Instead of Trying to Fix a Leak, We're Going To Take Care Of the Water: The Workers' Perspective on the Impact of Graduate Social Work Education on the Worker Client Relationship

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of

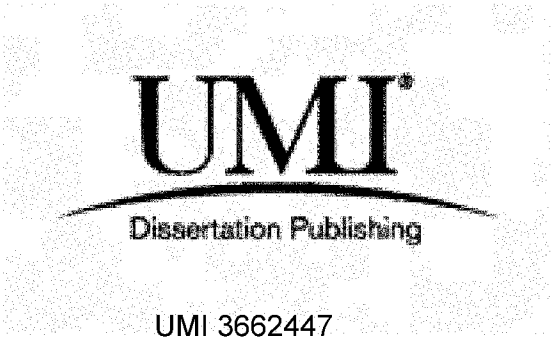
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Adelphi University School of Social Work

Garden City, New York

July, 2014



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Abstract

This research was undertaken to deepen our knowledge about the impact of graduate social work education on the way child welfare caseworkers form and maintain relationships with their clients. A qualitative approach was chosen because it best illustrates the process by which education can impact on child welfare work

Working Alliance Theory (Horvath and Luborsky, 1983) was used to provide a theoretical framework to understand the various components of the worker client relationship. In addition Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) and Experiential Learning Theory (Kolb, 1984) were used to provide a conceptual frame to understand the ways in which adults learn.

Fourteen child welfare workers from New York State were interviewed regarding their experiences with clients before and after their graduate education as well as what aspects of their education they found to be most salient. The results indicated that participants recognized the importance of the relationship with the client as opposed to simply seeing their job as simply a technical or procedural endeavor. Enhanced self-reflection and increased self-awareness was gained through class and field experiences. It enabled workers to differentiate their feelings from that of the client and act accordingly. In addition, workers were able to transfer learning from graduate classes and placements that were largely unrelated to child welfare.

The results of this study indicate that workers with an MSW recognize the importance of the worker client relationship as well as learned new skills that help manage this most difficult of relationships more effectively. Child welfare organizations should consider ways to recruit and retain these highly trained and valuable employees.

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Acknowledgements

To my academic advisor and mentor, Dr. Julie Cooper Altman, I would like to extend my sincerest gratitude for your patience, wisdom and guidance. I would have given up long ago if not for your influence. Thank you for helping me to see the project as worthy and important when I lost my way (many times). I would also like to thank the members of my committee for their input and guidance through the many iterations of this research and writing. You are all a great inspiration. Great thanks to Dr. McCarthy because without your assistance in recruitment, this research would not have been possible at all.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

My interest regarding the impact of graduate social work education on students is inspired by my own positive experiences as a graduate and doctoral student, teacher, field instructor and as a practicing social worker. Knowledge gained through reading, the wisdom and experience shared by my supervisors, professors, colleagues, students, and patients has been inspirational. My own experience made me wonder if others were also so inspired or if as many complain, graduate social work education is just a means to an end and lacks intrinsic value to the student. My education has also created moments of dissonance that have encouraged a deeper thinking process, created doubt about what I thought I already knew and eventually moved me to change my practice. It is an ongoing process. This investigation was born as a result of that questioning process about how child welfare workers perceive the impact of their graduate education on their ability to form and maintain relationships with their clients. The choice of using Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1991) to help guide the inquiry and focus of this study is in keeping with the basic belief that education can fundamentally shift the perspective of the student and that shift in perspective can lead to positive practice changes.

Child welfare workers face daunting challenges in their work. The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1987 (ASFA) mandates workers to work diligently to reunify families or sets strict timetables for termination of rights if reunification is not possible. Although it may be a commendable effort to ensure permanency for children, the law places tremendous pressure on workers and their parent clients for a rapid pace for change. Workers attempt to balance organizational demands, documentation requirements and legal mandates with their direct work with clients. However, many of these demands "draw attention away from building a helping relationship" (Maiter, Palmer & Manji, 2006, p. 168).

Despite competing demands, the quality of the worker client relationship is increasingly being viewed as an important element in child welfare work (Altman, 2008; Jenson, Pine, Spath & Kerman, 2009). However, the extant body of literature that has attempted to examine the benefits of an MSW for child welfare workers is rather sparse and offers no information related specifically to how graduate education impacts on the worker and client relationship (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte, 2007; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009).

Previous research (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte , 2007; Mason, LaPorte, Bronstein & Auerbach, 2012; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009) suggested that overall MSW level child welfare workers liked their MSW education and they report that it helped to improve their practice. In a qualitative analysis of child welfare administrators, Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez & Scwab (2010) reported that agencies that provide incentives for workers to pursue an MSW degree saw improved rates of retention and "a new rejuvenation and vision to graduates" (p.667). These studies however, do not help deepen our understanding of how graduate education impacted on their practice. Therefore, a more in depth investigation was warranted. A phenomenological approach was the preferred method to gain a deeper understanding of this issue from the point of view of the worker. The purpose of this exploratory study was to better understand how MSW level child welfare workers perceived the impact of their graduate social work education on the worker client relationship.

The relationship between the worker and client in child welfare practice has consistently been seen as an important but also challenging aspect of child welfare work (Altman, 2007; Fraser, Walton, Lewis, Pecora & Walton, 1996; Jenson, et al., 2009; Perlman, 1985; Platt, 2008; Yatchmenoff, 2005). It is complex and multi-determined (Yatchmenoff, 2005). Yatchmenoff (2005) defines the worker client relationship as an "interpersonal relationship...characterized by

a sense of reciprocity or mutuality and good communication" (p. 87). For this study, the worker client relationship will be viewed as an ongoing interpersonal process rather than just an outcome.

The process of building a relationship between worker and client has also been referred to as engagement (Jenson et al., 2009). However, engagement is often seen as a requisite condition for ongoing work between a worker and client "that enables a client to enter into a helping relationship and actively work toward change" (Altman & Gohagan, 2009, p. 74). A reduction of mistrust and open communication about the potential adversarial aspects of the worker client relationship in child welfare is necessary to help child welfare workers and their clients begin the engagement process (Platt, 2008). However in most cases, the worker client relationship goes beyond the initial stages of engagement. Workers and clients, even those that only perform investigations, must form an ongoing collaboration in order to develop goals, negotiate and complete the tasks required to realize their goals all within a short window of opportunity. Therefore, further attention to how workers learn to form and maintain relationships is needed, particularly for those workers who have invested their time and energy in obtaining an MSW degree.

Current state of child welfare and social work education

There is no doubt that the field of child welfare is challenging and demanding. The issue of child abuse and neglect is widespread and can have dire consequences. In 2011 1,570 children died from child abuse and neglect, most often from a combination of both neglect and abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Nationally, over two million reports of child abuse involving approximately 3.7 million children were investigated in 2011 (Child Welfare

Information Gateway, 2013). In New York State alone there were almost 162,000 reports of child maltreatment affecting over 211,000 children in 2011 (OCFS, 2012). In indicated cases, over 80% of the perpetrators of abuse or neglect were a parent. Given the large numbers and the negative consequences of child abuse and neglect, the field of child welfare is faced with the daunting task of providing high quality services that can assess and manage risk as well as provide services to families that are both effective and efficient.

The Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1987 (ASFA) stipulated that workers make reasonable efforts toward the goals of safety, permanency and child and family well- being in a shortened time frame and gave final case plan approval to the courts, rather than retaining the approval on the agency level. According to Ellett and Leighninger (2007, p.21), "This act resulted in increased judicial oversight and regulation of the system which has served to further de-professionalize child welfare." They define de-professionalization as "reducing or eliminating the minimum educational qualifications, particularly degrees in social work, for child welfare positions" (Ellet and Leighninger, 2007, p. 5).

Child welfare organizations have attempted to respond to calls to professionalize the workforce and recruit and retain qualified child welfare workers in many ways (Zlotnik, Strand & Anderson, 2009). One of the most successful has been federal Title IV-E funding. Through a combination of federal and state matching funds, Title IV-E provides tuition support and stipends for social work students working in child welfare to pursue a BSW or MSW degree. Federal support of various types for child welfare training is over 60 years old and was originally intended to provide assistance to child welfare workers to obtain a social work degree (Zlotnik, 2002). Title IV-E funding specifically was initiated in 1980 but was not widely utilized until after 1990 with the adoption of ASFA as one of the major catalysts (Zlotnik, 2002). In exchange

for the funds workers promise to remain employed in child welfare for a designated amount of time, usually two years post graduation. The funding is designed to help foster university and agency partnerships to encourage more child welfare workers to pursue degrees in social work (Zlotnik et al., 2009). Title IV-E funding has been increased in the past 30 years but currently only 40 states participate in the partnership. However, in 2003 the GAO continued to find that agencies suffered with low morale, high turnover and that fewer than 15% of all states require a social work degree of any kind for child welfare work and that the funding varied widely from state to state (GAO, 2003). Finally GAO (2003) also found a strong link between quality supervision and the retention of caseworkers and recommended that the MSW or other human service advanced degrees be mandatory for supervisors.

One of the ongoing questions that people in the field of child welfare and social work are asking is what type of education or degree best prepares future child welfare workers for practice? Although there are many studies suggesting that workers and supervisors do need to be better prepared for child welfare work (Ellett and Leighninger, 2007; Zlotnik et al., 2009) there is little agreement on how to best prepare people to become successful child welfare workers that impact positively on the families that they work with and on the organizations that they work for. Studies have indicated that masters level social workers are better prepared for child welfare work and have a greater retention rates (Dhooper, Royce & Wolfe, 1990; Ellett & Leighninger, 2007) but do not help us to understand what it is about the masters level child welfare worker that makes them a preferred practitioner or how the process of education impacts on them and their work.

This study was conducted in an effort to help understand how graduate level education impacts on child welfare workers and ultimately how MSW workers impact upon the families

that they work with. Perhaps if we can better understand how education changes the student's skills and attitudes toward the way they work with their clients, we will be in a better position to reverse the trend toward de-professionalization of the child welfare field.

Literature Review

This chapter will provide a review of the conceptual, empirical and theoretical frames used in this study. It will explore the concepts related to adult learning theory as a background to understand how the process of learning can affect the knowledge, attitudes and behaviors of adult learners. Secondly, it will focus on the current empirical literature regarding our knowledge of potential benefits and drawbacks of graduate level workers in child welfare. Finally, the chapter will examine the theoretical literature regarding the working alliance and worker client relationships in child welfare and related fields.

Conceptual Review: Adult Learning and Transformational Learning Theory

This research is informed by adult learning theory with an emphasis on Transformational Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1985; Mezirow, 1991). Transformational learning theory helps to explain the unique needs of adult learners and potential outcomes of adult education, such as graduate social work education. In addition, Kolb's theory of experiential learning will also be discussed as it relates to adult learning.

