

**Decentralization as a Means to Improve Child Welfare Practice:
Community-Based Services and the Problem of Street-Level Bureaucracy**

Brad McKenzie, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
University of Manitoba

Doctorate: Arizona State University

**Decentralization as a Means to Improve Child Welfare Practice:
Community-Based Services and the Problem of Street-Level Bureaucracy**

by

Brad McKenzie, Ph.D.

Research Problem

The provision of responsive, client-oriented services remains an elusive goal, particularly in an era where public investment in the social services is guided by the need for cost-containment and an increasing concern for cost-effectiveness. In child welfare, and related fields, decentralized, community-based service models are frequently advocated because they are associated with services which are more accessible, more responsive and of higher quality (Claque, Dill, Seebaran & Wharf, 1984; Daly, 1982; Hadley, Dale & Sills, 1984; Fallon, 1985; Rein, 1972; Yin & Yates, 1975). Benefits to staff are also hypothesized in smaller, more collegially-oriented workplaces because of the increase in job autonomy, participation in decision-making and job satisfaction (Fallon, 1985; Jackson, 1983; McNeely, 1983; Mellor, 1983).

However, the over-simplified cause and effect relationship hypothesized in much of this research is challenged by Lipsky's (1980) observations as outlined in his theory of street-level bureaucracy. In brief, Lipsky argues that street-level bureaucrats constantly strive to retain a relatively high level of discretionary power in their jobs. When faced with a work environment that becomes increasingly alienating due to inadequate resources, increased work demands, and conflicting goals the methods used to protect job discretion involve the adoption of routine client-processing methods which tend to depersonalize and stereotype many clients. Lipsky's observations and theoretical arguments are widely accepted in organizational theory (Ham & Hill, 1984; Moore, 1987), and if they are valid our expectations of line staff within many public welfare services need to be re-evaluated. Moreover, expectations that organizational and service decentralization are linked to more effective, client-oriented services may need to be more cautiously assessed. Despite the popularity of Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy, there has been no known previous effort to empirically test some of its assumptions. This study was designed to examine some of the general effects of service decentralization in child welfare, and to test Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy in this service context.

Background and Research Questions

This research was conducted in a western Canadian city which had decentralized its child welfare services to six community-based agencies located in the voluntary sector. Each agency was governed by a locally-elected community board.

Two central questions guided the study. The first involved an assessment of changes in social indicators pertaining to service provision in early intervention and prevention, service demand in child protection, and expenditures during the first three years of decentralization. The second major question focused attention on the theoretical assumptions in the theory of street-level bureaucracy. These involved an examination of the systematic relationships between

job-related stress, job discretion (autonomy), job alienation, and the expression of stereotypic and depersonalizing behaviors toward clients (an aspect of burnout) among front-line child welfare staff. Other related questions involved exploration of the relationship between the independent variables of centralization, job stressors, job motivators and social support, and the dependent variables of job satisfaction and burnout.

Methodology

A mixed quantitative and qualitative methodology (Greene & McClintock, 1985; Reichardt & Cook, 1979) was employed in this study. Data collection for the fieldwork component included key informant interviews, document review and the collection of statistical information on service provision and costs. Analysis involved descriptive comparisons of service patterns prior to and following service decentralization, and trend comparisons with a group of agencies which had not experienced decentralization.

The descriptive, correlational component of the study involved a one-time survey of direct service child welfare workers within the six community-based agencies (N=185). Using a structured questionnaire, data were gathered from 167 respondents (90.2% response rate) at the end of the second year in the field implementation phase of the new decentralized system. The questionnaire elicited responses to questions about service quality, job stress, job characteristics in the work environment, job alienation, job satisfaction and burnout. Job stress measures included information on role ambiguity, role conflict, workload, overtime, caseload numbers and the nature of client feedback. Job characteristics were assessed by scales designed to measure job autonomy, job variety, task significance, feedback, social support and participation in decision-making. Subscales from the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) were used to measure the concepts of depersonalization and staff feelings of personal accomplishment in their job. Analysis included the computation of descriptive statistics and correlations, hypotheses testing using appropriate tests of significance, and stepwise regression to explore the relative contribution of key independent variables to the variation in dependent variables.

