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SOCIAL WORKERS PERSPECTIVE ON BARRIERS TO FAMILY REUNIFICATION

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SOCIAL WORKERS PERSPECTIVE ON BARRIERS TO FAMILY

REUNIFICATION

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

———————————————

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

———————————————

by

Laura Velasquez

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this study is social worker's potential perspective on barriers to family reunification in a child welfare services agency located in Central California. A constructivist research paradigm was applied to this study as it permitted the researchers to use a subjective methodology for collecting qualitative data. The study gathered data using interviews with child welfare social workers to construct a joint understanding of social workers perspective on barriers they face when reunifying child welfare families. Child welfare social workers identified numerous barriers to effective social work both in practice and in policy. The barriers found were a lack of partnerships with outside agencies, funding, conflicting policies between the state and local level, high caseloads, and an overwhelming amount of social work job duties all of which affect family reunification according to the social workers' perspectives. Social workers shared several factors decreased a worker's effectiveness in serving families such as high caseloads and what practice and policy changes could address these issues. On a micro level, policy and practice changes should improve social work practice to decrease caseload size decrease, which may help families reunify.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

ASSESSMENT

Introduction

In chapter one, the researchers introduce the research focus of the study. It covers the research paradigm and leads into the literature review. This chapter also discusses the theoretical orientation associated with the research focus and concludes by examining potential contributions to social work practice on a macro and micro level.

Research Statement

This research aimed to study the social worker's potential influence on family reunification in a child welfare agency located in central California. In child welfare, when children are removed from their home and placed in temporary out-of-home placement, the primary goal is family reunification. In working closely with families attempting to reunify, the role of county social workers is to help achieve this goal; nevertheless, there are unsuccessful reunification cases in this county. Between October 2018 and September 2019, out of all the foster children in care at this child welfare agency, only 48% reunified with their parents (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2020). This indicated that slightly more than half of children removed from their homes did not reunify, suggesting that there are potential barriers to reunification involving both external and internal influences.

Clients that are unwilling to make behavioral changes, caseloads size, low wages, and or other external factors can overwhelm social workers, potentially impacting reunification. Internal factors can also overwhelm a social worker such as social workers' values and attitudes towards a specific culture or client, which can affect reunification, leading to stereotyping, misunderstanding, and communication barriers. This study aimed to examine if internal and external factors influenced a social worker's ability to serve clients and families of child welfare, and if this in turn affected family reunification rates. The researchers hope this study promotes change in the policies and practices of child welfare by providing insight regarding the internal and external factors that impact a social workers effectiveness in assisting families with child reunification. These potential factors included, but are not limited to, caseload sizes, wages, personal bias, the complexity of cases and outside stressors such as familial obligations. To achieve this aim, this study answered the following questions: What internal (e.g., social workers attitude towards culture, bias, stereotyping) and external factors (e.g., caseload amounts, low wages) influence a child welfare social worker's ability to serve clients and families of the agency? Do internal and external factors of a child welfare social worker affect family reunification rates in child welfare?

Paradigm and Rationale

A constructivist research paradigm was utilized in this study. In constructivism, reality is subjective and built by the researcher and participants of the study (Morris, 2013). Therefore, the researchers used a subjective methodology for collecting qualitative data. In this study, data was collected via interviews with social workers, who were referred to as "stakeholders". Through these interviews, social workers had the ability to voice what potential changes would increase efficiency and service delivery in the workplace. The stakeholders have experience in working with families involved in successful and unsuccessful family reunification cases. According to Morris (2013), in constructivism the assumption is that there is no separation between the researcher and those researched, which builds a mutual understanding as each has valid perspectives.

Data was gathered from a hermeneutic dialectic to construct a joint understanding of how social workers could be potential barriers in reunifying child welfare families. Therefore, constructivism was the most appropriate research paradigm for this research study as it provided stakeholders the opportunity to express data freely via interviews as opposed to pre-constructed surveys. Additionally, the constructivist paradigm allowed the researchers to contribute to the study as fellow social workers in a way that other paradigms would not.

Literature Review

 The literature review presented was used as a construction to support the research focus. It examined the prevalence, contributing factors, impacts and consequences, along with any potential interventions to address how social workers influence reunification among child welfare families. The study had two objectives: 1. Identify internal and external factors that influence a child welfare social workers ability to serve clients and families of the agency. 2. Understand if the identified internal and external factors affect family reunification rates in child welfare. The researchers hoped the study would promote change in the policies and practices of child welfare by providing insight regarding the factors that impact a social workers effectiveness in assisting families reunify.

Background

 Child welfare services consists of systems and services to ensure the safety and well-being of children and their families. A family can become involved with child welfare services when the agency receives a report on the family for possible child abuse or neglect (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). A report, known as a referral, to child welfare can be screened in or screened out (USDHHS, 2022). A screened-out referral does vary by state; however, it typically means it does not meet a child abuse or neglect concern or there is lack of evidence needed by child welfare to investigate. A screened in referral has meet criteria and receives an investigation from the agency. According to the most recent *Child Maltreatment* report, 3.9 million referrals for child abuse were

received by child welfare agencies in the United States in 2020. Out of the 3.9 million, 54% were screened in by the agencies across the 52 states meaning that they were investigated by a social worker (USDHHS, 2022).

      If a report on child abuse or neglect is found to be true, it is known as a substantiated report (Cole & Carson, 2010). Using the aforementioned data, approximately 17.6% of screened-in referrals were found to either be substantiated or indicated in 2020 (USDHHS, 2022). Upon determining if the child abuse or neglect is substantiated, a child welfare services social worker must determine if the child can safely remain in the family home or if the child is to be removed (Cole & Carson, 2010). If the child is removed from their care, the case becomes a family reunification case and the goal is to preserve the family unit by reunifying the family (Cole & Carson, 2010). Once a child welfare case is open the parents are required to make changes as part of a court-ordered plan to regain physical custody of their child within a specific timeframe (Cole & Carson, 2010). The timeframe can vary depending on the child's age and the circumstances of the case; judicially, the courts allow the parents a minimum of six months to reunify with their children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

      The AFCARS report found that there were 407, 493 children in foster care throughout the states, and 216, 876 had a case plan of family reunification plan indicating that 54% percent of the foster children were attempting to reunify with their families nationwide on September 30, 2020 (USDHHS, 2021).

Nevertheless, when reunification is not possible, or the family does not complete the reunification process, alternative plans of permanency are made (Cole & Carson, 2010). Often these plans involve children remaining in the care of child welfare in long term out of home placement (Cole & Carson, 2010). According to research findings by Leathers et al. (2019), children who remain in out of home placement were likely to experience behavioral issues and emotional hardships resulting from disruptions in relationships and their environment. Leathers et al. (2019) findings come after interviewing 139 foster parents who provided care to children who had a history of placement changes. Leathers et al. (2019) tracked the placement of the foster children for two years to identify and measure the child's behavior and hardships related to the placement change.