Epistemological origins. The theory is based on the ideas of John Dewey and the philosophic traditions of pragmatism. (Dewey, 1916; Mezirow, 2000). Pragmatism assumes that knowledge is constructed out of a process of individual experience that has a unique meaning in the context in which it occurs. Educational theory that is informed by pragmatism emphasizes the ability to create knowledge that is useful and valid within a specific social context. Dewey (1916) writes of pragmatism:

> *Its essential feature is to maintain the continuity of knowing with an activity which purposely modifies the environment...Only that which has been organized*

> *into our disposition so as to enable us to adapt the environment to our needs and to adapt our aims and desires to the situation in which we live is really knowledge...Knowledge is not just something which we are now conscious of, but consists of the dispositions we consciously use in understanding what now happens. Knowledge as an act is bringing some of our dispositions to consciousness with a view to straightening out a perplexity, by conceiving the connection between ourselves and the world in which we live.*
>
> (Chap 25, paragraph 20)

Transformational learning theory was developed by Jack Mezirow, an educator, in the late 1970's (Mezirow, 2000). The theory developed out of a grounded theory study that noted profound shifts in perspectives of adult women returning to the work force following their involvement in adult education (Kitchenham, 2008). It has since been expanded upon and refined to include both the processes and outcomes of adult education including the impact of various types of instruction, changes in cognitions, roles of affect, spirituality, culture and personality in the education of adults (Dirkx, Mezirow & Cranton, 2006; Jones, 2009; Snyder, 2008). Learning can be considered a "natural evolution of the forms of our meaning-constructing" (Kegan, 2000, p. 53) whereby the knower gains increasing conscious reflective capacity into the knowledge.

Kolb's experiential learning theory. Kolb's theory of experiential learning helps to explain how adult learners use experience to create knowledge rather than simply learning from didactic or "received instruction" (Bergsteiner, Avery & Newman, 2010, p. 30). Experiential learning is aligned with Transformational Learning Theory in that both have practical

applications for adult learners and both are grounded in the epistemic traditions of pragmatism (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). In particular, Kolb's theory has implications for understanding how to improve field work experiences of social work students as well as the student supervisor relationship (Raschick, Maypole & Day, 1998). Kolb (1984) defines experiential learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (p. 41). Kolb (1984) conceptualizes that there are four learning modes. The first two, concrete experience and abstract conceptualization help explain how learners take in a new experience. The second two, reflective observation and active experimentation help explain how learners interpret and transform information to action. Experiential learning is the process by which adult learners use each mode in a "recursive process" (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 298). The learning process begins with concrete experience that serves as the "basis for observations and reflections" (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p. 299). Reflections are then "distilled into abstract concepts from which new implications for action can be drawn" (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p.299). Opportunities for active testing of the new ideas can "serve as guides to create new experiences" (Kolb & Kolb, 2009, p.299). All in all experience plays a central role in the learning process.

Transformational theory and adult learning. Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) endeavors to go beyond how learners cognitively use experiences to adapt to the environment and create knowledge. Transformational learning theory helps to explain how the learning process can change the underlying assumptions that learners have about their world and themselves. Mezirow (2000) defines general learning as, "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience to guide future action" (p. 5). In contrast, transformational learning occurs when adults begin to

critically reflect on their long held assumptions and beliefs. Self-reflection distinguishes the process involved in transformational learning from other forms of knowledge accumulation. In essence, learning and experience can lead to habits of thinking and behaving while transformational learning leads one to reflect on those habits and perhaps develop more reality-based ones in their place. Mezirow (1991 p. 11) writes, "...when we learn something, we attribute an old meaning to a new experience...In transformational learning, however, we reinterpret an old experience (or a new one) from a new set of expectations, thus giving a new meaning and perspective to the old experience." This process has implications for social work on the macro and micro levels. On a macro level, social work education can help to place individual struggles in a larger social and historical context. On a micro level, social work education can teach students to respect the individual process of change and develop interventions that meet the client where they are in the process instead of where the caseworker wishes them to be. Large scale social action, social policy and political change can be fostered through transformational learning as well as individual change (Parks-Daloz, 2000).

Some learning leads to the development of habitual thinking and behavior. Dewey (1916) sees habitual thinking and behaviors as having both positive and negative attributes. One the positive side, habits of the mind help people to adapt quickly to situations which allows them to use past experience to guide future behavior and expectations. On the negative side, habitual thoughts and behaviors do not allow for the introduction of new experience to change pre-existing expectations in order to develop new and perhaps more useful knowledge. These ideas have implications for child welfare caseworkers. Training may teach procedure or help to develop habits necessary to perform routine job duties such as documentation. However,

habitual thinking and behaviors may not help caseworkers respond creatively to new situations or reflect on their own practice.

The practical knowledge workers have developed about signs of abuse in homes allows them to make decisions quickly about which children may be in danger. However, many of these decisions may become habitual rather than based on the unique individual circumstance. With transformational education comes improved reflective capacities. Educated workers will be able to make decisions using an expanded scope of skills and abilities as well as experience. This can have the potential of making decisions more laborious in the short run due to a change in habitual behavior and thinking but it can also lead to workers making better decisions in the long run and may lead to new and more effective habits.

Learning as meaning making. The process of meaning making is central to transformational theory. Underneath all learning is a culturally and socially rooted meaning perspective. According to Mezirow (1991) this remains largely unconscious but highly influential in how we cognitively and emotionally process information. A meaning perspective is defined as "the structure of cultural and psychological assumptions within which new experience is assimilated and transformed by one's past experience" (Mezirow, 1985, p. 144). There is a personal meaning that is rooted in the individual's self-concept and personality, the socio-linguistic meaning that is rooted in the words and symbols we use and epistemic beliefs we hold that guide how we use the information we gather (Mezirow, 1985). Each of these levels interacts to form a meaning perspective or "frame of reference" that is a "set of assumptions and expectations" (Dirkx & Mezirow, 2006 p. 124). These perspectives tend to generate an individual's point of view that includes their opinions and conclusions (Mezirow, 1991). Snyder (2008, p. 165) writes, "Through an accumulation of experiences, individuals establish and

validate meaning perspectives that they use to understand and navigate in their world." Therefore, a frame of reference is distinguished from cognitive schema in that it involves the affective, cultural and cognitive aspects of the learner rather than just the assimilation or accommodation of new information into a pre-existing schema (Snyder, 2008).

Transformational learning leads people to reflect on their long held habits and that can also lead to changes of behavior. Many people tend to endorse new information only if it fits into their pre-conceived meaning perspectives and reject information that does not (Mezirow, 1991). There are several steps involved in transformational learning (Mezirow, 2000). Originally conceived of as sequential in nature, new research indicates that these steps may be more phase oriented or cyclical in nature and heavily dependent upon the individual and the context of the learning (Taylor, 2000; Kitchenham, 2008).

The process of transformation. The transformative process begins with a distorting dilemma, an experience or series of experiences that are discrepant with pre-existing information or expectations of the learner (Mezirow, 1991). Attention to the distorting dilemma creates a sense of disequilibrium in the learner that can be a motivating force for critical reflection and perspective change. The process of transformation is rarely epochal, that is the creation of a sudden shift in perspective (Parks Daloz, 2000; Erickson, 2007). Most often it is incremental change built up slowly through accumulation of experience (Mezirow, 2000; Moore, 2005, Parks Daloz, 2000). In addition, transformational learning may not result in complete transformation or creation of new frames of reference for all learners in all situations (Mezirow, 2003). The typical stages of transformation include:

1. A distorting dilemma – this can be a single or several experiences in education or other areas of life that alerts a person that their expectations and beliefs may not be valid.

2. Self-examination – the dilemma or experience creates emotional responses such as shame, guilt, fear or positive feelings such as empathy or curiosity.

3. Critical examination of assumptions – the person begins to identify long held assumptions about the situation or reactions.

4. Recognition – after examination there is a sense of discontent and acknowledgement of a need for change.

5. Exploration – the person begins to look for options for new roles, relationships and actions in response to recognition.

6. Planning – the person seeks out ways to change the issue through action.

7. Acquiring knowledge and skills – the person finds resources and methods to change.

8. Provisional action – the person tries on new roles, attitudes or responses.

9. Building competence – the person develops self-confidence in new roles and relationships through experience.

10. Reintegration – the person integrates their new perspective to their life in a new way. (Mezirow, 2000 p. 22)

These initial steps can lead to other changes in behavior and attitude toward the client and the development of a new professional self for the worker. Social work education can offer experiences that create these dilemmas through readings, in class discussions, assignments or

field work experiences. Transformational theory holds that people can adopt more flexible and "dependable frames of reference" over a lifetime of learning (Mezirow, 2000 p. 19). In order to help create the necessary preconditions for transformational learning to occur, the educator and institution must create opportunities for active learning. This is also in keeping with Kolb's experiential learning theory as it stresses the need for adults to engage in active experimental learning in order to promote learning by doing and applying knowledge (Raschick et al., 1998). These opportunities can take place through field work, role plays and interactive classroom discussions in the short run. However, the theory suggests that ongoing opportunities to reflect on their work, try new ideas and incorporate new experiences over time would help workers evolve their perspective further and maintain a sense of competence, thus reinforcing their personal and professional change and growth. The transformational process is evident when workers who generally saw their job as procedural or technical begin to question their assumptions about the families or problems that they are dealing with. Workers' exposure to education begins to bring about a sense of doubt or curiosity about what was previously habitual. The person recognizes this discomfort and proceeds to reflect, explore and grow from the experience. Education and concurrent experience make up a transactional process that furthers the transformational process.

Overall, the goals of transformational learning (creating more dependable frames of reference and more reflective practice) are in keeping with social work values that encourage action toward social justice and practice that is reflective and honors principles of self-determination and respect for those that we work with (Jones, 2009). Jones (2009, p.18) states, "transformative learning argues that knowledge is not an entity waiting to be discovered and consumed by the learner, but rather is created by the learner through the interpretation and

reinterpretation of experience." This indicates that reflection by itself is not sufficient for transformational learning; it must be followed by action. This call to action is consistent with social work values that places emphasis on direct practice geared toward individual or large scale social changes.

Empirical Review of the Literature on MSW Child Welfare Workers

Research examining the relationship between educational attainment and various aspects of child welfare work has shown that MSW workers have advantages as well as some challenges in various aspects of child welfare practice (Coleman & Clark, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003). These aspects included the organizational, regulatory and interpersonal practice components of child welfare. Although there have been studies suggesting that the relationship with the client is an important aspect of child welfare work (Altman, 2008; Antle, Barbee, Christensen & Martin, 2008; Dumbrill, 2006; Kemp, Marcenko, Lyons & Kruzich, 2013; Spratt and Callan, 2004) no studies could be found that specifically looked at the way MSW workers performed this important aspect of their job. Overall, Ryan, Garnier, Zyphur, and Zhai. (2006, p. 998) found that "caseworkers with a terminal master's degree (specifically the MSW) perform a variety of social work tasks significantly better when compared with caseworkers without an MSW." However, there were also challenges noted by MSW workers and their supervisors.

