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THE VOICES OF FAMILIES AND SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE FAMILY REUNIFICATION SYSTEM

Gladys R. Bernal

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THE VOICES OF FAMILIES AND SOCIAL WORKERS
IN THE FAMILY REUNIFICATION SYSTEM

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Masters of Social Work

by
Gladys Rocio Bernal

June 2017

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ABSTRACT

This research project aims to explore the perceptions of professional service needs from county social workers and parents seeking reunification at Walden Family Services in San Bernardino. This research study gathers the professional perspective and personal opinions of social workers that work closely with parents who are attempting to reunify with their children and the perspective of parents going through the process of attempting to reunify. This research project explores the positive and negative themes that were found from the feedback given from social workers and parents.

The following study provides important insight into areas that can be improved from social workers and parents working together. The findings can help social workers understand the perspectives of parents going through the reunification process and provide insight into the barriers that might be hindering them from being successful. The findings can be of assistance to social workers working with parents in the social welfare system as they may assist in prioritizing attention to drop-out rates of services, poverty, social work expectation towards parents and the quality of social workers in general. Vice-versa, these findings can be a help to parents understand the viewpoints of social workers and their expectations social workers have on them.

Ultimately, the research aims to provide insights on barriers that are impeding social workers and parents from working together effectively and working as a team. The following study is an exploratory research project that

explores the discrepancies in perspectives from these two different groups. This qualitative study utilizes face to face interviews with open-ended questions as the tool to collect data from participants. The two central themes that emerged during the study were the emphasis both groups placed on the importance of communication and recognition of systemic barriers that prevent parents and social workers to be successful. Based on the qualitative responses of the eight participants in this study, the researcher has concluded that there is a discrepancy between perception of professional service needs from social workers and parents.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The importance of family is a universal value that most cultures have in common. In the United States, the importance of family is held dearly and is taken into strong consideration by the court system. In today's society, it is becoming more prevalent to encounter parents who are a part of the child welfare system. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2015) reported that the number of children in foster care has increased significantly in the last ten years alone and there were nearly 418,129 children in foster care programs. Out of all the children in the foster care program, only 51% were reunified with parent(s) or principal caretakers. A big number of families not getting reunified and a high number of children being placed in foster and group homes is an area of concern. This population of families getting their children removed can include parents that might be involved in domestic violence being present in the home that jeopardizes the safety of the children, substance abuse in the home, mental health issues, child endangerment, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and/or neglect.

Whenever a child is removed from their homes and is placed at a group home, foster care placement, or placed with a relative, a case plan is required by law. Around 55% of the foster care cases have a goal of reunification within their specific case plans (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015). Having

said this, it is important for the family to receive early intervention services, like visitation services in order for families to maintain and improve the relationship amongst parent and child. With coordination from the parents and the county social worker, the case plan is created that includes goals that parents need to complete in order for the child(ren) to come back home. This case plan is created to assure that children go back home to a safe environment and to give the parents a direction to reunification. This plan includes many objectives that may include the completion of parenting classes, counseling, drug/alcohol testing, and/or visitation requirements.

County social workers are the biggest team players that work closely with the parents to assure that parents have the resources and information needed to complete their Reunification/Service Plan. County social workers are a crucial component to a family's successful reunification with their child. They are the mediators between the courts and the parents. The county social worker is assigned to write reports to the court that state the services provided to the parents and improvements and completions of the Case Plan. County social workers also have the responsibility of connecting the parents with any resources required to be successful in their plan. Social workers are required to assess the strengths and needs of the families, which can consist in empowering parents in their tough journey, connecting homeless parents to housing resources, sending the referrals to the agencies for them to complete their classes required, to name a few.

From a macro social work practice perspective, there are many systemic barriers that hinder social workers and parents from being successful in the reunification process. One of the most known systemic barriers that social workers come across is the lack of sufficient staff that leads to high caseloads. Social workers are expected but have a hard time providing families with the ability to engage, deliver quality services, provide intensive attention and achieve positive outcomes for children and families (Child Welfare Information Gateway, July 2016). This is a real systemic issue that child welfare administrators are challenged with that has caused high turnover rates and burn out from workers.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to identify and explore differences in perceptions of professional service needs between parents and social workers. This study aims to provide insight into the barriers impeding social workers and parents from working together effectively as a team. The study aims to provide social workers and parents with each other's viewpoints to attempt to understand each other's barriers and identify ways to work more effectively together.

Although social workers have the responsibility to help parents with their plan, it has been observed though employees at Walden Visitation Center, that there has been an increasing amount of parents that have expressed negative feedback towards their social workers. Employees in the visitation center that supervise visits between biological parents and children have observed patterns through feedback from parents that feel like county social workers do not give the

necessary attention to their cases. Parents have often expressed that they feel like they are being “set up for failure” by the social workers and express the lack of support. This information was gathered through the researcher's past work experience working at Walden Visitation Center.

