5-3-2015

Societal Factors Impacting Child Welfare: Validating the Perceptions of Child Welfare Scale

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Research Article

Societal Factors Impacting Child Welfare: Validating the Perceptions of Child Welfare Scale

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Abstract

Objective: This research examines the psychometric properties of the Perceptions of Child Welfare Scale (PCWS). This instrument is designed to assess child welfare workers' understanding of how society views their role and their work. **Methods:** Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was utilized to analyze data on 538 child welfare workers. **Results:** The final model consisted of three latent variables with 14 indicators related to stigma, value, and respect ($\chi^2 = 362.33$, $p = .00$; root mean square error of approximation [RMSEA] = .09; 90% confidence interval [CI]: [.08, .09]; comparative fit index [CFI] = .96; Tucker–Lewis Index [TLI] = .95). **Discussion:** The way in which workers believe others view their work suggests an increasingly complex prototype for understanding workforce issues. Those wishing to examine societal factors related to child welfare workforce issues could use this validated instrument.

Keywords

child welfare, field of practice, discriminant validity, psychometric study, construct validity, face validity, instrument development, internal consistency, validity study

Introduction

The child welfare workforce faces substantial challenges in a number of areas. Challenging work conditions, high turnover rates, and disparities and disproportionality are a few of the ongoing difficulties facing the field. In order to be more effective in studying the child welfare workforce, it is helpful to use reliable and valid instruments to measure constructs of interest. The current study seeks to add to the knowledge base by evaluating the psychometric properties of the Perceptions of Child Welfare Scale (PCWS). This instrument is designed to assess child welfare workers' understanding of how society views their role and their work. The purpose of this study is to begin to validate the PCWS. In this study, "child welfare workers" refer to workers employed in private agencies whose mandate is to prevent unnecessary placement in out-of-home care due to neglect and abuse.

Public Perceptions of Child Welfare Workers

Child welfare workers are subject to public opinion and scrutiny about their work. Much of the information the public receives about child welfare work is through media sources such as newspapers, television, radio, and Internet (Gainsborough, 2010; Landsman, 2001). While some media accounts are favorable (e.g., National Broadcasting Company's [NBC's] Wednesday's child), the majority tend to focus on sensationalized cases of child abuse and neglect, such as the death of a child (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Garrett, 2009; Lachman & Bernard, 2006; Scannapieco & Connell-Carrick, 2007).

While the public has high expectations of the states' responsibility to protect children, most people lack complete and accurate knowledge about the nature and complexity of child welfare work (Briar-Lawson, Martinson, Briar-Bonpane, & Zox, 2011; LaLiberte, Larson, & Johnston, 2011). According to Cooper (2005), "this general lack of knowledge, coupled with perceptions of many Americans regarding the bureaucratic

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nature of large agencies, seems to foster public distrust in the ability of a government agency to carry out the function of child protection'' (p. 108). Not surprisingly, media attention of high-profile cases leads the public to develop negative perceptions and mistrust of the child welfare system and individual workers who handle these cases (Ayre, 2001; Ellett et al., 2007; Garrett, 2009; Lachman & Bernard, 2006). Child welfare agencies are often perceived as bureaucratic and inefficient, with individual workers seen as incompetent, unreliable, and untrustworthy (Thomlison & Blome, 2012).

Agencies are aware that the media plays a significant role in shaping public perceptions and attitudes of child welfare and often modify their actions based on media accounts (Chibnall, Dutch, Jones-Harden, Brown, & Gourdine, 2003). Chenot (2011) refers to this phenomenon as ''the vicious cycle,'' whereby there is media coverage of high-profile cases with previous or current involvement in child welfare services, then there is a political response prompting an external and internal review, the public becomes outraged and demands action, child welfare staff is placed on leave, demoted and/or fired, agency decision making becomes more conservative (e.g., foster care panic), minimal reforms or policy changes are made, and then it is back to ''business as usual'' until another high-profile case comes to light (p. 171).

