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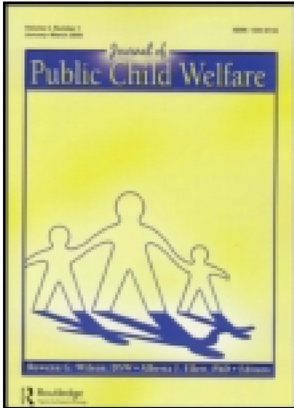

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The Vicious Cycle: Recurrent Interactions Among the Media, Politicians, the Public, and Child Welfare Services Organizations

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The Vicious Cycle: Recurrent Interactions Among the Media, Politicians, the Public, and Child Welfare Services Organizations

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The vicious cycle is a sequence of events that recurs to varying degrees throughout the United States. The cycle includes interactions among the media, politicians, the public, and child welfare services organizations in response to grievous incidents of child maltreatment. These interactions have a profound impact on child welfare services organizations and those who work in them. The cycle and the influence it has on child welfare services organizations are explored with a focus on the climates and cultures in those organizations, the cycle's impact on the child welfare services workforce, and the services they provide. Proposed solutions for managing the effects of the cycle on child welfare services organizations are also considered.

KEYWORDS *child welfare, child maltreatment, public relations, the media, organizational culture*

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The author has been an observer of the child welfare services (CWS) system in the United States for more than two decades. He was a member of the child welfare services workforce for approximately a decade and has been a child welfare educator and researcher for several years. In that time, the author has noted a phenomenon that forms a cycle of interaction among CWS agencies, the media, politicians, and the public. Despite variability, the cycle appears

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to occur in roughly the same manner in many areas of the country. The term *vicious cycle* has been mentioned previously and applied to events unfolding in much the same sequence as the one elaborated here (Balfour & Neff, 1993). In addition, others have studied elements of the cycle (Cooper, 2005; Douglas, 2009; Gainsborough, 2009). However, there seems to be sparse literature available concerning the effect of the cycle on child welfare services organizations. Those who work in CWS agencies on a daily basis are the best sources concerning the influence of external factors on their organizations, themselves, and their fellow employees. They are the *key informants* in this inquiry because their perceptions depict the organizational climates and cultures in CWS organizations. These constructs will be considered in light of the public pressure on child welfare services represented in the cycle. Finally, since there is limited empirical information concerning the influence the vicious cycle has on CWS organizations and the child welfare workforce, the impact of the cycle will be considered conceptually and with the assistance of related empirical literature in this exploration.

THE CYCLE

The phenomenon termed *the vicious cycle* here, unfolds something like this: The high point or spike in the cycle begins when a particularly grievous case of child abuse or neglect surfaces, often the murder of a child. However, for every child death there are many severe incidents of child maltreatment that do not lead to death. Many of these occurrences are considered newsworthy items due to the gruesome conditions the child has endured. The progression of the cycle includes the previous or current involvement by CWS agency personnel with the family in which this terrible event occurred. Local and sometimes even national media focus on the case. For example, the newspaper in the area may run a series of articles concerning the case. Emphasis in these articles is placed on the gruesome and, therefore, sensational details of the abuse or neglect and alleged or real disregard of responsibilities by CWS personnel who work(ed) with the family.

At some point after the initial article(s) and/or television news reports appear, a local politician begins to hold press conferences threatening investigations of the CWS agency in question. The sound bites that issue from these press conferences depict the politician as full of, time-limited, righteous indignation that a child should die or be harmed in their city/county/state. Subsequently, the local governing body decides they must look into the matter in something more than a cursory manner. The general public expresses horror that such an outrage could occur in their city/county/state. Other than general conversation, the forum for this expression is often through letters to the editor of the local newspaper, or sound bites from "person on the street" interviews on the television news.

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In the meantime, the director and/or other high-ranking administrators in the CWS agency promise a "full review," (internal) while the politician who has made this issue a temporary "cause" initiates an investigation (external). The CWS agency director appears in interviews issuing sound bites on the local television/radio news or is quoted in newspaper articles stating that they will "get to the bottom of the problem" that occurred in this particular case. Within the agency, the director and other administrators often adopt a "heads will roll" attitude as they look into the involvement of agency personnel with the case. The point of view at this juncture seems to be that if a few people are demoted or fired, this action will appease the temporarily irate politician who has latched on to this terrible circumstance and the public outcry about the case will die down (Sexton, 1997; Starks, 1997). Subsequently, a few line social workers are placed on leave during the investigation and then demoted, fired, or exonerated after the investigation is completed (Sexton, 1997; Starks, 1997).

