

The Evolution of a Social Work Researcher

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Research is a critical tool for all social workers. The process of becoming a researcher should start during social work education. This article will discuss, from the perspective of an undergraduate social work student and her professor, the transformation from classroom research student to actual researcher during the field practicum experience. The field site was a child protective services agency, and the student carried out a program evaluation. Here, we describe the process of this evaluation, as well as the results. {mosgoogle right}

The Practicum Student

As for all students, the word "research" seems daunting and overwhelming. At least I felt exactly this way. I transferred into a four-year university from a community college where research was rarely spoken about. My first semester was when it seemed as if research blind-sided me. I completed my first required research class with a "B," but not forgetting the confusion, tears, and late nights trying to figure out whether the population I was studying even existed. I was so relieved it was over, but I knew research would be a part of my life, as a social worker, forever.

I made it through two more semesters, and I became somewhat more comfortable with words such as "quantitative," "qualitative," "validity," and "reliability." My internship with Child Protective Services had brought up the idea to my professor of my refining and continuing their program evaluation. I was so intimidated by the thought of doing research on my own. I informed my professor that I was horrible at research and that I was scared of doing this. My professor gave me time to think about what I wanted to do but reassured me that she would help me along the way.

It took me two weeks to figure out if this would be the right choice. I weighed all the options and thought about the hard work that would go into completing this research. I wanted it to be done well, and I wanted to give the agency clear results. I was still not sure if I was cut out for the job. When it was time to schedule classes, I quit making excuses and registered for the independent research class.

During winter break, I completed the literature review and waited for the semester to begin. At my first meeting with my professor, I was given a timeline. My stress level was up by the end of our meeting, because time was a major issue. I needed to complete a proposal for the Review Board for Protection of Human Subjects, and I could not start the actual research until I had its approval. I needed to construct a consent form, work on the questionnaire, and make time to select participants. I had so many questions, and I was scared that there was not enough time to complete this project. It took the Review Board many weeks to review my proposal. The board wrote back with suggestions and concerns, to which I immediately replied. A few more weeks went by, and they approved my research proposal. It was time to begin.

In the beginning, my professor wanted me to do face-to-face interviews, but because of time constraints, telephone interviews became my only way of completing the questionnaires. I began organizing telephone numbers, continuing to work on my literature review, and hoping that I would have enough time to finish the research. The end of the semester had drawn near, and I had called everyone on my list. My sample size was important. I wanted to give the best results. I enjoyed getting feedback from the participants and saw how empowering this was for them.

I began working on the results of my paper, and I was getting excited. I could not believe that I was almost done and that I actually got feedback. When I had completed the entire paper and e-mailed it to my professor, I did feel relief, but I also felt sad. I wished I had more time to do more research! I wanted my agency to know more about its services, and I finally saw the importance of research in the field of social work. Although I was afraid at first, I learned that research is nothing to be afraid of and that it has a deep impact on all people within our communities.

The Professor

A course in social work research methods is required of all undergraduate social work students. It also appears to have become required for me to teach research. Entering my doctoral program after 20 years as a clinical practitioner, I did not foresee becoming the designated research professor. Life takes many unexpected twists and turns, however, and I have taught research throughout my academic career. Interestingly, my route has been similar to the student who co-wrote this article, in that she and I have both developed from being somewhat reluctant to passionate about research.

Much of my passion has come from teaching students who enter research with significant hesitation. As I work with them to learn the new "language" of research, I am amazed at how many of them grow from being terrified to dedicated to the pursuit of social work research. I did not actually have Melissa as a research student, as I came to my current university after she had completed the course. As her faculty field liaison, I needed to encourage and support research in her field placement.

Students' carrying out research projects in field is often even more challenging than their completing the research methods course. As the content from their practice and policy courses should come to life, such should be the case with research content. Often, the field instructors are just as intimidated as the students, not recognizing opportunities that often abound in the field for research or feeling confident to support the students' research.