Supervisor attitudes. From a supervisory perspective, child welfare supervisors report mixed perspectives of the skills and attitudes of MSW level child welfare workers (Hopkins, Mudrick & Rudolph, 1999; Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003). Supervisors who preferred MSW level workers also expressed concern that the values and attitudes of social workers could be unhelpful for work that was largely regulatory in nature (Hopkins et al., 1999). Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, (2003) reported that between 30% and 45% of administrators perceived Title

IV-E graduates to have superior skills of intervention, commitment to the field and values than BSW level workers. However, in the same study between 22% - 29% of supervisors disagreed and felt that MSW level workers were not better prepared than their BSW counterparts. Administrators with an MSW degree were more likely to find MSW level workers to possess superior skills and values than administrators of other disciplines (Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003).

MSW worker attitudes. From the workers perspective, completing an MSW degree was useful in developing necessary skills for child welfare work and they were very satisfied with their education (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte , 2007; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). These skills included the ability to assess families, establish rapport, assess child safety and view their clients non-judgmentally (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte, 2007; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). MSW level caseworkers tend to rate themselves as better prepared than their non-MSW counterparts in many areas (Hopkins et al., 1999; Lieberman, Hornby & Russell, 1988; Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman & Dickinson, 2008; Samantrai, 1992; Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003). They reported a greater sense of self-confidence, developed a better sense of professional identity, and had improved communication skills. Improved self-efficacy and commitment to professionalism both predicted greater job satisfaction and intent to stay employed in child welfare (DePanfilis & Zlotnick, 2008; Ellett, 2009).

A focus group study of Title IV-E MSW candidates reported that their graduate education was helpful to prepare them for practice as well as advancing their ability to solve problems and use critical thinking skills (Coleman & Clark, 2003). Workers reported that educational activities such as case presentations, open classroom dialogue, receiving the support of peers and sharing practice ideas helped workers move from an "absolutist" to a more "critical

thinking/evaluativist" orientation to practice (Coleman & Clark 2003, p. 87). The worker who relies on critical thinking skills tends to make fewer decisions based on rules and authority and more decisions using their own value based judgments with an integration of cognitive and affective processes (Coleman & Clark, 2003). This finding may help explain why administrators have differing perspectives about working with MSW case workers. It is possible that MSW caseworkers may be more difficult to supervise as they move towards using critical thinking skills rather than rules and an "appeal to authority" to make decisions (Coleman & Clark, 2003, p. 87).

Beginning level MSW Title IV-E workers with past experience in child welfare were more likely to express an interest in continuing child welfare practice after graduation than those in other fields (Mason et al., 2012) and were more interested in personal growth and self-expression (Perry, 2004). However, MSW level workers did not rate themselves as competent at dealing with criminal issues as their non-MSW counterparts (Lieberman et al., 1988), dealing with workplace or organizational issues (Mason et al., 2012) or dealing with the "brutality of child welfare work" (Samantrai, 1992, p. 456). Franke, Bagdasaryan & Furman (2009) found that new child welfare workers with an MSW came into the field with more knowledge of child welfare than other new workers. As measured by pre and post training instruments, this advantage held even after all workers underwent an eight week in house training. Franke et al., (2009) stated that "the findings from the current study indicate that workers with Master's degrees in social work (MSW) have more knowledge, as measured by performance on the study instrument, both before and after Academy training" (p. 1335).

Child welfare outcomes with MSW workers. Only one study could be found that looked directly at the differences in foster care outcomes between families with MSW and non

MSW workers (Ryan et al., 2006). The authors (Ryan et al., 2006) found that children in foster care who had a caseworker with an MSW spent significantly less time (5.15 months less) in foster care than children who were with caseworkers without the MSW degree (Ryan et al., 2006, p.1000).

In a recent study of child welfare workers that were permitted to take graduate level social work classes free of charge without having to obtain an MSW degree, participants reported that their education helped them to develop a better understanding of the social and environmental context of the client (Mason et al., 2012). Specifically the results of a survey found that taking graduate classes helped respondents feel more empathy for clients, gave respondents in depth understanding of how social relationships affect clients' daily life, helped respondents better understand how larger societal issues impact the situation of the client, helped respondents better understand social problems related to clients' environments, helped respondents identify strengths within the client system, enhanced respondents' client assessment skills and overall, enhanced respondent's ability to work with clients. The authors concluded that when increased understanding of clients is "coupled with the skills and values taught in social work education classes, then increasing the number of Masters level graduates is likely to improve practice with children and families" (Mason et al., 2012, p. 1740). However the study did not provide empirical evidence of such practice changes.

Summary. Overall, the literature comparing MSW and non MSW workers evidences positive findings about the advantages of an MSW degree, especially relating to aspects of practice that are non-organizational in nature. MSW workers report a greater sense of confidence, have better outcomes and generally enhanced skills (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte, 2007; Lieberman et al., 1988; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009; Ryan et al., 2006;

Scannepieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003) but no research has yet to contribute to the specific ways that MSW workers and their clients form and maintain their relationships and how their MSW education impacts on this important aspect of practice.

Nationally less than 15% of agencies report that they require either a bachelors or master's degree in social work for child welfare caseworkers (GAO, 2003). There are longstanding and renewed calls to re-professionalize child welfare services (Ellett and Leighninger, 2007; Ellett, 2009; Lieberman et al., 1988). Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte (2007) suggested that, "Public investment in MSW education can have significant pay-off by increasing the knowledge and skills of public child welfare workers" (p. 56). Ryan et al. (2006) also concluded that, "Whatever the reason, the outcomes associated with MSW level workers (e.g. less time in foster care) suggest that child welfare systems need to figure out strategies for recruiting and retaining employees with advanced degrees in social work" (p. 1004). They further suggested that (Ryan et al., 2006) "future investigations should...include measures of attitudes, beliefs... and perhaps even measures of the therapeutic alliance" (p. 1004) to differentiate performance and attitudes of MSW and non MSW workers. Franke et al. (2009) called for further research to "address what exactly it is about the Title IV-E educational experience itself that most influences developing competent new workers" (p.1336). Bellefeuille & Ricks (2010) called for child welfare inquiry that was based on the relational model of practice that emphasizes the importance of relationships in both practice and research.

Although previous research pointed to some benefits of the MSW degree in child welfare work, the way workers perceive the impact of their MSW degree on how they form relationships with their clients has not been studied. This study was designed to provide a more in depth

understanding of how MSW workers perceived the impact of their education on their ability to form and maintain relationships with clients.

Theoretical Review of the Literature on Worker Client Relationships

There has been renewed attention to developing models of casework that emphasize relational aspects of practice. Many models of child welfare casework advocate the development of a relationship with clients that encourages workers to identify strengths and possibilities for success, rather than a model that focuses on problems and deficits (Antle et al., 2008; Dumbrill, 2006; Kemp et al., 2013; Spratt and Callan, 2004; Waldfogel, 2000). There also have been calls to strengthen the case workers ability to form and maintain relationships with clients through training and policy changes that balance the need for protection with family support (Waldfogel, 2000).

In their study, Antle et al. (2008) found that workers trained in a strengths based, solution focused model of practice achieved several positive outcomes. Clients whose workers were well trained in solution focused child welfare work were more likely to achieve their goals and the rate of foster care placement was reduced than clients whose workers had minimal training in strength based practices. The study also found that the complexity of the families underlying issues or the number of times they were involved with child welfare did not significantly impact these outcomes. The authors (Antle et al., 2008) concluded greater collaboration between parent and worker encouraged workers to resolve conflicts with clients without involving the court. Kemp, et al. (2013) similarly found that parents that perceived that their workers employed a strengths based approach had a greater investment in child welfare services. The creation of a positive worker client relationship was important to help balance the need to mitigate risk while providing family support. However, in contrast, Altman (2008) did not find evidence that worker

client engagement was positively related to improved outcomes of child welfare interventions, specifically rates of visitation and family reunification.

In a study that focused on engagement between child welfare workers and parents, Gladstone, Dumbrill, Leslie, Koster, Young & Ismalia (2012) found that workers' and clients' perceptions of engagement were correlated and that workers who were more engaged appeared to have clients that were more engaged as well. Gladstone et al. (2011) concluded that overall, "It appears that workers can predict how well clients are engaged and that engaged clients are more likely to experience positive outcomes" (p. 116). Specifically, parents reported that a positive relationship with a trusted worker positively impacted their parenting practices and they also felt that their children were safer than before child welfare interventions. Gladstone et al. (2011) suggested that workers who can recognize that client hostility may be defensive rather than offensive can chose to respond differently in an effort to improve engagement. Spratt and Callan (2004) found that parents involved in the child welfare system cited their relationship with their social worker was an important part of their overall experience with the child welfare agency. Spratt and Callan (2004) suggested that workers with good communication skills, a respectful attitude and empathetic responses were perceived as going "beyond the procedural components of their job" (p, 217) by parents that were then able to respond positively to the worker, despite any past negative interactions with the child welfare system.

Worker client relationships and social work values. Interpersonal relationships are at the heart of the social work profession (Perlman, 1985). An investigation of interpersonal aspects of practice is in keeping with the core mission of social work (NASW, 2008). The profession has a set of principles, code of ethics, and educational standards that provide a guide for practice and education. Interpersonal relationships, respect for people, and engagement skills are an

important part of the standards that guide educational standards, practice and ethics for the social work profession (CWSE, 2008; NASW, 2008).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) defines core values and ethical principles for social work practice (NASW, 2008). The importance of human relationships is a core ethical principle in Social Work (NASW, 2008). The code (NASW, 2008) states that, "Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change", they "engage people as partners in the helping process" and "...seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities." In addition, the code of ethics reflects the value of recognizing the dignity and worth of the person. The code states that "social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person." Social workers "treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity."

Worker client relationships and social work education. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) was established in 1952 and currently has the sole authority to accredit both baccalaureate and master's level social work programs (Brieland, 1995). The CSWE provides the educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS) for curriculum development and overall goals for social work education programs (CSWE, 2008). According to the CSWE (2008) the BSW curriculum prepares its graduates for generalist practice through mastery of the core competencies and the MSW curriculum prepares its graduates for advanced practice through mastery of the core competencies augmented by knowledge and practice behaviors specific to a concentration.

According to the CSWE, engagement in "appropriate working relationships with clients" (CSWE, 2008, p.10) is a core competency. Core competencies are defined as "measurable practice behaviors that are comprised of knowledge, values, and skills" (2008, p.3). Advanced practice (MSW level) "refines and advances the quality of social work practice" (CSWE, 2008, p.8). It incorporates all of the core competencies augmented by knowledge and practice behaviors specific to a concentration (p.8). Engagement skills should, "substantively and affectively prepare for action with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; use empathy and other interpersonal skills; and develop a mutually agreed-on focus of work and desired outcomes" (CSWE, 2008, p.7). Therefore, although all social work practitioners should have basic engagement skills, MSW level practitioners should have more advanced skills informed by a deeper body of knowledge and utilized in more discriminating ways.