The research method used in this research study was a qualitative design. The study consisted in an exploratory research project that explored the discrepancies in perspectives between the two different groups. The study aimed to gather the perspective of the social workers and parents through face-to-face interview at Walden Visitation Center in San Bernardino. The research design was selected since the study focused on finding patterns through open ended questions and focused on collecting more in-depth results.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

The necessity to conduct research in this area arose from the researcher's experience working at Walden Visitation Center. The researcher was able to observe and listen to opinions first hand coming from parents themselves. The researcher was also able to observe and listen to opinions coming from social workers but never was able to assess if there was a correlation between parents who attended visitation and the quality of social worker.

In the social work profession, checking biases and values that one may hold are important to process as it may reflect the way social workers perform their work. The following study provides important insights into areas of

improvement that are necessary to increase family reunification. The findings might be of help to county social workers working with parents in the social welfare system as they may assist in prioritizing attention to drop-out rates of services, poverty, social work expectation towards parents and the quality of social workers in general.

The following project focuses on all phases of the generalist intervention model. The findings allow social workers to reevaluate their approach from the beginning, assessing, planning, implementing, evaluating, and terminating phase with parents going through the tough time with their families. The findings of this study also allow social workers to recognize the impact that they have towards families and possibly encourage workers to advocate for themselves when they feel like they cannot provide the appropriate attention and best quality service.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The following chapter consists of limitations found in research relevant to the issue of reunification among parents in the visitation center. The subsections will include drop-out and noncompliance in child welfare services, poverty, social work expectations, and studies focusing on quality of social workers. The final subsection will examine the theories relevant to this population that were used to conceptualize the idea in this study.

Studies Focusing on Quality of Social Workers

Social workers all over the field often face obstacles and challenges when engaging in conversation with their clients. In the field of social work, a social worker will run into clients with different personalities that present with complex stories and issues. Social workers are taught and expected to be able to connect and communicate effectively with the client to best assist them. In a study conducted by Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, and Hughes (2008), communication skills are asserted as one of the most important skill in the social work practice. The study presented by Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, and Hughes (2008) aimed to explore the communication skills social workers use.

The study was conducted through interviews between social workers and actors playing a parent. The most significant observation that was found in the study was the communication skills that social workers are lacked. The study

also found a lack of empathy and high level of seriousness which resulted in the high level of social workers raising concerns and rarely identifying any positives (Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, and Hughes, 2008). This study is important to consider because it provides research in the areas that might need improvements in the social work field.

There were limitations to the Forrester, Kershaw, Moss, and Hughe (2008) study. The study did not focus on a specific clientele as it was done with social workers and people who were acting to be clients. Although this study identified important qualities that social workers should have, the study lacked reliability because real clients might answer differently.

In a study done by Lee and Ayón (2004), research was focused and conducted on clients in the Los Angeles County that were a part of two programs in the Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), that consisted of Family Maintenance (FM) and Family Preservation (FP). The study aimed to explore whether there was a correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes in child abuse cases. Research in this specific study focused on closed cases from 1999 and 2000 gathered from Family Maintenance workers and Family Preservation workers (Lee & Ayón 2004). The findings in this study were significant, as it was successful in finding a correlation between the relationships with the workers and clients. The finding in this study suggested that there is a benefit and better outcomes when child welfare workers focus on building quality relationships with their clients (Lee & Ayón 2004). In support to

the following study that was conducted in this research project, the study done by Lee and Ayon (2004), does propose the need for workers to really focus on the quality of the relationship that they have with their clients. It is also suggested by Lee and Ayon (2004) that barriers that social workers have should be reduced in order for social workers to provide affective services and quality care.

There was a limitation to the Lee and Ayon (2004) study. The study reported that participants might have answered socially desirable answers instead of answering the truth for each question (Lee & Ayón, 2004). Individuals in the welfare system have a higher chance of providing socially desirable answers due to the fear of saying something that might affect their ability to reunify with their children. Parents answering socially desirable question is a limitation that might had happened in this study but nonetheless, this research opens up the floor to find out ways to have parents feel more comfortable in answering the questions truthfully.

Drop-Outs and Noncompliance in Child Welfare Services. According to an article written by Dawson, and Berry (2002), there are a high number of drop-outs and noncompliance rates in the child welfare realm. This issue has been leading to high rates of children being removed from their families consequently leading to termination of parental rights. The article states that client drop outs are a very problematic issue because it ranges from 25% to 70%.

Poverty. There are a high number of people who are in the child welfare system who suffer from poverty. As observed in the visitation center in San

Bernardino, most of the parents visiting their children are often struggling to find permanent shelter. The article by Dawson and Berry (2002) state that poverty is often linked with abuse and neglect because of the stresses that they carry in their life. In regards to Maslow's (1954) theory of a hierarchy of human needs, it can be predicted that an individual living in poverty, that has got their children removed, struggle in attending any parenting classes due to having to focus on their biological and physiological needs. The importance of a social worker being involved really comes into play when dealing with this population because much attention is required to help the parent's with these situation and living conditions.

Realistic Social Work Expectations. When talking about poverty, it is important to identify the realistic and unrealistic expectations that social workers have when working with a complex population. In a study done by Ribner and Knei-Paz (2002), the findings resulted in recognizing that, parents often expressed "unfulfilled expectations, unmet needs, and recurring disappointments" coming from their social workers. The population in this area often has complex lives which social workers must be aware of and have realistic expectations.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Systems theory is used to conceptualize the ideas in this study. According to Payne (2015), systems theory consists of systems that individuals have that interact with each other through a complex process in which

information and actions interact with each other. Payne (2015) explains that with systems theory, a social worker can better understand how individuals, families, communities and wider social environments affect each other.

