Preparing for Child Welfare Practice

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Preparing for Child Welfare Practice: Themes, a Cognitive-Affective Model, and Implications from a Qualitative Study

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SUMMARY. Specialized child welfare MSW programs and stipend support for child welfare MSW students have been developed in several states through the Federal Title IV-E program. Thirty-seven focus groups conducted over four years with approximately 550 Title IV-E MSW students in California were submitted to qualitative thematic analysis. The intense emotional challenge of child welfare work emerged in the focus groups. A three stage cognitive-affective model of student development is proposed. This exploratory study suggests several hypotheses for further research: that students at more advanced cognitive-affective levels should be less prone to burnout, better able to make the difficult value-based decisions demanded by child welfare work, and more likely to integrate and use the emotions of themselves and others. Im-

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plications are explored for graduate programs, professors, and supervisors. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. Child welfare, training, developmental perspective

INTRODUCTION

Public child welfare practice is widely recognized to be one of the most challenging areas of social work practice (Bunston, 1997; Dane, 2000). The child welfare worker is faced with some of the most emotional situations that human beings experience: encountering children and families reeling from painful episodes of abuse and neglect, and often faced with parents and children broken apart physically and emotionally as families and as individuals by these events. Simultaneously, the child welfare worker is expected to represent and implement laws and policies while attempting to advocate for their clients in a social service environment with often scarce resources. How do we prepare MSW students to work in this field? What are some unifying themes that help us understand the challenge that faces students, educators, and supervisors?

This paper seeks to provide answers to these questions through the analysis of the results of thirty-seven focus groups conducted over four years with approximately 550 Title IV-E MSW students in California. The focus groups were part of the evaluation efforts of the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) in the fourteen participating graduate schools of social work in California. The themes that emerged in the focus groups pointed to the need to understand child welfare work from a developmental perspective that embraces both cognitive and emotional dimensions. This paper develops a cognitive-affective model that will aid educators to target their teaching and training efforts. This model has important implications for social work educators, child welfare supervisors and administrators and for policy makers with an interest in increasing the quality of child welfare services. This working model should continue to be tested and elaborated through ongoing quantitative and qualitative studies.

Literature Review

There is surprisingly little literature on the emotional needs of social work students. As suggested earlier, it is first important to acknowledge the intense

emotional issues confronted by parents, children and workers in child welfare interventions. The retention of child welfare workers was not a primary concern of this study, but it is clearly related to the intensity and complexity of work with clients, and the atmosphere and level of support that an agency provides. Dickinson and Perry (1998), in a large sample quantitative study, found that burnout and "emotional exhaustion" are a concern of workers at all levels in the child welfare system,and was associated with workers leaving child welfare work. Several small sample qualitative studies have also addressed the issue of retention of child welfare workers, identifying the personal and agency qualities that contributed to decisions to stay in child welfare practice (Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994).

The aforementioned studies focused on practitioners who had been in the field for some years. This study gathers data from MSW students who have had a minimum of one field placement in child welfare, as they embark on a two-year commitment to practice in child welfare. What are the challenges, fears and skills that are salient at this beginning stage? Cohen (1994) conducted an exploratory study which indirectly touches on this issue in describing the emotional perspectives of culturally diverse social work students. The author notes that there were concerns expressed about the use of self, amount of self-disclosure, and fear of over-involvement. Countertransference is probably the most frequent framework for discussing students' emotional responses to social work training and education process (see Tosone, 1998, for a literature review). Transference refers to the feelings from other intense relationships that clients project onto practitioners. Countertransference refers to the emotional responses of practitioners to clients, both those derived from the practitioner's own psychology and history, and those evoked by the client's transferences. An example that occurs frequently in child welfare work is the transference of a child placed in foster care onto their worker as a parental figure. The worker's countertransference to this demanding emotional role can range from pleasure and satisfaction, to feeling they must save the child, or anger at the child's biological parents.