Concept of the working alliance. The working alliance, also known as therapeutic alliance or helping alliance, was used in this research as a way to identify key aspects of the worker client relationship (Bordin, 1979; Horvath & Luborksy, 1993). Working Alliance (WA) is a process defined as the "quality and nature of the interaction between the patient and therapist" (Kazdin, Marciano & Whitley, 2005 p.726). WA is considered a pan-theoretical concept (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993) that appears to be one common factor (Drisko, 2004) that predicts treatment effectiveness, reduction of perceived barriers, acceptability of treatment and satisfaction across multiple treatment orientations with different patient populations (Kazdin et al., 2005). A positive rating of working alliance between worker and parent has been shown to be associated with improvements in child welfare outcomes such as reunification (Alexander and Dore, 1999; Fraser et al., 1996; Jenson et al., 2009) and improvement in discipline and emotional

care by parents (Lee and Ayon, 2004), although others have not found any association between ratings of alliance and child welfare outcomes (Altman, 2008).

Although initially defined in terms of a therapist and client relationship, the concept of working alliance has been expanded to include other helping relationships that are geared toward client change including child welfare work (Altman, 2007; Jenson, et al., 2009) and therapeutic foster care (Bickman et al., 2004). Bordin (1979, p. 252) reiterates that the "working alliance between a person seeking change and a change agent can occur in many places besides the locale of psychotherapy. The concept of the working alliance would seem to be applicable in the relation between student and teacher, between community action group and leader..."

There are several theories that have contributed to our current conceptualization of worker client relationships and working alliance. They are derived from different theories of personality and human behavior but together help clarify our understanding of how the worker client relationship develops and is sustained.

Psychoanalytic origins. The term working alliance was popularized by Ralph Greenson (1965) in an effort to distinguish transference reactions from reality based relationship issues in the analytic situation. He defined transference as "the experiencing of feelings, drives, attitudes, fantasies, and defenses toward a person in the present which are inappropriate to that person and are a repetition, a displacement of reactions originating in regard to significant persons of early childhood" (Greenson, 1965, p. 156). This was in contrast to the working alliance that was defined as "the relatively non-neurotic, rational rapport which the patient has with his analyst. It is this reasonable and purposeful part of the feelings the patient has for the analyst" (Greenson, 1965, p. 156).

Greenson (1965) and other analytic theorists conceptualized the relationship between transference and working alliance as fluid. A patient may have periods of negative and irrational transference but can sustain the analytic relationship through a positive and conscious working alliance. This construct of working alliance was generally focused on the interpersonal relationship between the analyst and patient. In order to maintain a working alliance, the patient had to possess the ability to self-observe, verbalize thoughts and feelings and have some motivation to persevere in the relationship. Greenson (1965) advocated a relatively warm and not overly frustrating stance on the part of the analyst, specifically warning against an authoritarian style. In addition, he noted that the frequent and consistent sessions between analyst and patient also contributed to a positive working alliance.

Person centered approach. Carl Rogers (1949) person centered approach focused almost exclusively on the qualities of the therapist as preconditions for developing a positive working relationship. He stated that:

> *It is the counselors function to assume, in so far as he is able, the internal frame of reference of the client, to perceive the world as the client sees it, to perceive the client himself as he is seen by himself, and to lay aside all perceptions from the external frame of reference while doing so* (Rogers, 1949, p. 86).

The person centered approach considered the ability of the therapist to maintain unconditional positive regard and deep empathy with a patient sufficient condition for a positive relationship that would foster change in the patient (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). This however, ignores the contextual elements involved in a relationship as well as client related factors that impact the relationship and potentially the outcomes of treatment.

Cognitive and behavioral based concepts. Cognitive and behavioral approaches recognize the need for shared cognitive elements between worker and client to accomplish mutually desired outcomes. These elements would include the ability to collaboratively set goals with clients, develop interventions that are in keeping with the client's vision for change and break down tasks into manageable steps that are clearly defined in terms of responsibility. Leichsenring, Hiller, Weissberg & Leibing (2006) describe the worker client relationship in cognitive treatment as a reality based, here and now working relationship in which the therapist "supports the patient to tackle problems by harnessing his or her own resources" (p. 234) through various techniques that encourage both behavior change and cognitive restructuring. Leichsenring et al. (2006) state that, "a trusting and safe therapeutic alliance is viewed as an essential ingredient, but not as the main vehicle of change" (p. 235).

Pan-theoretical concept. The pan-theoretical concept of the working alliance takes into account characteristics of the worker, the client and the context of the relationship. It consists of three components. They are the bond with worker, agreement on goals and agreement on tasks needed to accomplish goals (Bordin, 1979; Horvath and Luborsky, 1993; Johnson & Ketring, 2006; Martin, Gaske & Davis, 2000). According to Johnson & Ketring (2006, p. 345) "Bonds represent trust, respect, and caring" between a worker and client. The tasks domain is the "agreement and collaboration around the activities" that worker and client will perform. The task domain also includes issues such as timing and pacing, cultural sensitivity and acceptability of tasks and the client's perception of whether or not the worker is able to help them (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). The goal domain focuses on both setting goals as well as on "the mutual agreement about, and investment in, achieving set goals" (Johnson & Ketring, 2006, P. 345)

The aspects of child welfare work that relate to the working alliance can be seen through a person in environment model. The alliance is influenced by client related, worker related, and contextual factors (Littell & Tajima, 2000). The development of a working alliance is made more challenging in work with clients who are involuntary or mandated to services, such as in child welfare, than in other therapeutic relationships (Altman & Gohagan, 2009; Perlman, 1985; Rooney, 1992; Snyder & Anderson, 2009). This is due to the "need to deal appropriately with often very serious confrontational or even controlling aspects of the work" (Platt, 2008, p.304). Perlman (1979, p.6) suggests that in order to have positive outcomes social workers engaged in child welfare work, "have learned that we must so deal with the child's parents that they may become our collaborators rather than our opponents."

Contributing factors to the working alliance. Child welfare workers often begin their interpersonal work with clients in crisis situations and must maintain a dual role (Skeem, Eno Louden, Polaschek & Camp, 2007). This dual role demands that workers adhere to many levels of laws and court ordered mandates while simultaneously offering individualized and empathetic responses to the client. Clients rarely invite child welfare workers into their lives and their homes voluntarily and often do not initially acknowledge the need for personal change (Yatchmenoff, 2005). Clients may experience the intrusion of the worker in their life as a crisis rather than the considering the problem that brought them to the attention of child welfare as the crisis that they must deal with.

The behavior of involuntary clients may appear to be in opposition to the goals that they endorse. For example, a parent may verbalize a strong desire to get her child back from foster care but continually engage in the drug use that prompted the removal. Understanding this behavior as reactive to circumstances rather than resistive to the worker may be helpful for a

positive working relationship to develop or continue (Altman & Gohagan, 2009). In order to accomplish this, however, the worker must be aware of how their biases, stress and values impact their ability to see parent clients as people and not adversaries (Altman, 2005).

Client characteristics. In addition to contextual factors, the process of developing a working alliance depends on both client and worker qualities and characteristics (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Summers and Barber, 2003). Studies have shown that qualities of the client play a significant role in the development of a working alliance (Hersoug, Hoglend, Havik, VonDer Lippe, Monsen, 2009; Horowitz, Rosenberg & Bartholomew, 1993; Horvath & Luborsky, 1993; Satterfield & Lyddon, 1995). Some of these qualities are related to the clients own early attachment experiences and attachment style (Horowitz et al., 1993; Horvath & Luborksy, 1993). Hersoug et al. (2009) found that people who initially presented with high levels of interpersonal problems of the "cold/detached kind" (p.178) and history of poor maternal care had the greatest difficulty forming a working alliance early in treatment. Although Hersoug et al. (2009) found that the working alliance could improve over time in treatment; other researchers found that brief and focused interventions were most challenging for clients with this interpersonal style (Horowitz et al., 1993). This finding is especially important for understanding the unique challenges of the worker client relationship in child welfare. Many parents involved in the child welfare system have histories of poor early maternal care, abuse and trauma themselves. However, the nature of child welfare work is often brief, focused and imposes strict timelines and expectations for client change (Jenson et al., 2009).

There is mixed evidence that the race and ethnicity of the client and worker have a potent effect on the working alliance (Chao, Steffan & Heiby, 2012). Chao et al. (2012) did find however that ethnic matching enhanced the working alliance between clients considered to be

severely and persistently mentally ill and their therapists. In a 2012 study Walling, Howard, Taft, Suvak & Murphy similarly found that ethnicity did not significantly predict working alliance ratings at the beginning of therapy with people that were perpetrators of intimate partner violence but did impact the development of working alliance over time. The authors (Walling et al., 2012) found that Caucasian clients reported a significant increase in working alliance over the course of treatment while those from ethnic minorities did not have such a "consistent pattern of change" (p. 180). These findings may be helpful to understand the difficulties that child welfare workers from any ethnic group may have to develop and sustain a positive working alliance with minority clients over time.

Perlman (1979) understands the complex issues and profound difficulty parents have forming relationships with child welfare workers from a psychodynamic and social perspective. She writes:

> *For many reasons they fear us, and sometimes even hate us. On the surface, it is because we have created a crisis for them—we have been the bearers of bad tidings that persons and forces in the community hold them to be deficient or harmful as parents. Below the surface is the long experience these parents have usually had of being outcasts from approved social groups; they have had frequent experiences of blame and punishment from their own parents, teachers, doctors, neighbors—in short, from persons who to them represent the Establishment. Those past experiences create expectations that are transferred onto us, however different our initial approach and attitude may be. Many parents act not in response to the reality we present but to past persons we remind them of.* (p.6)

Worker characteristics. Qualities of the worker also affect the development of the working alliance. When working with involuntary clients, the ideal qualities of the worker combine elements of both care and control (Platt, 2008; Skeem et al., 2007). Maiter et al. (2006, p. 76) found that parents involved in the child welfare system had positive feelings about workers who were caring, genuine, empathetic, "exceptionally helpful", listened, were non-judgmental, and accepting. Workers who advocated for and with their clients were also judged more positively by clients. Tempel (2009, p. 136) stated that "shifts in affect and perception that occurred during the shared involvement in case advocacy appear to have had a considerable influence on engagement in a working alliance." Littell & Tajima (2000) found that child welfare workers who were able to see client strengths were associated with better cooperation and compliance among parents enrolled in family preservation services.