Contributing Factors

As noted above, a small percentage of children in the county presented reunified with their parents. Between October 2018 and September 2019, 48% of children who entered care in the central California child welfare agency reunified with their parent within one year (California Child Welfare Indicators Project, 2020). At the social worker level, most research suggested that social workers influence not only the quality of services provided but also the court recommendation of whether a child should return home or not. Current law demands that child welfare social workers provide reasonable efforts in facilitating reunification (Jedwab et al., 2018). Child welfare social workers generally provide these efforts in the form of services, resources, and support.

Through these services, a social worker can dictate if children should return to their parents or remain in foster care; therefore, it was necessary to examine a social worker's influence on reunification services and the child welfare process.

Another contributing factor at the social worker level was possible bias against the family. According to Harris & Becerra (2020), parents in reunification cases can face having to make a good impression on their social worker both in what is said and not said. Another study with African American mothers found that when a social worker receives a negative response from the mother, that negative behavior reflects how the social worker views the case and the mother and could have been a contributing factor to the outcome of their child welfare case (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). Another study found that a social worker's perception of a family and a family's culture could have been a contributing factor to the outcome of their child welfare case. For example, Dettlaff & Rycraft (2010) found that a social worker's attitude towards a specific culture can affect reunification, leading to stereotyping, misunderstanding, and communication barriers from a social worker that stems from their values. This negative perception stayed with the social worker throughout the case, which then was reflected in the child's safety risk assessment and ultimately the recommendation to the court. Dettlaff & Rycraft (2010) found through their research of a few social workers, the social workers assumed that the hostility displayed by the African American mother towards them, exemplified the hostility shown towards their

child. Dettlaff & Rycraft (2010) suggests that this assumption made it less likely for the social worker who assumed this, to recommend reunification.

A contributing factor at a systematic level found was that child welfare social workers often carry a high caseload, leading to limited time to focus on the families and provide quality service (Yamatani et al., 2009). Social workers reported that their practice suffered when they have an overwhelming workload (Yamatani et al., 2009). Yamatani et al. (2009) study interviewed a focus group with 60 child welfare social workers and found that they had managed 24 or more cases monthly, which was double the recommended size for these social workers. These focus group social workers reported failures of providing adequate service delivery and proper assessment of families based on the demands of their caseload size (Yamatani et al., 2009). This indicates that social workers have an unmanageable caseload on a national average, and it impacts the families they are working with (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). One study found that child welfare families are frustrated with child welfare when their social worker fails to meet their needs; however, the social workers report that their work expectations are unmanageable leaving little time to engage their families and deliver quality service (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016). On average, social workers in all jurisdictions in the United States were found to only spend 20 to 30 percent of their time directly with clients, 60 to 70 percent on other case related responsibilities such as paperwork and court report writing,

and the remaining time on mandated trainings (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016).

Many studies have suggested that social worker's performance is often a result of the child welfare system itself. In addition to high caseloads, county social workers are responsible for many tasks that can affect reunification including monitoring families, writing court reports, making contacts with families, children, and collaterals, and locating placement (Payne, 2014). The high demands of a social worker in child welfare are apparent and the researchers are hopeful this study can assist in initiating policy and practice changes to lessen these demands.

Further, such demands placed on a social worker causes burnout and compassion fatigue, which is common among county social workers (Payne, 2014). Burnout is an emotional, physical, and mental feeling caused by prolonged stress (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Compassion fatigue is exhaustion on a psychological and physical level that causes withdrawal and an indifferent feeling by those in the helping field (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). Yamatani et al. (2009) reports that when a social worker suffers from burnout, compassion fatigue, or both, their work performance and values are compromised. When child welfare fails to adequately address burnout and compassion fatigue due to workload demands, the results are often negative (Yamatani et al., 2009).

Impacts and Consequences of Social Workers
Potentially Inhibiting Reunification

       As noted above, several studies indicated that high demands on county

social workers often result in adverse outcomes, which impacted children and

families involved in child welfare (Yamatani et al., 2009). These high demands

came from external factors such as high caseloads, high social worker turnover

rates, and unreasonable work expectations, which can affect a child welfare

social worker's ability to meet the goal of ensuring the safety, permanency, and

wellbeing of children involved with the agency (Yamatani et al., 2009).

Internal factors include bias, burnout, attitude towards a specific culture or

client, stereotyping, misunderstandings, and communication barriers from social

workers that stem from their values (Dettlaff & Rycraft, 2010). Due to the

aforementioned factors, children remain in care longer and reunification is

prolonged. A child's prolonged out-of-home placement results in instability and

further disruption in their relationships and environment (Leathers et al., 2019).

Additionally, this continued disruption affects their social and emotional well-

being (Leathers et al., 2019). When social workers do not meet these needs, it

can lead to families not receiving the services that are needed to reunify with

their children. Payne (2014) suggests that the demands on a social worker can

cause a rippling effect into adverse outcomes; when a social worker makes a

mistake, this can impact children's safety through inadequate safety and risk

assessments, which causes liability issues for the agency. Although research has

identified factors that impact reunification, much of it focuses on large systemic

issues. Current literature available focuses on the child welfare services system and the families involved, but not on the social worker. Considering that there is minimal research on a county social worker's perspective on internal and external factors such as caseload amounts, or low wages, which can impact reunification and even less on the internal factors such as a social worker's attitude toward a specific culture, this study aimed to fill that gap by adding literature on social worker level barriers.

<u>Family Reunification as an Intervention</u>

In this central California child welfare agency, the current interventions are not sufficient to improve reunification rates. The current intervention model is a general case management practice that focuses on monitoring families and services. According to Fitzgerald & Berliner (2015) child welfare traditional service plans are driven more by local practice rather than evidence-based service planning. Nevertheless, there is change on the horizon in California known as the Continuum of Care Reform (CCR). CCR is an added preventative approach within the child welfare agency in central California. CCR focuses on new and existing reforms within child welfare programs (California Department of Social Services Issue Brief, 2022). Case planning is part of the CCR that focuses on supporting the child and family (California Department of Social Services Issue Brief, 2022). The guiding principles of CCR are based on providing trauma informed and culturally competent services to children in out of home care and to allow children a voice in case planning (California Department of Social Services

Issue Brief, 2022). This is done during Child and Family Team Meetings, where the child's specific needs are addressed and an action plan including the child, the foster parent, and family is made. CCR intends to maintain stability for the child in the form of a permanent family, with reunification being the ultimate goal (California Department of Social Services Issue Brief, 2022).

Conclusion

The literature supports and suggests that social workers greatly influence case outcomes. Although we know there are contributing factors that affect social worker performance such as high caseloads, personal bias, burnout, and compassion fatigue, there is limited literature on the adverse outcomes of these factors that could potentially inhibit families from reunifying. Current literature available focuses on the child welfare services system and the families involved, but not on the social worker. This study filled this gap and added literature on social worker level barriers. Through this study, child welfare services can attempt to address these barriers through further preventative measures to support the overall goal of reunification.

