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DECISION MAKING IN CHILD WELFARE: THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN SOCIAL WORKER CHARACTERISTICS AND THE
PERCEPTION OF DETAINING CHILDREN IN
CHILD ABUSE INVESTIGATIONS

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
Elizabeth Ann Donth

June 2012

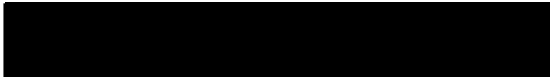
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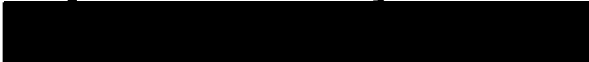
by
Elizabeth Ann Donth


June 2012

Approved by:


Dr. Jennifer Pabustan-Claar, Faculty
Supervisor, Social Work

6/4/12
Date


Dr. Laurel Brown, Deputy Director,
Riverside County DPSS, CPS


Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

The goal of decision-making in child welfare is to make fair, equitable, and unbiased judgments that promote the safety of a child while upholding satisfactory family outcomes. All too often however, child welfare decisions appear to be made in a subjective and prejudiced manner. Typically, overworked social workers are forced to make swift decisions during situations of high stress and chaos that may ultimately prove to be problematic and damaging.

This quantitative study explored several hypotheses regarding the relationship between individual characteristics of child welfare social workers (such as age, gender, relationship status, parental status, years of experience as a social worker, and educational level) and their perceptions of detaining children in child abuse investigations.

Following the utilization of a self-administered questionnaire, the results indicated only one variable, the age of a social worker's child as that of over age 15 had any significance on a worker's perception of monthly detention rates. The research suggests the need for further training which could lead to better outcomes for the families in the communities served.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to my academic advisor, Dr. Jennifer Pabustan-Claar for her guidance, wisdom, and insight with this research project. I would also like to thank the members of my cohort for supporting me through the last three years with your laughter, enthusiasm, and friendship. The professors in this program deserve thanks for consistently yet gently encouraging me to reach for the upper limits of this voyage I have been on for the past three years. Special thanks to my friends and family who believed in me, pushed me to follow my dreams and allowed me to develop my wings to fly.

DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my wonderful husband, Scott, and my beautiful children; Caitlin, Mary, and Molly, who have patiently encouraged me, listened to my frustrations, and held my hand in support. I have been blessed to have such amazing people in my life.

I would also like to dedicate this to my parents who instilled in me a passion for learning as well as the courage to follow my dreams.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

No one is happy to see a child protective worker at their door as this suggests there is a serious problem (Morris, 2005, p. 135). Parents may experience feelings of fear, anxiety, embarrassment, or denial. Conversely, social workers have long been criticized as being overzealous and judgmental. Social workers also have been identified as overworked and overwhelmed by the gravity of the choices they must make (Freitag & Wordes, 2001, p. 75). Social workers typically labor with limited resources and multiple demands, therefore decisions tend to involve some level of subjectivity (DeRoma et al., 2006). Schwalbe (2004, as cited in Parada et al., 2007) indicates that often professional judgments are drawn on intuition or common sense therefore, they are highly prone to error. This chapter will explore decision-making in child welfare including the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the significance of the project for social work practice.

Problem Statement

Nearly every day, children around the world experience maltreatment by those who are entrusted to provide the utmost care and nurturance, their parents. Within the dynamics of family development theory, the transition to becoming a parent is a life task which is thought to have inherent levels of stress as role expectations and responsibilities are changed within a family (Lesser & Pope, 2007, p. 302). Parents are entrusted to care for their young and in turn, children must receive adequate care, attachment, and protection in order to survive (Wasserman & Rosenfeld, 1986, p. 517). Winnicott (1958, as cited in Wasserman & Rosenfeld, 1986) held that most parents care for their child "adequately enough" so that the child survives and the species continues. Morris (2005, p. 134) states that child protection workers are required to act as nurturing agents of the state as they apply bureaucratic principles to assure that children are parented in appropriate ways.

Child maltreatment is not a recent issue as it is believed to have occurred for centuries based on the belief that children were the property of the parents, primarily the father, and were therefore not in need of

protection. Often, childhood beatings were thought to be in the child's best interest in order to be considered useful and productive members of society. Social pressure authorized extended family members, the church, and the community to care for orphaned children or those who were deemed as treated cruelly by the parents (Popple & Leighninger, 2008, p. 330).

In the 1800's, legislation began to be passed which addressed child maltreatment due in part to the increasing numbers of separated families who lived far removed from each other as industrialization within the nation expanded. Children without family assistance were often left to roam the streets until they were gathered up and placed in county poorhouses. The state of New York passed a bill in 1824 which stated there was a public duty to remove children (under age 15) from the streets where they were seen as vagrants, criminals, or beggars (Watkins, 1990, p. 500) Attitudes began to shift and children began to be recognized as valued humans who were not to live within the company of the mentally ill, sick, or elderly found in most poorhouses. In 1853, "placement agencies" such as Reverend Charles Loring Brace's Children's Aid Society worked to find rural homes for

children in an attempt to avoid urban decay. Agents of Children's Aid Society walked the streets to find children who did not have homes thus thrusting the concept of child protection into its early stages (Hacsi, 1995, p. 166). This movement led to the ongoing conflict regarding the emotionally charged nature of child welfare and the subjective manner of deciding when and if state intervention is necessary.

Today, child protection agencies across the United States investigate millions of reports of child abuse and neglect. In accordance with the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act of 1974 (CAPTA), states receive federal funds under the mandate that allegations of abuse or neglect are to be investigated (O'Neill Murray & Gesiriech, n.d.). In 2007, approximately 5.8 million children were involved in an estimated 3.2 million child abuse reports indicating a report is made every ten seconds (Childhelp website, 2010).

Once a child abuse concern has been established, phone calls and written reports are directed to a local child abuse hotline. During this period known as the screening process, a determination is made as to the severity of the concern, whether there indeed is a need

to respond, and if so, how quickly. During this triage phase, if it is established that further investigation is necessary, an investigating social worker is assigned the referral and an investigation begins.

Once a referral, or complaint, is generated, a social worker meets with the family and interviews the children, parents or caregivers as well as other individuals involved. The social worker takes on a quasi-law enforcement role as they attempt to seek evidence to determine if an allegation is true or false while also assessing safety and risk levels (Wells, 1994).