Melissa's field placement was in a Child Protective Services unit in a Department of Social Services (DSS). Her field instructor and the administration were eager to get feedback from recipients of the services. Since the recipients are typically mandated to receive these services, it can be difficult to engage them in an evaluative process. Palmer, Maiter, and Manji (2006) in their research of 61 parents receiving child protective services highlighted the importance of asking these families about their experiences. Many of their participants had positive as well as negative reactions. It is critical to know how to appropriately address the needs of these service recipients if social workers are to adequately address the issue of child maltreatment. Alpert (2005), in conducting a review of research on the experience of parents whose children have been placed in foster care, emphasized the need to get information directly from parents, not just the caseworkers.

Since the agency, the student, and I agreed strongly that it is critical to get feedback from the recipients in order to improve services, we developed a plan. Melissa would complete a survey from a population of those who had received services in the last 12 months. The agency had mailed a survey earlier with little response. Melissa would contact people, identifying herself as a social work student, and request their help in evaluating the services rendered. As an instructor, I knew I was asking her to complete a difficult task. Not only was she a new researcher, but she was going to be calling people who may be very angry about being designated recipients of child protective services. It is my job to empower and support students to do whatever may enhance the lives of service recipients, so we moved forward.

The Process

The ultimate goal of the child protective services system is to guarantee the long-term well-being of children within their families whenever possible (McCroskey & Meezan, 1998). Child protective service workers want to do their best for the children and families they serve. Program and service evaluations can tell workers if they are accomplishing the goals meant to help their families and children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2006).

Evaluating services on an individual agency level can be empowering to service recipients and service providers and help to bring accountability to agencies. Program evaluations can help individual agencies identify problems within worker-client involvement, understand and improve services, provide a framework for the achievements of the workers, and being accountable (Innovation Network, Inc., 1990). The Program Evaluation Division (1998) suggested that external and internal evaluations can help to focus on the appropriateness of individual child protective service agencies' decisions, rather than just focusing on the compliance with regulations and laws.

Child protective service workers use interventions and social work skills to protect children while fostering a strong family. The social work profession encourages evaluating practices to monitor services and evaluate the progress toward goal attainment. Social workers also bear an ethical obligation to evaluate the services they are providing. Social workers must determine whether clients are benefiting from services and whether goals are being met. Evaluation also lets agencies know the impact that services have on families and brings accountability to the agency.

Over a one-month period, an attempt was made to reach 203 families by telephone to participate in the questionnaire. Of 203 families, 109 were either disconnected, wrong numbers, or there was no number available. Seventy-one of the families did not answer the phone or did not have time to complete the questionnaire. Six of these families did not want to participate in the questionnaire and were "not interested." Out of 203, 17 of these families participated in the questionnaire.

This research cannot be generalized to other populations because of such a small number of participants, and also only one agency participated. Time was a limitation to this study, and if more time had been available, then more of the families may have been reached. The lack of time, disconnected numbers, wrong numbers, and unavailable numbers were major limitations to this study. Negative societal views of Child Protective Services may have also limited participation in this study.

The Product

The results of this study showed some consistency in answers. Eight of the 17 respondents rated the overall quality of services as good, and two rated it as very good. Eight respondents changed their overall opinion of CPS after being recipients of services. All but one of these was in a more positive direction. Families who did participate took the questionnaire very seriously and wanted to give feedback to the agency. Out of 23 families that were contacted, 17 people did want to participate. This may show that families are willing to take part in surveys that involve such a sensitive subject and is promising for future attempts at contacting families. Cultural competence was specifically important, and being aware of the differences among this diverse population that the agency serves is an important part of this research. Child Protective Services involves a very sensitive subject and population. This research gives families a chance to voice their opinions of the services that they were provided and to bring accountability to the agency. It can also help the agency better serve families within the community, because direct feedback is from the families involved in the cases. The agency can see the positive and negative effects of the services it provided while staying true to social work values and ethics. Agencies can only know the effectiveness of their services by going directly to the people their services affect.

Conclusion

When first involved with CPS, families may feel that their rights are pulled from them, and "self-determination" seems like a distant phrase. This research empowered clients. The clients who did participate were surprised that they were being called and really took the questions seriously. To know that their opinion mattered and brought accountability to the agency empowered the clients to speak on such a touchy subject. When given the chance to speak out and advocate for themselves, clients meet the challenge. When students are given the opportunity to carry out meaningful research they, too, can meet the challenge!

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