Results

Results from the social indicator analysis of service trends demonstrated that decentralized, community-based services were associated with a significant increase in community outreach and prevention activities, more use of early intervention services, such as homemakers, and an increase in the provision of voluntary family counselling services. But the most dramatic increase was in the demand for protective child welfare services. New case finding and increased referrals in child abuse and neglect led to a 62.5% increase in the number of children in care by the end of the third year of decentralization. During the same time period the increase was confined to 18.5% in other areas of the province. The number of families served almost doubled in this three year period within the community-based system whereas the increase was about 32% in other areas. While new public resources were provided in response to increased service demands, new resources for staff and related costs over the three year time period were limited to approximately 20% when adjusted for inflation. During this same period protective service cases, which are an indication of workload demand, rose by 84%. Thus, resource inputs failed to keep pace with the increase caseloads resulting from decentralization. Two outcomes were apparent. First, there was an increase in the level of workload stress

experienced by street-level staff. Second, although service improvements were demonstrated by social indicator analysis and results from the survey component of the study, these were limited by the resource-demand squeeze.

The workload trends in this service context illustrate the pre-conditions likely to lead to the effects anticipated in Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy; thus, data from the survey component were used to test hypotheses based on theoretically expected bivariate relationships from this theory. Only one job stressor was negatively associated with job autonomy, and this relationship was relatively weak. There was no support for the hypothesis that job stressors were positively associated with job alienation, although job autonomy was negatively correlated with job alienation at the $p < .05$ level. Job autonomy was also found to be negatively related to depersonalization ($p < .001$). However, no statistically significant association between job alienation and depersonalized behavior toward clients was found. These results indicate that there is no support for a number of the predicted relationships emerging from the theory of street-level bureaucracy. Although reduced job autonomy was associated with increased alienation and a tendency to express stereotypic attitudes towards clients, there is little empirical support for the linear relationships postulated by Lipsky involving high job stress, reduced job discretion, increased alienation and the greater likelihood of adopting depersonalized behaviors toward clients. These results need to be viewed cautiously because they involve data collected in the early stages of policy implementation. Nevertheless, they provide some support for Moore's (1987) argument that the theory of street-level bureaucracy must be viewed from a more complex political framework where both the organizational context and other variables are understood to affect staff in a variety of ways.

Regression analysis and further testing of bivariate relationships suggest job morale patterns which may have wider implications in organizing the work environment for better practice. First, while respondents demonstrated relatively high levels of burnout related to emotional exhaustion, job satisfaction and feelings of personal accomplishment did not appear to be adversely affected. There was a generally high level of staff commitment to the new, decentralized model of service delivery including related job design changes involving higher levels of job autonomy and participation in decision-making. Based on this experience, these changes appear to have a moderating effect on increased job stress, and serve to limit some of the adverse effects of burnout which may find expression in depersonalizing behaviors toward clients or negative feelings about job accomplishment.

Of particular significance is the finding that job stressors and job motivators, such as participation in decision-making, job autonomy and job variety, have somewhat unique and largely independent effects on job morale outcomes. Whereas job stressors are more strongly associated with the exhaustion and depersonalization aspects of burnout, job motivators are more influential in feelings about personal accomplishment and job alienation. Therefore, efforts to improve job morale, including the reduction of symptoms of job burnout and the tendency to depersonalize clients, require quite separate actions to limit workplace stressors and enhance the motivating potential of work through policy changes, job redesign and organizational change.

Utility for Practice

This research has important implications for improving social work practice, particularly in relation to legislatively mandated programs like child welfare. At a general level, the development of decentralized, community-based services can have important benefits related to

accessibility, service responsiveness, volunteer and community involvement, and the scope of services provided to consumers. However, such service models must be carefully planned to encourage the active participation of staff and community members in order to maximize these potential benefits and to limit potential weaknesses, such as problems in coordination, loss of efficiency and problems in accountability. For example, planning for decentralization should include the development of effective mechanisms for information sharing across systems, and clearly negotiated service contracts where roles and responsibilities are understood in ways which form the basis for a comprehensive approach to accountability. As well, planning for decentralization must anticipate new demands for resources, at least in the initial transition and implementation periods. Alternatively, new community-based resource options must be developed in order to maximize improvements in service quality, and avoid higher levels of staff burnout. One other observation concerning service costs emerged from this study. There was evidence that increased community involvement led to a broader definition of child welfare needs and a related increase in the demand for public support of services for children. While this can lead to a restructuring of interest group activity and place more demands on government for child welfare expenditures, it also contributes to the development of a needs-based approach in child welfare and has the potential of supporting a more integrated service response to families and children at the community level. Widespread consumer empowerment in child welfare practice may ultimately depend on how these relationships evolve.