The power of the media with regard to child welfare is not limited to being the primary source of information for the public, and it seems only natural that these negative views toward child protection impact child welfare agencies, individuals who work within the system, and the working conditions within agencies (Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006). In one study, public inquiry into deaths of children in care led to distress by individual workers, radiated stress throughout the agency and weakened public and community support (Regehr, Chau, Leslie, & Howe, 2002). Participants in another study found that society has become much more litigious in recent the years, resulting in added stress and heightened concerns about the legal liabilities associated with child welfare work (Westbrook et al., 2006).

With this in mind, it should come as no surprise that the media impacts child welfare agencies on both an administrative and worker level. In part, agency policies are shaped by the media, as agencies respond to broadcast stories (Chibnall et al., 2003; Gainsborough, 2009, 2010; Westbrook et al., 2006). Gainsborough (2009) found that media attention impacts how agency administrators manage the day-to-day operations of child welfare agencies, and Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, and Dews (2007) reported that negative portrayals of child welfare in the media have resulted in the termination of workers. As a result, the psychological climate within agencies is related, in part, to the way in which child welfare is viewed by the public, including climates rife with distrust, fear, tension, and low morale (Chibnall et al., 2003; Ellett et al., 2007; University of Maryland School of Social Work, 2007).

The media also impacts the way in which individual workers perform their job responsibilities and shapes worker behavior (Chibnall et al., 2003). For example, media attention has been shown to impact whether workers advocate for out-of-home placements compared to preventive care in a child's home (Shdaimah, 2010). The media often results in an increase in rates of substantiation and is a contributor to the overrepresentation of minority families involved in child welfare (Chibnall et al., 2003).

Negative media attention is also related to issues of recruitment and retention in child welfare, including unwanted turnover, burnout, job dissatisfaction, and job insecurity (Chibnall et al., 2003). In a study of child welfare workers, it was found that negative media attention was found to be problematic in recruitment efforts by 65% of those surveyed (Cyphers et al., 2005). Additionally, 41% of respondents reported that negative media coverage impacted preventable turnover (Cyphers et al., 2005). Ellett at al. (2007) cited ''criticism from the media'' as an organizational factor resulting turnover among child welfare workers (p. 273). In a study of turnover among voluntary preventive service workers, participants reporting negative public perceptions of child welfare were more likely to consider leaving their current position compared to participants reporting positive public perceptions of child welfare (McGowan, Auerbach, Conroy, Augsberger, & Schudrich, 2010). Similarly, child care workers with more favorable perceptions of child welfare work had higher levels of commitment to the field of child welfare and were more likely to remain employed (Schudrich, Auerbach, Liu, Fernandes, & McGowan, 2012).

Despite the negative impacts that the media has on child welfare workers and agencies, the media can also be seen as an agent for positive change. For example, Cyphers et al. (2005) found that nearly a quarter of respondents in their study (24%) indicated that improving the public image of child welfare would improve retention among workers and frontline supervisors. Additionally, the authors found that public service announcements aimed at recruiting child welfare workers has the potential to be effective. The relationship between agency administration and workers can be enhanced by improving the image of child welfare in the public (Landsman, 2001). One way to do this is to harness the power of the media. Briar-Lawson, Martinson, Briar-Bonpane, and Zox (2011) recommend that child welfare leaders learn to use the media to provide education and raise public awareness regarding the ''causes and consequences of child abuse and neglect and action steps to address child well-being'' (p. 192). In order to do so, child welfare professionals will need to become familiar with relevant media sources and foster positive working relationships with media organizations, reporters, and editors (Chenot, 2011; LaLiberte et al., 2011).

The current research was conducted to examine the psychometric properties of the PCWS. A valid and reliable instrument to assess how child welfare workers think the public perceives them would be valuable in better understanding the child welfare workforce. Previous research has considered this notion worth assessing (''SSW Professors Evaluate, Strengthen Child Welfare Workforce with $2.5 M U.S. Health and Human Services Grant—University at Albany–SUNY,'' 2008). Additionally,

research has uncovered a relationship between child welfare workers' perceptions of how they and their work is viewed by the public and their intentions to leave their agencies (McGowan et al., 2010; Schudrich et al., 2012). Therefore, a validated instrument could be useful in future child welfare workforce research.

