

# THE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS: Uncovering Pathways to Improving Public Systems & Interventions for Children and Families

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Multiple factors have been proposed as causes of racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare. Some theories point to **individual** risk factors—unemployment, teen parenthood and drug abuse—that are associated with increased rates of child maltreatment. Others highlight **community** risk factors and assert that overrepresentation has less to do with race or class, and more to do with high levels of neighborhood poverty, crime and violence, homelessness and other community factors that make residents more likely to be monitored by public systems.<sup>1</sup> Although multiple individual and community factors are at play, the disproportionality and disparities are also **systemic**, in part produced by how child welfare agencies function to meet the unique needs of families. Efforts to reduce these disparate outcomes are hindered by a lack of a clear analysis of the structural contributors.

The Center for the Study of Social Policy (CSSP) has worked with local agencies to use an approach that is guided by quantitative data and uses qualitative methods to uncover the institutional features that contribute to poor outcomes for particular populations, with a focus to date on African American and Latino families.<sup>2</sup> The goal of this approach, known as an Institutional Analysis (IA), is to identify organizational structures such as policies, administrative requirements and job descriptions that may contribute to

or produce the poor outcomes.<sup>3</sup> The IA also seeks to understand how families experience system interventions in the context of their lives and communities. Additionally, the framework assumes that patterns of structural and institutional racism exist in the United States society at large and that these patterns are also present in child welfare practice. The patterns are often subtle and so embedded in daily practice that they are not easily visible to the observer.<sup>4</sup> The results of the IA provide jurisdictions

with the practical information they need to develop local strategies to end disparate outcomes for children and families of color.

### THE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK

Conceptualized and originally implemented by Dr. Ellen Pence, the Institutional Analysis is grounded in a branch of sociology known as institutional ethnography. Institutional ethnography produces accounts of institutional practices that explain how workers are organized and

<sup>1</sup> Hill, R. (2006). *Synthesis of the Research on Disproportionality in Child Welfare: An Update* Casey-CSSP Alliance for Racial Equity in the Child Welfare System. Others have found that racial disparity is lower in communities with larger proportion of African American residents, higher rates of poverty, female-headed households and lower levels of educational attainment of parents. See Wulczyn, Fred and Lery, Bridgette (2007). *Racial Disparities in Foster Care Admissions*. Chapin Hall Center for Children and the University of Chicago.

<sup>2</sup> To date, the IA has been used to analyze child welfare systems in Wayne and Saginaw counties (Michigan); Fresno and Los Angeles Counties (California); Monroe County (New York); and Linn County (Iowa); and the juvenile justice system in Fairfax County (Virginia).

<sup>3</sup> This approach was created by CSSP in partnership with Ellen Pence from Praxis International.

<sup>4</sup> This framework can be, and has been, applied to other racial/ethnic groups and other populations, such as victims of domestic violence. The selection of the population depends on the quantitative data and desired outcomes of the jurisdiction.

coordinated to think about, talk about and act on cases. In child welfare, “cases” are unique families and children and youth. The ethnographic methods used in an IA uncover the experience of individuals as they encounter institutions and provide an understanding of how the organization of institutions and the way they process people as “cases” results in problematic outcomes.

When a child welfare system is functioning well, the expected outcomes are that children will be kept safely with their families whenever possible, children will be safe and nurtured while in foster care and families will be reunified or children will be connected to another permanent family and child welfare’s involvement will end. When these outcomes are not being achieved, or there is a disparate pattern of achievement, it is important to examine whether there is a problem with the system.

This methodology requires that considerable time is spent gathering the experiences of children and families who interact with public systems and understanding those experiences in the context of their communities. The data indicate a problem exists—poor outcomes for specific populations—but the “lived experience” of families provides insight into how the system is or is not working for them and how they experience the poor outcomes identified through data analysis.