Theoretical Orientation

This study used the ecological systems theory to understand barriers to reunification at multiple system levels. The ecological system theory focuses on the functioning of individuals at multiple level environments and the transactions made in those environments, which affect the individual and others. It examines

the transactions between people in the micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono

systems (Zastrow et al., 2018). The microsystem level is at the individual level,

the mesosystem is at the familial level, the exosystem is at the societal level, and

chronosystem is the life events that have occurred across the individual's

lifespan (Zastrow et al., 2018). By examining the interactions that occur between

the individual and others at various levels and throughout one's lifespan, the

researchers can further understand an individual's behaviors as a result of these

interactions. Additionally, the ecological perspective is based on the notion that

for one to thrive, one must have effective interactions within that environment

(Zastrow et al., 2018).

It appears the ecological perspective best encompasses how

interpersonal transactions with one's environment can influence the actions and

behaviors of individuals and others. These transactions can occur at various

levels, such as the familial, communal, and societal levels. Therefore, use of this

theory allowed the researchers to assess how a social worker's interaction at

multiple levels affects how they serve child welfare families in reunifying.

Potential Contributions of the Study to Micro

and/or Macro Social Work Practice

The research study presented implications to the field of social work on a

macro and micro level as it provided contributions to a child welfare agency and

the children involved in family reunification. On a macro level, the study results

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were used to deliver an opportunity for the agency to understand how contributing factors influence a social workers ability to assist families in reunifying. By providing further insight into social workers' perspective on social work barriers that affect reunification, the agency could investigate what actions need to be taken to address these issues through policy and practice. On a micro level, these policy and practice changes could lead to increased family reunification rates, which would decrease the social and environmental disruptions experienced by children in out of home care.

Summary

This chapter began with a description of the research study, which focused on the social worker's influence that potentially inhibits child welfare families from reunifying. Then the constructivist research paradigm was presented, which was used to identify the factors that contributed to social workers becoming a barrier in reunification. The rationale for use of this paradigm was that it allows the researchers to be involved in the development of a joint construction of the issue.

The literature indicated that multiple factors could impede a social worker's ability to provide quality service, which in turn could elongate a child's placement in out of home care and impact a family's likelihood of reunifying. Additionally, this study used the ecological systems theory to further examine the

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effects of a social worker's transactions within multi-level environments, and how

it influenced their effectiveness in assisting families in reunifying.

CHAPTER TWO

ENGAGEMENT

Introduction

This chapter describes the study site, strategies for engaging

gatekeepers, and how the researchers prepared for data collection of this

research study. This chapter also describes diversity, ethical, and political issues.

It also describes the role technology played in this study.

Study Site

The study site was a child welfare agency located in Central California.

The agency provides services to families and children with open child welfare

cases. The demographic breakdown for all children who are served by this

agency are unknown, but information for children who are in out of home care is

available. Three-fourths of children who entered out of home care in 2020 in this

county were Latinx and half were aged 5 and under (California Child Welfare

Indicators Project, 2020).

Social workers at the agency held at least a bachelor's degree in any field

and had experience in social work. The social worker assigned to a family with

an open child welfare case refers the parents and children to resources and

community agencies for enrollment in court ordered case plan services. The

services outlined in a typical case plan for a parent include parenting education,

drug testing, a mental health assessment, and an alcohol and drug assessment

along with any recommended treatment. Any specialty or additional services are determined by the family's specific needs. The social worker also refers the children to services that are necessary to address trauma or unmet needs, such as therapeutic services and educational services.

The social worker is also required to make referrals to community resources to support the family in attaining and maintaining stability even after exiting child welfare. These resources assist in food, clothing, transportation, housing, and hygiene kits amongst many other necessities. This increases the families circle of support within the community to decrease recidivism in child welfare. Information about the number of social workers employed by the agency or their demographic characteristics was unavailable.

Engagement Strategies for Gatekeepers at Research Site

The gatekeepers of this study are the director of child welfare services in this county, mid-level managers in the family reunification unit, and child welfare family reunification supervisors. As an engagement strategy, a proposal was provided to potential gatekeepers either via email or letter. Given that both researchers were employed within child welfare, it was expected that an email sufficed. The proposal included information regarding the research focus, study participants, the duration of the study, and ways of communicating outcomes. Additionally, gatekeepers were asked to provide input regarding other potential participants or sources of information. Furthermore, researchers utilized the

already established relationships within the agency to obtain data and reach out to stakeholders.

Self Preparation

As previously mentioned, a constructivist research paradigm required interaction between the researchers and participants to arrive at a joint construction of the research topic. Additionally, a constructivist approach allowed researchers to have a presence throughout the study and during data collection. To prepare for data collection, researchers planned around scheduled meetings, case contacts, and court reports to allow the time necessary for research. Additionally, researchers were aware of, and impartial to, personal bias or a conflict of interest based on current employment at the study site. Researchers were sensitive to, and aware of, the possibility of inflicting personal opinions on research data. To do this, both researchers analyzed each interview and compared each other's interpretations.

Diversity Issues

Researchers kept differences in mind among workers in education, years of experience in social work, home life, gender, and caseload size. Education and experience affected the participants' responses, as some workers had more knowledge about the research topic. Answers varied greatly between social workers who have only worked in the family reunification unit for a few months

versus social workers with years of experience in family reunification. Further, education contributed to a different mindset in terms of application of theories and additional training.

In the family reunification unit, there were three male social workers, which could have resulted in gender disparity in the workplace and could have affected participants' answers during data collection. The male social workers could have had a different opinion or point of view of how a social worker can be a potential barrier in family reunification. Further, a social worker's home life could impact answers based on whether there are several other stressors at home including but not limited to children, financial issues, divorce, and other obligations. Additionally, a difference in caseload sizes could have changed the perspective of a worker's effectiveness to serve clientele based on time dedicated to each case. By keeping these differences in mind during data collection, the researchers discussed them with participants and gatekeepers prior to beginning interviews. When coding and analyzing data, as researchers, we specifically looked at the characteristics stated above and actively looked into themes when reviewing data.

Ethical Issues

When conducting a constructivist study, it is important to review and assess any potential harm to participants as it can be an ethical issue (Morris, 2013). In this study, the researchers faced the ethical issue of maintaining confidentiality as participants were asked to join a face-to-face interview at the

research site where confidentiality could not be maintained. To ensure the study met ethical standards, the researchers set interview agreements indicating confidentiality of participants was upheld. If the interview agreements were breached, the researchers would not confirm or deny any individual's participation or share any identifying information. As ethical social workers, when conducting this research, it was imperative that the participants privacy, confidentiality, and anonymity was protected; if any risks were involved where this could not be upheld, the participants were to be made aware prior to the study commencing (Morris, 2013). Therefore, the researchers also informed the participants prior to agreeing to the study of the possible risks to confidentiality and anonymity and allowed them to withdraw from the study.

Another ethical dilemma that the researchers faced with video conference meetings was the risk of a breach in confidentiality. Morris (2013) indicated that although the participants do not have to share their name, they can be distinguished through their point of view by other participants of the research. Therefore, to uphold ethical standards, if breached, the researchers would not confirm or deny identity.