Several decisions are made during and following an investigation. A determination must be made as to the conclusion findings and that result may lead to a difficult judgment as to the child's placement. Generally, an investigation can be closed as unfounded (no evidence), inconclusive (no definitive evidence), or to substantiate (establish proof). Barnes and Chand (2000, p. 10) speculate that this decision is easier to make when there are clear injuries or physical evidence however, the decision can become more difficult when emotional, or neglect issues are present. The

determination can also be convoluted when workers are unable to obtain verbal information from a child, perhaps due to the young age of a child or if the child is too frightened or fearful of being removed from their parents and therefore is dishonest about the circumstances.

Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008, p. 109) hypothesized that workers seek to promote child safety while also attempting to keep the family intact and when these issues compete, one's professional judgment, personal values and attitudes shift the balance to an alternative decision.

Purpose of the Study

Social workers must balance the decision of safety with the desire to support a family while upholding their right to privacy and freedom from intrusion (Parada, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007, p. 36). More importantly, difficult decisions are made as to whether children should be removed from their parents care and involuntarily placed under the protection of the state. Concern that failure to remove the child may lead to the child experiencing further abuse or perhaps even death, poses an overwhelming responsibility for the worker.

Should the worker decide to remove, an additional burden experienced by workers involves an awareness that additional trauma will likely be inflicted on the child who would be subjected to the physical separation from and psychological loss of their home of origin. This separation in itself can cause a child undue stress and anxiety.

Workers often face a choice between "two evils," leaving a child in a potentially dangerous situation or placing the child in an out-of-home placement of unknown quality (Arad-Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2008, p. 117). Lazar (2006, p. 263) indicates that three general factors are thought to affect the decisions made by a social worker in an investigation; the worker's role expectations, the characteristics of the situation, and the worker's personal biases. Biases are thought to influence how a social worker behaves and makes decisions during the investigation based on their own personal values (Action for Child Protection, Inc., [ACTION], 2006). Alter (1985, as cited in Lazar, 2006) reports that the emergency situation is characterized by high stress, heightened emotions, and confusion which are conducive to creating "grey areas" of information.

Historically, early social workers or "friendly visitors" as they were called in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century's, were well known to deny assistance to tarnished women or those determined to be poor, immoral, or vagrant (Popple & Leighninger, 2008). It was not unusual for poor children to be removed from their homes and placed in institutions as it was thought that the condition of poverty itself would lead to a detrimental home condition. The actions of the friendly visitors were highly subjective and paternalistic in nature. Typically, the friendly visitor was a wealthy female volunteer and the inherent belief of the movement was one in which the moral insight of the visitor alone could lift the poor out of their quandary.

Modern day social workers still make decisions based on moral responsibility or the obligation to "act correctly" (Mattison, 2000). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics was first developed in 1960 as a means of providing guidelines for social workers when dealing with complicated ethical dilemmas and value clashes (Popple & Leighninger, 2008). The Code of Ethics has undergone several revisions with the most recent version approved in the year 1999.

The intent of this research study is to determine the relationship, if any, between social worker characteristics such as age, gender, parental status, years of experience as a social worker, educational level and the perception of safety and risk factors in child abuse investigations.

Findings in this study may assist child protection agencies to understand, better assist, and support decisions made by social workers.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

This research study will focus on the public sector of child welfare, specifically the initial investigation period (Investigative Services program) within Riverside County Department of Public Social Services in Riverside, California. Riverside County has the fourth largest land area in the state of California. The area is home to more than four million people; of those approximately 553,000 residents are children (Riverside County DPSS, 2008). Riverside County receives federal funding under the umbrella of the Social Security Act of 1935, later revised in 1962 to include "child welfare services" in order to prevent and remedy child abuse. This funding is

available to Riverside County in the form of Title IV-E funds which provides funding for child abuse prevention programs, placement services for children who cannot remain in the home, and reunification services to enable children to return home if suitable (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services: Administration for Children & Families, 2009, Chapter 6).

This research topic was developed in part by the California Social Work Education Center (CalsWEC) 2007-2008 "Request for Proposals" indicating a desire for further exploration in this area. Additionally, Riverside County Child Protective Services has indicated an interest in pursuing the topic in relation to safety in child welfare. The results of this study may contribute to social work practice and/or policy by improving the decision-making process within child welfare thus improving outcomes for the families, specifically those receiving Title IV-E funding, within the communities which are currently being served.

Several phases of the generalist intervention process will be informed by this study such as engagement, assessment, planning, and implementation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the

relationship between personal social worker characteristics and their perception of safety and risk factors in child abuse investigations.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This literature review will seek to determine the relationship between social worker characteristics and the perception of the decision-making process when investigating allegations of child abuse as examined in previous research. Several studies will be examined which will attempt to explain the difficult decisions social workers are obligated to make when working with families who are alleged to have engaged in child maltreatment. Decision-making processes as related to attachment and organizational theory, as well as an overview of the theories guiding conceptualization will be discussed.

Modern Perspectives on Decision-Making

Many media reports have been written about the failed efforts of child protective agencies which resulted in the untimely death of a child. Conversely, news stories regularly make the most of faulty judgments made by a social worker or agency who perhaps wrongly removed a child from the home. Child protection social workers are faced with difficult decisions on a daily

basis: 1) assessing the safety of children at risk of maltreatment, 2) deciding what services may be available to keep children safe in the home, and 3) determining if the above options do not override the need to remove the child from the home (DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994, p. 229). Per the Riverside County Department of Public Social Services website, in the year 2009, Riverside County Child Protective Services received 22,236 phone calls to the Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-442-4918) resulting in 18,410 investigations regarding a total of 37, 824 children. Of these investigations, social workers made the decision to remove 2, 359 children from their homes (Riverside County Department of Public Social Services [Riverside County DPSS], 2009, p. 1).

If the objective in child welfare is to decide which child is safe at home and which child is not, clear definitions of abuse should be easy to identify. "Safe" according to (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) is defined as 1) free from risk or harm; 2) secure from threat of danger, harm, or loss while "safety" is said to be the condition of being safe from undergoing or causing hurt, injury, or loss. Several researchers have acknowledged that child abuse is a socially constructed concept which

due to its nature, will change over time due to the prevailing norms of societies (Parton, 1997; Jenks, 1996; as cited in Barnes & Chand, 2000, p. 7). Often common-sense applications are made in child welfare which are questionable due to the possibility of a large margin for error (Schwalbe, 2004 as cited in Parada, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007, p. 37).