Agency administrators and line personnel are also likely to respond to this series of events by becoming extremely conservative in their decision making and engaging in activities such as placing a high number of children in out-of-home care—a reaction otherwise known as *foster care panic* (Crary, 2006; Kaufman, 2006; Poitras, 2003). In addition, internally, all of this has a marked impact on the morale of line workers and associated personnel.

In time, after the frequency of media reports about the grievous incident has slowed considerably or ceased, and the politician has found a new vote-generating popular "cause," the cycle slowly settles into the trough of "business as usual." As time progresses, the trough period of the cycle usually represents little change in structure or operations within the CWS agency other than tightened accountability measures that often amount to increased paperwork and oversight added to a system that is already suffocating in both. In many cases, changes do not represent lasting reform efforts; however, some exceptions are notable (Firestone, 1996; Purnick, 1996). The trough period represents a lull in public scrutiny of the agency and the preparatory phase that leads to yet another grievous case, which triggers a spike and the cycle continues.

The cycle that unfolded over the past two decades in Connecticut provides a particularly pronounced example of this recurring sequence of events. In 1995, a nine-month-old girl named Emily Hernandez died after being sexually and physically assaulted by her mother's boyfriend (Lang, 1996; McLarin, 1995). This horrible event and two other child deaths due to abuse that followed within an eight-day period prompted a great deal of media coverage and direct intervention by the governor. Foster care panic ensued when, within one month of Emily Hernandez' death, 100 children were removed from their families and over the next few months the number of children placed in foster care rose 20% (McClarin, 1995). In 2003, a 10-month-old boy, Al-Lex Daniels, was beaten to death in Hartford, Connecticut

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(Poitras, 2003). The department was urged by the governor to "err on the side of safety," and court orders for temporary custody of children doubled in the three-week period following the governor's statement. In one day, 43 court orders were filed to remove children from their families, which was the highest one-day total in the previous three months (Poitras, 2003). Though the cycle in Connecticut spanned two decades, it occurs in many places in the United States to varying degrees over differing periods of time.

At times the cycle includes high profile lawsuits that result in concessions by child welfare organizations such as consent decrees. Gainsborough (2009, p. 329) notes that lawsuits have become an "increasingly popular strategy for pushing states to reform their child welfare systems." In fact, some observers have suggested that the only way to engage CWS organizations in reform is to sue them over inaction or malfeasance with class action lawsuits (Lowry, 1998). Evidence of this trend appears in a study of CWS agencies by the American Public Human Services Association that surveyed agency administrators throughout much of the United States. Responses indicated that agencies in 16 of 34 states (47%) were involved in court decrees or settlements at the time of the study (Cyphers et al., 2005). Lawsuits have been particularly prevalent in states with a great deal of privatization since private agencies are more susceptible to legal action than public agencies. However, lawsuits do not appear to be quite as ubiquitous as media coverage and attention from politicians and do not typically follow the grievous event as immediately as the other phenomena do. Therefore, though lawsuits may be an integral aspect of the cycle anywhere in the country, they are not included as a normally occurring part of the vicious cycle as it is depicted here (Figure 1).

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IMPACT OF THE CYCLE ON CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

The Media and Child Welfare Services

The cycle outlined above has produced many effects on child protection in the United States. For example, although it cannot always be attributed to the cycle, media reports about CWS agencies and employees are often pejorative and tend to locate culpability for child abuse and neglect with these agencies or personnel (Cooper, 2005). This approach seems to be the case, even when the incidents that are the subjects of media reports could not have been prevented by the agencies or personnel in question or little could have been done by any professionals to prevent the abuse or neglect (Starks, 1997). However, some writers attribute an "absence of malice" to the press in most situations and view them as carrying out their responsibilities to report incidents of child abuse with only part of the information available to them