Political Issues

In this constructivist study, one political issue that could have arisen was that the agency could have been hesitant to allow social worker participation on reunification cases in fear that agency could be portrayed negatively through the

study. Additionally, the agency could have been hesitant to allow the sharing of information so as not breach client confidentiality. Another potential political issue was that the participants could be hesitant to provide their opinion on the research topic in fear that there will be repercussions from the agency and the public. Morris (2013) suggests that researchers need to address the political issues of the study before starting the research study. To address these political issues, the researchers negotiated with the participants and the agency regarding the issues prior to the start of the study. The researchers also had an open discussion about the end goal of the study, which is to improve reunification rates.

The Role of Technology

To carry out this study, the use of technology was important and necessary. One form of technology used was the internet to conduct literature reviews to support this research study. The internet also allowed the social workers to utilize the video conferencing software to maintain close contact with the participants that are unavailable in person (Morris, 2013). After the researchers initially met with potential participants face to face, other forms of technology, such as email and telephone, were used for follow-up. The usage of email and telephone allowed the participants flexibility as they could be busy and not have time for face-to-face contact (Morris, 2013).

Summary

      This research study relied on interactions between the researchers and stakeholders at the study site. The study site was at a child welfare agency located in Central California where both researchers were employed as social workers, one of which was assigned to the Family Reunification Unit. The researchers engaged the site gatekeepers by conducting an informal meeting to discuss the research proposal and focus. Further, the informal meeting allowed gatekeepers the opportunity to provide input regarding other sources of information in relation to the topic. Data was gathered in person and with the use of technology, through interviews with the stakeholders and gatekeeper. Researchers also used already existing co-worker relationships to assist in the engagement process. During this process, the researchers assessed and planned for issues of diversity and ethical and politics dilemmas.

CHAPTER THREE

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

In this chapter, the researchers presented the characteristics of the research study participants and the selection process of such participants. The chapter also discusses the data gathered, specifically the type of sampling strategy that was used in this study. Lastly, this chapter discusses the phases of data collection of the study, how data were recorded, and the data analysis.

Study Participants

In this constructive study, the study participants were social workers who were employed with child welfare services. The social worker participants were assigned to the reunification unit and had direct and current experience working families who were in the reunification process. The participants were eligible to participate in this study if they were working for a child welfare agency and assigned in family reunification during the time of the study. There were no exclusions on any criteria such as age, gender, ability, language, other than the participants being current family reunification social workers in the reunification unit at child welfare services.

Selection of Participants

The researchers first identified the key stakeholder and after interviewing them they were asked to invite other potential participants to help build the hermeneutic circle; this strategy is known as snowball or chain sampling. By conducting a snowball sampling, the researchers first determined and identified key stakeholders, who after being interviewed were invited to recruit other social workers to participate in the study (Morris, 2013).

Data Gathering

In this constructive study, the researchers were the data gathering tool as there was no usage of surveys or other questions on papers, but rather being the interviewing instrument themselves (Morris, 2013). To do this, the researchers interviewed the participants directly. However, the researchers needed to prepare regarding the study information. In preparing, the researchers spent some time in the family reunification unit with the social workers. This allowed the researchers to become knowledgeable about vocabulary and terminology used within family reunification. The researchers interviewed the participants to obtain qualitative data by asking questions about their experience with working with families in reunification. They were also asked about their opinions and values regarding reunification, and what barriers they see involving reunification.

Phases of Data Collection

There was one phase of data collection for this research study, the individual interviews. The individual interview phase began by obtaining consent in which an email was sent to participants and the gatekeeper, a child welfare manager, which provided further information about the process, purpose, audience, and data gathering procedures being utilized. This e-mail provided a consent form for participation and use of the information gathered during the research study. The form was signed and returned via e-mail prior to beginning interviews.

As part of the individual interview phase, a survey was used to gather initial information and demographics of participants (See the Appendix below). Upon completion of the survey, participants began the interview process. The interview started with questions pertaining to the participant personally, such as family life, personal interests, educational background, and work. Then a series of questions pertaining to efficiency at work and the likelihood of families successfully reunifying based on a social worker's efforts were asked. This included, but was not limited to experience, opinion, feeling, knowledge, sensory, and demographic questions (Morris, 2013). As part of the data gathering process in a constructivist study, researchers utilized more than the answers verbalized or written by honing in all five senses and anticipating the need to use intuition to encompass a well-rounded view of the participants construction (Morris, 2013). To close out an interview, the participants were asked if they had any further

opinions or information regarding potential factors in a social worker efficiently

assisting a family in reunifying. The researchers will also search the California

Child welfare Indicators Project for data on the exits from foster care in the

twelve-month period.

The individual interview started by obtaining consent; an email was sent to

participants and provided further information about the process, purpose,

audience, and data gathering procedures utilized. The email provided a consent

form for participation, authorization to record the interview, plan for

dissemination, and use of the information gathered during the research study.

The form was signed and returned via email prior to beginning interviews. The

interview began virtually with questions pertaining to participants' demographics.

Then a series of questions pertaining to efficiency at work and the likelihood of

families successfully reunifying based on a social worker's efforts was asked. To

close out the interview, the participants were asked if they have any further

opinions or information regarding potential factors in a social worker efficiently

assisting a family in reunifying.

Data Recording

Interviews, whether conducted in person or via zoom, were recorded

through video recording. If the participant did not want to be recorded, the

researchers took manual notes instead. Additionally, all forms completed online

were submitted via iCloud that was only accessible by the researchers using

password protection. Any notes taken during interviews were stored in a locked

cabinet using a lock and key, which was located in the child welfare office. A

research journal in the form of a Google document was shared amongst the

researchers to contribute throughout the study. Notes regarding research articles

and statistical information gathered to support the study were recorded in this

way to ensure data sharing was in real time as both researchers worked primarily

from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Analysis

Researchers used a "bottom-up approach" to data analysis, specifically

through "open coding". According to Morris (2013) this approach allows

researchers to analyze qualitative data in a more inductive and open-ended

manner. The open coding process helped the researchers sort the gathered data

into categories to help refine future questioning or observations (Morris, 2013).

Units of information were identified and grouped into categories. Qualitative data

were obtained through individual interviews after obtaining consent. The method

utilized to analyze the data was conventional content analysis; this methodology

is used for coding and recognizing patterns of text content to identify common

themes and subthemes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The interviews inquired about

internal factors and external factors such as social worker bias, attitude towards

culture, stereotyping, misunderstandings, and personal values. The external

factors such as clients, caseload amounts, low wages, and or other external

factors can overwhelm social workers, potentially impacting reunification. Internal factors can also overwhelm a social worker such as a social worker's attitude towards a specific culture or client can affect reunification, leading to stereotyping, misunderstanding, and communication barriers from a social worker that stems from their values.

Termination and Follow Up

Termination was discussed with the participants during the interview and the researchers explained to the participants the process of the termination and provided a contact telephone number, should they have any questions regarding the study. According to Morris (2013), a researcher must be committed to a plan of action known as termination for the study participants. Upon termination, the researchers checked in with the study participants through an email as the follow-up. In the follow-up the participants were able to provide progress updates and information about the joint construction.

Communication of Findings

Upon conclusion of the research study, the researchers created a final report with the study's results communicating the findings of study. The report detailed the data that were gathered, the process of the study, and the plan of action. Additionally, the study was published at the university scholar works (https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu) website and it was also disseminated at the

School of Social Work Research Symposium at the end of the academic year. The researchers informed the participants where the study was published as to provide the findings of the study.

