



**Values and Technology: Benefits and Difficulties of Applied Research in Child Welfare**

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# Values and Technology: Benefits and Difficulties of Applied Research in Child Welfare

Michael Kelly, PhD; and Paul Sundet, PhD, LCSW

## Introduction

"A consciousness of our social sins today does not mean that they are of sudden growth but rather that public opinion has slowly become enlightened enough to take cognizance of them"<sup>1</sup> Edith Abbot noted. A century later we are still in the discovery mode as concerns the social sins perpetrated against children and our professional responsibility and ability to assist them.

Child protection as a community concern has a lengthy history with references found throughout recorded annals. Earliest advocacy for child welfare was usually associated with religious institutions with only a gradual and still evolving shift to secular arenas. In the United States much of the impetus in defining child protection as a social concern came from child labor abuse arising out of the adoption of the English factory system. Familial abuse was a late arrival on the public agenda driven by the mythology of Mary Ellen and the outraged expansion of the Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' portfolio to encompass vulnerable humans.

For a social issue to rise to the level of social problem for which policy initiatives and ultimately programs are demanded by the commonweal, a number of elements must coalesce. In a period of just over a century in this country, the requisite components emerged. Child protection became a recognized concern with governmental sanctions, a growing bureaucracy and an active debate about what appropriate public policy should be and then how to translate that mandate into effective programs.

That debate continues today. At its heart is the very nature of public policy's two core components, values and technology. The greater the consensus on

values, the more discrete the policy. The greater the surety of interventive methodology, the more precise the policy emphasis. Dissensus on either axis exacerbates the uncertainty in program direction.

## Dissensus In Child Welfare

Clearly "child welfare" is a value driven field of public policy but where those values devolve from the hortatory to the operational level the illusion of consensus dissipates. A general concept has emerged that children are no longer chattel or another economic resource to be exploited. What began as social indignation took form ultimately in the Children's Bureau and progressively more protective legislation. While there was early agreement that children should be protected from exploitation and physical harm there is still wide debate on what behaviors rise to the level of "abuse" as is evidenced in the constant litigation and professional disagreement over corporal punishment both in the home and the educational system. When one adds defining "neglect" in all of its various forms to the controversy over what constitutes "permanency" to the even more vexing concept of "best interests of the child" it is evident that value consensus has not been achieved.

Practitioners in the field must daily work within this nebulous value driven conception of child welfare while trying to maintain an uneasy balance between parental authority and ever more strict societal legal mandates. In a recent Missouri Supreme Court commission on the status of dependency case processing there was a clear consensus that the system need change. But in the hearings the testimony was almost equally divided

<sup>1</sup> Abbott, Edith. (1908). A study of the early history of child labor in America. *American Journal of Sociology*, 14 p 24.

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between those who accused the courts and the child protective service agency with being too aggressive in removing children from their parents and those who claimed that those same entities were not nearly aggressive enough in removing children.

With these fundamental disagreements on the value underpinning of child protection is it any wonder that there is little consensus on practice technology? Compounding the problem of defining most appropriate interventive approaches is the relative dearth of empirical evidence to support child protection methodology. "Best practices" all too often represents simply a consensus on current behaviors in the field without any rigorous attempt to establish either validity or reliability of outcomes or impacts. And even in those instances where a particular method has proven effectiveness with a specific client constellation, it is frequently tempered by political or fiscal concerns.

### **This Edition**

It is from this policy/practice development environment that the articles in this journal edition were developed. Their theses arose from a conscious effort to isolate one aspect of child protective service practice and examine it with a degree of scholarly detachment. The element chosen was practice in the clinical supervision of front line workers. The values assumed were those long associated with clinical practice in social work including the potential for client positive behavior change, a focus on the strengths perspective, family preservation goals within concurrent planning and worker-client collaboration in modifying parenting practices.