Modern attempts to define child abuse indicate it is, at a minimum,

any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker, which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm. (Child Welfare Information Gateway website, 2009, para. 1)

Federal laws guide each state to categorize child maltreatment as: a) physical abuse (a non-accidental physical injury), b) sexual abuse, c) emotional abuse, or d) general neglect. General neglect could involve concerns such as parental substance abuse, abandonment, or witnessing domestic violence. Parton et al. (1997, as cited in Gillingham, 2006) indicate there is no clear definition of what constitutes child abuse and therefore,

research has been hard to interpret and apply to practice.

In a study aimed to explore how neglect was defined within child welfare, social workers were asked by the researcher to create their personal definition of neglect as well as respond to a series of questions regarding case vignettes. The findings suggested that no particular factor could be used alone to define neglect as there is "no simple litmus test" to reveal its presence (Stone, 1998, p. 91).

Decision-Making in Child Welfare

Decision-making theory has been utilized in many business areas such as economics, law, and medicine (Baron, 2000 as cited in Van de Luitgaarden, 2009). The basic premise holds that in order to achieve optimal decisions, one must minimize adverse outcomes and reduce bias, thus avoiding error (Van de Luitgaarden, 2009, p. 245). Cuzzi, Holden, Green Grob, and Bazer (1993, p. 5) noted that the decision making process can be viewed as a process with stages. Carroll and Johnson (1990, as cited in Cuzzi, Holden, Green Grob, & Bazer, 1993, p. 5) expanded on this position by indicating there

are times when a social worker progresses through the process in a linear, orderly fashion while other times the process may be more complex and non-linear.

The term "best practice" has been employed within social work to suggest a model which is solution focused (rather than deficit) to promote effective ways of responding to issues rather than attention to the problems (Ferguson, 2003). Rossi, Schuerman, and Budde (1999, p. 595) found that there appears to be no foundation for defining "good practice" standards based on decision making in their study in which child welfare experts and social workers were asked to make decisions about child abuse cases. Using actual rather than fictional case information, twenty-seven high-standing experts in the field of child welfare (with an average of twenty years experience in child protection) were asked to read summaries of 70 cases and then answer questions about decisions they would make on the case. Current case workers were then asked to do the same with 18 case histories. The results suggested that decision making in child welfare is "inconsistent and lacking in structure" (Rossi, Schuerman, & Budde, 1999, p. 595).

The Role of Personal Characteristics in Child Welfare

Several studies have previously attempted to identify characteristics of social workers in relation to decision-making. According to Drury-Hudson (1999, p. 148), the decision-making process is affected by a myriad of factors including the cognitive structure, schemas, or beliefs held by individuals, the individual's attitudes, values and knowledge, the agency and legislative context, and the characteristics of the service users.

In one of the earliest studies on decision-making in child welfare, Briar (1963, as cited in Lindsey, 1992, p. 67), found substantial differences in placement decisions depending on the worker involved. Briar asked social workers to make a series of judgments about hypothetical cases as well as placement recommendations. The study found that the outcome for the child varied depending on the worker making the decision even if there was agreement as to the diagnosis.

Lazar (2006) studied 154 child protection workers in Israel via questionnaires to assess the effects of personal, situational, and gender-based biases on

decisions in emergency situations. Workers were provided with four vignettes depicting real emergency situations and were asked to select an intervention they would most likely use if they were in that situation. Interventions ranged from "no action taken immediately" to "placing the child in a shelter." The study included variables about the workers such as age, gender, ethnicity, family status, and level of authoritarianism. The concept of authoritarianism was measured using a 16-item scale developed in 1950 by Adorno and colleagues. The results indicated that workers who scored higher on authoritarian measures were inclined to choose more authoritarian interventions. Specifically, subjective personality traits of the workers which included their own gender and level of authoritarianism along with the workers stereotypes of the child's gender interfered in the decision-making process.

A family's chance of having a child taken into custody varies widely according to the person who is assigned to investigate determined Rossi, Schuerman, and Budde (1996, p. 3). In their study comparing decisions made by "experts" (leaders within the child welfare field) and social workers in the field, the researchers

found that there was a great deal of discrepancy in deciding to take a child into custody between the two groups and that female and older workers were less likely to take children into custody. However, case characteristics such as the cooperation of the family and/or prior child welfare history appeared to govern decision making.

Ashton (1999) hypothesized that age, gender, marital status, and parenthood status would influence the perception of the seriousness of child maltreatment and then, whether or not one would report the matter to CPS. Eighty-six graduate social work students were asked to rate 12 case vignettes and the results suggested that there was not a relationship based on demographic status. The researcher did indicate that the sample size (along with their being primarily female) as well as the notion that those who choose social work as a profession have similar perspectives about child rearing (Ashton, 1999, p. 546).

DeRoma, Kessler, McDaniel, and Soto (2006) investigated 51 female social workers from four counties in South Carolina to ascertain social worker's perception of risk factors relating to the need to remove a child

from the home. Workers were contacted via telephone along with a follow-up in-person interview. Each participant was asked to rate (on a 10-point Likert scale) the degree of personal values and situational variables from a list of 35 risk factors involved when deciding to remove a child from a home. The subjects ranked the top five issues which influence their decision as; 1) the condition or stability of housing, 2) the ability of the parent to cooperate with the social worker, 3) effective supervision, 4) the level of parenting skills present, and 5) employment skills or willingness to secure employment (DeRoma et al., 2006).

This contradicts findings made by Snyder and Newberger (1986, p. 133) who utilized 239 pediatric hospital professionals to rate case vignettes, determining that female physicians tend to rate vignettes of child abuse as more serious than male physicians and that parents gave higher ratings than non-parents.

In a study of 323 professionals such as teachers and medical workers, as well as adults with or without children, Portwood (1998) looked at the extent to which one's own characteristic influences how one defines child abuse and neglect. The study found that those who were

not parents were more likely to rate an act to be abusive, perhaps due to idealism or a lack of parenting experience (Portwood, 1998).

Gold, Benbenishty, and Osmo (2001, as cited in Sullivan, Whitehead, Leschied, Chiodo, & Hurley, 2008, p. 700) found that social workers with three or more years of experience were more likely to advocate for removing a child from the home than those workers who had less than three years experience.

Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, Wozner, and Gabriel (2003) found that workers who had fewer years of experience made more decisions to remove than those workers with more experience. The researchers cited experienced workers had a greater awareness of their own limitations along with an understanding of the emotional and even physical damage that children may suffer when removed from even harmful homes (Davidson-Arad, Englechin-Segal, Wozner, & Gabriel, 2003, p. 693).