Development of the PCWS

This instrument was developed in response to a felt need to measure workers' perceptions of how they believe they are perceived by those outside the child welfare system. The researchers involved in the development of this scale were interested to examine this construct as part of ongoing efforts to address workforce issues within child welfare.

Development of the items for this instrument was based upon several factors. The first author's experience as a child welfare worker influenced the development of some items. Focus groups were used to elicit ideas for concepts that should be included in the scale in addition to interviews with individual workers. A drafted version of the instrument was shown to experienced child welfare workers for their comments and input into the final version of the instrument and to ensure face validity.

When the instrument was developed, it was the authors' intent to develop a scale that could be used with the wide range of job titles within child welfare; however, the items in the scale address the unique relationship between child welfare and society.

Methods

The Institutional Review Boards at Columbia University, The University at Albany, and Yeshiva University approved this study.

Sampling

Data for this study were obtained from a sample of 538 child welfare workers employed in voluntary child welfare agencies in a large northeastern city. Voluntary agencies in this locale are private agencies that are under contract with the public child welfare system to provide preventive and other child welfare services, such as foster care. All workers in these agencies were invited, but not required, to participate in the study ($n = 1,624$). The program directors of participating agencies were sent an invitation letter from the researchers to distribute to staff along with an informed consent, written survey, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. A follow-up letter from the research team and phone calls by research personnel were made to the directors of the programs with a low initial response rate in order to encourage participation.

Of the 204 agencies included in the sampling frame, employees from 150 agencies participated in the study. Ultimately, 538 workers responded to the survey for a total response rate of 33.1%.

Workers in the sample represented the various roles of staff within the agencies and included administrators, supervisors, social workers, caseworkers, and case planners.

Measurement

The original PCWS is a 29-item Likert-type scale. Items probe the worker on his or her perceptions of how those outside of child welfare may view the work they do. Examples of items include "The media provides a balanced view of our work," "Government officials understand the needs of child welfare workers," and "Most people blame the child welfare worker when something goes wrong with a case."

Items in this instrument are recorded on a 4-point scale ranging from $1 = strongly\ disagree$ to $4 = strongly\ agree$. This scale is scored by adding all items after reverse scoring negative ones.

Model Specification

In the current study, a specialized form of structural equation modeling (SEM), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), was utilized to validate PCWS. CFA is a measurement model that examines the relationship between observed indicators and latent constructs (Brown, 2006; Kline, 2011). CFA is theoretically driven and is often used to study the psychometric properties of study instruments (Brown, 2006). The data were analyzed using MPlus 7 using the weighted least squares with missing values (WLSMV) estimator (Muthen & Muthen, 2010).

In general, SEM can be utilized to confirm an a priori model, test alternate models, or generate models (Joreskog, 1993). According to Kline (2011), use of SEM for model discovery has three requirements. The first is that it is theoretically logical; the second is that it is "reasonably parsimonious," (p. 8) and the third is that it statistically fits the data. Model generation is the most commonly used application for the use of this statistical method. In the case of the present study, the model generating form of SEM was employed by respecifying the model based initially upon the theoretical concepts identified in the literature.

Finally, we assessed the validated model for criterion validity. Criterion validity assesses the relationship of a studied measure to a known predictor (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). In the current study, we assessed this by examining the relationship of identified dimensions of the PCWS to workers' intention to leave their agencies, as prior research indicated that negative perceptions of child welfare were related to excessive turnover (Cyphers et al., 2005; McGowan et al., 2010).