Young (1994) wrote about leading a clinical supervision group of child welfare MSW students. One focus that emerged in this group was the need to develop an understanding of transference and countertransference, grounded in the students' own practice experiences. Over the course of a year, students identified ambivalence about the use of authority, feelings of vulnerability in "slowing down" to explore the dynamics of their cases, and dealing with the issues of loss and separation inherent in child protective work. Grossman, Levine-Jordano, and Shearer (1991) recognized the role of emotion for social work trainees and proposed a model for normalizing student's emotional response to

field experiences and for integrating an affective component into field supervision.

Bunston (1997) analyzed the emotional impact of child protective work using both transference/countertransference and systems ideas. She writes: "The emotional toll of protective work appears too complex and often too painful to address, often resulting in a high turnover of staff and low professional recognition . . ." (p. 61). The ". . . too complex . . . and painful to address. . ." suggests an emotional push to use simpler cognitive processes. As an adaptive strategy, child welfare workers may be impelled to view children and families more as bureaucratic entities than as complex interactions between stressed family members.
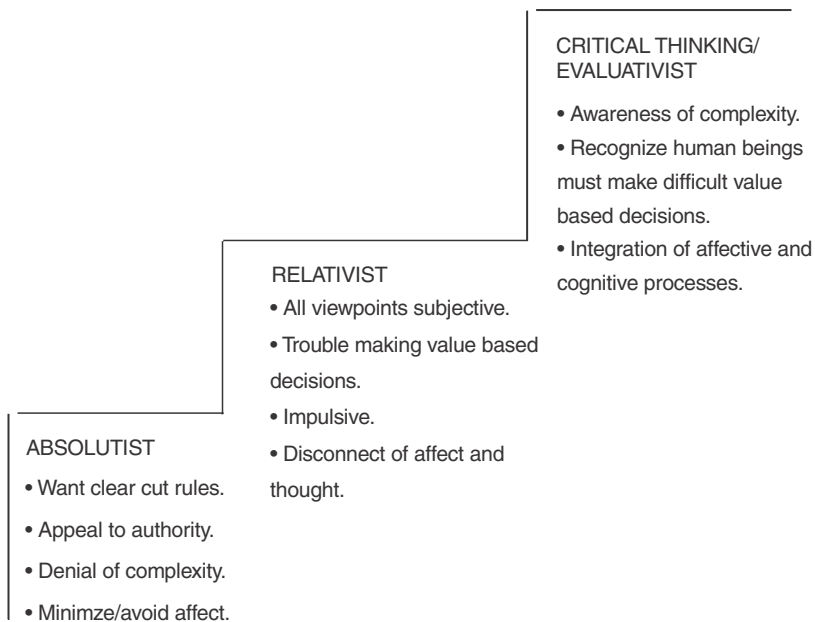
The literature on vicarious traumatization of psychotherapists working with sexually and physically abused clients has relevance to child protective workers as well (Neumann & Gamble, 1995). Vicarious traumatization recognizes the emotional and psychological impact of working day after day with the intimate details of abuse and neglect, and witnessing the traumatic impact on children and families of these events. These impacts may be exacerbated in child welfare workers by having to experience first hand the living situations of their clients, and by having to make weighty decisions in short time frames. Dane (2000) applied the clinical construct of vicarious traumatization to the experience of child welfare workers, and suggested a program to aid workers to use more adaptive coping strategies.

The emotional dimension of child welfare work, then, is in a relationship of mutual influence with the "cognitive set" of the worker. Like the colloquial "mind set," cognitive set is used here to evoke certain assumptions and belief patterns which workers use to interpret information and make decisions. When presented with an overwhelming emotional situation, workers may retreat from emotions and complexity, and fall back onto the unsophisticated application of agency regulations. Decisions are then made on the basis of regulation oriented formulas. While cognitive level may tumble under the pressure of intense emotional situations, more complex and emotionally aware cognitive functioning may allow the integration and management of affect (Goleman, 1995). How, then, do we conceptualize students' cognitive-affective functioning? The measures used in studies of social work students built on previous stage theories of cognitive development (Erwin, 1983; Perry, 1970; Martin et al., 1994). Each of the theorists use slightly different labels for their stages, but all three are working within a tradition and building on each other's work. We will use the work of Martin et al. (1994) to guide our cognitive-affective stages, as this work is the most current empirical research available. Here we will define three stages that summarize these approaches to cognitive development,

and emphasize the interrelationship of cognitive level and emotional coping style (see Figure 1).