Communication that was unambiguous and straightforward was valued by parents who were involved in the child welfare system (Altman, 2008; Platt, 2008). Altman (2008) found that parents most wanted workers who could provide "assertive, honest, clear and urgent messages" (p. 57) and who could provide a "deliberate, planned, and urgent progression of activities" (Altman, 2008, p. 57). Workers who had a rigid adherence to a single style of intervention, criticalness and lack of ability to see their own contribution to relationship difficulties have more difficulty establishing and repairing alliances when ruptured (Castonguay, Constantino & Holtforth, 2006). In work with involuntary clients who had a co-occurring disorder as well as criminal involvement, the quality of the relationship between probation officer and probationer "predicted rule compliance, that is, probation violations, probation revocation, and new arrests" (Skeem et al., 2007, p. 407). Skeem, et al. (2007) also found that when relationships were characterized as authoritarian, they were less likely to result in positive outcomes for

probationers. Authoritarian workers were characterized as having "many demands, little flexibility and belittling use of control" (p. 399). Rooney (1992) suggested that strategies that involve using fear to achieve goals or intimidation occur "when the intimidator has resources to which the target does not have access" (p. 140). He further points out that workers who use intimidation tend to forgo a sense of good will and overgeneralize the strategy to new situations (Rooney, 1992, p. 141).

The issue of authority in the professional relationship has long been realized as a potent factor in work with both voluntary and involuntary clients (Perlman, 1979). Authority is distinguished from control in that it does not indicate "domination" (Perlman, 1979, p. 69). In some cases authority can be demonstrated in positive ways through expert knowledge and skills that allow the client to feel that they are in good hands and eventually integrate those positive skills and attributes themselves (Perlman, 1979).

Client reactance. Reactance theory helps explain how communication between worker and client impacts on client behaviors. Specifically it focuses on how people react to threats, either deliberate or implied, to their freedom (Brehm and Brehm, 1981). The magnitude of the threat and the importance of the freedom may play a role in the type of intensity of reactance exhibited by the person. (Brehm and Brehm, 1981) Essentially, when workers attempt to persuade clients, either by direct threat or implied threat, to change behavior that a client perceives as a personal freedom they may be met with negative or even hostile reactions. Usually workers label this behavior as resistant, but reactance theory understands the behavior as resulting from communication difficulties between the worker and client (Mirick, 2012). In addition, reactance is considered a "motivational state that is aroused when a freedom is

eliminated or threatened with elimination" (Brehm and Brehm, 1981, p. 37). Mirick (2012) adds to the theory stating:

> *Reactance theory assumes every person has access to personal freedoms. Reactance is an expected, common response to a threat to one of these freedoms. It is a motivational drive to regain control of the freedom.* (Mirick, 2012, p. 167)

Reactance involves negative cognitions and emotions, usually anger, connected to the perceived loss of freedom (Rains & Turner, 2007). Child welfare clients may perceive the interference of a child welfare worker or agency as a threat to their ability to parent as they see fit or engage in other behaviors such as substance use that they perceive as their right to do. Clients may react to this threat by refusing to stop engaging in the behaviors that they are specifically banned from or by failing to comply with other requirements set forth by the court such as cleaning their home or getting medical attention for their child, even if they are aware that it may result in the removal of their children. This behavior is referred to as the "boomerang effect" (Rains & Turner, 2007, p. 242). The seemingly resistant reaction is designed to restore their sense of freedom in the face of a threat from a source of power or authority.

Research on public health behaviors such as smoking and drinking suggest that dominant, authoritarian and directive methods of communication are more likely to result in reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005). In addition, neither the strength of the argument nor the magnitude of the potential consequences had an affect on levels of reactance (Rains & Turner, 2007). Overall, workers may mitigate reactance by being aware of their own use of power, working collaboratively and using a strengths based approach to increase client self-efficacy (Dillard & Shen, 2005; Mirick, 2012).

Summary. The process of developing a working alliance is influenced by client, worker and contextual factors. Child welfare workers have built in challenges in both client and contextual areas. Clients may have significant pre-existing barriers to readily forming the type of relationship that furthers the development of the working alliance (Horowitz, 1993). The context of work in child welfare is generally one in which the client is involuntary, under strict mandated timelines for change, and are in often in crisis. An imbalance of power and dual relationship exists in which the worker must enforce certain predetermined goals that may not allow for clients to negotiate or even agree with some aspects of goal or task setting (Skeem et al., 2007). However, according to Jenson et al. (2009, p. 332), "timely development of effective working relationships is critical if the goal of helping parents solve the problems that led to their involvement with child welfare authorities...is to be reached."

The empathic stance and unconditional positive regard of the worker may be a factor in the formation of a positive working alliance with involuntary clients or others that have barriers to forming working alliances (Horvath & Luborsky, 1993). However, along with empathy, there is also a recognition of the need for a reality based, shared approach to goal setting and work that is advocated by the cognitive behavioral approach (Leichsenring et al., 2006).

Skeem et al. (2007) reiterate that "in the context of mandated treatment, effective relationships involve not only caring, but also fairness, trust, and an authoritative (not authoritarian) style..." (p. 407). Workers that increase client reactance by being authoritarian may create increased resistance and hostility thus thwarting the progress that both client and worker are hoping to achieve (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Given that workers may contribute to both positive and negative working relationships with clients, attention to the aspects of the working alliance that are influenced by the worker is needed to help best prepare child welfare workers

for this important aspect of their work. Manso, Rauktis & Boyd (2008) suggest that there is a "reciprocal influence" in which positive feelings about the worker facilitated the alliance and a positive alliance, once established, furthered positive feelings. (p. 67). In addition there is some evidence that clients who are ethnic minorities, as are many of the clients involved in child welfare, may have a more difficult time building positive working alliances. This study therefore hopes to better understand how graduate social work education impacts upon the skills and attitudes of child welfare workers to engage in these most complex relationships.

Methodology

This chapter describes the qualitative research design and methods chosen for this study. First, the research questions guiding this study will be presented followed by a summary of the phenomenological tradition of inquiry chosen to guide this research. The research design and the process of recruiting participants, data collection and analysis will also be outlined. Finally, the limitations of this study will be discussed.

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of how graduate social work education impacts on the way child welfare workers form and maintain relationships with their clients. Previous research (Alexander & Dore, 1999; Fraser et al., 1996; Jenson et al., 2009) has shown that the quality of the relationship between the worker and client plays an important role in work with many types of clients, including those that are mandated such as in child welfare. There have been calls to professionalize child welfare work by hiring and retaining master's level child welfare workers but there is a gap in the literature that helps understand how graduate education actually impacts MSW level workers, their clients and the agency (Ellett and Leighninger, 2007; Ellett, 2009; Lieberman et al., 1988). A qualitative methodology was chosen for this because it best captures the voices and experiences of the participants in the study. A better understanding of their lived experience as students and workers is a valuable tool to deepen our knowledge of the way graduate social work education impacts on the workers ability to form and maintain relationships with their clients.

The three research questions are:

1. How do graduate MSW workers perceive the impact of their education on their ability to form and maintain relationships with their clients?

2. What specific parts of their education do MSW workers perceive to have had the most impact on the interpersonal parts of their practice?
3. How do MSW level workers think that the skills they have learned and developed in graduate school can be used in child welfare work best?

Research design

The design of the research was a semi-structured open ended interview that provided a series of structured questions yet allowed participants to explore their experiences and thoughts in as much or as little detail as they were able. (Appendix A). A phenomenological approach was chosen in order to best capture the lived experience of the participants and capture their voices.

Phenomenological tradition of inquiry. This study was informed by a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective. Simply put phenomenology attempts to fully describe the lived experience of people in relation to a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). It seeks to get to the essence or underlying meaning of the phenomena being studied but recognizes that experience can be understood in many ways and is subject to interpretation. The hermeneutical tradition does not separate the object and subject but rather understands that "the reality of the object… is inextricably related to one's consciousness of it" and "is only perceived within the meaning of the experience of an individual" (Creswell, 1998, p.53). This is referred to as "intentionality of consciousness" (Creswell, 1998, p. 53) and assumes that "there is no stance that is free of the world" (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2009, p. 173). Heidegger's "proposal that a human being is a Dasein", defined as, "being in the world" (Eatough & Smith, 2009, p. 180) represents this notion of subjectivity that is essential to phenomenological inquiry.

Although no research is a purely neutral endeavor, in traditional qualitative inquiry pre-existing experience and bias on the part of the researcher are made explicit and then "bracketed"

in order to allow the analysis of the information to proceed with minimal researcher influence (Creswell, 1998). However, there is also the recognition that even the choice of research question has imbedded within it a perspective and intrinsic bias (Joseph, Beer, Clark, Forman, Pickersgill, Swift, Taylor & Tischler, 2009). A hermeneutic phenomenological approach recognizes and incorporates the lived experience of the researcher. According to Laverty (2003 p. 28) hermeneutics "asks the researcher to engage in a process of self-reflection...specifically...the biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather are embedded and essential to interpretive process."

Researcher point of view. In phenomenological research, the point of view of the researcher impacts upon the meaning that is made of the data and thus should be revealed as fully as possible. As a child therapist and behavioral health administrator, I have seen the impact that child abuse and foster care has on children and families. I have a firm belief that children deserve to be safe and cared for. However, I have also seen that placing children in foster care is traumatic and often does not leave them in a better place than where they began. In my experience, the relationship between the child welfare worker and other professionals such as mental health providers can often be more contentious than need be, perhaps reflecting a lack of understanding of the role of the other and tremendous organizational pressures on both. These conflicts are often precipitated by mistrust between professionals. In some cases, there is concern that information given to the child welfare agency gained during a counseling session will be misinterpreted or misused against a family. At times, conflicts occur when child welfare workers seek the opinion of therapists as to placement decisions that are outside the scope of the therapist's role. Unfortunately there is not always a resolution to these situations and mistrust of the child welfare agency and staff is perpetuated. It was during these exchanges that I became

aware of the stress involved in child welfare work and their sense of powerlessness over the outcome of their cases, particularly when the family was involved with the courts.

Later in my career as an instructor of graduate social work students I witnessed how students that worked in child welfare struggled to incorporate social work values and knowledge into their agency practice. In class these students would often reflect on their work and question whether or not they responded to clients appropriately or took action that may have been prompted by their feelings and fears, not the family. These experiences made me wonder how and what parts of their education may have affected them. I knew that both my graduate and doctoral education had a great deal of influence on my thinking and practice, but regularly heard from students that they only went to school to get a promotion or raise and that they did not feel that their graduate education had a deeper value beyond its utility.

Recruitment of participants. This study used a sample of child welfare workers that were currently employed in public child welfare agencies. Participants that worked directly with families receiving child welfare services were invited to participate. Sample size was determined by saturation (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). That is, when the researcher noticed that the narratives of the participants did not generate new codes, the data collection process ended.

Participants included child welfare workers who completed their MSW degree within the past six months to two and one-half years of the interview, were engaged in child welfare practice prior to their graduate education, and continued in child welfare work after completing their degree. This range of time was chosen because in order to reflect on their post MSW experience, participants must have had some experiences to reflect upon in their post MSW practice. However too long a period of time since graduation may have made it difficult to recall their graduate school experience and the impact it may have had on their practice.