Results

Demographic Description of the Sample

Not unlike the child welfare workforce, in general, the sample was predominantly female ($n = 453$, 85.80%), and the average age of workers was nearly 37 years (mean $= 36.78$, $SD = 11.58$ years). The largest group of workers, almost a third of those sampled, identified as Latino/Latina ($n = 168$; 32.88%) while the next largest group was African American ($n = 134$; 26.22%). Nearly half of the sample ($n = 231$; 47.05%) earned between \$35,000 and \$45,000 per year, and the next largest

Table 1. Demographic Description of Sample.

	n	%	Mean	SD
Gender				
Female	453	85.80		
Male	75	14.20		
Race/ethnicity				
African American	134	26.22		
African	10	1.96		
Caribbean	64	12.52		
Hispanic/Latino/Latina	168	32.88		
White	92	18.00		
Asian	25	4.89		
Native American	6	1.17		
Other	12	2.35		
Highest level of education				
Nonprofessional	248	46.10		
BSW/MSW	222	41.26		
Graduate degree (non-social work)	68	12.64		
Social work license				
No license	433	81.70		
License	97	18.30		
Current salary				
$25,000 or less	11	2.24		
$25,001–$30,000	24	4.89		
$30,001–$35,000	107	21.79		
$35,001–$45,000	231	47.05		
$45,001–$50,000	62	12.63		
More than $50,000	45	11.41		
Age			36.78	11.58
Years employed at agency			4.63	5.33
Years in current position			3.56	5.02

Note. BSW = bachelor of social work; MSW = master of social work.

group (*n* = 107; 21.79%) earned between $30,000 and $35,000 annually.

In terms of professional training and licensure, two of the five workers (*n* = 222; 41.26%) had either a bachelor of social work (BSW) or master of social work (MSW); however, slightly more (*n* = 248; 46.10%) had a nonprofessional undergraduate degree or less. Only 97 survey participants possessed a professional social work license (18.30%).

With regard to job tenure, the mean amount of time participants were employed at their agencies was 4.63 years (*SD* = 5.33 years) while workers averaged 3.56 years (*SD* = 5.02 years) in their current positions. A more complete description of the sample is displayed in Table 1.

CFA

The best fitting model comprised three factors consisting of 14 observed variables and is illustrated in Figure 1.

The first factor, *stigma*, was made up of four observed variables. Factor loadings for this subscale ranged from a low of 0.69 ("I feel uncomfortable admitting to others that I am a child welfare worker.") to a high of 0.80 ("People look down on my work because of the types of clients I serve and the needs they have."). All relationships were significant at the $p = .00$ level.

Coefficient α for these 4 items was .82. Because negative items were originally reverse-scored, higher values for the stigma factor actually indicate lower levels of stigma.

The second factor, which we called *value*, consisted of 6 items. Factor loadings for this construct ranged from 0.62 ("Most people wonder how I can do this kind of work") to 0.82 ("Most people blame the child welfare worker when something goes wrong with a case."). All relationships were significant at the $p = .00$ level. Coefficient α for these 6 items was .76.

The final factor, *respect*, consisted of 4 items with factor loadings ranging from a low of 0.74 ("People make me feel proud about the work I do.") to a high of 0.88 ("Most people respect you for your choice to work in child welfare.). Like the other factors, all relationships were significant at the $p = .00$ level, and coefficient α for these 4 items was .83.

Fit statistics for this model suggested that the data fit the model well. While χ^2 was significant, this was not surprising given the large sample size. The root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), a measure of badness of fit, was 0.09 with a 90% confidence interval ranging between 0.08 and 0.09, which is considered an acceptable range (Kline, 2011; Tabachnik & Fidell, 2007).

The Comparative Fit Index (CFI) was used to assess the model's goodness of fit. CFI values greater than or equal to 0.95 are considered to be indicative of a good fitting model (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The CFI for this model was 0.96.

The Tucker–Lewis Index (TLI) was also used to assess the model's goodness of fit. This index is often used in combination with RMSEA and CFI to confirm the goodness of fit of SEM models in social work research (Bowen & Guo, 2012). Similar to the CFI, values greater than or equal to 0.95 are considered to be indicative of a good fit (Hu & Bentler, 1999). The TLI for this model was 0.95.

