

# **CHALLENGING THE 'NEW ACCOUNTABILITY'?**

## **SERVICE USERS' PERSPECTIVES ON PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT IN FAMILY SUPPORT**

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Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

Political Economy, Faculty of Economics and Business

The University of Sydney

March 2006

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# Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor any material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

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# Acknowledgments

Like most things, this thesis would not have been possible without the co-operation and support of others. I am fortunate to have carried out the research as part of the ‘Currencies of Care’ collaboration linking researchers at The University of Sydney and the non-government child welfare agency, UnitingCare Burnside. I am grateful for the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (no. LP0229120) that made it possible to undertake a PhD with Burnside as Industry Partner, and for Burnside’s impressive commitment to social justice, ethical research, and quality in child and family services.

I have benefited enormously from the guidance and co-operation of many members of the Burnside ‘family’. My heartfelt thanks go to the parents and family support workers who participated in the interviews and focus groups. Special thanks go also to Christine Gibson, Manager of Research and Quality Assurance, for her encouragement and advice throughout the project, and to Robert Urquhart and Claerwen Little who worked to establish the project in its early stages. Other Burnside staff helped with various aspects of the research, including Helen Townsend, Anne Hirst, Linda Mondy, Chris Sinclair, and Louise Smeaton. Burnside’s current and former Chief Executive Officers, Jane Woodruff and Rhonda Stien, generously supported the research, and numerous other Burnside staff members and volunteers helped with the field work logistics.

At the University of Sydney, I have been privileged to have expert supervision from Dr Gabrielle Meagher, senior lecturer in Political Economy. Gabrielle’s clarity, consistency and encouragement have greatly enriched the research experience. My associate supervisor, Karen Healy, Associate Professor at the University of Queensland, also gave critical advice and encouragement, and along with Gabrielle, identified the need for performance measurement research and established the collaboration with Burnside.

Other PhD students in Political Economy at the University of Sydney have also been a source of advice and support over the last few years– in particular Joy Paton, Dr Ben Spies-Butcher and Dr Christina Ho. As I have been writing up the thesis, I have also benefited from discussions with and encouragement from colleagues at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Azadeh Fadaghi provided impressive Farsi interpretation and translation, and Dr Denise Thompson proofread the document in its final stages. Of course, any errors or omissions are my own.

Last but not least, Gina Dog and Daniel Person kept me walked and fed, snuggled and smiling over the years this research and writing has consumed.

# Abstract

After two decades of public management reform, the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement is a *routine* feature in the relationships between Australian government agencies and the non-profit organisations they fund to provide child and family services. While performance measurement offers to resolve tensions about how governments manage the quality and productivity of contracted services, the indicators they commonly adopt raise well-documented practical, political and epistemological challenges in social services. Left unresolved, these challenges risk biasing representations of service performance, by emphasising the most tangible dimensions of service activities (such as measures of client throughput) over relationship building and care. Capturing only part of service activity compromises the usefulness of performance data for managing quality and outcomes, and denies policy makers critical information about the value and meaning of care in users’ lives.

This thesis identifies and critically explores one set of challenges for performance measurement: the role of service users. Uniquely, I explore how user involvement in social service evaluation can make visible how these services enhance the quality of family and personal life. Using a case study of family support services in New South Wales, the research makes a series of empirical and theoretical contributions to problems of user involvement in social service evaluation.

Firstly, the research examines the performance indicators currently used by government to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of family support services in NSW. This shows that performance indicators in family support capture output more thoroughly than outcome, and confirms the minimal role that service users play in assessing service quality and outcomes. But while service users are largely excluded from participation in performance measurement, theoretical perspectives as diverse as managerialism and feminism treat service users as *well placed* to capture and report otherwise elusive information about care quality and outcomes. Further, participation in evaluation facilitates the exercise of users’ rights to self-expression and self-determination in the social service delivery and policy process.

After identifying the widespread exclusion of service users' perspectives from performance measurement in NSW family support, the thesis makes its more substantial contribution, in documenting findings from a detailed study involving adult family support service users (parents) and their workers (the 'Burnside Study'). This qualitative study was conducted in four socio-economically disadvantaged service delivery sites located around New South Wales. Using focus group, interview and observational methods and a modified grounded theory approach, the study contributes exploratory evidence of what these service users think of, and how they think about service quality, outcomes, and evaluation in family support.

The parents' accounts of using family support capture their unfulfilled social ideals and the broader visions of the justice they hoped these social services would help them achieve. Their criteria for measuring service outcomes and service quality, and their views on evaluation methods embody core themes that social theorists have struggled to analyse, about the purpose of social services and the nature of 'a good life'. The theoretical framework I develop highlights the role of family support in the context of service users' struggles for social justice, and in particular, their struggles for self-realisation, recognition and respect (Honneth, 1995). The research extends theories of recognition beyond publicly articulated social movements to those struggles in social life and social politics that exist in what Axel Honneth terms the 'shadows' of the political-public sphere (2003a: 122).

After establishing a conceptual framework that facilitates deeper interpretation of users' perspectives, I present the findings in three categories: users' perspectives on service outcomes; users' perspectives on service quality; and users' perspectives on evaluation methods.

The findings show how service users define 'service outcomes' in the context of their struggles for recognition and respect, highlighting the contribution welfare services and welfare professionals make beyond the managerial 'Three E's' of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Further, the findings confirm the importance of 'helping relationships' to the quality of service delivery in family support, despite the invisibility of service relationships in

existing performance indicators. The complexity of worker-client bonds highlights the difficulty of evaluating social services using simple numerical counts of client or service episodes, and plays into broader debates about strategies for revaluing care work, and the role of care recipients.

Finally, the findings show the role performance measurement processes and methods might play in facilitating users' struggles for recognition. Users identified a role for evaluation in making visible the contribution of family support in pursuing their social justice goals, and saw evaluation as an opportunity *in itself* to facilitate recognition and respect.

Overall, the thesis offers concrete evidence about how family support service users experience and define service quality and outcomes, and how they see their own role in evaluating the services they use. The research shows how users' perspectives both contest and confirm the 'new accountability' of performance measurement, pointing to new directions, and further challenges, for conceptualising– and evaluating– social services.

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# Acronyms & Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Burnside	UnitingCare Burnside
CCQG	Council on the Cost and Quality of Government (NSW)
CSGP	Community Services Grants Program
DoCS	Department of Community Services (NSW)
IFSS	Intensive Family Support Services
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
NSW	New South Wales (Australia)
SEA Reports	Service Efforts and Accomplishments Reports