The body of work supporting the Institutional Analysis suggests there are at least eight core standardizing methods<sup>5</sup> that institutions like child welfare systems use to organize how workers get to know families, work with them and have the capacity to act in a way that supports safety, reunification or alternative permanency and nurturance.<sup>6</sup> Any one or combination of these methods can interfere with achieving the desired outcomes for all populations. The emphases on the lived experience of families and viewing the system through these standardizing methods are what makes the IA methodology unique.

The methods, with examples from our work, are as follows:

- **Policies** in the form of laws, rules, regulations and policy manuals. For example, we examine how laws and regulations regarding the Adoption and Safe Families Act affect the timely and safe placement of children with kin.
- **Administrative procedures and protocols**, such as forms, screening tools, report-writing formats, matrices and assessments tools. We have examined the impact of protocols that allow workers to transfer offices after their first year of employment affects engagement of families with the agency. We look at the allocation (or absence) of **resources**, such as prevention and diversion programs, visits from workers, mental health and substance abuse treatment, and staff time (caseloads). For example, we examine how high caseloads of parents’ attorneys affect the timeliness of services and reunification.
- **Systems of accountability** to clients, to other practitioners, other intervening agencies, to the intent of policies and directives and to the goals of intervention. Examples include supervisory case plan approval, integrity of case documents, family involvement in case planning, court review of placements, the use of lawsuits and grievance procedures. We have found that without adequate accountability, some contracted service providers fail to adequately work with parents and children in their communities or provide culturally appropriate interventions.
- **Job descriptions, agency missions** and specifically **assigned tasks** at various points of intervention inform a worker of his or her role and duties and set boundaries for what a worker is and is not expected to do on a case. We have observed workers introducing themselves to parents as the child’s worker and explaining their role as reporting on the parent’s compliance with the case plan to the court. This limited role impacted the parent’s willingness to seek help from the worker.
- **Education, training, and skill development** in the form of training for workers and supervisors; educational requirements; exposure to professional discourses; mentoring opportunities; and participation in local, state and national forums. For example, we have found workers and foster parents with insufficient knowledge and skills to address the trauma and mental health needs of the children and youth they serve.
- Organized **linkages** that connect a worker operating at a given point of intervention to other practitioners with prior or subsequent involvement in the case. For example, an investigator’s actions are in part determined by information received by the hotline worker and in part determined by the information required by the county attorney, judge and subsequent case worker. Inadequate information sharing can result in the needs of families being overlooked, misunderstood and unaddressed.

<sup>5</sup> Pence, E. & Sandusky, J. (2005). The Praxis Safety and Accountability Audit Tool Kit, Praxis International, Inc.

<sup>6</sup> This includes the overall systems capacity to act, as well as how workers are afforded the proper resources and authority to act.

<sup>7</sup> Institutional Ethnography (IE) is an approach to empirical inquiry associated with the prominent Canadian social theorist Dorothy E. Smith. Combining theory and method, IE emphasizes connections among the sites and situations of everyday life, professional practice and policy-making. Retrieved from: [http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/mdevault/Information\\_about\\_IE.htm](http://faculty.maxwell.syr.edu/mdevault/Information_about_IE.htm)

- **Concepts and theories** that are embedded in the discourse of the field as well as in policy and administrative regimes. Policies and administrative practices are connected to broader assumptions, theories, values and concepts regardless of the individual values of the practitioner who will carry them out. We have found a dominant concept to be that a child welfare worker primarily supports the parent or caregiver who has the child in their home rather than supporting the entire family constellation who interact with the child.
- Other methods may be particular to a specific location and will be discovered by the IA investigation team. For example, in jurisdictions where a particularly egregious or fatal event

involving a child occurs, the political atmosphere may pressure judges or administrators to move toward removal of children and placement in foster care in cases where children might otherwise be able to remain safely at home with an adequate safety plan or support services in place.

### DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Data collection activities and analyses employ techniques traditionally used in case studies, organizational assessments and managerial audits combined with the concepts and assumptions of institutional ethnography.<sup>7</sup> This focus is not intended to uncover all the sources of racial disparity but strives to explain a significant piece of a bigger puzzle and, more importantly, the piece local agencies have the most power to change.

## THE INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS AND OTHER EXISTING ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORKS AND NEUROSCIENCE FINDINGS



The IA approach is aligned with analytical frameworks that focus on the role of institutions and complex systems to the achievement of desired outcomes. Two such frameworks are provided by implementation science and complex system theory. In addition, neuroscience has greatly expanded the ability to understand and test human psychological functioning producing a growing body of knowledge that is also applicable to institutional functioning. One example is the work being done to identify and respond to “implicit bias” – the attitudes that affect our “understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner.”<sup>8</sup>

#### • Implementation Science (National Implementation Research Network)

Implementation science has documented the selection, training, coaching and performance evaluation of staff as critical components to successful implementation of innovation. However, just as the IA suggests it is the institution and its standardizing methods that organize how the selected workforce functions and thus contribute to the outcomes experienced, implementation science theory reminds us that the workforce does not exist in a vacuum. Staff are directed and supported by the organization – the administrative structure and processes – in which they are located. The standardizing methods the IA investigates represent administrative structure and processes. A facilitative administration, identified by implementation science as another core component, supports rather than hinders the workforce as it exercises its knowledge and skills and holds everyone accountable with a focus on results and data-driven decision making. A facilitative administration also intervenes in external systems to assure ongoing resources and support for effective implementation.

#### • Complex System Theory (InSites)

Beverly Parsons and her colleagues at the Colorado-based nonprofit InSites use the image of an iceberg to illustrate there are observable behaviors, activities and results of interventions as well as the “hidden” norms, infrastructures and policies that more significantly define social systems. Similarly, the IA strives to make the “invisible visible” by identifying the underlying concepts and assumptions driving decision making and the unintended consequences of organizational components and policies.

#### • Neuroscience and the Documentation of Implicit Bias

The IA specifically considers how concepts and theories influence how we frame policies and procedures and make decisions about clients. Concepts and theories are often invisible but emerge as we look closely at the stereotyping language used by the workforce and in the policies that guide their work while workers and leadership alike maintain they are “color blind”, neutral or objective. However, the science of implicit bias acknowledges that these biases “are activated involuntarily.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore staff are more susceptible to the effects of implicit bias under conditions that are often found in institutions: ambiguous or incomplete information, time constraints and high cognitive load.

<sup>8</sup> Staats, Cheryl (2014). State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review 2014, Kirwan Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## KEY ELEMENTS OF AN INSTITUTIONAL ANALYSIS

### PHASE ONE

*Historical data trends direct the focus of inquiry.*

The inquiry is generally prompted by a jurisdictional/organizational/agency concern with the outcome pattern revealed in the available data, and this leads to a deeper analysis of longitudinal quantitative outcome data of, for example, rates of entry into foster care, rates of reunification, foster care length of stay and timeliness to adoption or guardianship. The analysis disaggregates the data by race and ethnicity over as many time periods as are available, allowing for cohort comparison. Based on this data, the focus of inquiry is framed. Jurisdictions are encouraged to involve community partners in the data analysis and shaping the focus of inquiry. Such partnership helps promote community buy-in to the process and the community's ability to hold the agency accountable for changes moving forward.

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### PHASE TWO

*Data collection to understand work practices and the concepts and theories that drive practice.*

The second phase of the work involves examining how each worker at each point of intervention is institutionally organized to act on a case. The examination is designed to build an understanding of the communication patterns, assumptions, theories and concepts built into or underlying how workers are organized to know the families and children and to act on their knowledge. Qualitative data collection and analysis includes the following activities:

- 1** A **case processing map** is developed to serve as the basis for understanding how cases flow through the system. In any given system, there are numerous steps to processing a child protection case that include decision-making and routine practices. Each interchange on a case has potential to produce inequity and lead to disparity. The map is used to decide what types of work practice interviews to conduct and the interchanges that should be observed.
- 2** **Interviews** – Reviewers interview youth, parents and caregivers to understand their experiences of institutional interventions. Reviewers interview agency leadership, community providers and other key actors to uncover issues anticipated regarding funding streams, local political structure, court and agency structure, local data, missions and directives of the child protection agency and its partners. Additional individual and group interviews provide opportunities to understand case practices – learning how practitioners put information together and how they coordinate with others. These interviews collect information on how cases flow through the child welfare system, what laws and policies guide cases and what resources are available in the community.
- 3** **Observations** provide the opportunity to see practitioners of different experience and skill levels performing the tasks, duties and responsibilities discussed in the interviews. We observe practitioner-client interaction with the permission of the clients. Multiple observations are desired to see the application of institutional work coordination on actual cases in real time under conditions typical of an agency intervention. Observations deepen the information gained from interviews by identifying when and why practitioners may deviate from stated work practices and provide a better understanding of the work conditions, time pressures, interactions among interveners (i.e., judges, family members, workers, attorneys, etc.) and availability of resources to get the job done.
- 4** **Two sequenced forms of case reviews** – First, an intensive case-based analysis involving both case documentation review and interviewing all relevant actors in a case is completed. This review is conducted by a subset of the Analysis Team that is specifically trained in the Quality Service Review case-based review process<sup>10</sup>. This review generally occurs several weeks before the full on-site data collection effort. Data from the case-based analysis provides a preview of problematic features to be explored further in the on-site interviews and observations. This is followed by a review of case documentation assigned to all team members during the on-site effort. Case selection is completed in conjunction with the institution under study and based on criteria specific to the focus of inquiry. In addition to racial and ethnic identification, criteria may include length of time in foster care, age, gender and placement setting.
- 5** **Text analysis** is conducted on policies, forms, training materials, case notes and other written materials to gain insight on the expectations of workers and the type of information sought by the system to inform its actions.

## PHASE THREE

### *Drawing conclusions and producing findings*

The data collection and analysis phases are as much concurrent as they are sequential. Each new piece of information is considered in light of previous information starting with the original quantitative data that drove the focus of the inquiry. There is a constant, iterative process of explanation building and creating a “chain of evidence” to support conclusions. All findings must be supported by multiple sources to be considered valid. The data presented in a final analysis are common occurrences, not rare events.

## LIMITATIONS

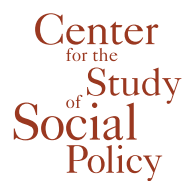
Led by the data and the concern of local leadership who engage with the team to conduct an IA, the focus to date has been specifically on the experience of African American and Latino families. In any given location, the findings from an IA are based on the experience of a limited number of children and families. As a result, this work should be considered a beginning point, not an exhaustive investigation or statistically generalizable. The method is not intended to identify the causes of disparity but to point out what in the institution itself could be contributing to it. This is uncharted territory for the child welfare field. Little attention has been devoted to unpacking the interaction between organizational dynamics and family experience. Each application of the approach identifies new learning and opportunities for refinement to strengthen the next application.

*The remaining papers in this series describe in more detail findings from the IAs conducted to date and provide policy and practice recommendations. Visit [www.cssp.org](http://www.cssp.org) to download them.*

<sup>10</sup> The Quality Service Review process used in an Institutional Analysis is based on the work and with the permission of Dr. Ivor Groves and Dr. Ray Foster of Human Systems and Outcomes, Inc. It is a means of providing in-depth case-based reviews of frontline practice in specific locations and points in time. For a more in depth description see, <http://www.cssp.org/publications/child-welfare/child-welfare-misc/Counting-is-Not-Enough-Investing-in-Qualitative-Case-Reviews-for-Practice-Improvement-in-Child-Welfare.pdf>

## ABOUT CSSP

The Center for the Study of Social Policy is a national organization recognized for its leadership in shaping policy, reforming public systems and building the capacity of communities. We support elected officials, public administrators, families and neighborhood residents to take the actions they need. Our goal is to make sure children can learn, develop and thrive with the support of strong families, in safe and healthy communities.



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