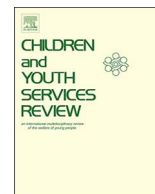




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The evolving relationship between casework skills, engagement, and positive case outcomes in child protection: A structural equation model



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A B S T R A C T

This paper reports a study that aims to increase the understanding of the relationship between workers and their child protection clients through the development of a client engagement model. A conceptual exploratory structural equation model (SEM) of caseworker skills, engagement and client outcomes is presented. Results indicate that including parents in the planning, not ignoring problems parent identify as important, not asking them to do something they would not find helpful, and locating appropriate services, leads to higher client engagement. Although not directly related, having workers return clients phone calls acted as mediator between other worker casework skills and client engagement. Client engagement was also influenced by satisfaction with the case outcome. Worker engagement was also influenced by whether they included parents in the planning, which in turn was influenced by worker experience. Workers who were kind and considerate were more likely to be engaged. Worker engagement predicted satisfaction with the case outcome and whether workers' believed families would contact the agency in the future. Lastly, client engagement predicted worker engagement although it is our belief that this is an iterative reciprocal process.

1. Introduction

This paper examines mechanisms that contribute to the change process as it pertains to adult parent clients in the field of child welfare. Specifically, we focus on the impact that casework skills, engagement, and positive case outcomes have on one another. We offer the Ontario perspective. According to Kemp, Marcenko, Lyons, and Kruzich (2014) who have conducted modeling of client and worker relationship in US child protection, this area of research is “often overlooked in child welfare research” (p. 33).

Emerging research is helping to develop a conceptualization of the change process. A relationship has been found between adult client engagement and positive case outcomes. For example, open communication between workers and parents has been associated with the ability of parents to provide appropriate discipline and emotional care to their children (Lee & Ayon, 2004). Greater collaboration between workers and clients in treatment planning has been associated with greater cooperation on the part of clients, which in turn has been related to fewer out-of-home placements (Littell, 2001). Gladstone et al.

(2012) found that parents who were more engaged with their workers reported greater satisfaction with the outcome of service and with the way that service was provided. Parents also felt that their parenting had improved and that their children were safer than they had been before agency involvement.

Several contextual factors have been found to be related either to client participation in services or more directly to the concept of “engagement” itself. These include client factors, such as the presence of family conflict and client motivation; worker factors, such as education and attitudes towards clients; and organizational factors, such as size of worker caseload and client access to services (Darlington, Healy, & Freeney, 2010; Littell & Tajima, 2000; Okamoto, 2001).

A study by Randolph, Fincham, and Radey (2009) suggests that parents' involvement in prevention programs is related to the potential severity of parental problem behaviors and parents' understanding as to how these behaviors may put their children at risk; the benefits and barriers to taking action; and expectations that their action will be successful. Altman (2008), who looked at the concept of “engagement” more directly, found that client engagement was related to whether

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clients acknowledged problems, were motivated to change, had a sense of hopefulness, felt that workers were respectful, participated in collaborative goal setting, and received clear communication. In a study conducted by Gladstone et al. (2012), parent engagement was related to the perception that workers were more experienced in their jobs and therefore more understanding of parents' problems.

As well as these contextual factors, the use of casework skills has been found to have an impact on client engagement. Casework skills have been organized into 4 categories by Trotter (2002) who refers to role clarification, collaborative problem-solving, pro-social modeling, and relationship skills. Several qualitative studies have associated client engagement with workers' being honest and straightforward, providing information, and being able to listen and empathize (Platt, 2008), being flexible and focusing on client strengths (Gockel, Russell, & Harris, 2008), clearly communicating the purpose of agency involvement, responding to calls in a timely manner, and following up on tasks as promised (De Boer & Coady, 2007; Drake, 1994; Maiter, Palmer, & Manji, 2006).

In a statistical analysis of data gathered from worker-parent dyads, Gladstone et al. (2014) found that parent engagement was largely explained by 4 main skills: the extent to which workers did not ignore problems perceived to be important to parents, the extent to which workers did not ask parents to do things that they felt would be unhelpful, how skilled workers were at locating appropriate services, and whether workers made or returned telephone calls when arranged.

In summary, studies have found a relationship between parent engagement and positive case outcomes; studies have identified contextual factors associated with parent engagement; and an association has been found between the use of casework skills and parent engagement. In this paper, we look at a structural equation model that explains the way that casework skills, adult parent engagement, worker engagement, and positive case outcomes are related to each other in a child welfare context.