Results pertaining to theory testing indicate the complex ways that job stressors, policy innovation and organizational structure affect staff morale and the quality of services they provide. It is significant that the job setting and the presence of high job stressors do not inevitably lead to a loss of social work commitment to clients and their needs. While job stress, the nature of the policy change, and organizational structure appear to have somewhat independent effects on service quality, there are some important interrelationships. First, staff involvement in and support for policy change makes it more likely that they will successfully cope with some increase in job stress that may emerge from these changes. Second, service and organizational models that incorporate job characteristics valued by staff, such as adequate levels of job autonomy, supervisor support and meaningful participation in decision-making, will encourage staff commitment to policy changes and moderate the adverse effects of increased job stress. These job design features were influential in all job morale concepts considered in this study, and they were particularly important to job satisfaction, job alienation and job accomplishment. Several suggestions are important to consider. Job roles which provide for sufficient variety and time away from protection functions in child welfare should be considered. Clear policies and job expectations are necessary in providing a framework for service provision, but then staff prefer a setting which allows for considerable staff participation in decision-making and considerable autonomy in organizing work activities and processes. A facilitative management style is preferred where considerable attention is paid to feedback and new learning opportunities. In summary, this research suggests that some job stressors associated with burnout are caused by resource constraints, and improvements to experienced job strain and service quality require that this issue be addressed directly. However, other job morale outcomes associated with improved service quality may be positively affected by reorganizing service technologies and case management practices, and these need not await the infusion of new resources.

References

- Claque, M., Dill, R., Seebaran, R., & Wharf, B. (1984). Reforming human services: The experience of the community resource boards in B.C. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Daly, A. (1982). The impact of decentralization on organizational effectiveness in an urban county Department of Social Services. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Chicago.
- Fallon, Jr., K.P. (1985). Participatory management: An alternative in human service delivery systems. In S. Slavin (Ed.). An introduction to human service management (pp. 251-259). New York: Haworth.
- Hadley, R., Dale, P., & Sills, P. (1984). Decentralizing social services: A model for change. London: Bedford Square Press.
- Green, J., & McClintock, C. (1985). Triangulation in evaluation: Design and analysis issues. Evaluation Review, 9(5), 523-545.
- Ham, C., & Hill, M. (1984). The policy process in the modern capitalist state. Brighton, Sussex: Wheatsheaf.
- Jackson, S.E. (1983). Participation in decision-making as a strategy for reducing job-related strain. Journal of Applied Psychology, 68(1), 3-19.
- Lipsky, M. (1980). Street level bureaucracy. New York: Russell Sage.
- Maslach, C., & Jackson, S.E. (1986). Maslach burnout inventory (2nd ed.). Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press.
- McNeely, R.L. (1983). Organizational patterns and work satisfaction in a comprehensive human service agency: An empirical test. Human Relations, 36(10), 957-972.
- Mellor, Y. (1983). Structural contingency approach to organizational assessment. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Chicago.
- Moore, S.T. (1987). The theory of street-level bureaucracy: A positive critique. Administration & Society, 19(1), 74-94.
- Reichardt, C.S., & Cook, T.D. (1979). Beyond qualitative versus quantitative methods. In C.S. Reichardt & T.D. Cook (Eds.). Qualitative and quantitative methods in evaluation research (pp. 7-32). Beverly Hills: Sage.

Rein, M. (1972). Decentralization and citizen participation in social services. Public Administration Review, 32 (Special Issue), 687-701.

Yin, R.K., & Yates, D. (1975). Street-level governments. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath.