)</td>
<td>65% (126)</td>
<td>33%(65)</td>
<td>.800***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
study includes a specific focus on the safety practice model beliefs to addresses the final research question of whether organization climate is associated with congruence in practice model beliefs (Table 4).

Six of the seven climate items were statistically related to whether child welfare workers reported congruence in the core practice model belief for the safety scale (children and youth should be safe). Chi-square analyses suggest statistically significant differences in feelings of support and congruence related to safety beliefs, with 85% of staff who always or often felt that the climate in their office is encouraging and supportive reporting congruence on

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate Items</th>
<th>Congruence in safety practice model beliefs (I = agency)</th>
<th>Not congruent beliefs</th>
<th>$\chi^2$ (1)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support: The climate in this office is encouraging and supportive ***</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10.64 ($p = .001$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always/often</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust (original coded): Climate is distrustful and suspicious</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>4.22*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never/ seldom</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comfort: The climate in this office is relaxed and comfortable)*</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>3.84 ($p = .05$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always/often</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rigid (original coded): Climate is rigid and rule-based</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>.062</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never/ seldom</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity: People in this office are sensitive to differences in their coworkers’ cultural beliefs, values, and practices *</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3.93 ($p = .047$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always/often</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciate: You appreciate belonging in this office **</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>7.45 ($p = .006$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always/often</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving: Your office is successful at problem solving) **</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>8.62 ($p = .003$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always/often</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other response</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.  

TABLE 4. Congruence in Safety Practice Model Beliefs by Climate Items (Always/Often Responses)
the safety beliefs as compared with 56% of those reporting other responses ($\chi^2 = 10.64, \text{df} = 1, p = .001$). The results related to a climate of trust were also statistically significant in terms of safety beliefs, with 67% of staff who never or seldom felt that the climate in their office was distrustful reporting congruence on the safety beliefs as compared with 33% of those who gave another response ($\chi^2 = 4.22, \text{df} = 1, p = .04$).

Similarly, these results suggest significant differences in feelings of comfort and congruence related to safety beliefs, with 83% of staff who always or often felt that the climate in their office is relaxed and comfortable reporting congruence on the safety beliefs compared with 60% of those who did not feel that the climate is comfortable ($\chi^2 = 3.84, \text{df} = 1, p = .05$). Having people in the office who are sensitive to differences among co-workers and congruence related to safety beliefs was also significantly different, with 75% of staff who always or often felt that they worked in a sensitive climate reporting congruence on the safety beliefs compared with 58% of those who did not feel that the climate is comfortable ($\chi^2 = 3.93, \text{df} = 1, p = .047$). Almost three-quarters (73%) of staff who appreciate belonging in their office reported congruence on the safety beliefs as compared with 54% of those who did not report this appreciation ($\chi^2 = 7.45, \text{df} = 1, p = .006$). Also, three-quarters (77%) of staff who felt that their office is successful at problem solving reported congruence on the safety beliefs compared with 55% of those who did not feel that their office worked successfully on problem solving ($\chi^2 = 8.62, \text{df} = 1, p = .003$).

For this specific analysis, there did not appear to be practical differences in these results based on demographic characteristics such as whether the employees had social work or other degrees. While there were some statistically significant differences, the actual differences in percentages varied little and generally reflected the results in Table 4.

In summary, the study finds that staff assessment of climate was favorable, with highest average scores related to being appreciated and success at problem solving. Additionally, there was generally congruence between staff beliefs and perceptions of agency beliefs in practice model concepts. Finally, staff congruence in practice model beliefs was associated with six of the seven measures of agency climate. Notably, workers experiencing a less positive organizational climate were less likely to endorse the agency’s practice model beliefs regarding safety.

DISCUSSION

This study suggests that measures of organizational climate may be associated with child welfare staff members’ endorsement of one specific practice model belief involving safety. For the New Hampshire Division for Children, Youth, and Families, these results suggest that perceptions of agency climate are for the most part, favorable. Additionally, staff generally felt that there was congruence between their own perceptions of the practice model and the
agency’s beliefs regarding the practice model. The study’s findings support this study’s research question regarding whether staff assessments of organization climate are related to belief congruence in a specific model of practice. Six of seven climate items were statistically associated with staff members’ reported congruence in safety components of this state’s practice model. This analysis contributes to existing implementation science literature, which suggests that the environment within an organization is one factor impacting the success of programs (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Duda, 2013–2015). Similarly, the findings contribute to previous research suggesting that perceptions of climate can be associated with outcomes in child welfare (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998). The sociotechnical view of organizations (Rousseau, 1977) highlights the importance of considering this linkage between innovative new models of practice and the social context within child welfare agencies.

It is worth noting that rigidity in climate was not significantly related to congruence in practice model beliefs. Rigidity may be more of a feature of the agency culture or accepted norms, rather than a shared perception of climate. Some suggest that rigidity within child welfare organizations may potentially be beneficial, if it supports positive outcomes for youth (Williams & Glisson, 2014).