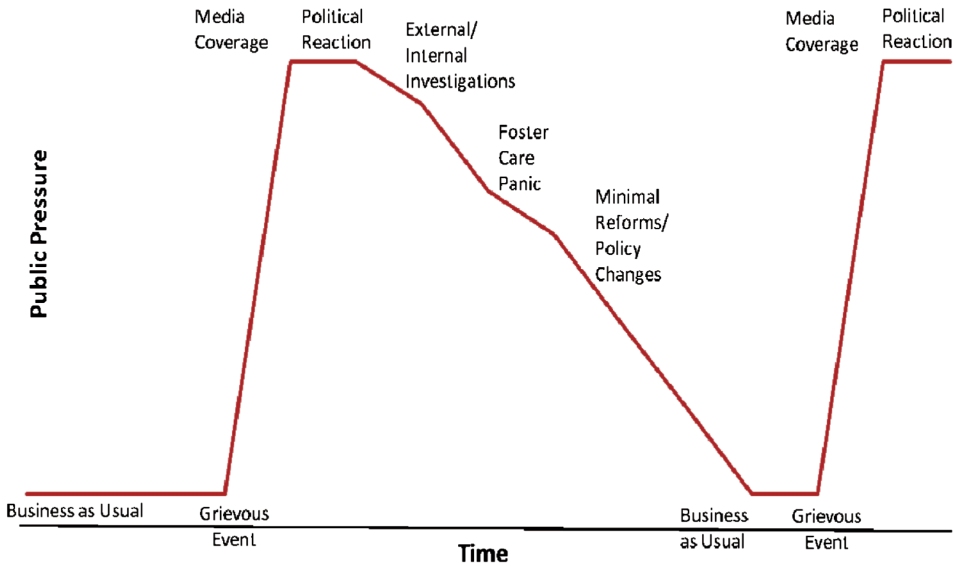

FIGURE 1 The vicious cycle (color figure available online).

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due to the cloak of confidentiality invoked by CWS personnel (Schellenberg, 1996). Others emphasize the penchant among the media to report rare, extreme incidents of child abuse (ignoring the most common forms of abuse social workers encounter every day, i.e., general neglect) and focus on the sensationalistic elements of those events in a way that induces "moral panic" among policy makers and the public (Ayre, 2001).

Further, there is evidence that media coverage of actions done to and by children has led to a heightened sense of "fear, danger and dread" that has become associated with children in the minds of the general public in a manner that was not the case in the past (Altheide, 2002, p. 230). Through an accumulation of fear-stimulating reports concerning children, the media has shifted the focus from specific incidents to a general public perspective and become "a fear-generating machine" (Altheide, 2002, p. 230). In this environment, media reports about child abuse and neglect tap into the general discourse of fear and alarm increasingly associated with children. The cycle mentioned here unfolds within this context and every new grievous incident of child abuse taps into the generalized climate of fear associated with children in the public mindset.

In addition, media coverage of the services offered by CWS agencies to their clients is often unbalanced and portrays social workers and other CWS personnel as incompetent and unreliable because they have either been too harsh or too lenient with parents/caretakers on their caseloads concerning the protection of their children (Ayre, 2001). Seldom are CWS personnel depicted as competently performing their duties. In fact, Ayre (2001) asserts

the extremes that appear in the media concerning child protection efforts have led to "a climate of mistrust" concerning child welfare agencies and personnel among policy makers and the general public (Ayre, 2001, p. 889). In Parton's (2009, p. 718) bleak assessment of the political and public climate, "Social workers have been found wanting and are no longer trusted."

Child welfare services agencies in the United States have major public relations (PR) problems. These difficulties are historical and continue, in no small part, fueled by the cycle previously outlined. Several factors contribute to the perennial PR problems experienced by CWS agencies. For example, aggressive members of the press often focus on sensationalistic stories that will capture the public fascination with details of extremely violent or injurious human behavior. When stories that are inherently inflammatory are coupled with "investigative reporting" that is aimed at castigating agency personnel for allowing grievous events to unfold, child protection administrators end up in a "no win" situation even if their staff behaved professionally. In many situations, CWS directors and administrators are accused of hiding incompetence under the veil of confidentiality. The fact that some seem to have done exactly that in the past exacerbates these PR problems. Even when the claim to confidentiality is applied appropriately, it is difficult for CWS agencies to establish anything the general public might consider "transparency" due to confidentiality laws and ethical concerns connected to those laws. However, poor relationships with the press and the general public are often self-inflicted due to ineffective or nonexistent ongoing PR efforts and the adoption of a consistently defensive posture with the media.