In the social work profession, social workers are taught to look at clients through a wider lens and be mindful of the multiple systems that clients present with. System theory is very important to consider when working with clients, as it illustrates the importance to understand how one piece of a system can profoundly affect other pieces of a bigger system. It is equally important to understand how domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health issues, physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and/or neglect, in a family can impact an individual's system. Systems theory is appropriate for this study when attempting to understand and recognize that it is difficult for families to reach homeostasis when there is a lot of dysfunction. This theory can be a helpful tool for the social work field to be able to gain a greater understanding of how these experiences can impact the children who are involved in the child welfare.

Summary

This study aims to provide social workers and parents with each other's viewpoints to attempt to understand each other's barriers and identify ways to work more effectively together. There are many barriers to reunification that parents are confronted by every day. Systems theory is used to structure the following research. Although there are two sides of each story, this study aims to

provide and add to the parent's and social workers insights to the literature and look for solutions to enhanced therapeutic relationship between parents and social workers.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study aims to explore differences that may exist between the perceptions of professional services needs from social workers and parents seeking reunification. The following chapter provides detailed information of how this study was carried out. The following section discusses the study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study is to identify differences in perceptions of professional service needs given between parents and social workers. This study consists of an exploratory research project that explores the discrepancies in perspectives two different groups. This study gathers the perspective of the social workers, who have professional viewpoints and impressions of the topic, and also include the parents going through the process in attempting to reunify with their children. This study is to gain knowledge of barriers and differences that may exist between social workers working in the child welfare system and parents that are in the child welfare system in San Bernardino County. This qualitative study utilized face to face interviews with open-ended questions as the tool to collect data from participants.

The reason for using an exploratory, qualitative approach with face-to-face interviews is that participants were able to provide their own personal experiences and add their own answers, rather than participants being restricted to what they can answer. Since the social worker and parent perspective has not often been researched, this will allow participants to voice their opinions and insights.

A limitation of using face-to-face interviews can be more intrusive and less anonymous than conducting surveys which might have caused for parents to provide more socially desirable answers instead of answering the truth for each question. When considering the population that was used as participants in this study, taking in consideration that half of these participants are parents in the welfare system, it can be predicted that families in the welfare system had a fear of not doing anything wrong in order to receive their reward- in this case, their ability to reunify with their children. Parents might have not felt comfortable answering the truth in fear that it will affect their reunification with their children. The social worker might have also felt uncomfortable sharing their honest opinions as they might not want to tell the truth of what really happens in their thought process and fear of information affecting their employment. Nonetheless, this type of research method opens up the floor to parents and social workers voice to be heard and noted.

Sampling

This study utilized a non-random purposive sample of social workers that refer families attempting to reunify to Walden Visitation Center. The sample also included parents attending visitation at the visitation center. Approval was given by the supervisor from agency Walden Family Services which included approval from the county to interview county workers and parents. There were a total of eight participants that were asked to participate in a face-to-face individual interview, with four participants being social workers and four participants being parents attending visitation at Walden Visitation Center. The agency's supervisor and staff selected parents and social workers who were willing to participate in the study. Once a participant volunteered to be interviewed, the researcher coordinated a time with participant to interview that was convenient for all parties; which included the participants and researchers schedule and availability of the conference room where study took place.

The sample members represented a variety of ages from 28-51 years old. Researcher also attempted to acquire information from a diverse population when considering gender, ethnicity and years of experience/years of being in the welfare system.

Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected via live, audio-recorded face-to-face interviews. The face-to-face interviews consisted of six questions that differ from

each group interviewed. For the set of parents attending visitation at Walden Visitation Center, parents were asked, (1) to describe the ideal social worker that would assist them in getting reunified. The second question asked, (2) how would they describe their experience working with social workers and were asked to please expand on positive and negative feedback? The third questions asked, (3) do they think the quality of social worker impacts their motivation? The fourth questions asked, (4) what expectations do they feel social workers have on them and if they feel like they are realistic? The fifth question asked, (5) what are some barriers that they have witness that prevent them from being successful? The sixth questions asked, (6) what do they think can help them be more successful or motivated in reunifying with their children?

The social work participants were asked, (1) how they would describe the ideal social worker characteristics and roles that help parents reunify. They were then asked if there are any barriers that prevent them from being able to affectively take the social work role. The third questions asked, (3) what they expect from the parents attempting to reunify. The fourth question asked, (4) why they think parents fail to complete their reunification plan. The last questions asked, (5) if they thought there is a correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes in reunification. The researcher employed the use of probing questions to further delve into participant responses.

Procedures

Each face-to-face interview began with instructions and description of the study and its purpose. After a participant agreed to participate in the interview, demographic information was acquired by the researcher providing a survey with questions. This information collected consisted of age, gender identification, ethnicity identification, achieved education level, number of years in current field/number of years in the welfare system, specific trainings, and spoken languages.