The goals and aspirations of the four demonstration projects which provide the majority of the content for this edition were detailed in an earlier issue of *Professional Development* (Volume 6: Nos. 1 and 2). The specific models to be tested and their attendant evaluation protocols were described along with the federal (*Children's Bureau*) and regional (*Southern Region Quality Improvement Center*) rationale, expectations and oversight plans. Much

has transpired in the intervening four years and the guest editors appreciate the opportunity this issue provides to examine the results of this important experiment in testing a practice theorem. And as in any real-life experiment the results represent a continuum from those that show remarkable promise for service improvement to ones of valuable if limited application to those which demonstrate the frustration of introducing innovation in environments where an external locus of decision-making is beyond the administrative control of the researchers.

Four elements in particular stand out as one reviews the results from these demonstration sites. First, the nature of the primary intervention, developmental education of supervisors in clinical practice techniques, while laudable in itself, is too distal an intervention to allow for rigorous testing of impact on client behavior. Although in some sites case outcome data show changes in the desired direction there is insufficient control to definitively attribute such movement to the experimental intervention. The many mediating elements of worker behavior, turnover and context make attributing causation a risky assumption.

Second, the demonstrations were to hopefully have a positive impact on worker turnover. The widely noted "crisis" of turnover of experienced and well trained workers has every person involved seeking solutions and these demonstrations were also so charged. Supervisory improvement was another sought after nostrum for the loss of good workers for reasons most believed could not be rooted in the nature of the work. Called "preventable turnover," each project sought to define and reduce this kind of loss. Most efforts foundered lacking an operational definition of "preventable turnover" and adequate data from the employing organizations.

The third element present in all the demonstration sites that impacts research results is the ever-changing nature of the bureaucratic environment in which the services were delivered. In all locales top

administrative change was the norm and with such change came varying degrees of commitment to the core values upon which the technology depended. The confounding aspects of this variable are demonstrated directly in the turnover of experiment subjects in some of the sites and indirectly in the focus group feedback on the difficulty of attempting innovation while in an essentially an organizational survival mode.

An example of this uncontrolled variable is found in the Arkansas demonstration project where a series of administrative and policy changes produced such personnel and program adjustments that the original research protocol became obsolete. And yet, as Pat Page, the interim state Children's Division director wrote in her summary, the participants' self-perception was one of beneficial and substantial professional growth.

The fourth, and related, aspect of this research may be termed the unanticipated consequences of planned change. Some of the most intriguing and potentially long-lasting results of these demonstrations were not formally set out as objectives in the original designs but evolved as a result of participant initiative as the projects evolved. These, too, are described in this volume.

## Contents

In the first article following this introduction, Carol Hafford, Melissa Lim Brodowski, Catherine Nolan, and Jack Denniston explain the experiments within an experiment by discussing the Children's Bureau rational for and experience with establishing quality improvement centers (QICs) to test methods of funding locally coordinated research and demonstration projects. Their article principally concerns the other QICs while, in the next article, Crystal Collins-Camargo and Kay Hoffman discuss the Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center (SRQIC) within the University of Kentucky's College of Social Work. Starting with the social work professions' involvement in child welfare, they link the SRQIC's role in applied research to

the College's extensive efforts in professional child welfare education, direct training and state and local policy development.

In the first of the supervisory project articles, Brian E. Bride and Jenny L. Jones respectively the evaluator and project director of the Tennessee demonstration, explore the role of supervision in moderating secondary traumatic stress among workers and provide evidence supporting the hypothesis that the quality of supervision plays an important role. Next, Alberta Ellett, Crystal Collins-Camargo, and Chad D. Ellett discuss findings from the individual supervisory projects and their own related research. Several instruments developed by the Ellett's were chosen to provide cross site evaluation of the SRQIC projects. Combining project findings with other large scale studies, the authors argue that evidence supports linking personal variables and organizational variables which affect workers intention to remain employed and achievement of case outcomes. These variables are noted to have implications for supervision and professional development of child welfare workers.