The PR problems for CWS agencies include that disseminating information about successes often must take the form of an "argument from silence." In other words, it is difficult to demonstrate success when the goal of the organizational processes is to produce the absence of an occurrence (i.e., for nothing unhealthy to happen to children). A statistical decline in abuse and neglect or the absence of either of these can certainly be demonstrated but highlighting "nothing" is never as interesting and certainly not as sensational as featuring "something" that is produced by an organization. In the media, prevention is not ordinarily considered attention grabbing headline news.

Additionally, child welfare organizations will not be able to prevent every case of child abuse or neglect in the families within their jurisdictions. It needs to be clearly communicated to the media and the general public that, try as they might, workers in CWS agencies will not be able to prevent all acts of violence against children or neglect of children in the families they serve. Reliable prediction of risk to children with any certainty is a tenuous proposition (Littlechild, 2008; Rycus & Hughes, 2008). Even with helpful tools and high level training, if CWS workers lived with families 24 hours a day they might not be able to prevent incidents of maltreatment.

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Despite the best efforts of competent child welfare social workers, when the will or impulse to harm children arises, some adults are going to harm their children. This setting is the unfortunate context within which child welfare services are offered. As more than one newspaper reporter has pointed out, even in areas in which child protection agencies have received a great deal of funding to improve services and where systems reforms have been realized, children still die (Bernstein, 2001; Lachman & Bernard, 2006; Lang, 1996).

The notion that this behavior can be prevented at an absolute level is an unattainable ideal. However, the assumption that informs public expectations of CWS agencies seems to be that all abuse should be prevented when CWS personnel have begun to work with families (Hamburg, 1998; Littlechild, 2008; Starks, 1997). In a study that included an investigation of media accounts of child abuse, Cooper (2005, p. 113) found that these reports were often negative and blaming 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." Although the wish that all children throughout the country will be protected is laudable, it is unrealistic that any CWS organization will be able to produce preventative results with a 100% success rate. A final question to ponder in this discussion is: What other public agencies are held to expectations of absolute success? Is there an assumption that public health agencies will have a 100% success rate at preventing the occurrence or spread of each incidence of disease? Are law enforcement agencies expected to prevent 100% of crime? In the public imagination, child protection organizations appear to be held to a standard that is an ideal no public agency can achieve (Kopels, Charlton, & Wells, 2003). Public expectations of CWS organizations must become more realistic and this will only happen with a great deal of education and improvement in the relationships between CWS agencies and the public (Cooper, 2005).

Finally, it must be acknowledged that sometimes media reports are accurate about the mistakes made by CWS personnel. Indeed, dereliction of duty, incompetence, and unethical behaviors have contributed to some of the grievous incidents referred to in the vicious cycle (Sexton, 1997). Many factors appear to be at work here and a few will be mentioned. The difficulty of recruiting and maintaining a stable workforce in child welfare organizations has been the topic of many studies. Clearly high turnover rates affect service provision. For instance, a series of workers assigned to work with children appears to affect outcomes such as permanency decisions for children in out-of-home care (Flower, McDonald, & Sumski, 2005). In addition, "deprofessionalization" has been lamented by many observers in the field of child welfare (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007). The trend toward hiring less qualified individuals and the general difficulty of retaining educated/well-trained social workers in CWS organizations increases the potential for errors in decision making and incompetence among the workforce.

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Politicians and Child Welfare Services

There is evidence that grievous cases, and the coverage of those cases by the media, have led to the passage of child abuse prevention laws at both the state and federal levels (Douglas, 2009). These laws are often aimed at creating greater accountability and oversight of CWS agencies and personnel, for example, through the creation of citizen review panels (Jones, 2004). However, there is also evidence that many of the laws appear to be largely symbolic rather than substantive since they are often passed without accompanying funding to allow agencies to carry out the mandates included in the laws (Gainsborough, 2009). Although some of these laws have beneficial effects on child protection, they often increase the work of already overburdened CWS personnel while intensifying oversight. Amplifying accountability may lead to greater compliance with rules, but it may also lead to the unintended consequence of stifling creativity and proscribing autonomous decision making in the development and implementation of interventions with families that can lead to long-term child protection.