The absolutist level, the first stage of cognitive development, is characterized by an appeal to authority to define right and wrong and the reliance on rules to guide decision making. At the absolutist level, affect and emotion is relegated to a secondary role to "doing what you have to do." The second stage, relativism, centers on an ability to recognize multiple viewpoints and that one's own perspective is subjective. The relativist, however, is prone to concluding that there is no basis for assessing the relative truthfulness of different accounts of reality. The relativist may value emotion but will not integrate affective responses within a cohesive intellectual framework. This may lead to impulsive actions, "it felt right," or to a paralysis of action in an inability to make difficult value-based decisions. The third stage, critical thinking, incorporates the awareness of complexity in the relativist stage, while recognizing that human beings must select from competing perspectives using value judgements. At this third stage, the authors discuss such ideas as commitment and empathy, and here emotion is integrated into overarching value-based perspectives.

FIGURE 1. Levels of Cognitive-Affective Development

CRITICAL THINKING/
EVALUATIVIST

• Awareness of complexity.
• Recognize human beings must make difficult value based decisions.
• Integration of affective and cognitive processes.

RELATIVIST

• All viewpoints subjective.
• Trouble making value based decisions.
• Impulsive.
• Disconnect of affect and thought.

ABSOLUTIST

• Want clear cut rules.
• Appeal to authority.
• Denial of complexity.
• Minimze/avoid affect.

Absolutist workers will make decisions based on formulas found in manuals or passed down by supervisors, and will be unable to weigh complex issues such as effects on children's developmental trajectories, attachment issues, or cultural factors in child rearing practices, to name only a few. Relativist workers, on the other hand, will disavow making difficult discriminations on the basis that there is no way to choose among competing perspectives or choices. Relativist workers will tend to be passive, allowing others to make decisions, or postponing action until mandated interventions are required. Critically thinking workers weigh the complex perspectives involved in a practice situation, consider the ethics and values that underlie different views, and include an assessment of the emotional features (both their own, and others). It is at the critical thinking level that the emotional experience of the worker can be usefully integrated into practice.

In addition to the level of cognitive-affective functioning of the worker, there is the influence of the agency. Studies of policemen, teachers, and social workers identified the individual and institutional push for civil servants to simplify their jobs (Lipsky, 1980; Scott, 1997). This street-level bureaucrat theory argues that workers are impelled to "routinize" their jobs as a defense against the difficult emotions and decisions inherent in their work, and in response to bureaucratic pressures to process a high number of cases (Meyers, Glaser, & McDonald, 1998). These types of bureaucratic pressures encourage absolutist workers, while critically-thinking workers are more likely to resist routinizing their work.

The proposed cognitive-affective model helps to conceptualize the experience of MSW students, and allows an entry point for designing targeted educational interventions. There has been little research on how educational experiences can prepare workers for the complex emotional challenges of practice. In an analogous domain, research in the field of death and dying suggests that education can have beneficial effects in preparing workers to cope with human trauma (Kleespies, 1998, p. 2). Curriculum, class exercises, and supervision interactions that use the developmental cognitive-affective framework are likely to help students better adapt to the challenges of child welfare work. This framework may also be helpful for students and practitioners in other areas of social work practice.