The correlation between the latent constructs *stigma* and *value* was .14. The correlation between *stigma* and *respect* was .57, and the correlation between *value* and *respect* was .20. Items included in the validated scale can be found in Table 2.

Criterion Validity

To assess for criterion validity, we conducted four logistic regressions, one for each of the identified dimensions and one for the overall validated scale. To create each of the subscales, a mean for the items in each dimension was created for each respondent. Then, we created a total score by taking the mean of all 14 items in the three validated subscales. Therefore, total scores on each subscale and the total instrument could range from 1 to 4. To measure intent to leave, respondents were asked a single question, "Have you thought about leaving your agency in the past year?" Those responding *no* were coded as 1, and responses of *yes* were coded as 0. The results for these are displayed in Table 3.

For the *stigma* dimension, the odds of intending to remain employed increased by 24% for each unit increase in the stigma subscale; however, these findings were not statistically
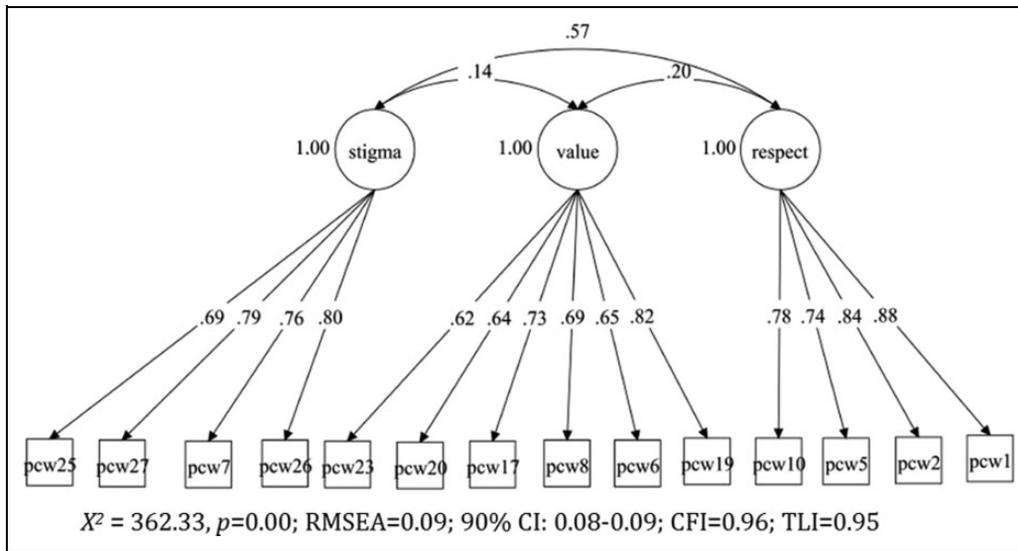
$X^2 = 362.33$, $p=0.00$; RMSEA=0.09; 90% CI: 0.08-0.09; CFI=0.96; TLI=0.95

Figure 1. Final confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) model.

Table 2. Items Included in Validated PCWS Instrument.

Latent Construct	Item #	Item	Factor Loading
Stigma	PCW25	I feel uncomfortable admitting to others that I am a child welfare worker	0.69
	PCW27	Most of my friends and family act like they don't want to know anything about my work	0.79
	PCW7	When people find out I am a child welfare worker, they seem to look down on me	0.76
	PCW26	People look down on my work because of the types of clients I serve and the needs they have	0.80
Value	PCW23	Most people wonder how I can do this kind of work	0.62
	PCW20	Most people think that child welfare workers do too little to help the children and the families who are their clients	0.64
	PCW17	Government officials only pay attention to our work when there is a serious incident	0.73
	PCW8	The government should take more responsibility for improving child welfare services	0.69
	PCW6	People just don't understand what you have to go through to work in child welfare	0.65
	PCW19	Most people blame the child welfare worker when something goes wrong with a case	0.82
Respect	PCW10	The work I do is valued by others	0.78
	PCW5	People make me feel proud about the work I do	0.74
	PCW2	People feel that child welfare work is important	0.84
	PCW1	Most people respect you for your choice to work in child welfare	0.88

Note. PCW = perceptions of child welfare; PCWS = Perceptions of Child Welfare Scale.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results for Four Separate Factors: Stigma, Value, Respect, and Total Perceptions of Child Welfare.

