Family feedback in Child Welfare Services: A systematic review of measures

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A B S T R A C T

Background: Assessing family feedback in Child Welfare Services is embedded in family-centered practice, and the availability of validated, reliable instruments to perform this evaluation is essential for front-line practitioners, managers, and policymakers. Nonetheless, to date, no study has systematically identified and analyzed the measures in this field.
Objectives: A systematic review of the literature following the PRISMA guidelines was conducted to identify, describe and conceptually and psychometrically assess all of the published measures of family feedback in Child Welfare Services.
Method: A search of the measures published in peer-reviewed scientific journals in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French from 1980 to October 2013 was performed. Ten electronic databases and reference lists of relevant studies were consulted. In total, 13 studies including eight instruments were identified and analyzed.
Results: Most studies omitted information regarding the descriptive characteristics of the instruments and made no reference to a conceptual model. In most cases, the development and validation processes of the instruments and their psychometric characteristics were insufficiently reported. Additionally, some relevant elements of family-centered practice were frequently omitted in the dimensions of the questionnaires.
Conclusions: The scarcity of validated measures to evaluate family feedback in Child Welfare Services demands further research to develop new instruments that overcome these limitations. Recommendations for designing and validating future instruments are provided.

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1. Introduction

In the last three decades, child welfare systems in most Western countries have evolved from a traditionally investigative and deficit-focused approach toward a more family-centered and strengths-based perspective (Connolly, 2007). This shift in social work practice has translated into the recognition of the family as a critical context in a child's life as well as the need to provide families with adequate support. Such practice is embodied in family preservation services, which aim to prevent children's out-of-home placement and to ensure children's well-being within their families of origin. From a family preservation approach, the notions of user consultation, user involvement, user input and user-driven services have a central role (Kelly & Blythe, 2000). In this line, studies about service user feedback may serve as a means to empower parents and to give them a chance to have a voice with regard to their experiences with services. The process of being asked about their own opinions may actually change their perceptions about the staff and the services; it may also help to reduce the pronounced power asymmetry that exists between practitioners and child welfare users, and to provide client-centered and family-focused casework practice (Alpert, 2005; Baker, 2007; Tilbury, Osmond, & Crawford, 2010). Additionally, systematically assessing families' opinions about services is consistent with the principle of turning users into active agents of the intervention and promoting their autonomy (Rodrigo, Maiquez, Martín, & Byrne, 2008). All of these aspects lead us to consider that family feedback encompasses more than just user satisfaction; it is a broader concept that includes all the perceptions and opinions that users hold about services (their characteristics and effectiveness), practitioners, and outcomes.

The importance of assessing family feedback with Child Welfare Services (CWS) has been widely recognized (American Humane Association, 1998; Baker, 2007; Cortis, 2007; Kapp & Vela, 1999; Lietz, 2009; Tilbury et al., 2010). Parents involved with child welfare have unique perspectives and interpretations about the processes, events, and decisions that occur in those services. Such input is helpful in assessing program efficacy, designing service delivery improvement strategies and enhancing professional practice, which in turn may increase parental engagement with interventions (Tilbury et al., 2010). Within this field, client or user satisfaction has been the most studied dimension. The American Humane Association (1998) considers family satisfaction to be one of the outcomes that should be assessed in CWS, as it improves accountability to families. Furthermore, user satisfaction has been associated to positive outcomes in child welfare, such as practitioner estimates of client progress, fewer further notifications and children remaining at home (Trotter, 2008) as well as a greater likelihood of service completion (Damashek, Doughty, Ware, & Silovsky, 2011). Additionally, the parent–worker relationship, which is an essential element of user satisfaction with CWS, has been found to be a consistent predictor of intermediate outcomes (Marsh, Angell, Andrews, & Curry, 2012). Specifically, the strength of the parent–worker relationship predicted service completion (Girvin, DePanfilis, & Daining, 2007); staff perception of family involvement (Korfmacher, Green, Spellmann, & Thornburg, 2007), child and family well-being (Johnson & Ketring, 2006; Johnson, Wright, & Ketring, 2002; Southerland, Mustillo, Farmer, Stambaugh, & Murray, 2009), and improvements in child safety (Johnson & Ketring, 2006; Lee & Ayón, 2004). The perception of services may also affect child and family outcomes indirectly. For instance, satisfaction has been associated with program completion, collaboration with practitioners, engagement and compliance in interventions. Compliance, in turn, predicts reductions in the likelihood of subsequent reports of child maltreatment and out-of-home placements (Littell, 2001), and engagement is positively associated with parents' perceptions that their children were safer because of their