The data collection for parents took place in a conference room at Walden Visitation Center. Conference rooms were reserved for each face-to-face interview. The researcher asked supervisor of the visitation center for best times to reserve the conference rooms. The conference rooms were reserved for approximately one and one half hours for each face-to-face interview with a total of four interviews. The data collection for social workers took place in the county office in San Bernardino where social workers reserved the conference room for the interview to take place.

Data Collection was conducted between February 9th and February 22nd 2017 by the researcher.

Protection of Human Subjects

The information gathered from all participants was kept completely confidential. Face-to-face interviews were take place in private conference rooms behind closed doors. Before the interview was taken, each participant

was informed of their confidentiality and anonymity. Participants also read and signed informed consent at this time and were informed about the audio recording. Each participant was assigned a number to keep their names confidential. Once the study was completed, the sign-in sheets, printed email records, audio recording, participant's assigned names, and note taking were shredded and deleted from USB drive.

Data Analysis

Data was gathered through face-to-face interviews and was analyzed with qualitative techniques. The first thing that the researcher did was transcribe the audio recorded of the face-to-face interviews. Thematic analysis was used to identify the themes. Participants were assigned a code to be used to identify each participant. Major themes and subthemes were identified and coded into codebook that was built by the researcher. The themes and subthemes were categorized and organized according to the common themes.

Summary

This chapter addressed the research method that was used in conducting this study on the perception of professional services needs from social workers and families seeking reunification. This chapter discussed the study design, the sampling methods used, the data collection analysis, procedures, interview instruments, the human subjects and confidentiality.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This study explores the differences that exist between the perceptions of professional services needs from social workers and parents seeking reunification. Even through the narratives given by the parents and social workers were unique, there were some common themes that emerged. The following section provides detailed description of the participants and a detailed synopsis of the responses from the two groups; parents and social workers.

Sample Description

The eight participants in this study were individually interviewed on different days. In the beginning of each interview, each participant was given a demographic questionnaire that requested the following information: age, gender, ethnicity/race, marital status, highest level of education completed, employment status, and languages spoken. The social workers were asked two additional questions in the questionnaire. The first additional question asked the number of years the social worker had been in the field. The second question asked whether they had ever received specific training on substance abuse, child abuse or domestic violence.

The demographic characteristics of the participants were also grouped into two, a group for the parents and a group for the social workers. Table 1 in

Appendix A presents the sample demographic characteristics. The mean age was 35.5 for the parents group, with an age range of 34-40. For the social workers, the mean was 37.75, with an age range of 28-51. The study, between both groups, were largely female (7), with the exception of one male parent that was interviewed. The majority of the participants for the parent group were Hispanic with three out of four parents were Hispanic, with one parent being white. For the social workers, there were two Hispanic, one white and one social worker who identified as 'other'. In terms of education, two parents completed some high school, one was a high school graduate, and one completed some college. For the social workers, all participants in this group had their master's degree. The employment status was three out of four parents that were unemployed with one parent stating she was self-employed. For the social workers, they were all employed. The social workers years of experience ranged from 4.5 years to 10years with a mean of 6.25 years. In regards to marital status, two parents reported being single and two parents being separated. All social workers reported that they were currently married. Three of the parents had their children removed for child endangerment and one parent reported that his child had been removed for his substance abuse problems and child neglect.

As previously discussed, parents in this study were required to be attending visitation at Walden Visitation Center and social workers were required to be social workers who refer their parents to Walden Visitation Center. Participants were asked open-ended questions to elicit responses regarding their

perception on professional service needs. The questions asked each group what they considered to be the ideal social worker, ideal way for parents to work with social workers, and addressed motivation, expectations, and barriers.

Qualitative Results

Parents Perspective

Several themes emerged from the parent interviews, which are described in this section. The themes that were identified from the parent's responses were: their perspective of the ideal social worker, negative and positive experiences with social workers, their issue on the lack of motivation, their opinion on the expectations that social workers have on them and the barriers that prevent them from being successful.

Ideal Social Worker. Parents were asked to describe their ideal social worker that would best assist them in getting reunified with their children. All the parents stated that their ideal social worker communicated with them openly and honestly. The parents emphasized that they often did not feel like their social workers reached out to them enough and were not available or flexible enough to build a relationship with the parents. The following quote from one of the participants truly embodies the sentiment of all the parents in terms of communicating with the social workers:

“...It takes too long for them [social workers] to call us. We are waiting for our appointments to come and they tell us that we need to wait for them to call us to let us know where we need to go and what times we can go. In

the meantime, I am waiting for this phone call and sometimes I don't get the phone call, you know, she tells me that I shouldn't wait too long to call her but that's what I'm supposed to do, I'm supposed to wait for her phone call."

All four parents made very similar statements during their interviews in regards to communication.

Many parents also stated that their ideal social worker would follow through with the actions that they said they would do. Three out of four participants mentioned a desire for consistency and follow through with phone calls. They expressed that many times, social workers would tell the parents that they would enroll them in a specific class that was required by their case plan. However, more often than not the social worker did not take initiative until the parents reminded them of their obligation. Parents went on to state that many times, the social worker would tell the parents that they would call them back with information the parents needed however they would not follow through. The parents in this case feel like they need to constantly follow up with the social worker in order for their questions to be answered. Per the parents, the ideal social worker should be able to promptly connect them with the appropriate resources and do their best to assist the parents with their needs. All of the parents agreed that an ideal social worker should be understanding and should try to be objective. Three out of four parents felt that their social worker always

seemed to be judging them and were not motivating the parents enough to make real change in their lives.