Mandel, Lehman, and Yuille (1994, as cited in Sullivan, Whitehead, Leschied, Chiodo, & Hurley, 2008, p. 700) discovered that trained social workers were more likely to make additional requests for information, make fewer assumptions, and generate more hypotheses than a

group of untrained assessors. In their own study, Sullivan, Whitehead, Leschied, Chiodo, and Hurley (2008) asked sixty-three social workers in Canada (twenty-seven workers with less than three years experience and thirty-six workers with more than three years of experience) to read scenarios of child abuse situations. The researchers found no significant differences between more experienced and less experienced social workers when deciding to take a child into care.

Hay, Weisner, Subramanian, Duan, Niedzinski and Kravitz (2008, as cited in Regehr, Bogo, Shlonsky, & LeBlanc, 2010, p. 622) found that confidence in decision making increases with experience yet the findings were not clear whether this was related to the accuracy of judgments.

Assessment tools have been developed over the past several years as a means of ensuring that social workers were effectively making decisions in child welfare. These tools aim to improve the consistency, objectivity, and validity of child welfare systems while also focusing on families at the highest level of risk for re-victimization (Freitag & Wordes, 2001, p. 76). Parada et al. (2007) found that social workers tend to base

their decisions on their social work skills and "practice wisdom" while adapting assessment tools to the established policies of an agency. The researchers defined practice wisdom as intuition based on a social worker's professional experience. In utilizing practice wisdom, social workers may employ an agency assessment tool to support decisions they had already made.

In the Regehr, Bogo, Shlonsky, LeBlanc (2010) study on the professional judgments of social workers, workers viewed two 15-minute scenarios of cases similar to those experienced by child welfare workers. Ninety-six social workers were then asked to complete risk assessments based on what they had read. The findings suggested that age factored into the amount of confidence in completing risk assessments, specifically that social workers cited their experience, training, and past supervision as predictors of making correct decisions.

Arad-Davidzon and Benbenishty (2008) studied 200 child protection workers in Israel to understand workers attitudes on child removal along with other variables. Workers were asked to review a vignette regarding a poor family who had been brought to the attention of protective services after the child went to her nursery

school and was found to have bruises on her hands and back (as well as previous broken bones within a short time period). The social workers were asked to rate the risk to the child on a 7-point scale (7 = very high) and to make a recommendation on interventions ranging from 1) take no action to 6) remove the child to foster care. The researchers also asked the workers to complete an "Attitude Questionnaire" to assess attitudes toward removal. The findings suggested clusters of "pro-removal" and "anti-removal" workers regardless of the demographic or professional features of the workers.

Roberts (1970, as cited in DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994, p. 231), found that personal characteristics such as age, sex, race, marital status, or social class did not influence worker judgments. Fanshel and Shinn (1978, as cited in DePanfilis & Scannapieco, 1994, p. 231) also found no relationship between experience, education level, age, gender, marital status, or parenthood when making decisions on child placement. Jones (1993, p. 259) suggests that additional studies are needed to examine the effects of worker's characteristics such as age, years of experience, demographic variables or experience as a child victim. Collaboration with supervisors can

also be unique to a worker's level of expertise thus influencing decision-making.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

Several studies recognize knowledge of attachment theory as an effective tool when assessing for child abuse. Attachment theory, as defined by Bowlby (1969) posits that infants need to form attachments with a caregiver in order to feel protected and develop a sense of security that will provide a foundation for human survival (Lesser & Pope, 2007, p. 207). Howe, Dooley, and Hinings (2000) indicate that knowledge of attachment theory can be useful for social workers when examining the parent-child relationship as they found that children develop adaptive strategies to cope with the home environment. The researchers state that when there is abuse in the home, children run the risk of developmental impairments which social workers should be aware of when making decisions in child welfare.

Crisis theory states that support, education, and guidance provided in a timely manner can assist clients to mobilize their own strengths and resources in order to resolve a disturbance with the goal of preventing further

deterioration along with a return to a pre-crisis level of functioning (Regehr, 2011, p. 137). Social workers, especially those working in Investigative Services, should have a strong understanding of crisis intervention which includes establishing rapport, empathetic listening, problem exploration/definition, identifying resources or previous strategies utilized by the client or family, and developing an action plan.

Additionally, organizational theory should be considered within child protection as Gibbs (2009) suggests in her study which examined the behavioral norms, values, and expectations within a child protection agency. She found that agencies need to create an open culture that allows workers to openly reflect on their professional experiences in order to reduce the level of anxiety in decision-making. Gibbs further states that workers unconsciously develop defense strategies in an attempt to avoid the uncomfortable feelings generated when dealing with abused children and their families (Gibbs, 2009, p. 290).

Coping mechanisms are often used by social workers, especially front-line workers, who seek to "survive" by exercising occasions in which discretion is used such as

identifying or working with clients most likely to succeed (Lipsky, 1980, as cited in Smith & Donovan, 2003, p. 543). This hints that typical child welfare practices go amiss of the empowerment-focused and strengths-based practices promoted in social work training.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This chapter provides information on the research methods to be used in this study. The topics discussed include the study design, sampling criteria, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects and the data analysis to be used when examining the relationship between social worker characteristics and the perception of safety and risk factors in child abuse investigations.

Study Design

A review of the literature regarding decision-making within child abuse investigations indicates that few studies have examined the role that personal characteristics of a social worker play in investigation outcomes. Therefore, this quantitative study was designed to explore several hypotheses regarding the relationship between individual characteristics of child welfare social workers and their perceptions in child abuse investigations.

The ultimate goal of conducting this study is to identify how to improve the consistency of decisions made during investigations thus reducing the level of subjectivity which could lead to improved outcomes for the children and families served.

In order to accomplish the goal of the study, a quantitative questionnaire was provided to social workers currently assigned within Investigative Services (IS) programs in Riverside County Department of Public Social Services. Due to the geographical distances (Riverside County covers 7,208 square miles), the questionnaire format was determined to be the most efficient method to use. Additionally, the questionnaire was found to be low to no cost, convenient, and likely to achieve generalizability. Limitations to this method included a lack of response due to the enormous workload of social workers and the potential or perceived lack of anonymity. The survey included nine questions aimed at a worker's perception of referral risk level and monthly detention rates. Additional questions included perception of recommendations from auxiliary sources such as supervisor input, state required assessment tool recommendations, Team Decision Meeting (TDM) outcomes, and other case

staffing as well as a ranking of important safety factors when deciding to remove a child. The hypotheses included:

- H1) There will be a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of the risk level of child abuse referrals assigned;
- H2) There will be a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of monthly detention rates per social worker; and
- H3) There will be a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of one's average detention rate.