Covariates (Outcome Variable: Intention to Remain Employed—1 = *intention to stay*; 0 = *intention to leave*)	95% CI	SE	z	P	Odds Ratio (OR)
Model 1: Stigma	[0.94, 1.60]	0.17	1.57	.12	1.24
Model 2: Value	[1.30, 2.20]	0.24	3.55	0	1.67
Model 3: Respect	[1.37, 2.62]	0.31	3.90	0	1.90
Model 4: Total perceptions of child welfare	[2.29, 6.55]	1.03	5.05	0	3.88

Note. CI = confidence interval; SE = standard error.

significant (Odds Ratio [OR] = 1.24; p = .12). For the *value* dimension, the odds of intending to remain employed increased by 66% for each unit increase on the value subscale, and these findings were statistically significant (OR = 1.66; p = .00). With regard to the *respect* dimension, a one-unit increase in respect was associated with a 90% increase in intention to remain employed (OR = 1.90, p = .00). Finally, when considering the entire 14-item instrument, a one-unit increase in total perceptions of child welfare was associated with a 3-fold increase in intention to stay (OR = 3.88; p = .00).

Discussion

The current research adds to the empirical knowledge base by providing a parsimonious way to assess how child welfare workers' believe they are perceived by those outside the child welfare system. High factor loadings and small standard errors, ranging from .021 to .037, for observed exogenous variables for the latent factors are indicative of convergent validity. Additionally, low correlations between each of the factors suggest
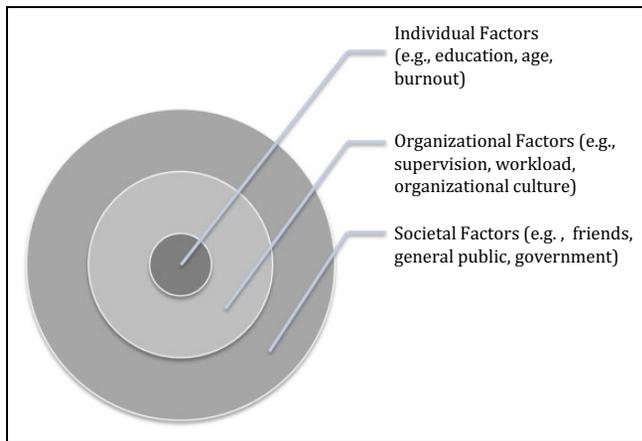
Figure 2. Understanding retention and turnover in child welfare.

that each of these is independent of the other, which is indicative of discriminant validity for each of the subscales. These ranged from a low of 0.14 to describe the relationship between stigma and value to a high of 0.57 to describe the relationship between stigma and respect. Correlations between latent factors of .85 or less are indicative of good discriminant validity (Auerbach & Beckerman, 2011). Additionally, we were able to develop a more parsimonious measure by reducing the validated scale from the original 29 items to 14. A ready-to-use copy of the complete validated scale is included in the Appendix.

The indicators associated with the latent factor, *stigma*, were related to the degree to which workers feel that their work is looked down upon by family, friends and the general public. Indicators associated with *value* were related to how appreciated workers feel by both the general public and the government, while the indicators of the latent factor, *respect*, were related to how respected workers feel by the general public.

The results of the logistic regression for each of the four subscales, *stigma*, *value*, and *respect* along with the total perceptions of child welfare, further support the findings of the CFA and prior research, which also indicated that negative public perceptions of child welfare were related to workers' intention to turnover. Additionally, the logistic regression lends support to the criterion validity of this instrument.