Experience working with social workers. Parents were asked to describe their experiences working with their social workers. Three out of four parents expressed that their experience working with their social worker had been negative overall. Most of the parents did not have many positive things to say about social workers. The first three parents stated that they have, and continue to have difficulty keeping good communication with their social worker. They expressed that the social workers were never available and were never a source of support. Three out of four parents expressed that their social worker never motivated them in completing their case plan. The three parents stated that they wished they had someone to cheer them on and provide reassurance that they were doing well.

The fourth parent stated that they had a very good experience with social workers. The participant stated that she had two different cases open and that her first experience with her social worker was great. She stated that her social worker was her only form of support and that her social worker was extremely motivating. This participant stated:

“...she believed in me, she motivated me to go to my classes, they didn’t let me give up on my classes when I was about to. She [social worker] was like, “no, we’re not giving up, we believe you can do this, you can!”

This participant really emphasized that her social worker really gave her the confidence to continue her classes. This participant stated that this experience was only positive with her first case. She stated that things changed after her second open case. She stated that the second social worker did not connect her with any resources needed and that she felt judged from her social worker. In addition to this parent's second experience with a social worker, the other three parents had issues of feeling judged. The other three parents expressed that they felt that their social worker was too 'quick to judge' and felt that their social workers would make remarks that made them feel judged for their actions.

There was a theme of blame and shame that was consistent in the sentiment of all four parents. The parents expressed that their social worker often times made them feel like they were bad parents and that made them feel like they were not important enough. One parent stated that she felt like she needed to jump through 'hoops' to get her kids back.

Connection between quality of social worker and their motivation. Parents were asked if they felt that there was a correlation between the quality of social worker and their motivation. There were different responses to this question. Half of the responses expressed that the quality of social worker does impact their motivation. The male respondent stated:

"...if the social workers were more on the ball, I would be too."

The second respondent stated that her motivation often goes down because of the time period that the kids are removed. She expressed that she believes that she is motivated when the social worker prompts her to do because it makes her feel that she has something to accomplish to reunify with her children.

Two respondents stated that they don't believe that there is a correlation between the quality of social work and their own motivation. The two parent respondents who stated this were the high school graduates. They stated that the social workers had nothing to do with their motivation. They stated that their motivation stemmed from their children and that there was nothing that surprised them from the social works. Both parents stated that they felt that if they had a bad social worker, it would only motivate them more to prove to them that they can do it.

Expectations. Parents were asked what expectations they felt social workers had placed on them and if they felt that they were realistic. Three out of four parents stated the same exact statement:

“...to be perfect.”

Three out of four parents felt that the social workers expected them to be perfect. The parent who had two open cases and was a high school graduate was the only participant who expressed that she felt that the expectations from the social workers were very realistic. She expressed that the social workers expected her to finish all the classes and follow the case plan.

Barriers. Parents were asked to list the barriers that they think have hindered them from being successful. The parents described different barriers that have prevented them from following through their case plan. Two of the parents stated that transportation was a big barrier for them at times. Both of these participants stated that they had issues in getting their bus passes from their social workers. They stated that the bus was their only sort of transportation and that they relied on the social worker providing them with the passes. One parent stated that their main barrier was their homelessness. She stated that she felt that if she had a place to get ready for her visits, she would feel better prepared to see her children. She expressed that it was hard to sleep in the streets. The last participant stated that her biggest barrier was life itself and the social worker. This Participant did not expand on what she meant on life being a barrier. She stated that her main barrier was her social worker because she felt that she was not given all the tools to be successful.

Social Worker Perspective

Several themes emerged from the social workers, which are described in this section. The themes that were identified from the social worker's responses were: their perspective of the ideal social worker, barriers that prevent social workers from affectively taking the social work role, the expectations that they have towards parents, reasons why parents fail to complete their reunification plan, and the correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes in reunification.

Ideal Social Worker. The four social workers were asked to describe the ideal social worker characteristics and roles that help parents reunify. The social worker's responses had a lot in common pertaining to the ideal social worker. Some themes that were identified in their responses were; the social workers believed that the ideal social worker must be well organized and must maintain consistency in their contact with the parents. They also expressed that the ideal social worker must be able to communicate, engage, and motivate the parents they are working with. They also expressed that the perfect social worker should be nonjudgmental, must give encouragement, treat people equal, have patience, and have empathy with those they work with.

Barriers. Next the social workers were asked to describe the barriers they believe prevent them from being as effective as possible when taking the social work role. All four social workers stated that their biggest barrier from providing the highest level of service was the sheer case load they have to manage. They stated that often times; they did not always have the time to meet with every client once a month and often times were forced to do phone conferences with parents instead of meeting with them in person. They stated that the high case load of fifty to sixty cases made accurate and thorough documentation a real challenge. The four social workers stated that the extensive documentation that they are required to do for each client takes a lot of time away from them and they are not getting the help they need. They went on to state that the department of children and family services (DCFS) is working on trying to

decrease the volume of cases that each social worker is currently responsible for.