Sampling

In an attempt to look at the relationship between personal characteristics and perception of safety and risk factors in child abuse investigations, questionnaires were provided to Investigative Services (IS) social workers with Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, Child Protective Services. IS units from several different geographic regions within the county were selected which included Moreno Valley, West Corridor, Southwest, Command Post, Desert, and Metro regions.

Data Collection and Instruments

The research data were collected using a modified questionnaire based on a study conducted by Britner and Mossler (2002) used to examine how groups of social workers and child welfare professionals make placement decisions when provided with a vignette of child abuse. Permission was received from Dr. Britner prior to implementation. Additional questions were added to the questionnaire while other items were removed due to irrelevance. Approval was also obtained from Riverside County Department of Public Social Services prior to conducting the study.

The independent variables were the social worker's age, gender, relationship status, parental status (and if a parent, age of children), years of experience as a social worker (in general and within Riverside County CPS), and educational level. The dependent variables studied included the relationship between these personal characteristics and:

- 1) The perception of risk level of referrals,
- 2) The perception of monthly detention rates per social worker, and
- 3) The perception of one's average detention rate.

Procedures

A research proposal was submitted to Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, Child Protective Services seeking permission to conduct the study within the agency. The proposal included a summary of the research purpose, the methodology to be used, the population to be examined, and how the respondent's confidentiality would be protected. Copies of the questionnaire, informed consent, and debriefing statement were also provided. Permission was also requested from the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board by providing the same information.

Once permission was received from all parties involved, a questionnaire including informed consent, the questionnaire, and a debriefing statement was provided to Investigate Services social workers within Riverside County Child Protective Services requesting their participation in the study. Data collection began in November 2011 and concluded with the data analysis taking place in February 2012.

Protection of Human Subjects

In an attempt to protect the human subjects who participated, informed consent and a debriefing statement were provided with each questionnaire. Subjects were informed of the purpose of the study, the expected duration of time subjects would be involved, any foreseeable risks to the subject participants, and the protection of confidentiality. Also included in the informed consent was a clear explanation that participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and that subjects had the ability to discontinue participation at any time. Each participant was provided with a ticket for a raffle opportunity to win one of three \$15.00 Star Bucks gift cards.

The questionnaires did not include the participants name or any other identifying data to ensure anonymity. The data was collected and stored in a locked file cabinet until the conclusion of the study, at which time the data was destroyed.

Data Analysis

As the data in this quantitative study examined the relationship of one or more variables, both bivariate and

multivariate analyses were used. Coded responses were entered into a statistical database (SPSS version 15). Descriptive statistics were utilized in order to make the results easier to understand. Inferential statistics were also used as the data was collected from a sample rather than the entire population of Investigative Services social workers within the United States. Bivariate statistics such as T-tests and correlations were used to analyze the measures of the independent and dependent variables. The relationships examined were:

- Q1) Is there a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of risk level of referrals?
- Q2) Is there a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of monthly detention rates per social worker, and
- Q3) Is there a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of one's average detention rate.

Summary

In summary, this quantitative study examined the relationship between personal characteristics and the

perception of safety and risk factors in child abuse investigations. The study was conducted using a quantitative questionnaire of Investigative Services social workers within Riverside County Department of Public Social Services, Child Protective Services in Riverside County, California. This chapter discussed the study design, sampling criteria, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects and the data analysis used.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

The results of this study are discussed in this chapter. Data were used to examine personal social worker characteristics such as "age," "gender," "relationship status," "parenting status," "years of experience in social work" and "level of education in relation to a social worker's perception of safety and risk factors in child abuse investigations.

Presentation of the Findings

The study participants included 99 Investigative Services social workers employed by Riverside County Child Protective Services. Seventy-four percent of the sample were female ($n = 74$) and twenty-three percent were male ($n = 23$). A wide range of respondent ages were found in the sample (age 26 - age 66) with the highest percentage of respondents ($n = 9$, or 9.1%) indicating they were 30 years old ($M = 37.96$, $SD = 8.79$).

Nearly half of the sample reported they were married ($n = 46$, or 46%) while one in ten stated they had never been married ($n = 21$, or 21%). This was closely followed

by those who were divorced (n = 19, or 19.2%) and those who were cohabitating totaling eleven percent (n = 11). A majority or 72.7% (n = 72) had children with the ages of children varying between age zero and 18. Thirteen percent had children over age 18 (n = 13) while twelve percent had children under age three (n = 12). Forty percent (n = 40) had children whose ages were under the age of 15.

Respondents reported a sizeable span of time (1 - 40 years) with regards to the number of years they have practiced social work (M = 8.63, SD = 5.84). A little more than one quarter (n = 27, or 27.3%) of the workers employed with Riverside County CPS reported four years of employment within the agency (M = 6.32, SD = 3.43). All participants were college educated with a wide range of specified degrees. For the purpose of this study, participants were grouped into four education areas: BASW (n = 9, or 9.1%), BA (n = 31, or 31.3%), MSW (n = 27, or 27.3%), and MA (n = 19, or 19.2%). A small percent (n = 13, or 13%) of the respondents failed to declare their educational field of study and degree status.

The number of monthly referrals was reported as 18 (n = 16, or 16.2%) with the majority of social workers

(52.5%) reporting they detained children at least once a month (n = 52). More than half (n = 57, or 57%) perceived the risk level of the referrals they were typically assigned to be "somewhat high." The majority of participants rated their average detention rate (or the frequency of removing children from their homes) as "not very frequent" (n = 48, or 48.5%).

When asked "How often does your supervisor's input support your decision to detain?" 69.7% indicated always, 23.2% somewhat, 6.1% undecided, and 1% not very often. The question, "How influential is the recommendation of Structured Decision Making (SDM) on your decision to detain?" had findings of 43.4% reporting somewhat influential, 26.3% very influential, 14.1% not very influential, 12.1% undecided, and 4% stated not at all influential. Similarly, the responses to the question "When applicable, how influential is the recommendation of a Team Decision Meeting (TDM) on your decision to detain?" were 35.4% very influential, 33.3% somewhat influential, 13.1% not very influential, 12.1% undecided, and 5.1% were not at all influential. Lastly, questions of "How influential is the recommendation of collaborative staffing such as those with Public Health,

Mental Health, etc., on your decision to detain?" were found to be 49.5% somewhat influential, 18.2% very influential, 16.2% undecided, 8.1% not very influential, and 2% not at all influential.

In looking at the most important issues social workers identified when deciding to detain, five main factors were recognized. A majority ($n = 68$, or 68.7%) of the social workers identified "severity of abuse" as the most important factor involved when they are deciding to detain. Duration/pattern of abuse ranked second in importance (41.4%), followed by likelihood of abuse reoccurrence (24.2%), parent's level of substance abuse (14.1%), and parent's psychopathology (10.1%).