Summary

Researchers remained an active role in this constructivist study and as such, the researchers were the interviewing instrument. The phases of data collection included the consent, identifying a key stakeholder to suggest other potential participants and individual interviews. Through this research, the researchers looked at the perceptions of social workers to further understand barriers outside of the physical obstacles of service delivery. The researchers provided the findings by providing the participants with the publishing website.

CHAPTER FOUR

IMPLEMENTATION

Introduction

This chapter includes an analysis of the data gathered from the interviews in which the researchers explored how social workers could potentially inhibit child welfare families from reunifying. This chapter also discusses the implications of the findings for micro and/or macro practice, with regards to the study findings.

Description of Sample

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Social Workers (N=10)

	n
Gender	
Male	3
Female	7
Level of School	
Some college, no degree	0
Associates degree	0
Bachelor's degree	5
Graduate degree	5
Years of Experience	
Less than one year	0
1-2 years	3
3-7 years	2
8 or more years	5
Have a child or are a caregiver to someone in their home	
No	3
Yes	7

As noted in Table 1, ten participants were interviewed individually. The interviews started with demographic questions obtained the following information about their gender, their educational level, years of experience with the current agency, and if they were currently caring for a child or were a caregiver at their home. Out of the ten participants three were males (30%) and seven were females (70%), five of the participants had a master's degree (50%), two in which had a master's degree in social work (20%). Five participants in the study had ten or more years of experience (50%) and the other five participants had between two and five years of experience as a social worker with child welfare (50%). Seven of the participants had children in their home who they cared for (70%), and three (30%) of the participants had no children or were a caregiver to anyone in their home. It is important to note that the participants had a clear understanding of the child welfare family reunification process as they had direct and current experience working with families who are in the reunification process.

Qualitative Results

As indicated in Table 2, what emerged from the participant responses was one theme with four subthemes. The major theme that emerged was barriers to effective social work, and the four subthemes were lack of partnerships, funding, family resistance, and conflicting policies. The table is followed by several supporting quotes that highlight the various subthemes provided.

Table 2. Barriers to Effective Social Work

Themes	Description
Lack of Partnerships	There are limited agencies providing resources to child welfare families in reunification; thus, causing the referral and services delivery of resources overwhelming and delayed.
Funding	There is a lack of funding allocated and provided to the social work field, which in turn creates overwhelming work for current social workers. A lack of funding means fewer social workers are hired, which can then impact families from receiving proper and effective family reunification services.
Conflicting Demands	Social workers are often faced with conflicting demands from state policies that do not align with the communities and agencies they are intended to support. These bureaucratic policies create more work for micro level social workers and it leads to less time spent with the families they are to serve.
Resistance	Parents in family reunification have a hard time accepting agency involvement, creating resistance to services, and causing delays in their service plan. The delays in turn cause more work for their assigned social worker.

Lack of Partnerships

The first subtheme that emerged was a lack of partnerships with outside agencies. A few of the participants stated that direct services and resources such as drug treatment, visitation, and transportation, affect families in reunification as they are not readily available. A few participants stated that the referral process

to outside agencies was overwhelming and caused delays for parents who were attempting to reunify and frustration as social workers were unable to recommend reunification of the families. Participant 5 (a social worker who has seventeen years with the agency) stated,

> There is a lack of immediate resources that are available during a client's time of crisis. CWS offices in different cities have closed, our bus transportation sucks, referral services have waiting lists from service providers, referral service in itself is long. There are so many hands in the pot, the paperwork is long.

Participant 9 (a social worker who has ten years of experience in child welfare):

> The court will say okay you have used drugs and we are taking your children, now you need to stop work and everything else and do outpatient services. Outpatient services can be so demanding, it sets them up for failure. Our services do not align with what our court says.

<u>Funding</u>

The second subtheme that emerged was that funding in the social work profession is an external factor. Nearly all participants stated the value in properly funding the social work profession is not only lacking, but also affecting how social work is practiced, which in turn affects families in child welfare. Participants stated that funding is severely lacking in their county and it causes staff reduction and retention, the type of support offered to social workers, and the pay social workers receive. The consensus of the participants stated that

without proper and sufficient funding from the state, their local county agency is unable to hire social workers, and when they cannot hire social workers, the workload is distributed amongst the social worker staff who then becomes inundated with the workload leading to less time with their families. The participants reported there is huge discrepancy in funding and the service that must be provided to the families in reunification, largely leaving the social workers feeling unsupported and undervalued. As stated by Participant 9 (a social worker who has been with the agency for ten years):

> The lack of social workers, the state not providing enough of funding to offer more social worker positions which causes high caseloads, that then impacts the families we work with, that then impacts the families we work with and the support we give them, and the that becomes a factor why families do not reunify.

Participant 3 (a social worker with five years with the agency) stated:

> The state and federal system does not really value child welfare and social work in general. We are the most underappreciated profession out here. They do not fund our profession well enough to give us proper amount needed to support our families.

Participant 7 (a social worker with 10 years with the agency) stated:

> We do not have the funding to support all the great work that comes with it. We barely have enough staff to make regular contacts, now the state of California wants us to make contacts asking their worries, their wants, and

their status. It is a lot of work. Again, great work, but the state does not want

to provide further funding to add this amount of work, and again this gets

sent to our county to implement with no support.

<u>Conflicting Demands</u>

The third subtheme that emerged was conflicting demands. Some of these

demands stemmed from policies, maintaining self-care, and workload.

Participants reported they were able to keep up with their workload for the most

part and continued to manage their family reunification cases; however, they

unanimously expressed concerns with caseloads size and the tasks it takes to

manage them. The participants stated that the size of the caseload in conjunction

with their monthly social work duties by far is the biggest barrier that affected

their social work practices, and in turn affects family reunification. For example,

participant 10 (a social worker with five years of experience in child welfare)

captured this sentiment:

> We are constantly busy and have something. Each case requires referrals,
>
> visits, collaborations, meetings, follow ups, reviews. We also have regular
>
> employee obligations, mandatory training, mandatory work participations
>
> events. And new policies, come new work obligations. So guess where that
>
> falls, that is another duty. We always have something on so monthly duties
>
> lists just get longer and longer and longer.

Participant 9 (a social worker with ten years of experience in child welfare)

described her overwhelming experience by stating:

Right now, I would say it is starting to get unmanageable, but 25 to 30 cases was a good number where I felt managing my caseload. Right now with 35 and in the 40's, I feel like it will get hard. By hard I mean I am going to struggle to keep up with daily tasks like referrals, returning calls in a timely manner, the small things. The bigger tasks like seeing the children and court reports, will be completed, those take priority, whether that is you seeing them, an intern, or our coworkers helping, the children will get seen monthly because we are here for the families and especially children, but what does fall on wayside is those little things like calling clients back.