As discussed in the literature review, the media is a powerful mechanism by which the public acquires information about child welfare practices. High-profile cases lead the public to form negative perceptions of child welfare. Public outrage over sensational cases influence agency policies and procedures, organizational culture, and individual casework practice (Chenot, 2011; Chibnall et al., 2003; Ellett et al., 2007; Gainsborough, 2009; Regehr et al., 2002; Westbrook et al., 2006). It is not surprising that these societal factors are associated with recruitment, hiring, and retention issues (Cyphers et al., 2005). With regard to the turnover literature, prior study has identified both individual and organizational factors related

to turnover; however, the way in which workers' believe their work is viewed by others suggests an even more complex prototype for understanding workforce issues (Auerbach, McGowan, Augsberger, Strolin-Goltzman, & Schudrich, 2010; McGowan et al., 2010), as displayed in Figure 2.

The validation of an instrument capable of measuring how workers perceive these societal factors will enable researchers to consider multiple indicators of workforce recruitment, retention, and turnover. Previous studies on these topics have not systematically included societal factors; thus, this validated instrument makes a significant contribution to the empirical literature. That is, understanding how workers' understand the public's perceptions about their work provide an opening into mitigating negative aspects. For example, if it is assessed that workers' feel like their work is not valued by the external environment, agency administrators could try to work with the media and government to actively improve negative misperceptions about the importance of child welfare work in the community.

A limitation to this study is related to the workers participating in this study. In our research, the sample only included child welfare workers employed in voluntary agencies. There is no way to tell if the findings from this study would be applicable to workers employed in public agencies, as at least one previous study indicated different characteristics between public and voluntary workers (Auerbach et al., 2010). Therefore, it would be helpful to replicate this research with a sample of public child welfare workers. Additionally, it would be useful to examine the three factors—stigma, respect, and value—on a broader level to better understand their impact on workforce issues. Because of the length of time needed and complexity to establish other types of validity (i.e., construct and concurrent validity), these could not be established in the current study. Still, the PCW demonstrated strong discriminant validity and internal validity in the current study, and the scale displayed strong criterion validity when using intention to leave as the outcome measure. Further assessment of the psychometric properties of the instrument is warranted.

Previous studies have focused mainly on individual and organizational factors influencing turnover. The development and validation of the PCWS provides researchers a useful measure of workers' understanding of public perceptions of their work. It offers insight into the influence of various societal factors including stigma, value, and respect. Through better understanding the impact of public perceptions on workforce retention and turnover, child welfare leaders will be better equipped to design evidence informed interventions focused on recruiting and maintaining a stable child welfare workforce.

Appendix

Perceptions of Child Welfare

The purpose of this survey is to gain your perception of the general public's view of child welfare workers.

Below is a list of statements about how various individuals and groups perceive child welfare. For each statement, please indicate if you *strongly disagree* (SD); *disagree* (D); *agree* (A); *strongly agree* (SA).

	SD	D	A	SA
1. Most people respect you for your choice to work in child welfare	☐	☐	☐	☐
2. People feel that child welfare work is important	☐	☐	☐	☐
3. People make me feel proud about the work I do	☐	☐	☐	☐
4. People just don't understand what you have to go through to work in child welfare	☐	☐	☐	☐
5. When people find out I am a child welfare worker, they seem to look down on me	☐	☐	☐	☐
6. The government should take more responsibility for improving child welfare services	☐	☐	☐	☐
7. The work I do is valued by others	☐	☐	☐	☐
8. Government officials only pay attention to our work when there is a serious incident	☐	☐	☐	☐
9. Most people blame the child welfare worker when something goes wrong with a case	☐	☐	☐	☐
10. Most people think that child welfare workers do too little to help the children and the families who are their clients	☐	☐	☐	☐
11. Most people wonder how I can do this kind of work	☐	☐	☐	☐
12. I feel uncomfortable admitting to others that I am a child welfare worker	☐	☐	☐	☐
13. People look down on my work because of the types of clients I serve and the needs they have	☐	☐	☐	☐
14. Most of my friends and family act like they don't want to know anything about my work	☐	☐	☐	☐

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