To compare gender and the perception of referral risk level, a T-test was performed. There was no significant relationship found ($t = -.898$, $df = 95$, $p = .371$). Likewise, there was no significant relationship found when comparing gender and the perception of monthly detention rates ($t = .244$, $df = 92$, $p = .808$) or with gender and the perception of average detention rates ($t = .601$, $df = 95$, $p = .549$).

When looking at the correlation between the variables of respondent's age and the perception of risk

referral, no significance was found (.857, $p > .01$). In fact, age was not a significant factor when comparing the perception of monthly detention rates (-.068, $p > .01$), perception of how many times a month a worker detains (.159, $p > .01$), and the perception of a worker's average detention rate (-.114, $p > .01$).

A T-test was performed to determine the influence of having children or not as to the worker's perception of detention rates. There was no significance found with any of the variables such as the perception of risk level of referrals ($t = .770$, $df = 97$, $p = .443$), the perception of the number of times per month a worker typically detains ($t = -.183$, $df = 94$, $p = .070$), and the perception of one's average monthly detention rate ($t = 1.21$, $df = 97$, $p = .231$).

There was a significant finding as to the age of the respondent's child and the perception of how many times a month a worker detains. A T-test determined that workers with children over age 15 reported that they detained more frequently than those workers with children under age 15 [$t(67) = -2.673$, $p < .01$].

Correlations were used to compare years of social work experience and the independent variables of

perception of risk referral ($r = .634, p > .05$), perception of monthly detention rates ($r = .818, p > .05$) and the perception of a worker's average detention rate ($r = .738, p > .05$) with no significant findings. Years of experience within Riverside County CPS also did not point to any significant findings with the perception of risk referral ($r = .235, p > .05$), perception of monthly detention rates ($r = .825, p > .05$), and the perception of a worker's average detention rate ($r = .788, p > .05$) as all indicated no relevance.

A one-way between subjects ANOVA test was carried out to compare the relationship between educational levels, either Bachelor or Master's level, and the dependent variables of perception of risk referral [$f(3, 82) = 1.017, p = .389$]; perception of monthly detention rates [$f(3, 79) = 2.68, p = .109$]; and the perception of a worker's average detention rate [$f(3, 82) = 1.49, p = .259$]. There was no significance found indicating that a worker's educational background is not related to how they rate perception of risk referral, monthly detention rate, and average detention rate.

Summary

This chapter addressed the findings of the research project. Using descriptive statistics, the demographics of the questionnaire respondents were provided. Bivariate and multivariate analyses were introduced as a means of testing the research hypotheses.

On average, the hypotheses were not supported as statistically significant: there does not appear to be a relationship between personal characteristics and the perception of referral risk, perception of monthly detention rate, and the perception of average detention rate with the exception of a significant finding with regards to the age of a social worker's child(ren). The findings suggest that those workers with children over age 15 perceive that they have a higher monthly detention rate.

Riverside County CPS social workers reported the risk level of their assigned referrals to be "somewhat high" while workers felt their detention rate was "not very frequent." The average monthly referral rate was reported to be 18 per month with a perceived average of one detention per month.

Collaboration when deciding to detain was found to be very influential when consulting or "staffing" cases with one's supervisor or when utilizing the practice of having a family-involved group meeting (TDM); whereas a state-required and department mandated risk and safety assessment tool and mutual communication with auxiliary staff were found to be only somewhat influential.

Lastly, when looking at the most important factors when making decisions to remove children, social workers ranked severity of abuse, duration/pattern of abuse, likelihood of abuse reoccurrence, parent's level of substance abuse, and parent's psychopathology as the principal determinants of their assessment.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter five includes an overview of the findings gathered during the course of conducting this research project. This study was aimed at exploring if there were any significant findings when looking at the relationship between social worker characteristics and their perception on detaining children. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Discussion

This research project aimed at examining whether there was a relationship between a social worker's personal characteristics (such as age, gender, relationship status, parental status, years of experience as a social worker, and educational level) with a social worker's perception of detaining children. The research project hypothesized that there would be some correlation or relationship between the personal characteristics of a social worker and their perception of detaining children.

Bivariate and multivariate analyses were run to test the hypotheses. Only one variable, age of a social worker's child as that of over age 15, had any significance on a worker's perception of monthly detention rates.

While the results in general did not support the hypotheses, the study draws parallel findings with other similar studies. A study by Rossi, Schuerman, and Budde (1999, p. 589) determined that personal characteristics were found to be less important than the case characteristics in decision making. Other studies have also found that personal characteristics have little to no impact on substantiation decisions (Ards, Myers, Malkis, Sugrue, & Zhou, 2003; Drake & Zuravin, 1998; and Wells, Fluke & Brown, 1995, as cited in Jent et al., 2009, p. 1674).

In this study, severity of abuse was found to be the most important feature when workers decide to detain. Other studies have also found that severity of abuse predicts removal (Fialkov & Cohen, 1990; Tjaden & Thoennes 1992; as cited in Britner and Mossler, 2002, p. 319) and the pattern or chronicity of abuse has also been found to be a predictive factor in decisions to

remove (Britner, 1998; Fialkov & Cohen, 1990; and Lewitt, 1993 as cited in Britner and Mossler, 2002, p. 319).

Additional factors identified in this study as critical to predicting removal include duration/pattern of abuse, likelihood of reoccurrence, parental substance abuse, and parental psychopathology. These thorny constructs of the investigation process reflect the intricacies of decision making when working with families and children.

It is interesting that the only significant finding in this current study was related to the age of a respondent's child. The results of this variable could indicate several potential factors are involved when one has a child over age 15. For example, having an older child suggests that the worker is also older and that the parental situations these workers have personally encountered could convey a different level of understanding of both the demands and stressors of parenting along with an awareness of "crossing the line" and abusing a child. This could be supported with the outcomes of several studies, which found that children under age six are removed more often than those over age 12 (Phillips et al., 1971, Lindsey, 1991, Katz et al., 1986, and Meddin, 1984, as cited in Jones, 1993, p. 253).

While the current study failed to find a significant relationship between years of experience and the perception variables, experience in the field of social work can lead to what Grimball (2005, p. 349) calls "situation awareness" as workers base current decisions on the corrective feedback they have received from previous decision making experiences. This concept may also support the significant finding of the age of a respondent's child and the perception of detention rates as higher as having an older child implies the worker is older and therefore, possibly has more experience making difficult decisions.