All participants associated their high caseload and the number of duties that comes with that case affecting the way they serve families in reunification, the type of social worker they want to be to the families, and the type of family reunification service they want to provide. Most participants stated they wanted to provide good service such as seeing the clients themselves versus social work interns or other staff. The following response by participant 5 (a social worker with seventeen years of experience in child welfare) truly embodied the overall construct of the participants with regards to this barrier:

I think if we had more time to devote to cases, it would really help to work with the family to help the family understand and make the change necessary to get their children back. I think because we are just trying to stay afloat, the social work aspect of it gets lost and the family is left defeated.

In a similar manner, Participant 8 (a social worker with sixteen years of experience in child welfare) described the difficulties of managing her workload and social work responsibility in response:

I have to get it done so somehow I manage to get it done, I would not say it is quality work but it gets done. Well, quality work would be that I would take my time during home visit and when meeting the families, or it actually being me who goes and evaluates the family every month versus extra help, or not writing cookie-cutter reports. I would love to be able to give that kind of detail, but we have to do what we have to do to get it done. There is not really quality work, but the work gets done.

Another barrier identified by participant 1 (a social worker with two years of experience with child welfare) was the balance between family life and work commitments. Several participants identified their stress level to be high and all participants with children indicated family as a de-stressor where they were able to decompress from the demands of work. Some participants with families expressed familial obligations also impacting their work productivity and the upkeep of the workload demands as noted by participant 1 (a social worker with two years of experience with the agency), "A lot of my coworkers who stress out or are behind are those with families and outside commitments involving kids."

Participant 4 (a social worker with a young family and ten years of experience in child welfare) described how she balanced her work and family commitment:

I would say family, and I say that because I am constantly making sure that I am considerate with my time. I try to work one day of overtime a week if I must, and when I am at home, I try to make sure I am focused on home. It becomes a personal factor because I take pride in my work and I don't like to leave my work responsibilities to other, but I also want to make sure I am there for my family. I have three children and even though they are a little older now and are understanding, I still make them a propriety and sometimes that affects my daily work. There are times where I am like let me just stay five more minutes to finish this, but then my kids are like mom you better come home right away. It's a constant battle between self-care and my work.

Participants who cared for a child at home reported that they struggled to keep a balance between wanting to take time off to be with family and not taking time to maintaining the upkeep of their workload. These participants echoed a similar sentiment in that days off meant delays in their work assignments, accumulation of workload, and delivering low quality work. Further, they indicated that any unexpected work such as overtime impacts their family life.

Participant 2 (a social worker with a year of being with the agency) described the impact work responsibilities have on her workload and family:

We have such a busy and structured schedule, that any changes in my schedule like overtime or having to come in early, or taking days off, or calling in sick, all of that affect my daily work.

Most participants stated that policy also contributed to conflicting demands as a child welfare reunification social worker. The participants stated the California Department of Social Services inhibited the type of social worker they are and how they practice based on their implementing policies. The participants reported that they are bound by larger bureaucratic policies which affected their social work practice at a smaller county level as it is difficult to implement with the resources they have. Participants stated that some of these larger state bureaucratic policies require a larger workforce and outside community resources, in which smaller counties do not have. The participants by far felt there was a major disconnect at the state level and county level and it impacts the families they work with as they are unable to properly implement the policies developed by the state with resources available; for example, many stated there is a lack of social workers to provide the new policy effectively in their county, and programs available to clients in their area. The following quotes are from the participant 6 (a social worker with three years of experience in child welfare) on conflicting policies:

> If I am looking at the big picture, I want to say that the system itself is a factor. Just how everything is set up. How the system is so bureaucratic, it takes so long to change processes and the way it functions, so even though here is good intentions, we are bound by the system so it can impact our work. We get policies that are tricked down from state that an overall policy

for California, but doesn't really apply to our area, we are mandated to do it.

The state is asking to implement SOP, which is Safety Organized Practices, which don't get me wrong, I learned this practice a long time ago in school and in theory, it is a great practice, but we do not have the manpower to put it in in place. At least not here. The state is asking for a few years for total implementation and even with the little we have implemented, it has been hard.

Participant 1 (a social worker with two years of experience in child welfare) stated:

There is a lack of understanding between the state child welfare system and its counties. I personally think each county shouldn't have to be forced to implement all practices if it does not apply to their county or if the state isn't willing to properly fund that county.

Participant 10 (a social worker with five years of experience in child welfare) stated:

State has policies that may not be in the best interest for this county, and it causes our families more harm and stress, which then increases the condition for failure. An example is the state suggests families should have this many visits with parents supervised by social worker, well social worker is so busy we give it to someone else to supervise and report back to us.

We don't really know what is going on there, but we have to take that

visitation supervisor's word for it. Policy does not align with practice.

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We don't really know what is going on there, but we have to take that

visitation supervisor's word for it. Policy does not align with practice.

Results at the Micro Level

The data generated through individual interviews expressed a struggle with

delivering quality services to child welfare families at the agency located in

central California due to an abundance of additional duties amongst their regular

monthly tasks. Additionally, a lack of time to devote to families was

communicated, which affected the ability to go over services and referrals

properly with clients. This absent source of social work practice was defined as a

barrier to clients agreeing and understanding the need for services and/or

agency intervention.

This replicates prior studies highlighting the numerous barriers families

face when reunifying. Child welfare parents are inundated with case plans

services to meet their goal of reunifying with their children (Findley & Crutchfield,

2022). The Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was developed to create

safety, protection, and promote permanency by having a time limit on family

reunification; however, the ASFA did not account for the way case plan service

components could delay the parents from reunifying, indicating there is a

disconnect between policy and practice (Findley & Crutchfield, 2022). Findley &

Crutchfield (2022) found that a lack of transportation to services was a barrier for

parents in reunification and that there was direct link between a lack of

transportation and unsuccessful reunifications. Although the agency is required

to assist with transportation, the accountability is left on the parents (Findley &

Crutchfield, 2022). Amongst the various case plan services ordered lies an

exacerbated barrier for parents to access said services due to transportation

issues (Findley & Crutchfield, 2022). Though agencies attempt to alleviate this

barrier through the availability of bus passes, clients are reliant on public

transportation that is only available during certain hours and predisposed routes

(Findley & Crutchfield, 2022).

Case plans are created by social workers to assist the family in

addressing the issues and risks that led to agency intervention. However, when

case plans are not created with targeted services in mind, this within itself can be

a barrier to parents experiencing life challenges, as accessing multiple services

per week could interfere with parent's attending the services that are critically

necessary (D'Andrade & Chambers, 2012). When a social worker is limited on

time it affects their ability to complete tasks such as targeted service case plans

as it requires individualization of each case plan per family. If more time was

allotted to social workers for proper case planning and service delivery, it could

be assumed more families would successfully reunify.

Taken together, this suggests that child welfare agencies should consider

the ramifications of additional tasks assigned to social workers to increase

productivity, but in turn, creates a struggle for social workers to provide quality

practice that supports reunification efforts. The limited amount of time a social

worker can dedicate per family could affect a parent's or child's ability to understand the reason for agency intervention and court ordered services. This miscommunication and disconnect could inhibit families understanding what evidence-based practice to mitigate and alleviate to reunify. Fitzgerald & Berliner (2015) suggest that to increase case plan effectiveness, evidence based interventions frameworks are to be applied as they be utilized to increase effectiveness in ordering services for parents that are appropriate. By favoring effective services rather than the amount of services offered, case planning can be more effect and helpful to families (Fitzgerald & Berliner, 2015).