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involvement with services and that their parenting had improved (Gladstone et al., 2012). It is likely that parents who feel better about the services they receive and the relationships established within those services will be more receptive to suggestions, referrals, and assistance offered by child welfare agencies (Alpert, 2005; Chapman, Gibbons, Barth, McCrae, & the NSCAW Research Group, 2003).

In spite of the importance of measuring such aspects, there is still a lack of information about family feedback on child welfare systems, and family participation in performance measurement is rare (Baker, 2007; Cortis, 2007; Tilbury et al., 2010). Additionally, most studies have focused solely on satisfaction with services, ignoring other relevant aspects of the experience with CWS. Kapp and Vela (1999) attribute the underdevelopment of this area to several reasons: public social service agencies generally are not economically supported by users, and therefore, some of them may lack the incentive to measure user feedback; most of the families involved with CWS are involuntary users, and funding or performance measurement is typically based on outcomes (e.g., number of children in out-of-home placement) as measures of service effectiveness, which are partly independent of user perceptions. Lastly, an undervaluation of user opinions, considering them unreliable or biased may also be responsible for the lack of emphasis on family feedback in child welfare (Russell, 1990).

An important segment of the research in this field has been criticized for lacking methodological rigor (Heneghan, Horwitz, & Leventhal, 1996). The methodological weaknesses of the research on child welfare program evaluation may be partly attributable to the absence of well-established, sound, reliable and valid measures to assess family feedback (Baker, 2007; Berrick, Frasch, & Fox, 2000; Harris & Poertner, 1998). Most of the instruments lack psychometric analysis or have not been adequately tested (Harris & Poertner, 1998), which may mean that studies may not be measuring user satisfaction well or not even measuring the factors they believe they are measuring (Young, Nicholson, & Davis, 1995). On one hand, the majority of the studies tend to use ad hoc questionnaires without a conceptual framework that can only be used for a specific service or program or offer insufficient information about instrument development, validation or reliability (Kapp & Vela, 1999). On the other hand, many studies have assessed user feedback through qualitative methods, such as open interviews and focus groups (e.g., Buckley, Carr, & Whelan, 2011; Cortis, 2007). These methods may offer a rich and valuable vision of participants' perceptions, but a comparison of the results is not feasible. This hampers the collection of user feedback data as well as the possibility of comparing the findings over time and across different programs and services; it also diminishes the impact that such data could have in improving organizations or changing social policies (Baker, 2007). In addition, there is a challenge in identifying core constructs that should be included in family feedback measures, and the construct itself has yet to be consensually defined. The lack of a conceptual model that frames the empirical findings is common in user satisfaction studies (Pascoe, 1983). On a research level, more user feedback studies are warranted to conceptualize and identify its main components and contribute to theory development in this area (Baker, 2007).

Taking into account the aforementioned reasons, it seems that having validated, reliable instruments available to assess the perceptions of users of CWS is key for front-line practitioners, managers and policy makers. Nonetheless, to the best of our knowledge, no attempt has been made so far to systematically identify the existing instruments in this field or to assess what is being measured and how. We should mention two previous efforts as exceptions: the reviews by Harris and Poertner (1998) and Kapp and Vela (1999). In the first review, the authors examined the measurement of client satisfaction in several human service agencies and examined instruments in terms of their ability to reflect clients' experiences with services, the dimensions of satisfaction they measured and the quality of the data. They managed to identify four client satisfaction instruments in child welfare/protection services. Kapp and Vela (1999) reviewed the instruments used to measure consumer satisfaction in family preservation services and other related areas and found nine instruments. In spite of the usefulness of these reviews, neither of them followed an explicitly systematic review procedure, and more than a decade has passed since. To overcome these gaps, a systematic review of the extant literature was performed, following the PRISMA guidelines for conducting and reporting systematic reviews and meta-analyses (Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009). The aims of this systematic review were:

1) to identify and to characterize all of the published measures of family feedback with CWS that are suitable for research and service evaluation purposes;
2) to assess the conceptual framework and psychometric features of these measures;
3) to offer guidelines for the construction of new instruments that might overcome the current limitations.