Another big barrier the social workers mentioned was the barrier of resistance from parents. They stated that resistance from the parents makes their job extremely difficult at times. They expressed that many times it is hard to build a relationship and help the parent with their needs, if they resist the idea of making a cooperative and compromising relationship with the social worker.

All of the social workers agreed that one of their biggest barriers was having limited access to necessary resources. Three of the social workers stated that there had been many times when homeless parents had completed their case plan but were still missing the housing component required for reunification. They stated that San Bernardino County lacked sufficient housing resources and this prevented parents from reunifying with their children. Social workers expressed frustration that the lack of resources in the county for homeless parents was not enough. The county was also not providing enough resources for parents or people with substance abuse problems. The social workers stated that the barrier of substance abuse prevents the parents from being able to reunify especially if they are still using. One social worker stated that in order for parents to maintain sobriety, they have to put their recovery first. She explained that without the parents being sober, it is hard for the parent to maintain a job, housing, or continue their classes, let alone reunite with their children.

The last barrier that the social workers discussed was the limited access to contact parents. All four social workers stated that parents are always changing their numbers and do not update them, therefore making it hard for the social workers to communicate with them. They state that often times they are not able to easily communicate schedule changes or changes in case plan with the parents because of this.

Expectations. Social workers were asked to describe the level of expectations they place on the parents. The responses that they provided were, again, very similar to one another. The main subtheme that was expressed in this category was the expectations they place on parents to complete the assigned case plan. The social workers stated that the parents were expected to complete all the classes required, be consistent with their visitations and show recognizable behavioral changes. They also stated that the parents were expected to show positive interaction during visitations and use positive parenting skills. All social workers stated that they expect for the parents to show effort, communication and take responsibility. They stated that parents need to stop blaming others and take control of their own case plan. Parents are expected to maintain sobriety and try to compromise with the social worker to develop a positive, nurturing relationship. One social worker stated:

“...when you are working harder than the client, there is a problem because at the end it’s not going to benefit them.”

Unsuccessful Reunification. This study asked parents and social workers to provide reasons why they thought some parents were unable to complete their reunification plan. The subtheme that stood out the most was the issue on the parents not taking responsibility. All four social workers stated that they have noticed that, in most cases, the unsuccessful parents have been the ones who did not take responsibility and blamed others for their failure. These same parents were often the ones who continuously resisted the social worker and were not willing to work them. The following statement from the social worker embodies this issue:

“ ...they like to blame us because we are not doing certain things but we give them the tools and they have to use them and make changes.”

The four social workers also mentioned that they understood why parents became upset or confused when they are meeting with different social workers each visit instead of having only one social worker throughout the process. They explained that during the process of parents getting their children taken away, a parent will have to interact with multiple different social workers. The social workers interviewed described how they were the third or fourth social worker some of these parents had worked with. This lack of consistency caused several parents to approach each new social worker with resistance. The social workers noticed that the parents who are unsuccessful in reunifying with their children are lacking in their communication with the social worker. They expressed that these parents would not check in with them to see the status of their case and follow up

with them. All four social workers stated that the parents often expect them to hold their hands at all times.

All of the social workers in this study made it clear that a major reason why parents fail to reunify is because of the parent's drug abuse, homelessness, domestic violence as well as a lack of social support. Often times, these issues make it extremely hard for parents to maintain focus on their case plan which in turn causes them to fail. All four social workers were concerned with the lack of support and resources for drug addicted parents. It is extremely important to provide them with these necessary resources because a parent can easily relapse from drug use, causing them to engage in domestic violence or end up homeless again. A strong social support structure is critical to parents recovering from addiction.

Client-worker Relationship and The Outcomes of Reunification. Social workers were asked if they believed there was any correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes in reunification. Three out of the four social workers agreed that there is some sort of correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes of reunification. The three social workers had similar responses that focused on the importance of having a good client-worker relationship. The social workers stated that when there is a good client-worker relationship, there is a much greater chance that the parents and social worker are in good communication and both parties are aware of each other's needs and expectations. One social worker stated that if they have a good

relationship with their client, more resources are available to them because the client is able to reach out and state what they need. Another social worker stated that it is vital to have good communication because parents and social workers can work together as a team.

The social worker who did not believe there was a correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes in reunification stated that she gives the same tools to all the parents and that if parents don't reunify, it is because the parent hasn't done what they needed to do.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The following section discusses the findings that were presented in chapter four. This section will also address the limitations of this study and the implications for the social work practice issues on which the study was focused.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to explore the differences that may exist between the perceptions of professional service needs from social workers and parents seeking reunification. The two central themes that emerged during the study were the emphasis both groups placed on the importance of communication and recognition of systemic barriers that prevent parents and social workers to be successful. Based on the qualitative responses of the eight participants in this study, the researchers has concluded that there is a discrepancy between perception of professional service needs from social workers and parents. The responses of each parent and social worker were similar to their respective group. For example, all four parents had many similar responses to each other's perception of professional services which paralleled with the responses of all the four social workers.

The most notable theme that emerged in this study was the importance of communication. Throughout the interview, all participants seemed to emphasize

the word communication and miscommunication throughout the interviews.