Conversely, Davidson-Arad et al. (2003, p. 693), found that more experienced workers tended to implement their decisions less often than novice workers alluding to several interpretations. The researchers suggest that burn-out, an awareness of the worker's own limitations on correcting the issues involved in a client's life, as well as a greater understanding of the multitude of complex issues faced by children when removed from even harmful homes contributes to decisions made for or against removal (Davidson-Arad et al., 2003, p. 693).

Employer demand for social workers with advanced learning has led to an increase in college educated field staff. However, the current study found no relation between level of education and the perception of referral risk, monthly referral rate, and average detention rate. Another study contradicts these findings as the study of decisions made about physical abuse cases, Jent et al. (2009, p. 1677), determined that professionals with advanced degrees (Master's level or higher) were three and half times more likely to classify vignettes as abusive than those with Bachelor's degrees. The authors posited that this difference could be a result of additional training and exposure to child maltreatment research held by those with more education.

Surprisingly, workers reported that the risk level of their assigned referrals was only "somewhat high" and their average detention rate as "not very frequent." This may suggest that workers seek to rationalize the impact of their decisions on families or perhaps they chose the response they considered was socially desirable. Another possible explanation for this finding may suggest workers strive to comply with legal as well as department mandates which emphasize preventative services prior to

child removal. In doing so, social workers may seek alternative best practice solutions to detention such as establishing a safety plan (written agreement between the parent and the department) which outlines specific tasks the parent is required to fulfill in order to have the child safely remain in the home.

Along the same lines, an interesting finding in this study pertained to the influence of others in decision making. A large percentage of respondents indicated that supervisory input was "always" influential when deciding to detain. This could reflect the collective nature of decision making within the department as workers recognize that supervisors have a better understanding of policy and procedures, thus allowing workers to utilize the experience and expertise of their supervisors. Supervisors in turn, then empower their workers to make informed decisions while remaining focused on the safety and risk factors involved. Conversely, this finding could be attributed to the worker's fear of being considered insubordinate if their supervisor was strongly suggestive of removal. This could also hint at the possibility that the supervisor's higher level of experience and/or level of education could strongly steer a worker to detain thus

relieving a worker of carrying the burden of the decision alone.

Similarly, collaboration when utilizing the practice of having a family and community-involved group meeting (TDM) was reported to be "very influential." This finding reflects the overarching view of team decision-making as a strengths-based tool which stresses resolution strategies while utilizing the extended family and community to empower a family to solve the issues that have led to CPS intervention (Browe Olson, 2009).

The question "How influential is the recommendation of Structured Decision Making (SDM) on your decision to detain?" had a surprising low percentage of workers reporting that the tool was "very influential." A majority of workers indicated that the use of SDM was only "somewhat" influential. This correlates with the findings of Sholnsky and Wagner (2005, as cited in Crea, 2010, p. 198) who imply that the use of an actuarial assessment cannot possibly capture the unique circumstances of each family, thus workers still employ a degree of subjectivity with their decisions. Another study suggests that workers cultivate their decision to detain and then "fit the structure" to match one's

decision (Parada et al., 2007, p. 52). It could be suggested that workers view their ability to override an outcome decision as an indicator of the tool's inability to make a reliable judgment. Other workers may find fault with the procedural manner of completing the assessment (after returning to the office to complete case paperwork, following the decision to detain or not) and thus interpret the tool's function as perfunctory and time-consuming.

The best practice method of using a multidisciplinary team (MDT) approach with auxiliary staff such as Public or Mental Health workers was found to be only "somewhat" influential. This speaks to a study conducted by Wolfteich and Loggins (2007, p. 347) in which the researchers found that multidisciplinary models of child abuse investigations were associated with higher frequencies of substantiated abuse and higher arrest rates of sexual abuse perpetrators. As may be the case with the current study, the researchers pointed out that typically MDT cases tend to be more complex and severe than other cases of abuse thus suggesting the higher likelihood of substantiation and/or arrest in general.

Limitations

Limitations of this study would include that the respondents were taken from a small population of social workers within Riverside County CPS which may not be representative of other child welfare agencies.

Additionally, as the questionnaire was constructed by the researcher, the validity and reliability of the tool have not been confirmed with the exception of the listing of safety and risk factors used with permission from Dr. Britner's 2002 study. Further designs of the questionnaire should consider the elimination of the option of choosing "undecided" as this may have provided an opportunity for respondents to avoid revealing their genuine feelings.

Also, the questions used to determine perception levels may not take into account the full scope of relevance when determining perception rates along with a limited analysis of the data which may constrain the interpretations of the findings.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

The nature of child welfare necessitates that social workers make difficult decisions. It is essential that

these decisions are made objectively, rationally, and competently. Smith and F. Donovan (2003, p. 542) suggest that everyday child welfare procedures fall short of the family-centered and strengths-based practices believed to be the most effective approaches for helping families.

Ongoing and improved training is central to improving child welfare outcomes. Schuerman, Rossi, and Budde, (1999, p. 615) support improved training to reduce the tension between making consistent decisions and making right decisions as this is vital to improving outcomes for families. Utilizing the Generalist Model of social work; when workers improve their engagement, assessment, and planning skills, they may become more mindful of the subjective nature of their decisions and thus, strive to incorporate best practice methods into their daily routines. Increased collaboration through the use of supervisory consultation, Team Decision Making (TDM's), and a stronger reliance on the use of the SDM tool are recommended. This collaboration should also include community support and the input from family members or extended relatives.

Although there have been fervent efforts within the department to demonstrate the effectiveness of the SDM

assessment tool, social workers need to steadily recognize the value of assessment tool. Workers need to grasp that the intent of the tool is to expand on one's assessment and practice skills rather than to obstruct investigation outcomes. In other words, understanding the usefulness of the tool as an objective, supportive measure of one's assessment is paramount to improving the consistency within child welfare decision making. Supervisors and administrators could assist with this change in mindset by refocusing the emphasis to critical thinking about assessment outcomes as well as the case in general while lessening the emphasis on the administrative deadlines and tasks associated with the tool. Likewise, the pooling of information and shared knowledge through the use of TDM's can also assist in improving decision outcomes.

Lipsky (1980, as cited in Coble Vinzant & Crothers, 1998, p. 41) cites that some public service workers operate largely independent of direct supervision as they carry out their daily tasks. According to Gray and Gibbons (2007, p. 223), an overemphasis on the technical manner of decision making limits how workers learn to respond intuitively. Supervisors need to build trust and

engage their workers in active dialogues that assist workers in reflecting on the legitimacy of their observations (Gray & Gibbons, 2007, p. 223).