2. Methods

2.1. Search and eligibility criteria

A search for studies that included or referenced instruments assessing family feedback with CWS was completed. The following inclusion criteria were considered: (a) The target population included the measures designed for caregivers of families at psychosocial risk whose children had not been placed in out-of-home care. The instruments assessing satisfaction with other services (e.g., mental health services) or developed with other populations (e.g., foster parents; parents with children in out-of-home care) were excluded. (b) The dates ranged from 1980 to October 2013. Articles published prior to 1980 were excluded because of the changes in policy, organizations and structure that CWS have undergone in the last three decades. (c) The types of sources and languages included peer-reviewed articles published in scientific journals in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian and French.

Two search methods were followed to identify the studies: An Internet-based search of the literature and a scan of the reference lists of articles that were found in the previous search and deemed relevant. The following electronic databases were searched: (i) PsycInfo, (ii) MedLine, (iii) PsycArticles, (iv) ProQuest Psychology Journals, (v) Social Services Abstracts, (vi) FRANCIS, (vii) ERIC, (viii) Web of Science, (ix) OVID and (x) Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection. To identify subject-related research terms, the authors performed a preliminary literature search and consulted child welfare experts. Based on these findings, an iterative search on each electronic database was carried out by matching two sets of terms, including both truncated and thesaurus terms. The truncated search strategy is displayed in Fig. 1.

An example of the thesaurus search for PsycInfo is presented in Fig. 2.

2.2. Selection procedure and study characteristics

Records were sorted by relevance, and duplicates were removed. In the cases in which the search retrieved more than 100 records, a filter was applied to exclude studies with unrelated subjects (such as job satisfaction, mental health and substance-related disorders). A preliminary study selection was performed by the first author. The relevance of the studies was determined through the screening of the titles and/or the abstracts (if the study was not in the relevant subject area, it was excluded on the basis of the title) of the retrieved records. After this selection, the studies that met the eligibility criteria were evaluated in further detail. Studies that made reference to or used at least one questionnaire on family feedback on child welfare or family preservation services or programs were included in the review. For data collection, a data extraction sheet was developed and adjusted after testing it with the first selected study (obtainable from the corresponding author). The first author extracted data from all of the selected studies, and the second author checked and confirmed the accuracy of the extracted data. In the case of disagreement between the first and second authors, the opinion of the third and fourth authors was solicited.

The search of the aforementioned databases provided a total of 17,954 records[1] (see Fig. 3). After adjusting for unrelated subjects, dates, types of publications and publication status, 3839 records remained. Of these, 3,791 were discarded because after reviewing their abstracts, it was concluded that those studies did not meet the criteria for inclusion. The full text versions of the remaining 48 studies were examined, and 37 studies did not meet the inclusion criteria as described. Ten studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the review, and three relevant studies were identified by checking the reference lists of the studies that met the inclusion criteria. Finally, a total of 13 studies including eight instruments assessing family feedback on CWS and family preservation programs were identified and analyzed for this review.

2.3. Data analysis

Information was extracted from each selected instrument on: 1) questionnaire subscales, 2) the number of items, 3) number of response options, 4) administration length, and 5) reading level. The following information about the sample to which the instrument was administered is provided: 6) size, 7) country, and 8) program or service

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[1] This number was obtained by summing all of the records retrieved for each database. Because the research was performed in 10 electronic databases separately, it is not possible to calculate the exact number of total records. In some cases, the same records were retrieved in more than one database.