It is worth noting, as well, that the motivations of politicians when they take up the cause of child protection are difficult to discern. One thing is certain, though; any politician who gains publicity by championing the cause of child protection while railing away at the agency that is charged with protecting children engages in a no-risk proposition. What is the downside for a politician? They can only look heroic in the eyes of the public when they lead a crusade to protect children while "going up against the bureaucracy." In addition, it is easy for them to tap into general public distrust of bureaucratic agencies, especially agencies that appear secretive (e.g., due to confidentiality). CWS agencies are indeed fallible and any history of mistakes made by agency personnel adds to a politician's credibility for waging a public campaign against the agency. It must be noted that the set of circumstances mentioned here is not always the case since some politicians are sympathetic to the plight of those who labor in CWS agencies and are sincerely interested in improving the system for the workforce and the children and families they serve.

An additional consideration is the overall outcome of the numerous internal and external investigations that have led to policy changes concerning child welfare services. As Lachman and Bernard (2006) point out, the legislative changes made in response to child death review inquiries have not produced more effective practice in CWS or ensured improved outcomes for children. They assert that, "even after extensive revisions of service provision, children continue to die" (Lachman & Bernard, 2006, p. 964). In addition, policy changes in the wake of grievous events have typically been made without the input of the professionals they affect most, child welfare workers. This has led to policies that "may not be best for the system in

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the long run" (Malm, Bess, Leos-Urbal, Green, & Markowitz, 2001, p. 19). Clearly, the collective might of politicians, no matter how well intentioned, has not transformed child welfare services into a system that is perceived as effective.

INTERNAL RESPONSE TO THE VICIOUS CYCLE

The impact of the vicious cycle, internally, includes several concrete manifestations of collective anxiety, guilt, and the avoidance of blame during the backlash prompted by grievous events. These reactions often include internal investigations, a "heads will roll" mentality on the part of the administration, and foster care panic. In the depiction of the vicious cycle included here, all of these internal reactions to the other parts of the cycle have been placed under the heading *foster care panic* since this is such a profound and recognizable response to the preceding events in the cycle. The term "foster care panic" emerged in the wake of terrible children's deaths to epitomize the marked overreaction of CWS organizations and has been documented by several reporters (Beaumont Enterprise, 2006; Crary, 2006; Kaufman, 2006; McLarin, 1995; Poitras, 2003). In the example from Connecticut introduced earlier, within six months of a child death, the numbers of children taken into protective custody increased by 1,000, a much higher rate of foster care entries and reentries than the state had experienced previously (Lang, 1996). Foster care panic represents a visceral reaction on the parts of CWS administrators and staff that manifests itself in a temporarily overly conservative approach to child protection. Cases that seemed somewhat stable yesterday become a cause for alarm today.

Less concrete reactions to the public pressure represented in the cycle include defensive or evasive postures by administrators and staff and a shared sense of low morale among the workforce. As Lachman and Bernard (2006) point out, public pressure on agencies tends to generalize blame for the behavior of a few employees to all of the personnel in the organization, including many who competently work to achieve positive outcomes for their clients. In addition, there is evidence that individual CWS social workers tend to "personalize" organizational problems (Lewandowski, 2003). This personalization process may be accompanied by internalization of the public's unrealistic prevention expectations elaborated above. Individually, these expectations may lead to a sense of failure when one child on a worker's caseload is harmed. Collectively, when the agency is "under fire" from the media, politicians, and others, personalization of organizational problems and internalization of unrealistic expectations is likely to lead to a shared sense of low morale, diminished job satisfaction, low commitment to the organization, and a temporarily pronounced effect on staff turnover (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Landsman, 2001).