Methods

Student focus groups have been conducted near the end of the 1994-1995,1995-1996, and 1997-1998 school years in most of the 14 schools of social work in California that are in partnership with CalSWEC. The total number of focus groups conducted, taped and transcribed is thirty-seven. Since this is

group level data, exact counts of participants were not collected in two of the three years. In the one year where participants were counted (1996), the average number of participants was 15 (excluding one group that had only 3 participants, and one where no count was conducted). An estimate of total sample size is 550 (37 groups averaging 15 participants each). The groups are conducted in the student's last semester of MSW study, and it is estimated that 75 to 80 percent of the graduating California IV-E students have participated in the focus groups. The focus groups followed a semi-structured format with probes of student views of the specialized child welfare curriculum. Although the emotional challenge of child welfare work was not part of the question protocol, the theme spontaneously emerged in many groups, and was present as a sub-text in most if not all of the groups.

This research was reviewed by the Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS) at the University of California, Berkeley, and declared to be in a category exempt from full review. Group participants are assured of confidentiality and of the voluntary nature of their participation. Informed consent was elicited both verbally and in writing.

In this study, a hybrid of traditional read and reread coding and of text searches for certain words was employed (Buston, 1997). The qualitative analysis software package NUD*IST (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 1997) was used both to organize coding and to perform automated keyword searches. All keyword searches were "cleaned" of irrelevant hits, and random checks of comprehensiveness were conducted. Line by line coding serves as a procedural check, insuring that the researcher's thinking stays close to the actual words spoken by the subjects. Themes and coding were reviewed by both authors in an iterative process that led to the development of more abstract ideas, or theory. This method of coding and grouping in categories is the core qualitative analytic technique in common to many specific methods (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

As noted, the semi-structured interview format did not directly question emotional and cognitive approaches to field work. The most frequent manifest themes in the groups clustered around a focus on direct practice preparation. As the authors explored these categories of themes, the unifying interpretive structure of the emotional challenge of practice and a range of cognitive-affective responses emerged. These hypotheses were then tested by returning to the transcripts of the groups and seeking examples of these themes, as well as for examples that falsify or contradict the hypothesized interpretive framework. The reader is invited to reflect about the verbatim focus group material presented below and critically appraise the interpretive framework proposed by the authors.

FINDINGS

The most frequent themes of the focus groups centered on direct practice. Paradoxically, students emphasized direct practice as the most frequently mentioned strength of the curriculum as well as the most frequently mentioned weakness. This fact underlines students' preoccupation with being prepared for the challenging situations of practice. The counts of themes found in this study are reported elsewhere (Coleman & Clark, 1998). As the authors explored the student's comments in the focus groups, anxiety and apprehension about the emotional challenge of child welfare work emerged as a theme. Further, it became evident that the students had different styles of handling this challenge that reasonably corresponded to the absolutist, relativist, and critical thinking model of cognitive-affective development. This section uses summaries of student comments and direct quotes to first profile the emotional impact of child welfare, and then illustrate the three stage cognitive-affective hierarchy.

The Emotional Impact

Highly representative of the feelings stirred up by child welfare work is the following statement of a group member about a child who lost a "good placement":

> Eventually, they kicked her out. I cried about that one. Now she will be in another home and things will happen to her all over again. I felt like no one would ever love her. I had thought that this family was her last chance. She had started to make progress, and they were really dedicated to her. Now I feel she will be bounced around in group homes until she is 18.

Another student spoke of the difficulty in knowing what was appropriate affect to feel and show:

> When I had to tell a mom her 12 months were up, she had six more months. Basically, I let her know we were looking at adoption. I had to watch her cry. I'm human. I knew that she hadn't been doing much to reunify with her children. I didn't want to cry in front of her.

Specific to the emotional issues inherent in beginning practice, an older psychotherapist once remarked to one of us (DC) that in the first several years of psychotherapy practice there was a natural terror about one's ability to bear the pain and need for nurturance of a caseload of clients. The different experi-

ence of a child welfare job may mitigate some terrors and exacerbate others compared with psychotherapy practice. The issue of caseload and the inherent contradictions of meeting bureaucratic guidelines and providing service to children and families is encapsulated in the following statement:

> What I never heard in class is how you can do anything with 70-80 cases. What did we have in school that taught us how do deal with that as well as help anybody? It really scares people away from certain units. You will lose good workers.