Initially, the researcher anticipated that workers that would be referred by field work and supervisory personnel from local graduate schools in the Nassau County and New York City area. However, after considerable outreach by mail and by phone to distribute flyers (Appendix C) to graduate schools of social work, private child welfare agencies, and public child welfare agencies, the researcher was not able to obtain a sufficient sample of participants. The recruitment strategy was modified and the researcher made contact with Mary McCarthy, PhD, the co-principal investigator at the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. This organization is funded by the Children's Bureau and is committed to improving the effective practice of child welfare through training and research. After several discussions with Dr. McCarthy she agreed to distribute my recruiting flyer to NCWII contacts throughout New York State.

Sample size and participant demographics. In total 14 participants were interviewed for the study. Participants represented various child welfare workers from areas throughout New York State including those in rural areas as well as in Native American territories. Contact with NCWII yielded twelve inquiries from interested participants. They initially contacted the researcher via the email address provided on the flyer and left a phone number to contact them. The next step was to call the prospective participant to determine if they generally met the criteria for participating in the study and to answer questions that they had about the study and their participation. This step eliminated one participant who had over 20 years of post- master's experience and one participant who did not return follow up phone calls. All other participants that contacted the researcher participated in the study. The other four participants were referred by colleagues of the researcher.

Although my original intention was to meet each participant in person, the diversity of participants that telephone contact enabled me to obtain added to the study's ability to capture

voices from rural communities that would not have been available for this study. The table below captures key demographics of the sample.

Name	Gender	Ethnicity	Age	Years of experience prior to MSW	Primary Location of work	Current capacity of work in child welfare
Frank	male	African American/ Hispanic	32	2	suburban	Child welfare caseworker
Susan	female	African American	50	17	suburban	Child welfare caseworker
Carlos	male	Hispanic	51	17	urban	Investigations/Supervisor I
Joyce	female	African American	48	2	urban	Supervisor
Anna	female	African American	50	15	urban	Supervisor/sex abuse unit
Cathy	female	Caucasian	32	5	suburban	Preventive worker
Nancy	female	Caucasian	30	1	rural	Child protective and foster care case worker
Linda	female	Caucasian	44	17	rural	Clinical coordinator
Cindy	female	Caucasian	42	<1	rural	Foster care and preventive caseworker
Mike	Male	Caucasian	35	1	rural (Native American)	Investigations and child welfare caseworker
Pat	Female	Caucasian	37	7	Rural (Native American)	Supervisor
Laurie	Female	Caucasian	29	5	urban	Caseworker – Differential Response Unit
Gail	Female	Caucasian	34	5	rural	Caseworker – Differential Response Unit
Felicia	Female	Hispanic	30	2	suburban	Foster care worker

Data collection. Data was collected using a semi structured interviews as well as a journal responses of the participants (Appendix D). These interviews were done both in person, when the participants was within a 50 mile radius of the interviewer, or by phone, when the participant was located beyond a one to two hour drive. Eight participants were seen in person

and six were interviewed via telephone. Most participants did not wish to be interviewed on the weekend or in the evening and chose instead to meet with the researcher during their work day at lunch or early in the morning. There was no discernable difference between in person or telephone interviews in terms of discussion subjects or length of interviews

Interview data were collected by digital recorder and was transcribed by the researcher herself. The length of each meeting varied based on the request of the participant and whether or not they felt that they had fully expressed their thoughts on the subject. Each interview was between 30 and 60 minutes in length. When subjects responded to questions with answers such as "I think I already went over that" or "I think I have said all I can" it was a signal to the interviewer that the participant did not feel that they had more to add to the subject being discussed. On several occasions, the researcher began the interview but the participant was interrupted due to work issues or conflicts in scheduling. On these occasions, the interview was rescheduled for later in the day or the next day and was completed. Initially, the interview questions were designed to be broken into two distinct sections but the researcher found that throughout the interviews, participants often moved back and forth through different parts of the interview as the material evolved rather than simply following a script. Participants were also asked to complete a journal page. Three participants completed the page. For those that did not wish to complete the page in writing, the researcher offered to ask the questions verbally to the participant during the second part of the interview process. It was hoped that writing would help the participants reflect on their work and ideas at their own pace. It appeared that asking the questions verbally lead to somewhat less rich and detailed responses.

The semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix A) was designed to offer the participants an opportunity to reflect on their practice with clients both before and after their graduate education

as well as experiences during their graduate social work education. In keeping with the phenomenological approach, the interviewer used a combination of broad, open ended questions such as "What was that experience like for you?" as well as more specific questions focused on aspects of their experience "Was there anything you remember from your education?" In addition, demographic data was gathered including the participant's age, ethnicity and number of years in public or private child welfare (Appendix D). At the end of the interview, the researcher asked the participant if there was anything that he or she thought we did not talk about that could be important and what the experience of the interview was like for the participant. Several participants were able to add to their narratives at this point, two of whom particularly focused on the impact of their field work. This information helped guide the researcher to ask about field work in the next interviews if the participant did not address the subject themselves.

After the conclusion of the interview, the researcher wrote her thoughts, observations and questions in a journal in an effort to remain as self-reflective as possible. These entries helped the researcher to incorporate her feelings and reactions into the process of data analysis.

Phone and email contact between the researcher and participant was established to answer any questions that the participant may have had and clarify questions that the researcher had while transcribing the interviews. No participant had any follow up questions or concerns however, on several occasions the researcher sought out participants to clarify their comments or follow up on questions that the researcher had about the interview.

Human subject protections. Informed consent was gathered in two ways, depending on the location of the participant. Those participants that were to be interviewed by phone were sent informed consent information by mail to be returned by mail or fax to the researcher prior to participation in the study. Those who were to be interviewed in person read and signed the

informed consent materials at the beginning of the initial meeting with the researcher. Issues of confidentiality were discussed prior to meetings that took place at the participants' place of work.

They were informed of the voluntary nature of participation and that they could withdraw at any time from the study without penalty. In addition, the disclosure contained contact information about the researcher as well as contact information for the Adelphi University IRB (Appendix E) if they had any questions or concerns. Each participant was also advised that upon completion of the interview process, they were entitled to receive a $30.00 gift card.

Data analysis

Principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Eatough & Smith, 2008) were employed for data analysis. IPA is concerned with "the detailed examination of the individual lived experience" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 179) and the "meaning making interpretative activity of the person" (Eatough & Smith, 2008 p. 185). It gives "emphasis to the interpretative features of the analysis" (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 182) and acknowledges that this analysis will be influenced by other factors such as culture and previous knowledge regarding the phenomenon being studied.

The results of this study were accomplished following two complete analyses of the data. The first analysis was completed using a line by line analysis consistent with the coding method advocated by IPA (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2012). This method rendered results that tended to be reductionist and created categories of responses and did not reflect the authentic voice of the participants or the meaning that they made out of their experiences. Upon consultation with my dissertation mentor, I re-analyzed the data completely.

In order to accomplish this I had to first attempt to bracket my pre-existing ideas and notions about the data and the meaning that I had previously made. This took some time as I had to step away from what I thought I knew and leave myself open for a new reading of the data. I began by re-reading each transcript, my notes, and journal entries. I then re-examined each narrative and created new codes drawn from the stories that the participants told about their work, their clients, and their experiences in school and in their agencies. In addition, looking back at the reflective notes I had taken following each interview also helped to bring the feelings of the participants and my own experiences back into the analysis.

The next step was to complete an analysis of the content of the stories told by the participants (Patton, 2002). This analysis revealed new codes that better represented the voices of the participants and the meaning that they made of their educational and professional experiences. This process resulted in the identification of seventy one separate codes. These codes represented attitudes expressed by workers, ideas, reactions and behaviors. The codes reflected worker behaviors such as "negotiating with clients", attitudes such as "workers have to recognize their own triggers" and values such as "client self-determination is important."

Further reduction of the data was accomplished by placing these codes into a matrix and scanning the data for common themes and patterns. For example, codes that involved issues related to the worker's use of power and client's fear of worker's authority were clustered under the theme of dealing with power and authority. This process created nineteen themes. As advocated by Patton (2002) these larger themes were reviewed and revised throughout the data reduction and analysis constantly as the researcher checked back with the transcripts to ensure that the authentic voices of the participants were adequately represented. This resulted in the

creation of a matrix that captured the emerging themes and tied them to relevant quotes from the transcripts.

A great challenge during this process was to develop themes and then patterns that were both conceptually tied together as well as distinct. My earlier efforts at coding that resulted in categorical but not conceptual themes, made my new efforts at reducing data painfully difficult. In an effort to remain open minded to changes, these categories emerged and were transformed several times, even throughout the process of writing up the results.

Trustworthiness and credibility. There were several strategies employed in this study that added to its trustworthiness and credibility as advocated by Creswell (1998). The first strategy was the identification of deviant cases, the second was having an external auditor and the third was engaging in peer debriefings.

In order to identify deviant cases, I examined the data to determine if there was data that did not fit the dominant themes. There were several instances of participants that expressed views and offered experiences that were not expressed by other participants, particularly regarding their opinion of the benefits of a graduate degree for child welfare workers. I was careful to incorporate these divergent opinions into the final analysis and results of the study.

The input of my dissertation advisor acting as an external auditor was crucial during the period of data analysis. Her feedback helped me to see that what I might have viewed as a confirmatory quote or excerpt in fact, did not confirm the theme or pointed to an even deeper theme in the narrative.

My colleagues in the field of social work and psychology that worked with child welfare agencies and with children were a source of peer debriefings for me during the entire data collection and analysis process. I was able to regularly explore my ideas and concerns with them

and get feedback on emerging issues and questions. Although I have many years of experience clinically interviewing people, the research experience was quite new to me and I had many concerns about the differences between conducting clinical and research interviews that my colleagues were helpful in distinguishing between. In particular, I had some difficulty deciding whether or not to ask follow up questions that probed personal issues of the participants when strong emotion was unexpectedly evoked during the interviews. I worried that neither I nor the participant were prepared for an emotional reaction to the material as much of the preparatory discussions about the research was professional in nature. In the end, I chose to reflect the feelings of the participants saying things like "it sounds like that was a really powerful experience" to check back to see if what I thought they were experiencing was indeed their experience without probing into personal details of the situation that they were describing.

Results

This study focused on how MSW level child welfare workers perceived the impact of their graduate social work education on the ways in which they form and maintain relationships with their adult clients. This chapter presents the results of semi-structured interviews conducted with MSW level child welfare workers that had child welfare experience both before and after completing their MSW programs. The interview questions offered participants an opportunity to reflect on their pre and post MSW practice with clients as well as on how their graduate education impacted on the relational aspects of their practice.

There were three research questions chosen to explore how workers perceive the impact of their graduate education on the worker client relationship.