2. Method

2.1. Theoretical model

Our first step was to construct a theoretical model containing some central variables that have been identified with the change process. Several meta-analyses have concluded that client engagement can lead to positive case outcomes (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Horvath & Symonds, 1991; Marziali & Alexander, 1991; Shirk & Karver, 2003). This relationship may also be bi-directional (Littell, 2001; Reisinger, Bush, Colom, & Battjes, 2003). As stated above, numerous studies have associated the use of casework skills and client engagement (Gockel et al., 2008; Maiter et al., 2006; Platt, 2008). We incorporated clients' sense of hope into the model for two reasons. There is a suggestion in the literature that client engagement is related to a sense of hopefulness (Altman, 2008). Moreover, hope might alleviate depression (Carr, 2004), which can have an impact on a client's capacity to parent effectively (Sheppard, 2002). We also looked at worker engagement and how it might be related to client engagement. Systems theory would state that the change agent system and the client system can impact one another in a reciprocal way (Pincus & Minahan, 1973). Finally, we added worker stress to the model since there is empirical evidence that worker stress can affect worker performance (Regehr, LeBlanc, Shlonsky, & Bogo, 2010; Regehr, Leslie, Howe, & Chau, 2005).

2.2. Design and sample

Personal interviews were conducted to gather quantitative data from child welfare workers and adult parent clients receiving service from 11 child welfare agencies (CAS) in Ontario, Canada. Participating agencies were from both large and medium sized urban communities as well as from rural communities. There was representation from North

as well as Southern Ontario. Both secular and Catholic agencies took part. There was no specific representation from Indigenous agencies.

The sample was composed of 131 worker-parent dyads. Each child welfare worker and adult parent client included in the sample was in a working relationship with one another. Data were also gathered from an additional 28 parents and 19 workers (in these cases, one party had declined to participate after the other had been interviewed and their information was removed from the sample). The sample of parents consisted of 147 mothers and 12 fathers.

Excluded were parents whose children were removed from their care as the intent as the study was to demonstrate that improving client engagement could result in improved outcomes for children while in the care of their parents. Parents of children who have been removed from their care, tend to have less "buy-in" compared to parents whose children are still living at home (Kemp et al., 2014). Families with single and multiple experiences with child welfare were included in the sample.

The mean age of the parents was 36.7 years (the range was 18 to 62 years of age). Most (74%) were Caucasian; 6% were African-Canadian and Aboriginal, respectively. The sample was fairly evenly divided between parents who were married (22%), co-habiting or in a relationship (20%) or single (21%). About one-third (31%) said that they were separated or divorced. Parents were relatively well-educated (67% had finished at least high school). About one-third (34%) of the parents were employed full-or part-time with the majority (79%) stating that their annual income was \$30,000 or less.

The mean age of the workers was 39.8 years (the range was 23 to 63 years of age). The majority (71%) were Caucasian, 11% were African-Canadian and almost 4% were Latin Canadian. Every worker had a university or college degree; most degrees (61%) were in social work. Most (69%) had worked in child protection for at least 4 years and most (70%) had children of their own.

2.3. Measures

Parent engagement was assessed using Yatchmenoff's (2005) measure of engagement. This measure is composed of 19 items spread across 4 dimensions, which include "buy-in," "receptivity," "working relationship" and "mistrust." Yatchmenoff's measure is scored on a 5-point Likert scale with scores ranging from 19 (no engagement) to 95 (full engagement). Yatchmenoff's measure has high internal consistency and strong validity and was specifically designed for use in child protection services. Cronbach's alpha: 0.91.

The outcome of parents' involvement with the child welfare agency and its workers was assessed in several ways. *Satisfaction with service* was measured in 5 ways. We asked parents "How satisfied have you been with CAS as a whole in terms of the way service was provided to your family?" "How satisfied have you been with CAS as a whole in terms of the outcome of service?" "How satisfied have you been with (name of current worker) as a whole in terms of the way service was provided to your family?" "How satisfied have you been with (name of current worker) as a whole in terms of outcome of service?" Response categories for each of these measures included "very unsatisfied," "unsatisfied," "unsure," "satisfied," "very satisfied." We also asked parents "Would you consider contacting (name of current worker) for advice or assistance if you had problems in the future?" Responses were scored dichotomously as "yes/no." The wording of these measures was influenced by the work of Trotter (2002).

Perception of child safety was measured by asking parents "to what extent do you think that your child(ren) are safer now than they were immediately before you began working with (name of current worker)?" response categories included "a lot less safe," "less safe," "the same," "safer," "a lot safer." *The extent to which parents felt that their parenting had changed* was measured by asking parents "Since you began working with (name of current worker), to what extent would you say that the way that you parent your children has changed?" Response

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