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Other effects of the vicious cycle include what Parton (2004, p. 89) calls an "increased emphasis on managerialism" that has accompanied the pursuit of greater accountability. Driscoll (2009, p. 339) portrays these changes as leading to a great increase in administrative work "at the expense of direct work with families." This sentiment is echoed in the findings of a study completed by the Urban Institute, in which the most frequently noted changes by child welfare personnel were, "that their jobs had become more clerical in nature and that the interaction with children and families had suffered as a result" (Malm et al., 2001, p. 20). Certainly factors other than the cycle have contributed to these changes but various aspects of the cycle, external and internal investigations and "reforms" that are focused on increasing accountability, seem to have played an influential role in this shift (Malm et al., 2001).

This trend also indicates that the promotion of autonomous decision making among line workers has decreased considerably (Malm et al., 2001). In many studies on the CWS workforce autonomous decision making is a factor that makes the job more satisfying for line workers (Landsman, 2001). Autonomy is also likely to contribute to a sense of professional efficacy and expertise.

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THE VICIOUS CYCLE, ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE AND CULTURE, AND THE CHILD WELFARE SERVICES WORKFORCE

Although others have discussed aspects of the cycle outlined here, one of the questions that has not received attention, conceptually or empirically, concerns the effects the cycle outlined here has on the climates and cultures of CWS organizations. By definition, *organizational climate* concerns the employees' shared perceptions of the psychological impacts their work has on them individually, including the services they provide to clients (Glisson, 2000; Sells & James, 1988). *Organizational culture* forms the "social context" within the organization and is a blend of assumptions, beliefs, values, and shared behavioral expectations that are shared within organizations (Glisson, 2000; Schein 1990, 2000). Both of these constructs have significant influence on the personnel in organizations including the acculturation of new employees (Glisson et al., 2008; Major, 2000).

External stressful contextual effects produced by the cycle, such as the ever tightening vice of blame and increasing accountability measures spawned by media coverage of grievous events and subsequent legislative changes, are likely to have a marked impact on internal CWS organizational climates. When researchers who study organizational climates attempt to gauge workers' shared perceptions of the climates in their agencies, they investigate engaging and stressful aspects of agency climates (Glisson et al.,

2008). Overall, studies on the climates of CWS agencies indicate that collectively experienced stress adversely affects job satisfaction and has a negative impact on the retention of workers (Chenot, 2007; Glisson, 2007; Glisson & James, 2002; Glisson, Dukes, & Green, 2006). The most egregious finding concerning CWS climates, however, is that stressful climates adversely affect the quality of the services offered to children and the outcomes of those interventions among children served by CWS organizations (Glisson, 2007; Glisson et al., 2006). Since the system that produces these outcomes is embedded within the vicious cycle, it follows that undesirable outcomes, both for the workforce and the children they serve, may be indirectly influenced by various elements of the cycle.

The cycle may also influence organizational cultures. The shared sense of culture in CWS organizations may be viewed as composed of constructive and passive defensive aspects (Glisson & James, 2002). There have been few studies completed on the cultures in CWS organizations (Chenot, 2007; Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Glisson, 2007; Glisson & James, 2002; Glisson et al., 2006). However, it appears that employee perceptions of the passive defensive dimensions of CWS cultures are characterized by a high level of uniformity. For example, an effort to examine consensus among CWS employees concerning perceptions of passive defensive culture in 11 CWS agencies Chenot (2007) found significant levels of agreement among individuals but no significant variability between groups of employees concerning this construct. In addition, passive defensive organizational culture had a negative effect on early career employees' intentions to remain in their agencies while longer serving employees appeared to have become acculturated to the passive defensive cultures in their agencies (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009). It is likely that the cycle explicated here both dampens favorable perceptions of CWS cultures (constructive) and contributes to the passive defensive aspects of the cultures in CWS organizations. Passive defensive cultures are composed of norms, such as a rule-following orientation, and evasion of responsibility, blame, and accountability (Cooke & Szumal, 1993; Glisson & James, 2002). The external pressure from the vicious cycle contributes to the shared perceptions of employees concerning the need to conform while evading responsibility, and avoiding accountability and blame. When employees work in organizations embedded in an external milieu that is characterized by impending or realized blame, it makes sense that the internal cultures of their organizations take on similar qualities.