Forrester, Kershaw, Moss and Huges (2008) state in their study that communication skills are asserted as one of the most important skills in the social work practice. This concept of effective and efficient communication is a major component of all social work professions. However, there seems to be a discrepancy between the communication experiences of the parents and social workers in this study. Communication is a key component to building a positive client-worker relationship. The findings of this study support the Lee and Ayon (2004) study, where Lee and Ayon discover that there are benefits and better outcomes when child welfare workers focus on building quality relationship with their clients. In support to this study, Lee and Ayon (2004) propose the need for workers to really focus on the quality of the relationship that they have with their clients and reduce barriers that they might have to provide affective services and quality care.

Throughout the interviews, the parents emphasized how they wished their social worker would be more prompt in returning phone calls and be more understanding when communicating with parents. The parents expressed that they did not feel like their social worker was a source of support for them. The parents also expressed financial and housing barriers that prevented them from being successful in reunification with their children. The results from this study supports the research done by Ribner and Knei-Paz (2002) that resulted in

recognizing that, parents often expressed “unfulfilled expectations, unmet needs, and recurring disappointments” coming from their social workers.

In contrast to the parent’s statements on communication, the social workers emphasized that they noticed a different communication problem. The problem that social workers identified was that the parents were not calling them back. The social workers stated that this communication barrier was due to the parents constantly changing their phone numbers. In addition, the social workers spoke about the systemic barriers that get in the way of reunification. The high case load was a prevalent problem as well as the other systemic barriers the social workers face. The high case load appeared to be the main reason why the social workers felt that the parents could not be fully supported.

It is interesting to note that from the social workers perspective, they understand that there are systemic barriers in the way of having perfect communication with the parents but do have the expectations for parents to complete their case plan affectively and take responsibility of their actions. They expect the parents to maintain sobriety and not blame others for their mistakes and in the parent’s perspective, they see themselves as overwhelmed with demands, in need of more support and not being able to meet so many deadlines.

The theme of resistance was also noted by the social workers during the study. The social workers all stated that their main challenge was dealing with resistant parents. All four social workers expressed how difficult it was to

connect with parents when they arrive at their office in a resistant or unapproachable manner. During the interview with the parent participants, it was noted by the researcher that the parents seemed to express a great deal of anger about their children being removed. It also appeared as if they were blaming the social worker for their child's removal instead of the parents recognizing the real reason for which the children were removed.

During the study, a pattern between the education level of the parents and their perspective towards their social worker was identified emerged. It was noted that the parents who expressed bad experience and blame towards their social worker had a lower level of education. It was also noted that the individual who was a high school graduate stated that the expectations the social workers had placed on her were both fair and realistic. The parent who had some college education stated that she did not think that her social worker's expectations were reasonable but she did not feel like the client-worker relationship mattered. This parent expressed a bad experience with her social worker but did not place blame on the social worker. This parent expressed that she just wanted to know what she needed to do to get her children back so she can complete it. The two high school graduate parents appeared to take responsibility for their actions in comparison to the two parents who were not high school graduates.

Limitations

Although this study contributes to the social work practice, it is important to consider the limitations of this study. A limitation in this study is the small

sample size. Due to the small sample size, this may not be representative of the general social work and parent population. Another limitation of this study was gender of the sample population. The sample consisted of seven females in total and only one male. This small size may not best reflect the same opinions and responses of the general population of social workers and parents. Additionally, the participants of the study were recruited by the supervisor from Walden Visitation Center, potentially excluding parents who were not present during the supervisors 9:00am to 5:00pm work schedule.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

The findings of the present study have several implications for the field of social work. These findings suggest that individuals in the social work profession have barriers that prevent them from administering the social work role as effectively as possible. It also suggests that social workers have expectations towards parents that can many times be unrealistic, especially when parents do not have a strong support system or have other barriers that prevent them from being successful in reunification. It is important for social workers to maintain an open line of communication with their clients in order to best assist and assess their needs. Based on the results gathered in this research, the client-worker relationship is extremely important to keep in mind while working in the social work profession. It is also extremely important to be engaged with the client and be motivating, nonjudgmental, patient, and have empathy for the families in the child welfare system.

The findings of this research have implications in the macro level. The findings suggest that the systemic barriers have negative affect on the social workers and their relationship with the client. The systemic barriers appear to hinder the social worker from having enough time to affectively take their social work role. The biggest systemic barrier that was identified was the high caseloads. This is a real systemic issue that social workers are challenged with that has caused high turnover rates and burn out from workers.

Furthermore, issues including resistance with parents needs to be addressed in future research. Social workers can benefit from new engagement tactics while working with parents who show resistance. The benefits of words of affirmation can also be addressed in future research. As expressed through the parents in the study, they wished their social worker was more motivating and encouraging. They stated that they needed motivation and reassurance that they were doing okay.

Conclusion

This research was conducted to explore the discrepancies on perception of professional services needs from social workers and parents seeking reunification. The data for this study was gathered from four social workers that work directly with families that attend Walden Visitation Center and four parents attending the visitation center. Parents and social workers were asked different questions regarding their view on their experience working together and their

view on professional service needs. The results of this research supported previous research that indicates the importance of the client worker relationship, the quality of social work and the barriers that prevent social workers and parents to be successful and effective.