The preceding quotations illustrate that child welfare workers are challenged to work with intense emotional situations under the pressure of high caseloads. No matter the overall cognitive-affective level of the worker, child welfare work will be very challenging. However, at more advanced levels of cognitive-affective functioning, the worker is more likely to be able to place the emotion they are experiencing into a meaningful context. In the next section the student's comments will demonstrate how the cognitive-affective levels are manifested in child welfare practice.

Cognitive-Affective Levels

One contributor to the focus groups' emphasis on basic training for child welfare practice is that the anxiety about the challenging role of child welfare practice is handled by becoming preoccupied with the technical aspects of the job. Students feel that if they know all of the specific assessment criteria and laws, then they will be able to handle the large caseload and the complex family issues. This strategy is the absolutist solution–the job is the application of black and white rules to situations. Of course individual agencies, and units within agencies, vary in their work culture including the recognition of the child welfare work as a complex cognitive-affective process. Some work cultures encourage critical thinking workers, where others favor the absolutist approach.

The following student comment reflects the pragmatism of the absolutist cognitive-affective set, and of the sense of urgency to be prepared for practice:

> Forget about the history. My classmates thought I was funny when I said the first day of class that I didn't want to hear about anything that happened before 1980. I need something I can use right now if I go out on the line.

In this next statement, a student is discussing having received classroom instruction on several "theoretical" ways to approach assessment:

> After a while, when you get into the county, things are done, but they are formatted. When you are actually putting it into practice, you don't have time to think about taking a theory and applying it.

The paradox of the absolutist solution to the problem of beginning practice is the question of whether the flawless bureaucratic worker can do sound, ethical social work. Absolutist workers may also be vulnerable to burnout and stress related illnesses because they are avoiding the emotional dimension of practice. While an absolutist worker attempts to apply clear-cut rules, they are forever stymied by a world that is shades of gray.

The MSW social worker is intended to be able to approach the tasks and problems of social work in a more complex and contextualized manner, to understand the need for flexibility and an appreciation for the inherent contradictions and ambiguities of social work practice (Harrison & Atherton, 1990). This goal of MSW education is reflected in the critical thinking stage of the cognitive-affective development schema.

The following comment reflects the student's awareness of complexity, and the relativism of different perspectives on practice situations:

> Self awareness is very important. It is almost impossible to be a good social worker and not be self aware. We run into so many diverse clients we need to be aware of any biases we might have.

Another student discussed the necessity to be able to apply theoretical knowledge to practice situations, and to be able to interpret this knowledge to clients:

> You are dealing with children so you have to have a good understanding of developmental milestones of children. You need to be able to assist the families in identifying these milestones as normal occurrences when the parents may translate them as abnormal or obnoxious.

The following comment exemplifies the critical thinking approach to practice:

> I think personally I did have some struggle in the beginning of my internship because I wanted to do what was correct for the agency. In trying to follow policy, I would sometimes forget about advocacy. Being an intern, I often didn't want to go for it because something else might be jeopardized that might harm my studies or whatever. Coming back and reviewing those things I saw different approaches.

This student felt the push to work from an absolutist framework–"to do what was correct." However, he or she weighed the risks of harming his or her academic progress, and weighed the perspectives of the agency, and of a value of advocating and empowering clients. It is this openness to ambiguity and multiple perspectives that is one goal of graduate social work training. The other is the ability to make value-informed decisions and actions with an awareness that it is based on limited information, and bound by one's own perspective.

A student identified the practice class as catalyzing a change in how he or she thought and felt about child welfare practice:

> The practice class raised my standards from before. Before I did this job I responded like I think. Now I care more. I see more interventions. I have more concern about helping . . .