In addition, the vicious cycle appears to have an impact on some of the outcome variables that are often studied concerning the child welfare services workforce. For example, in separate studies of large samples from the CWS workforce in two different states, Landsman (2001, 2005) employed a variable entitled "community stress" as a predictor in a path analyses using structural equation modeling. This variable is defined as the "degree to which the employee perceives the organization as consistently 'under fire' by the

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community" (Landsman, 2001, p. 411). Community stress had a negative causal effect on organizational commitment among CWS employees in both states (Landsman 2001; 2005). Additionally, in Louisiana, Ellett (1995) found that "external factors," including the media and "public criticisms," produced negative impacts on the perceptions employees had about their work and their "personal and professional esteem."

Qualitative studies have also revealed significant themes related to the cycle. The most interesting of these, in light of the current topic, was a large study ($N = 365$) of the factors that lead to either turnover or retention for CWS employees (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Daws, 2007). Among the organizational factors that lead to turnover, the participants identified an atmosphere of "tension and fear" that is produced by "criticism from the media, courts, public . . . [and] fear of dismissal and of criminal and civil liability for doing their jobs" (Ellett et al., 2007, p. 273). Under personal factors, social workers mentioned the "fear and anxiety" they have concerning the potential that their careers, along with their personal and professional reputations, could be ruined due to involvement in a high profile case (Ellett et al., 2007). These studies provide empirical evidence of the deleterious effects the vicious cycle has on the CWS workforce.

The research discussed here highlights some of the direct and indirect effects of the vicious cycle on child welfare services organizations and the child welfare services workforce. Alleviation of the pressure exerted by the cycle is likely to contribute to improvements in the cultures and climates of child protection organizations.

PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Although grievous events involving child maltreatment will continue to occur, the effects of the vicious cycle stimulated by these events may be mitigated with a range of potential remedies. The most ambitious is a fundamental change in the residual approach to children in this country that would alleviate some of the environmental conditions that lead to child abuse, especially neglect (Lindsey, 2004; McGowan & Walsh, 2000). The massive social and political overhaul that would be affected by such a foundational cultural shift would certainly make several changes in the cycle through reducing child poverty, providing increased funding for child abuse prevention and child protection services, and so on. Even though the cycle would continue, perhaps the public would come to see the prevention of child abuse and neglect as a collective responsibility that is not situated in one system in society. This would neutralize some of the "culture of blame" mindset that is generated through the cycle.

However, until a massive shift from the residual approach to social prioritization of children and families is realized in society more practical

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solutions must be considered. For example, one way to approach the problem is to concentrate substantial resources on targeted prevention strategies, especially during the "business as usual" period of the vicious cycle. Although child abuse incidents will continue to occur, this approach may lower the number and frequency of such events and increase positive associations in public perceptions of CWS agencies. To mount prevention programs in an effective manner some have employed a public health approach (Arias, 2009; Scott, 2008). For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has pursued an impressive prevention initiative. The CDC is emphasizing "strengthening parenting practices and community systems" (Arias, 2009, p. 18). One of the specific things they have done within the overall prevention strategy is to include the media as one of many "support mechanisms" as they implement parenting programs (Arias, 2009).

Others suggest that the prevention of child maltreatment is a generalized social "adult responsibility" and have called for wider adult vigilance (Davies, 2004). As Weber (1998, p. 130) states when discussing the manner in which the public tend to place all responsibility for child maltreatment prevention on one underfunded, overworked system, "No single sector of society can fulfill such an awesome responsibility." In fact, some members of the media have promoted the notion of generalized responsibility in the midst of taking CWS agencies to task for real or perceived errors when reporting on child maltreatment. For example, reporters have mentioned the need for widespread social vigilance by adults, imploring their readers, "IF YOU SEE SOMETHING, SAY SOMETHING" (emphasis in the original) and asserting that attempting to defuse potential child abuse situations or notifying authorities concerning specific incidents is part and parcel of "being a citizen-a human being" (Ingrassia & Evans, 2006).