Kim Anderson and Paul Sundet, respectively, one of the project faculty and the Missouri project director, next provide practical advice on operationalization of approaches often found in the mission statements of public child welfare agencies. Drawing on their experience with the Missouri demonstration, they discuss how they infused the project with a "family centered" and "strengths based" practice by adopting a human behavior base of resiliency and a core intervention strategy of solution-focus therapy. Incidentally, this aspect of the project along with supervisory development discussed later, has found great favor with the state child welfare agency leading to implementation of new training and development approaches.

Findings from the Mississippi demonstration project are detailed in the next article by Kim Shackelford, Kathleen Sullivan, Maxine Harper, and Tiffany Edwards, respectively the project director

and three members of the evaluation team. Employing a cultural consensus model to involve the supervisors in the experimental group in determination of the topics to be explored in a series of learning labs the project moved individual supervisors from self described "professional isolation" to a group of colleagues engaged in professional support and sharing. While this result alone was quite important, the extensive evaluation provided additional data support to the supervisor's perceptions suggesting that in the intervention regions more effective supervision resulted in workers skill building and may have improved workers self efficacy scores when compared to the control region.

Jenny L. Jones and Sangmi Cho return to the Tennessee project data to explore group differences in two of the Ellett instruments used in the project evaluation — the Professional Organizational Culture (POC) scale and the Intention to Remain Employed (IRE) scale. The authors report that significant group differences were found and that organizational commitment as measured by the POC scales was the greatest predictor of intent to remain employed in child welfare in Tennessee.

In the next article, we (Sundet and Kelly) explore the dilemma of developing critical analytic skills among supervisors and, in turn, having the supervisors teach analytic skills to front line workers. While development seems to be an unqualified positive, it may require supervisors to question practice and policy doctrine established by the agency. The results of using a full circle (360 degree) evaluation wherein higher administrators, peers and a supervisor's workers provided evaluative data that was used by the project supervisors for their own development plans demonstrated that supervisory development can be achieved but organizational support is critical to maintenance of the changes.

Crystal Collins-Camargo, SRQIC project director, provides a thematic overview of the four state supervisory projects from her unique vantage point. Armed with her own data from focus groups in each state, national evaluative data, and the reports

from each of the projects, she provides a good overview and summary of what was attempted and what was achieved.

As part of this special double issue, we are pleased to include three articles that deal in different ways with the basic challenges involved in professional continuing education in those contexts that require consideration of the organizational needs and requirements. While professional social work education is a favored background for child welfare and, thus represents a fruitful area for continuing education and related organizational development, it is not the exclusive higher education background of all front line employees. Each of the following three articles provide opportunities to examine innovative responses to the immense obstacles and dares which lie before us.

First, Alberta J. Ellett, Chad D. Ellett, Tonya M. Westbrook and Betsy Lerner discuss a research based model for improving the selection of child welfare employees which they are currently testing with the Georgia Division of Family and Children Services. With the ultimate goal of improving service outcomes for children, youth and families, the improved employee selection protocol seeks to standardize within state laws the screening and selection of the most appropriate employees who will remain with the agency.

Next, Hal Lawson et al describe a multi-faceted partnership between social work education and state and local child welfare agencies. Originally focused on preparation of workers, the partnership has evolved to focus on action research in several areas necessary to develop and sustain a stable workforce. The authors note that "tinkering" with the system will not solve the turnover problem in child welfare and addressing turnover requires addressing a long list of related organizational and job design issues. These two previous articles described in the paragraphs above may help explain why improving supervisory performance alone or in combination with organizational culture/climate change cannot be expected to reduce "preventable turnover."

The issue ends with an important article by Susan Boyd et al discussing their work in designing and delivering joint professional continuing education to workers from a local child welfare agency and a local mental health agency. Their discussion brings us all back to the basic issues of delivery of learning to groups of mixed social workers and non-social workers, the issues of "turf" when exploring practice issues and the problems of turnover among those being trained. These are familiar issues which serve to remind the readers of basic challenges in our chosen field of endeavor.