Conclusions

In general, there remains much to learn about how decisions are made with the wide range of variables considered in child welfare. According to Proctor (2002, p. 3), decision quality may be compromised by factors such as time pressure, emotions, cultural differences, a lack of information, and a wide range of alternatives for choice. Much work is to be done to examine the decision-making process in social work, in particular, within child welfare. As change agents, social workers must strive to incorporate best practice methods and clear decision-making procedures into our daily routines in order to best meet the needs of the families and communities we serve.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

This survey was designed to examine decision-making in Child Welfare. There are no right or wrong answers and your responses will remain anonymous.

You are asked to reflect on referrals you have previously been assigned.

Please read the following questions and then answer accordingly by placing a check in the box that best fits your case management over the past 12 months:

- 1) In general, what would you say is the risk level of the referrals you are typically assigned?

☐ Very high ☐ Somewhat high ☐ Undecided ☐ Not very high ☐ Not at all high

- 2) How many referrals do you average each month? _____

- 3) How many times a month do you typically detain? _____

- 4) Would you say your average detention rate is:

☐ Frequent ☐ Somewhat frequent ☐ Undecided ☐ Not very frequent ☐ I never detain

- 5) How often does your supervisor's input support your decision to detain?

☐ Always ☐ Somewhat ☐ Undecided ☐ Not very Often ☐ Not at all

- 6) How influential is the recommendation of Structure Decision Making (SDM) on your decision to detain?

☐ Very Influential ☐ Somewhat ☐ Undecided ☐ Not very Influential ☐ Not at all Influential

- 7) When applicable, how influential is the recommendation of a Team Decision Meeting (TDM) on your decision to detain?

☐ Very Influential ☐ Somewhat ☐ Undecided ☐ Not very Influential ☐ Not at all Influential

- 8) When applicable, how influential is the recommendation of collaborative staffings (i.e. PHN, Mental Health, other) on your decision to detain?

☐ Very Influential ☐ Somewhat ☐ Undecided ☐ Not very Influential ☐ Not at all Influential

Developed by Elizabeth Donth

9) How important have the following factors been to you when making a decision to remove a child from the home?

a. Please **circle** the number which best fits your response (from 1=Not at all important to 7=Very important):

	Not at All Important			Somewhat Important			Very Important
a. Severity of Abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b. Duration/Pattern of Abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c. Likelihood of reoccurrence	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d. Child's ability to recount abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e. Child's developmental level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
f. Child's attachment to parents	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
g. Parent's cognitive ability	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
h. Parent's stress level	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
i. Parent's level of substance abuse	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
j. Parent's psychopathology	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
k. What services have been offered	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
l. Parent's responses to past services	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
m. Family social support	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
n. Family financial situation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
o. Stability in the family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
p. Neighborhood safety/risks	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
q. Availability of "good" quality placement options	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

b. From the list above, identify and write below the five most important factors to you when deciding to detain. Indicate your selection using the letter that corresponds with the factor above in order of importance (1=most important, 2=next to the most important, etc.)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Britner, P. A., & Mossler, D. G. (2002). Professionals' decision-making about out-of-home placements following instances of child abuse. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 317-332.

Please tell us a little bit about yourself:

How old are you? _____

What is your gender? ☐ Male ☐ Female

What is your relationship status? ☐ Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Separated
☐ Widowed ☐ Never Married
☐ Cohabitation with partner

Do you have children? ☐ No ☐ Yes—if yes, what are the ages of your children?
(Check all that apply) ☐ 0-3 ☐ 4-6 ☐ 7-10 ☐ 11-14 ☐ 15-18 ☐ 18+

Overall, how many years have you worked as a social worker? _____

How many years have you worked for Riverside County CPS? _____

Which programs within Riverside County CPS have you worked and how long were you in each program? (Check all that apply and indicate number of years of program experience)

☐ ER:_____ ☐ CDU:_____ ☐ FM/FR:_____ ☐ PP:_____ ☐ Other:_____

What is the highest level of education you have completed? Specify degree and field of study:

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate in is aimed at examining the relationship between social worker characteristics and decision-making. This study is being conducted by Elizabeth Donth, a Master of Social Work graduate student, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. This study has been approved by the School of Social Work Human Subjects Sub-Committee of the Institutional Review Board, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose is to look at the relationship between social workers personal and professional characteristics and their perceptions of decision-making in child abuse investigations.

DESCRIPTION: You are being asked to participate in a self-administered survey questionnaire. You will be asked to reflect on referrals you have been assigned and then answer several questions about your perception of the risk involved as well as demographic information.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. There are no penalties for non-participation. You may discontinue or withdraw your participation at any time. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question and/or withdraw at any time.

CONFIDENTIALITY: All participation in this study is anonymous. Participants will not be asked at any time to provide their name or any other identifying information on the questionnaire. All data obtained will be stored in a locked file cabinet until the conclusion of the study, at which time the data will be destroyed. At no time will any information be tied to a particular social worker.

DURATION: The questionnaire should only take 10-15 minutes to complete.

RISKS: There are no anticipated risks to participating in this study. Some participants may feel a little uncomfortable due to the personal nature of some of the questions and therefore, you are reminded that you are free to not answer any question and/or withdraw at any time.

BENEFITS: Benefits for participating in this research study will be to increase knowledge about social worker characteristics and decision-making. The goal is to improve the consistency of decisions made within Child Welfare. Additionally, participants will be given a raffle ticket for a chance to win one of three \$15 Starbucks gift cards.

CONTACT: If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the research supervisor, Dr. Claar, Professor, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California, 92407, jpabusta@csusb.edu, 909-537-5000.

RESULTS: The results of this study will be available at the Pfau Library, California State University, San Bernardino after September 2012.

STATEMENT OF CONSENT: By placing an "X" mark below, I acknowledge that I have been informed and understand the nature of this study. Thereby, I freely consent to participate.

Place an "X" here: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

The study you have just completed was aimed at examining the relationship between social worker characteristics and decision-making. The results of this study may assist with improving the consistency of decisions made during child abuse investigations which could lead to better outcomes for the children and families served by the agency. There was no act of deception used in this study. If you have any questions about this study, feel free to contact the supervisor of this study, Dr. Claar, Professor, School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino, 5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, California, 92407, jpabusta@csusb.edu, 909-537-5500. If you are interested in obtaining a copy of the results of the findings of this study, contact the Pfau Library, California State University, San Bernardino after September 2012.

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