As agencies implement and develop specific best practice approaches or more comprehensive practice models, administrators and managers can take steps to anticipate the impact of climate on that process. These activities could include focus groups with staff prior to implementation of new practices, the implementation of climate surveys such as the one described here, and focused efforts to involve staff from various sectors of the agency.

Study Limitations
There are several limitations to this study. The primary limitation is that due to the cross-sectional nature of this study, it is impossible to assess whether in the process of developing the practice model and associated core beliefs there were improvements to the climate within this child welfare agency. Second, while the response rate was 65% for this survey, there may still be some selection bias in terms of survey completion. A third limitation is that it is impossible to assess whether these responses reflect the views of all staff in terms of organizational climate. It is possible that staff were more or less inclined to complete the survey based on their perceptions of climate within the agency. Child welfare staff members may have elected not to complete the survey for a variety of other reasons, which could include concern regarding identification or other issues that may be related to the organizational climate. A fourth limitation is that the survey was distributed to employees during a time when some of staff members were going through a quality assurance review and this may have also impacted the number of respondents. Fifth, the instrument itself has several limitations, including the length (as noted, it
included 147 questions), the assignment of response categories for ordinal measures and the absence of qualitative comments, which may have provided a more nuanced picture of employees’ perceptions. Sixth, the employees who completed the survey may not be representative of child welfare employees in other settings, as the results seems to reflect a more mature and seasoned staff profile than might be present in other settings. Finally, unknown staff characteristics may have impacted results. For example, the survey did not ask about caseload size or engagement in the practice model implementation process.

**Directions for Future Research**

These findings suggest a need for at least three future research considerations. First, these data could be augmented with focus group data to assess more contextualized perspectives on practice model beliefs and agency climate. Qualitative research could provide a more nuanced understanding of many of the organizational climate items included in this analysis, which might provide insights into how specific features support or hinder implementation of evidence-based models of practice. Second, supplemental measures of climate could be utilized to facilitate comparisons with other organizational settings and existing research. For example, a more comprehensive analysis of the role of rigidity or rule-setting in child welfare agencies could provide additional insights into whether specific types of rules or policies might be associated with staff members’ engagement in a new model of practice.

Finally, there is a need for longitudinal analyses to assess the how organizational shifts, including practice model implementation, may relate to organization climate. Again, while these results suggest a favorable association between workers’ feelings that their own beliefs match agency beliefs and the overall climate, longitudinal data could support additional analysis of efforts to implement practice models within child welfare agencies.

**Implications**

This research contributes to the literature regarding organizational development, leadership, and implementation of best practice in child welfare. Child welfare administrators and policy-makers could consider ways in which organizational climate may be related to the implementation of best practices and practice models.

**Policy Implications**

Child welfare agency policies can be developed to reflect agency efforts to affect change in climate and practice. These efforts could include introducing
new hires to agency practice model beliefs to ascertain their initial perceptions and assessment of congruence with those beliefs following core training for new employees. Additionally, child welfare agencies could consider establishing supervisory standards related to climate that also parallel agency practice model beliefs. These efforts may enhance the overall agency climate and also promote implementation of SBC and other evidence-based practices.

**Practice Implications**

These findings extend conceptions of climate, in that they suggest that it may affect the implementation of specific models of practice. These results are important to consider in light of the time and resources dedicated to implementing evidence-based practices in child welfare settings. Awareness that agency climate may be associated with belief in a specific practice model emphasizes the value of efforts to enhance shared perceptions among staff. Specific agency-wide initiatives and staff development related to agency climate may be associated with shared staff perceptions because they may help build momentum for change. This could potentially support uniform implementation and overall fidelity of evidence-based practices in child welfare settings.

Practice within child welfare agencies would ideally be considered within the context of climate, particularly if an agency is implementing a new practice model. Efforts to cultivate sustained attention to a positive climate may support preparation for or implementation of evidence-based practices and practice models. Research related to agencies’ readiness for change suggests that successful implementation of evidence-based practices includes consideration of the agency’s implementation infrastructure, as well as the specific selection of a practice model (Fixsen et al., 2013). Agencies could consider staff and organizational development activities to support an agency culture of learning, which may positively influence climate over time. For example, creating a shared agency vision by including staff in the development of policies related to core beliefs and principles of the practice model may assure that there is general understanding and agreement among staff.

Ongoing fidelity to a practice model also requires sharing results and implications with administration, supervisors, and child welfare staff working directly with children and families. Implementation literature suggests that these sorts of consistent “practice-to-policy” communications are essential for sustainability of organizational efforts (Fixsen et al., 2013). Exploring issues of organizational climate may contribute to systemic changes that create an environment supporting the implementation of evidence-based practice models in child welfare. Ultimately, such conversations can also lead to consistency in the application of practice model beliefs and principles, ideally to result in better outcomes for families.
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REFERENCES


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