Further, participants advised the stress caused by their workloads affected productivity and overall client interactions. However, most participants reported being able to complete their monthly tasks by prioritizing certain duties over others such as seeing all monthly contacts and completing court reports over not returning calls or completing referrals promptly. The multifaceted roles and tasks assigned within the current social work practice increases the potential for variability in stress (Lloyd et al., 2011). Additionally, role ambiguity, such as additional tasks assigned to social workers on top of their regular monthly duties, creates stress from unclear expectations that result in job dissatisfaction, lowered motivation to work, lessened confidence and intention to leave one's occupation (Lloyd et al., 2011). A prior study examining the experiences of social workers indicates that job satisfaction is directly correlated with turnover rates and decreased attendance in the workplace (Lloyd et al, 2011). In a survey

conducted by Lloyd and colleagues (2011), it was found that social work staff who experienced role ambiguity had a higher general health questionnaire score as compared to those who were confident in their jobs (Lloyd et al., 2011). The effects of high turnover rates, resulting in higher caseloads, only contributes to the struggle of quality social work practice and the implications of social worker's potentially inhibiting reunification efforts. Workplace demands affect the wellbeing of social workers as well because it can lead to burnout (Lizano & Barak, 2015). Burnout has been found to be entwined with job satisfaction and job performance; therefore, if we do not address barriers such as burdening caseloads, burnout is inevitable, which in turn affects families in reunification (Lizano & Barak, 2015).

An additional micro barrier expressed by participants was familial obligations which impact their daily work productivity. Many reported a struggle to balance home and work life, along with a need to prioritize their family as many continued to stress over work duties that were not getting done on their days off. Others reported a struggle to take time off to care for their children as it delayed their work duties, affecting their clients. The effects of burnout and stress on social workers and family relations at home, were more likely to experience depression, anxiety, irritability, and lowered marital satisfaction (Lloyd et al., 2011). Therefore, even if participants of this study are reporting an ability to complete monthly duties, this is a weak correlation in determining whether social work stress effects productivity, as stress can affect a multitude of areas in one's

life, both internally and externally, which could in turn result in lessened productivity. Several studies highlight the importance of ensuring adequate work-life balance as the lack of it could lead to burnout. In a meta-analysis study, it was found Furthermore, studies in this area suggest there is evidence that parents experience more issues with work-life balance as compared to workers without children due to higher family demands (Gragnano et al., 2020). This implies that increased stress in the workplace could affect a social worker's ability to provide quality service delivery and case planning, which could result in job dissatisfaction and overall lowered motivation and productivity.

Results at the Macro Level

Many participants expressed a need for state funding and realistic expectations in social work practice from the state. The participants reported issues with being understaffed, which subsequently resulted in increased workloads for current employees. Further, it was expressed that initiatives to change policy and practice by the state increased social work duties, yet additional funding to roll out said initiatives and policies was unavailable. Strategies to support reunification efforts and prevent foster system reentry included collaborations with agencies, community providers, the courts, and child welfare families (Child Information Gateway, 2017). Additionally, the support of agency leaders in supporting staff in achieving safety and stability, along with maintaining manageable caseloads, was identified as a systemwide strategy to

support reunification (Child Information Gateway, 2017). However, these strategies are clearly not maintained as exemplified by the reports of participants that advised an overwhelming number of tasks and high caseloads result in a lack of quality social work practice and service delivery.

One study found that a new state policy requiring child welfare agencies to implement concurrent planning adds to social worker responsibilities (D'Andrade & Berrick, 2006). Concurrent planning is a social work practice that requires intensive efforts by one or more social workers (D'Andrade & Berrick, 2006). Concurrent planning initially was implemented by the state as a tool to help social workers find suitable families for foster children; however, it become a rigorous task as it takes a lot of resources and time for child welfare agencies to properly implement (D'Andrade & Berrick, 2006). The consensus amongst the group was that state policies did not align with practice. According to D'Andrade & Berrick (2006) states are required to make reasonable efforts to reunify families; however, there are reunification exceptions allowing states to bypass reunification which ultimately leads to unburdening the child welfare system with family reunification cases. In California, reunification exceptions are not applied as often as they should and even more alarming, they are being applied differently across the state (D'Andrade & Berrick, 2006). When the reunification exceptions are not applied as intended and counties are interpreting state policies differently, children and families who should not receive services and resources from child welfare, are overwhelming the system (D'Andrade &

Berrick, 2006). This suggests that social work practices are affected by California policies.

Last, there was an overall report of struggle to meet the needs of clients and provide visits and court ordered services in a timely manner. This also raised the question as to whether providing reasonable services was possible in today's social work practice. As previously mentioned, current law demands that child welfare social workers provide reasonable efforts in facilitating reunification (Jedwab et al., 2018). Therefore, the intentions and direction by the state appeared to do more harm than good in terms of service delivery and providing reasonable efforts to child welfare families. Traditional casework keeps families from reunifying, suggesting that different service approaches are needed that can improve family preservation within child welfare (Lindsey et al., 2002). The approach of intensive casework services limits the demands and barriers in social work such as high caseloads and less paperwork (Lindsey et al., 2002). Social workers can have less demands when given smaller caseloads which can enhance a social worker's ability to effectively aid a families in reunifying.

It would be beneficial for a fundamental reform in the state and local policies set forth in social work to align with the goals supporting reunification efforts by implementing initiatives that support social workers and collaborations. In 2018, Congress passed the Family First Preservation Act (FFPA) which allowed for the state to access Title IV-E funding to provide prevention services to keep children in their homes (Lindell et al., 2020). This was a major child welfare reform and is

another fundamental change to child welfare policy and practice (Lindell et al., 2020). Even if funding for prevention services restrictions did not go into effect until October 1, 2019 and states were able to delay implementation for up to two years, child welfare agencies must use a proportion of these new funds on evidence-based services (Lindell et al., 2020). Prior to the FFPA, the foster care program was the largest Title IV-E spending category as states were entitled to an unlimited federal reimbursement for a percentage of the costs to care for eligible children (Lindell et al., 2020). With the number of children in foster care increasing since 2012, the focus and collaborative effort to reduce the number of children in group care and increase access to relative and family based placements has led to the FFPSA contributing to this effort at the federal level (Lindell et al., 2020).

The changes identified at the federal and state level could lead to policy and social work practice changes at the micro level, that were aimed to alleviate the barrier theme and subthemes identified through this study including, a lack of funding, partnerships, the presence of conflicting demands, and resistance. By integrating the changes needed to provide quality and accessible services, alongside evidence based case planning and lowered caseloads, job satisfaction could increase in the social work field and contribute to better work-life-balance practices.

CHAPTER FIVE

TERIMINATION AND FOLLOW UP

Introduction

According to Morris (2013), a researcher must be committed to a plan of action known as termination for the study participants. Upon termination, the researchers checked in with the study participants through an email as the follow-up. In the follow-up the participants were provided progress updates and information about the joint construction.