The study results suggested that there is a discrepancy in the way that social workers and parents view their experience working with each other and the services provided. The study also suggests the need for further research on the way to engage resistant parents in the welfare system.

APPENDIX A

SAMPLE DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Table 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics				
Sample demographic characteristics	N Parents	N Social Workers	M Parents	M Social Workers
Age			35.5 (range: 34-40)	37.75 (range: 28- 51)
Sex				
Male	1	0		
Female	3	4		
Race/ethnicity				
Hispanic/Latino	3	2		
White	1	1		
Other	0	1		
Highest level of Education completed				
Some high school	2	0		
High school	1	0		
graduate	1	0		
Some college	0	4		
Master's degree				
Marital status				
Single	2	0		
Married	0	4		
Separated	2	0		
Employment status				
Employed	0	4		
Unemployed	3	0		
Self employed	1	0		
Reason for children being removed from parents	3			
Child endangerment	1			
Substance abuse	1			
Child neglect				
Years in the field of social work				6.25 (range:4.5-10)
Trainings completed				
Substance abuse		4		
Domestic violence		3		
Child abuse		4		

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview Guide

Demographic Questionnaire

1. Age_____
2. Gender_____
3. Ethnicity/Race
 - a. Hispanic or Latino____
 - b. African American____
 - c. Asian____
 - d. American Indian or Alaska Native____
 - e. White____
 - f. Other____
4. Marital Status
 - a. Single____
 - b. Married____
 - c. Divorce____
 - d. Widowed____
 - e. Separated____
5. Highest Level of Education Completed
 - a. > middle school
 - b. Middle school
 - c. Some High school
 - d. High school graduate
 - e. Some College
 - f. College Graduate
 - g. B.A
 - h. B.S
 - i. Master's degree
 - j. Other____
6. Employment Status
 - a. Employed____
 - b. Unemployed____
 - c. Retired____
 - d. Self-employed____
7. Languages
spoken_____

Questions asked for Social Workers ONLY

8. Years in the field of Social Work____
9. Trainings completed
 - a. Substance abuse
 - b. Domestic violence
 - c. Child abuse
 - d. Other_____

APPENDIX C
INFORMED CONSENT



California State University, San Bernardino
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 12/20/2017 VOID AFTER 12/19/2017
IRB# SW1727 CHAIR *[Signature]*

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to gain knowledge of barriers and differences that may exist between social workers working in the child welfare and parents that are in the child welfare system in San Bernardino County. The study is being conducted by Gladys Bernal, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Erica Lizano, Professor in the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-committee at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to identify differences in perceptions of professional service needs between parents and social workers.

DESCRIPTION: Study Participants will be interviewed and audio recorded. They will be questioned on their perception of service needs and insights on their own experience.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain anonymous and data will be reported in aggregated form and in coding.

DURATION: It will take 30 min to 1 hour to complete the interview process.

RISKS: There are no foreseeable risks to the participants.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Lizano at (909) 537-5584.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2017.

.....
I consent to be audio recorded for the purpose of this study YES_____ NO_____

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Place an X mark here _____

_____ Date

APPENDIX D
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Questions for Parents attempting to reunify with their children

1. How would you describe the ideal social worker that would assist you in getting reunified?
2. How would you describe your experience working with social workers?
 - a. Please expand on positive and negative feedback.
3. Do you think the quality of social worker impacts your motivation?
4. What expectations do you feel social workers have on you? Do you think they are realistic?
5. What are some barriers that you have witness that prevent you from being successful?
6. What do you think can help you be more successful or motivated in reunifying with your children?

Question for social workers

1. How would you describe the ideal social worker characteristics and roles that help parents reunify?
2. Are there any barriers that prevent you from being able to affectively take the social work role?
3. What do you expect from the parents?
4. Why do you think parents fail to complete their reunification plan?
5. Do you think there is a correlation between the client-worker relationship and the outcomes in reunification?

APPENDIX E
AGENCY APPROVAL



December 2, 2016

Walden Family Services Visitation Center
255 N. D Street, Suite 400
San Bernardino, CA 92404
(909) 361-3000

To Whom it May Concern,

Gladys Bernal, an employee of Walden Family Services – Visitation Center, has requested to utilize Walden Visitation resources/data to complete a research project. The study will examine barriers and differences that may exist between the perceptions of professional services needs from social workers among families seeking reunification. This study will explore differences among parents and social worker's perspectives and highlight the barriers that may impact reunification.

Data will be gathered through face-to-face interviews of county social workers and parents that utilize Walden Visitation Centers, and will be analyzed using qualitative techniques. Ms. Bernal will be using 2016 data pulled from Walden program statistics. Ms. Bernal will also transcribe audio recorded of the face-to-face interviews, using open-ended questions. Participants will be assigned a code to be used to identify each participant.

I have discussed and will be providing the data and subjects to be interviewed in order to complete the research study. I understand that this research project will be published and used as Ms. Bernal's thesis to completed her Master's in Social Work at CSUSB. If you have any further questions, or concerns, please contact me at (909) 361-3000.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Rochelle Emerick".

Rochelle Emerick, MSW
Supervisor, Walden Family Visitation Center

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