1 How do graduate MSW workers perceive the impact of their education on their ability to form and maintain relationships with their clients?
2 What specific parts of their education do MSW workers perceive to have had the most impact on the interpersonal parts of their practice?
3 How do MSW level workers think that the skills they have learned and developed in graduate school can be used in child welfare work best?

Overall, child welfare workers with an MSW found that their interpersonal practice with clients was improved and that their graduate education positively impacted the way they formed and maintained relationships with their adult clients. Through analysis of the interviews, several important themes emerged that helped explain the impact of graduate social work education on the way workers formed and maintained relationships with their clients as well as which particular aspects of their education participants found most influential and why. These themes were 1) the establishment of a professional social work identity 2) the development of a deeper

understanding of the dynamics involved in the worker client relationship and 3) changes in worker's self- reflective capabilities and self- awareness. In addition, two elements of graduate social work education were identified as most impactful on the MSW workers ability to form and maintain relationships. The study found that the most impactful educational experiences were those that 1) changed their ideas and beliefs about themselves and their clients 2) provided opportunities to transfer knowledge from the classroom or field to the child welfare agency.

The results also indicated that workers found many ways to utilize the information and skills that they learned through their graduate education. The transfer of knowledge and skills from classroom to the field was evident. Many participants reported that they were easily able to transfer information gleaned from courses and field work that was not directly related to child welfare back to their work with child welfare clients.

Establishment of a professional social work identity

Throughout their narratives many participants specifically identified themselves as social workers. Several conveyed a sense of passion and commitment that incorporated social work values, skills and knowledge in child welfare practice that changed their professional and sometimes personal identity. Felicia, a suburban worker with six years of experience, articulates the integration of her professional and personal social work identity stating "it's just in me."

> *I mean, it's just, I honestly feel that going to grad school for social work has in very small ways but small ways just stacked up changed the way I interact with my clients that it is kind of hard to separate the two. It has become second nature to me so I don't think, Oh, I'm doing something social work now, it's just in me.*

Social work values. One of the most important ways that MSW workers distinguished themselves was in their ability to use social work values and ethics to guide their decision making. Having a professional identity enabled workers to acknowledge their own point of view as well as the requirements of the agency but weigh them against the rights of the client. The value of client self-determination was particularly important for workers to understand when making critical decisions regarding whether or not to indicate cases or remove children. Laurie, an urban worker with over eight years of experience reflected on how incorporating the value of self-determination changed the way she thinks and makes decisions.

> *...client self-determination and things like that that help you realize what your role actually is...that you have been in this role for years and I don't want to say doing it incorrectly but maybe not even understanding what it is you're actually doing...it goes back to...differentiating between what your personal feelings or standards might be and what others might be.*

Specialized skills and knowledge. Participants in this study utilized specialized knowledge and skills in order to facilitate the establishment of a professional relationship between the worker and client. They reported that they thought about the best way to engage a client, how to talk, and when to listen without saying anything. Most importantly, workers described an awareness of their own role in creating a working relationship with the client. They were able to distinguish between their own needs and feelings and those of the client. The judicious use of self-disclosure is one example of the way that Frank, a suburban worker with over six years of experience, evidenced a professional social work identity in his post MSW practice:

It is up to you to always keep that I guess that line drawn of professional, helping but professional helping...hearing about their lives you may give snippets about things you may understand your experience but the focus is on helping them with their issues, it's not an opportunity for you to talk about what's going on in your life.

Several participants considered themselves to be naturally empathetic and compassionate. Nancy, a rural worker with seven years of experience, found that her education defined and enhanced her natural qualities in a way that they could be utilized professionally:

...my graduate education has helped to make me who I am and has helped me to...kind of define characteristics of myself... I guess for example, I have always been someone who likes to help people in any way I can I am passionate and compassionate...having the skills from the social work degree has helped me to...be effective...

While workers often felt that their natural passion and talent were honed though education, they also expressed concerns that their nascent professional identity needed to be nurtured in order to preserve it and keep their skills up to date. This could be accomplished through reading or independent study. Joyce, an urban supervisor with eight years of experience, exemplified this concern:

So I feel like when a person is doing a career and it is a passion of their (s) ... you are open and thirsty. You want to read the newest book. Like just the other day I said, Oh my God, I feel like I'm doing too much investigations...I need to read something to bring me back because I felt myself slipping into "I got to prove this

case" and I don't want to ever lose my social work, the social work in me because that's my passion.

Not all participants report that their professional identity or work changed in their post MSW practice. Several participants felt that graduate education was positive but not necessarily a vehicle for professional or personal change. Mike, a rural worker with three years of experience, expressed his ambivalence:

... I guess that the MSW does not make you, it helps tremendously...but it doesn't mean that you are going to be a better automatic child welfare worker.

Carlos also distinguished the professional value of the degree from the routine or technical aspects of his job. He did not feel that the technical aspects of his work were changed as a result of completing his MSW although his professional perspective was changed. He stated:

I see myself, I am a child protective caseworker in the hours...So, with the Master's Degree it has helped me as a person to be a better person to listen to other people to be more aware of my surroundings. Personally it has helped me a lot, but job wise, it is like I never went to school. I am doing the same thing I have done it 20 years ago, I visit homes, I supervise visits, I get metro cards, food, furniture, it has not changed.

Summary. The establishment of a professional social work identity is a common theme that influenced the way workers formed and maintained relationships with clients. Many participants in this study identified themselves as social workers as distinguished from their

official title, such as caseworker. They strived to maintain and integrate the values and skills they learned in their graduate education but several also expressed concerns that their professional identity may be compromised if they do not have opportunities to nurture their newly developed identity through opportunities to do meaningful work that utilizes their skills, have professional development or supervision to further hone their skills and solidify their identity.

Develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics involved in the worker client relationship

Through telling stories of their encounters with clients, participants reflected on the differences between their pre and post MSW practice. Participants established a greater appreciation for the importance of the worker client relationship in their post MSW practice. They also reported having a deeper understanding of the elements and dynamics involved in forming and maintaining relationships.

Participants described their pre MSW practice as focused more on the concrete tasks of casework than the process of forming and maintaining a relationship with the client. These included tasks such as enrolling clients in parenting classes, anger management or obtaining substance abuse services. This focus often lead to relationships that were one sided and at times adversarial, creating a sense of personal frustration and anger toward clients that did not comply with mandates ordered by court. Completing this check list of mandates became the primary focus of work rather than developing a relationship with the client or dealing with any other issues that the client may be struggling with.

In post MSW practice workers gained an appreciation for the importance of the worker client relationship and the role that the worker plays in forming and maintaining that relationship that may facilitate client change, gain compliance with mandates and improve child safety.

Several important elements of the worker client relationship emerged as particularly salient. They included the worker's 1) recognition and use of power and authority 2) recognition of the role of the client and worker in promoting client change 3) ability to manage worker client interactions 4) having a better understanding of the complex determinates of human behavior and 5) developing a strengths based perspective about clients. Together these elements promoted relationships between workers and clients that were helpful, empowering and encouraged client self-determination despite difficult circumstances.

Recognition and use of power and authority. Participants in this study readily acknowledged that there is a power differential between workers and clients. The issue of power and authority was a common theme and one that workers often struggled with. Child welfare workers recognized that they have power and authority over crucial aspects in the lives of clients, specifically their children. They also acknowledged that their work can affect the lives of families involved in the child welfare system. Pat, a rural worker with 11 years of experience, expressed her concern regarding the overwhelming feeling of responsibility for protecting children in her pre MSW practice:

> *...I was so worried, this awesome responsibility of protecting people's children. I was just overwhelmed by it and wanted to do a very, very good job and never wanted to cause any hurt to children.*

In describing their pre MSW practice, workers cited two distinct ways of using the power and authority of the position. Some workers used their authority and power as a tool to coerce clients to be compliant. This often took the form of threats or aggressive tactics designed as a show of force. Other workers expressed a sense of discomfort with their own power and

authority. They had difficulty setting effective limits with clients and often preferred to have the court or other authority figures become the "bad guys" who set rules and enforced consequences. Some workers struggled with a tendency to avoid using their power or defer their authority to a higher power, such as a supervisor, lawyer or judge. Carlos recounted a story of a removal in his pre MSW practice of a child due to physical abuse. He maintained that he wanted to avoid using his power and would rather wait for others in authority to inform the parents of the findings.

> *I spoke to [the parents] again and I said thank you very much, I didn't show power or nothing. But once I left, I was outside in the lobby, I called my supervisor who called the police and met me there. They arrested the father and they took the girl.*

Participants reported that neither of these approaches effectively promoted positive worker client relationships. They reflected that indeed, either approach may actually have thwarted the progress they hoped to make with the client and negatively impacted on the worker. Anna, an urban supervisor with over 10 years of experience, reflected on how she managed issues of power and authority with a client she worked with both before and after her MSW degree. She expressed her personal sense of frustration and sense of being "weighted down" by a single minded emphasis on enforcing mandates in her pre MSW practice:

> *This was the second time having the case and it was the exact same issues and nothing changed...So I was a little frustrated with that...maybe there was some sort of bond there but looking back I don't think it was a positive one. It was more of me being the role of authority and directing versus any kind of...empathy for her or anything like that...*

She went on to describe the toll that an authoritarian approach took not just on the client but on the worker as well.

> *And I often say that I would remember leaving ... I would leave the home and be so weighted down and heavy...That because the interaction was such again, if you go in with that directive authoritative, you are going to be combative and most people are not going to receive that well and she did not...So it was a battle.*

Participants reported that the ability to use power and authority without becoming authoritarian could be achieved when they were more comfortable with their own power as well empathetic to the impact that their power and authority may have on the client. Linda, a rural coordinator with 23 years of experience, cautioned against using power in an overtly threatening style:

> *...They know that you have power to remove their children and that you have power to do a lot of things but you don't need to flaunt that power and use that as a threat...*

Several participants noted that they appreciated how difficult child welfare involvement was for families. They described how power struggles with the client can be avoided by having empathy for the client's perspective. They were then able to modify their approach to the client accordingly and resist the urge to be authoritarian. Here Cathy reflected on the change between her pre and post MSW practice on her ability to use authority without becoming authoritarian:

> *... I think that the less experienced you are and the less confident you are, the more you try to overcompensate by using the loud voice or other loud aggressive*

tactics... now I know that I don't really need to assert myself. I know that I have the authority anyway and probably through the social work experience I know that they are already experiencing the authority figure without me even coming ...they are already anxious about it. It is already a life altering experience for them so I try to be more of the empathetic social worker because I know how stressful it is.

Participants recognized that as the embodiment of the authority of the state clients often vented their anger and frustration at them directly. Laurie suggested that how the worker handles these reactions can intensify conflicts and in some cases, result in an overuse of power by the worker and a negative outcome:

Colleagues of mine have just been offended by somebody and have reacted to being offended. It does not necessarily have anything to do with child safety... one of our attorneys...said, "You know you can't indicate based on nothing, you can't indicate based on the fact that they yelled at you, you know.