Communication of Findings

Upon the conclusion of the research study, the researchers created a final report with the study's results. The report detailed the findings of study such as the hermeneutic dialectic circle, the data that were gathered, the process of the study, and the plan of action. Additionally, the study was published at the university scholar works (https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu) website and it would also be disseminated at the School of Social Work Research Symposium at the end of the academic year. The researchers informed the participants via email where the study was published to provide the findings of the study.

Summary

The researchers remained an active role in this constructivist study and as such, the researchers were the interviewing instrument. The phases of data collection included the consent, identifying a key stakeholder to suggest other potential participants and individual interviews. Through this research, social work barriers were examined as factor affecting families from reunifying. The researchers provided the findings by providing the participants with the publishing website.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions were developed by the researchers, Laura Velasquez and Annamarie Merrill:

<u>Demographic Questions</u>

What is your gender
       A. Female
       B. Male
       C. Other:

What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
       A. Some college but no degree
       B. Associes degree
       C. Bachelor's degree
       D. Graduate degree

How many years have you been with the agency?
       A. Less than one year
       B. One year
       C. Two years
       D. Three or more years

Do you have children or a caregiver to someone in your home?
       A. No
       B. Yes
       C. If yes how many:

<u>Interview Questions</u>

How many cases do you typically carry, and what is considered a full caseload in your unit?

Are you able to complete your monthly work obligations (family face to face contacts, court reports) on time?

What outside personal factors do you feel affect your daily work. (i.e., commute to work, children/family stressors, medical condition)?

What internal factors do you feel impact your daily work? (i.e., caseload, commute to see clients, administrative duties-data entry, court reports, policies?

How often do you feel stressed or overwhelmed in a month?

When stressed or overwhelmed, how does this affect your work (interaction with clients, court reports timeliness)?

What do you do when you are feeling overstressed and how do you relieve your stress?

What do you think is the most common reason families do not reunify in your agency?

Are there any gaps in your agency's policies and the child welfare system practices regarding reunification?

Do you believe any of the aforementioned factors affect your ability to help families reunify?

APPENDIX B

IRB APPROVAL

IRB-FY2022-174 - Initial: IRB Admin./Exempt Review Determination Letter

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>
Mon 3/7/2022 9:32 AM
To: 003564222@coyote.csusb.edu <003564222@coyote.csusb.edu>;007426842@coyote.csusb.edu
<007426842@coyote.csusb.edu>;James Simon <James.Simon@csusb.edu>

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SAN BERNARDINO

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Administrative/Exempt Review Determination
Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-174

James Simon AnnaMarie Merrill, Laura Velasquez
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear James Simon AnnaMarie Merrill, Laura Velasquez:

Your application to use human subjects, titled "HOW SOCIAL WORKERS CAN POTENTIALLY INHIBIT
CHILD WELFARE FAMILIES FROM REUNIFYING" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the
Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means
your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB
has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be
required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should
consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of
Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as
needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human
research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC,
California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's COVID-19 Prevention Plan for
more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research
Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification,
renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with

instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

- **Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.**
- **Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study.**
- **Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.**
- **Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.**

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-174 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

APPENDIX C

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate how Child Welfare Social Workers can potentially impact family reunification. This study is being conducted by Laura Velasquez and Annamarie Merrill, under the supervision of Dr. James Simon, Adjunct Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: This research studies how Child Welfare Services Social Workers can affect family reunification. The study will look if internal and external factors influence a social worker's ability to serve clients and families of child welfare, and if this in turn could affect family reunification.

DESCRIPTION: The study will gather data using interviews with Child Welfare Social Workers to understanding of how county social workers could possibly be a barrier in foster children going back home to their parents. This study will be conducted via video conferencing, Zoom, and through email.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to. You can also skip any questions and can freely withdraw from participating in the study at any time. Your participation to this study will take 30 to 45 minutes.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All responses are confidential. However, there is a risk that confidentiality can be compromised. To minimize risk, we are taking precautions such as using a password protected computer and password protected cellphones. This study does not request personal identifiable information during interviews, and any names that are known will not be used. Notes taken during individual interviews will be stored in a locked cabinet using a lock and key located. This locked cabinet is locked at the Child Welfare Office that has 24-hour security onsite. The locked cabinet and key will only be accessible to these researchers. Video recording will be stored on a shared iCloud drive that will be password protected in which only the researchers will know. When the study is over, the data and emails received will be deleted from the computer, the notes will be shredded and discarded, and the iCloud drive will be deleted. All of this will be executed within three (3) months of the study's completion. Only the researchers will be able to see your answers and questions, and California State University San Bernardino will receive a summary of the study results that do not include name, individual answers, or identifiable information.

DURATION: The individual interviews will take approximately 30 to 45 minutes. If more than 30 minutes are required, the researchers will then schedule multiple sessions with the individual if desired.

RISKS: In this study risks are minimal and lessened as there is no requirement to participate; there is no punishment for lack of participation in this study. You can refuse to answer any question and stop participating at any time with no consequences.

BENEFITS: Although there are no direct benefits to you, the researchers are hopeful this study will be useful for Child Welfare Services to evaluate how social workers can potentially impact family reunification.

VIDEO/AUDIO/PHOTOGRAPH: I understand this research will be video recorded. Initials_____

CONTACT: For answers to questions about the research and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury, contact Adjunct Professor, James Simon, James.Simon@csusb.edu Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino.

RESULTS: Results of the study will be created in a report by the researchers and the location of the report will be communicated during a final email to the participants. The report will detail the findings of the study and can be accessed by contacting Dr. James Simon at James.Simon@csusb.edu

CONFIRMATION STATEMENT:

I have read the information above and agree to participate in your study. The researchers provided me with an extra copy of the informed consent. I am aware that the signed confirmed consent will stay with the researchers and confirm that the non-signed copy was provided to the participant.

SIGNATURE:

Signature: _____ Date: _____

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:
   Assigned Leader: _____
   Assisted by: _____
   OR
   Joint Effort: <u>Laura Velasquez</u>
   <u>Annamarie Merrill</u>
2. Data Entry and Analysis:
   Assigned Leader: <u>Annamarie Merrill</u>
   Assisted by: <u>Laura Velasquez</u>
   OR
   Joint Effort: _____
3. Writing Report and Presenting of Findings:

   a. Introduction and Literature:
      Assigned Leader: <u>Laura Velasquez</u>
      Assisted by: <u>Annamarie Merrill</u>
      OR
      Joint Effort: _____
   b. Methods:
      Assigned Leader: _____
      Assisted by: _____
      OR
      Joint Effort: <u>Laura Velasquez</u>
      <u>Annamarie Merrill</u>
   c. Results:
      Assigned Leader: _____
      Assisted by: _____
      OR
      Joint Effort: <u>Laura Velasquez</u>
      <u>Annamarie Merrill</u>

   d. Termination and Follow Up:
      Assigned Leader: _____
      Assisted by: _____
      OR
      Joint Effort: <u>Laura Velasquez</u>
      <u>Annamarie Merrill</u>