A theme emerged in the groups of certain classroom techniques that the students credited with helping advance their learning, and their emotional coping with practice. A student contributed the following comment:

> Oral presentations and case presentations. The class being involved in the case. Just hearing experiences from other students not only helped me professionally but helped me to work through my own issues or feelings about frustrations. I had no other way of knowing that other students were going through some of those same experiences. It was very validating and informative.

DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged in the focus groups tell of the emotional challenge of child welfare work, and suggest three distinct cognitive-affective modes of approach. The students' comments themselves also suggested the pathway to facilitating movement to more advanced cognitive-affective levels: the opportunity to talk about case material, to receive support from peers, and to share ideas about how to respond to specific situations. These classroom case discussions also include an emotional component of mutual support, and of suggesting to one another ways of understanding and using the emotions in practice situations. Instructors should be attuned to facilitating these dialogical and supportive processes in the classroom. The exploration of multiple viewpoints in an atmosphere of emotional awareness in the classroom mirrors the intrapersonal process we wish to see students achieve as individuals. Both in the classroom, and

within each student, the presence of emotionally aware dialogical processes is a marker that higher level cognitive-affective functioning is taking place.

To model and begin these processes, faculty should illustrate theoretical material with case examples or other connections to the day to day practice of child welfare. Students liked courses which used actual cases to explore the content areas of the course. This needn't be isolated to practice courses or field seminars. Case material can be used to illustrate policy dilemmas, principles of child development, and theories of treatment. Faculty could improve their credibility, and gain material for integrating course material with the practice world, through spending some time in child welfare agencies and observing child welfare workers in action. The use of case material can allow students to experience the complexities and ambiguities of practice without the weighty pressures of real life practice. Faculty who have experienced front-line practice can model a dialogical and emotionally self-aware stance to practice, to help students to advance in their capacity to tolerate the conflicting feelings and the inherent ambiguity of direct practice.

Schools and individual instructors may wish to examine the issue of the prevailing level of cognitive-affective development of students, and to tailor learning experiences to work toward the goal of a more advanced and flexible cognitive-affective process. Seminar classes where an atmosphere of trust and acceptance has been established may permit students to discuss the complex web of emotions and thoughts involved in beginning practice. This will facilitate support from the instructor and other students, allowing a loosening of the emotional pressure on the student. Students showed an appreciation for opportunities to talk honestly with one another about practice. Dane's (2000) small focus group study with child welfare workers also suggested a similar group model for child welfare workers to develop their understanding and coping skills with emotional stress. Perhaps the emotional component should be explicitly included in curricula and syllabi to remind all participants to attend to this important area, and to endorse classroom time spent on the students' emotional responses.

Programs, instructors and supervisors who are mindful of both the affective and the cognitive dimensions of the training and education process seem more likely to meet the needs of their students. If the student's fears about practice are not addressed, they are more likely to use a absolutist approach in their work. Alternately, we feel that students who use critical thinking are more able to manage the emotional demands of child welfare work. If schools of social work produce absolutist child welfare workers, the aims of professionalization are defeated. Students have to be encouraged to see beyond the routine application of codes and regulations: at stake is not only the lives of children and

families, but also their own mental health and the sustainability of practicing as a child welfare worker.

This study worked from the verbatim statements of the students themselves. Future research could use quantitative methods and random sampling to test the ideas emergent in this study. Educators could test cognitive-affective functioning of students using a measure of cognitive level (Martin et al., 1994), or emotional intelligence (Schutte et al., 1998). Testing early in a course would allow assessment of how students at different levels respond to educational techniques. Testing later in a course could allow an assessment of effectiveness of the overall curriculum, or of specific modules. This type of correlational study is highly feasible, as it only requires completing short paper and pencil inventories.

Although more complex and costly, the true frontier in research on child welfare education is studies that examine effects on client outcomes. Possible outcome measures vary from the average duration of a worker's caseload in foster care, to client ratings of satisfaction with a worker, or, ultimately, measures of developmental outcomes of clients.

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