Proposals that promote a vigilant and supportive approach to help children and families that struggle with potential or current child maltreatment include expanding community based partnerships by creating "community networks of protective adults" (Davies, 2004, p. 426; Mondy & Mondy, 2004). Areas that have made concerted sustained efforts to build comprehensive community partnerships have reported positive results for the workforce and most importantly for clients (Arias, 2009; Mondy & Mondy, 2004). Similar recommendations have been advanced for years and compose one of the primary elements of the movement toward child welfare reform through practices such as differential response (Waldfogel 1998, 2000). Although still relatively young in terms of implementation, differential response projects have demonstrated short-term effectiveness, particularly when strong community partnerships are created and service provision is bolstered among service providers working with the CWS system (Waldfogel, 2008). Measures like these are particularly important during the trough period in the vicious cycle due to the potential for increases in the shared sense of responsibility

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for prevention and strengthened community partnerships that may aid or sustain CWS agencies when public pressure increases.

CWS administrators can adopt other preemptive measures during the "business as usual" stage of the cycle as well. For example, CWS organizations may be able to have a positive impact on media coverage during this phase of the cycle yet traditionally this practice has not been emphasized. For example, in a recent study of child welfare administrators' views on the recruitment and retention of staff, the participants were asked to list the most important actions or initiatives they needed to pursue in order to retain staff. The question garnered 121 responses from administrators in 33 state agencies. Only one of those responses mentioned the agency's image or the media: "improved public image through media" as an important pursuit (Cyphers et al., 2005, p. 44). As has already been noted here, the vicious cycle, including media coverage, appears to have an impact on retention. It is informative that this influence is not on the minds of CWS administrators.

In fact, child welfare administrators and staff often have unhelpful relationships with the media that contribute to poor public images. In an interview concerning child welfare directors' relationships with the media, *New York Times* reporter Richard Jones pointed out, "the only times directors of child welfare agencies and reporters speak with each other in a sustained and meaningful way is in moments of crisis" (DeSantis, 2006, p. 1). Jones went on to assert that the public interprets the disinclination to share information by child welfare administrators as an effort to engage in "damage control" or denial of problems in the agency rather than concern about the grievous incidents that often prompt media coverage. Jones summed up his advice for directors in two words: "be transparent" (DeSantis, 2006). Most important, Jones advises cultivating a professional relationship by meeting and interacting with reporters, discussing the policy agenda for the agency, programs in the agency, and so on, and asking them which stories they are interested in within the context of this relationship over time (DeSantis, 2006).

Cultivating such a relationship can best be accomplished when there are no crises to cover or the furor from the most recent one has died down. CWS agencies can be much more transparent than they have been historically and yet maintain confidentiality. For instance, a child maltreatment program in Australia has handled this touchy issue by "vetting" media organizations and reporters with a careful eye to their publication histories concerning child protection issues and granting greater access to those who have provided fair coverage in the past. In this manner, they have been able to "cultivate" journalists who are "balanced, fair and objective and who are sensitive to issues of confidentiality and privacy" (Mondy & Mondy, 2004, p. 437). The program also provides training on public speaking and media issues to staff and parents in the program who choose to speak to the media (Mondy & Mondy, 2004). Efforts such as these are likely to lay the groundwork that

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will sustain CWS agencies during the spike in media coverage and political pressure triggered by grievous incidents of child maltreatment.

Establishing helpful relationships with politicians and other influential stakeholders can be equally difficult for child welfare administrators. However, positive relationships with these figures are crucial when crises trigger spikes in the cycle and must be developed during the business as usual phase of the cycle in order to aid or sustain the agency when grievous incidents emerge. To do this, Ellett et al. (2007), suggest identifying high profile individuals and groups they call *strategic champions* that will aid in promoting the importance of child welfare, explaining the operations and difficulties of CWS organizations to the media, the general public, and particularly policy makers since they often have a profound impact on CWS agencies.

In summary, the vicious cycle exercises a great deal of influence on child welfare services. The public pressure represented by the cycle appears to adversely affect the organizational climates and cultures of these organizations and the workforce that labors to protect children and serves families. The collective and individual impact of the cycle on child welfare services workers may lead to unfavorable outcomes that compromise the services they provide to children and families. The effects of the cycle can be mitigated through comprehensive community partnership building and improved public relations efforts that center around cultivating helpful relationships with media representatives and politicians during the "business as usual" period of the cycle. These preparatory measures are likely to moderate the public pressure that follows a grievous child abuse incident.

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