Workers reported that by setting limits without alienating clients, a stronger working relationship could be built. Felicia recounted a situation in her post MSW practice in which setting an effective limit helped her client to communicate her own needs more directly and resulted in a better relationship. Felicia acknowledged that her own difficulty setting limits had contributed to problems in the past:

... she showed up once to a visit clearly intoxicated and on something ...telling her that if she did that again...she could not have visits with her children in that state... My ability to do that helped her realize that I am not gonna back down...I

think that sometimes she needs that and she has been vocal recently about saying that when I am acting out of line you can tell me that...It is really not in my nature to do that, I am really a much more go with the flow type of person... I'm you know a person who can take away your kids. If you think like that and you act like that it breaks communication and it breaks the working relationship that you can have with a client.

Workers recognized that the power and authority embodied by child welfare workers could precipitate various reactions among clients, from anxiety, to fear to anger. They were aware that most clients did not welcome nor request CPS intervention. In his post MSW practice Frank acknowledged the power differential between worker and client but was able to reduce the client's sense of powerlessness and promote a positive relationship by using power to help the client get services:

I can use this power that I have you know with my title and my authority with the government to help get you services ...your treatment or whatever need be so that you can be a better functioning family.

Overall, participants reported that since completing their graduate education they were generally more comfortable with their own power and could use it in more discriminating ways. In this passage Joyce demonstrated how she was able to develop supportive and collaborative interventions in her post MSW practice while acknowledging the reality of the power differential:

I still have to use power and authority but I always put forward the helping approach first, that is how I am. However, because everyone is not like a

willing... "Hey you're a nice lady, thank you for coming!"...I think with that is that when it comes down to putting what I need to do forward...I am straight forward with that...My first approach is let's do this together...Dealing that way I find that when people feel supported they kinda respond in a positive way. I remind them of their role. I remind them of the tasks that need to be done. And we move forward from there.

Recognition of the role of the client and worker in promoting client change. Workers reported that the main goal of most child welfare interventions was to change the behavior of parents in order to assure the safety of children. They reported that completing court mandated tasks, often referred to as a check-list, was often the only tangible evidence of progress and proof that the family no longer required child welfare services. Completing the check-list of tasks became the focus of interactions rather than the relationship between the worker and the client. In the process, workers tended to either shoulder the burden of change themselves or place it solely on the client rather than on balancing the responsibility for change between the client and worker. Participants recognized that clients must complete the check- list but that alone did not mean that the client has truly changed nor that the children in the home were safe. In her post MSW practice, Felicia expressed the idea that clients need to do more than complete tasks in order for any durable change to occur:

...the change doesn't come because they completed the checklist, they may get out of court because they completed the list...But change doesn't happen because they did it...

Here Anna reflected that in her pre MSW practice, she equated client compliance with actual change. In her post MSW practice, she realized that change is in the hands of the client and cannot be directed by the worker:

> *... she could only do what she could do and the child could only do what he can do...I got them to sign up for the services, because again it was more the pressure of the authoritarian directive...And they went for the first two times and then I closed my case...And it so happens that I did get that same case back...*

Workers reported that they had difficulty balancing their responsibility and that of the client when attempting to promote change in pre MSW practice. Participants that shouldered the responsibility for client change reported that they felt a sense of personal failure with emotional consequences. In her pre MSW practice, Nancy, a rural worker, described a situation in which she went above and beyond to assist a client to get much needed mental health services. She hoped that her efforts would motivate the client to change. Her account of the situation revealed that she experienced both personal pressure as well as organizational pressure to "do more" to make this ambivalent client more compliant:

> *...I would leave my home really early I would pick up a county car and pick her up and bring her to her program and then start my day and I thought that she needed that. I thought that if she could get the mental health services that she needed...it would help her create the motivation to want to continue...but that didn't really work out that well.*
>
> *(I)... what did you feel when it wasn't working out?*

Incredible... kind of real sadness...because you know of who I am I just thought that there was more that I could do...I felt guilty...I still think that I get that a little bit some of that is my own personality but some of it is what government agencies perpetuate... That idea that somehow you could do more or if the client is not doing what they are mandated to do that somehow you could do more.

Facilitating client change through collaboration. Participants acknowledged the reality of court imposed mandates and timelines but also understood that facilitating change was a complex process that involved both the worker and the client. Workers struggled to balance the reality of having mandated tasks with the need to work collaboratively with the client on the goals that the client found most important to them. Participants readily admitted that there were some barriers to forming a collaborative relationship with a mandated client. Pat, a rural supervisor, articulated that it is the responsibility of the worker, not the client, to understand how to balance mandated tasks with client wishes. In her post MSW practice she relied on talking and empathy to help her overcome initial barriers with the client:

Well it's an awful lot of talking... about their perspective and sometimes trying to get their agreement and mutual understanding to move forward.

Some workers were in the position of observing and evaluating clients, in this case at a supervised visitation session. Participants emphasized that the formation of a relationship was possible when the worker was able to empathize with the clients feelings and to try to normalize them. In her post MSW practice, Nancy's ability to connect with the client's discomfort helped her find a way to work collaboratively:

...when I see them [the parents] I try to think what are they probably feeling right now and then I go with what I think they are feeling. Like if I think they are feeling angry or feeling scared I kind of go with what I think they are feeling and then ask them...Hey, I wonder if you are feeling a bit nervous right now? I just want to let you know that you know it's OK.

In their post MSW practice, workers reported that they recognized that the power to change ultimately rested within the client. The client worker relationship was not based on coercing the client to comply with mandates but rather to accept the decisions that clients made and help them see the potential consequences of their choices. Workers voiced their concerns or disagreed with clients but were still able to preserve the relationship. Relinquishing a sense of control over the process of change allowed Laurie to put control back into the hands of the client and increase the potential for long term change:

...I firmly believe that you can take peoples kids away but you are not really changing anything, they have to make the change no matter how hard you try to force the change to be made. It's never going to be a long- term change unless they are the ones who actually do it...So you can put in all the protective factors you want but unless it is the family keeping the child safe it is not going to be a long term outcome.

Workers reported that they were aware that mandated tasks might not always be helpful to the client. They managed client resistance by collaborating and encouraging clients to find ways to complete the tasks while maintaining a focus on the relationship as a tool for change. Nancy described her style of collaborating:

You don't always agree with the tasks that you have to do...so I may not always agree and I tell people that I may not always agree, but it is what it is and this is where we are at and we can't change any of that, but let's figure out how we can work together.

Here Gail, a rural worker with 10 years of experience, referred to the collaborative process as "finding our way through" as opposed to simply enforcing a court mandated plan:

...Well I think that you know I recognize that if I had gone in there with a plan and said this is what you have to do and this is what you're going to do it wouldn't have worked... finding our way through...It has worked ...

Workers reported that collaborative relationship was furthered when they could help clients see that they were part of the goal setting process and not simply carrying out directives. Frank discussed his efforts to help a troubled teenager define her rights and responsibilities in a way that could reduce her behavioral acting out:

[I gave]...the young girl a sense of responsibility that she was a part of this program, she is a part of the service plan, she is not being directed to do certain things...In her effort to try to make a better family unit to keep things going, she was an integral part to it running well...I told her that it was her responsibility to inform Dad what she wanted to do. I kinda tried to make her understand that she is a young adult and she had a lot to do with things running well and running smoothly.

Managing resistance to change. When clients are unable or unwilling to change, workers reported that they could become frustrated, often placing the responsibility for change

upon themselves. When they placed the responsibility for change on the client, they could maintain a professional relationship, even if the client was not ready to change. Mike described the change in his thoughts about his role in promoting client change in his post MSW practice:

> *...I guess that's all you can do... it took me a while to understand that if people are going to change, that it's kind of up to them... You can give them all the tools to help them change but it's up to them to pick up the ball and run with it...*

He further revealed that this helped him to remain professionally but not personally involved:

> *...that's what I think helps as a coping mechanism as long as I can go home and say that I gave them every opportunity and I hope that they can take advantage of it, that's how I can sleep at night, but I can't make them do anything.*

Participants noted that many clients voiced a desire to change but resisted actually changing their behaviors. Their ambivalence could create frustration on the part of the worker that may see the client as more ready to change than they really were. Linda described a situation in her post MSW practice in which understanding the complexities of change helped to make sense of seemingly self-defeating behavior:

> *... We have this poor lady who grew up in foster care herself and I knew her way back when, and she is with a bad dude and her kids keep getting in foster care and everybody is like, Why? Why she puts him first? Well, probably because she had no one to love her and this is the only consistent person in her life and I can kind of see why she is not making the change and she might not ever be ready to make that change.*

Several workers discussed their experience working with families that have been referred to child welfare services multiple times. Recidivism was understood by workers as a sign that there was a problem with the system as well as with the client. In their post MSW practice, workers struggled to resist the tendency to blame the client or to become hopeless when the family was referred back to CPS multiple times. Pat, a rural supervisor, actively sought to maintain a neutral perspective and an open mind when a family returned due to a new CPS report:

> *Well, you know at any point in time things can happen that can you know, I guess bring a family back to a different place, or I really think about things and give them the benefit of the doubt ... especially if there is a hotline report and allegations, and really try to think about alternative hypothesis instead of, Oh well, here we go again!*

Workers in this study were aware that client change was a multi-determined, complex process. However, they also reported that change in child welfare is primarily measured as an outcome. Did the client complete the treatment program? Did they attend the classes? Was the child in school? MSW level workers recognized that any durable change must come from the client but that they could play a role in facilitating that change. They found that they could have a collaborative relationship with the client that acknowledged the reality of the child welfare system while also helping the client set and achieve personal goals for long lasting change.

Understanding the complex determinants of human behavior. Participants reported that they had a deeper understanding of the complexities of human behavior in the post MSW practice. They found that the relationship with the client was strengthened when they could

make sense of how the client's history and environment impacted on their current behaviors. In particular, post MSW workers described changes in the way they understood the impact of mental illness and substance abuse as well as the impact of the social and cultural context of the client on the behavior of the client. They reported that they differentiated casework from social work practice in their ability to see the client from a broader perspective. Frank differentiated between his pre MSW casework approach and post MSW social work approach to clients. He maintained that a psychosocial perspective could help workers to facilitate long term change rather than short term band aid fixes:

> *...casework is focused on fixing this issue and not taking into account this persons past, their current environment, what is going on in their life, family, friends, all of the psychosocial stuff that is involved...I think that social work allows you to look at those things and you are going to get to your resolution much quicker. So instead of trying to fix a leak we're going to take care of the water...and then we work on the leak...*

Workers were aware that clients faced many societal and individual stressors in their lives that might have contributed to their involvement with protective services. They recognized that the same issues often made it difficult for clients to complete the mandated tasks and may lead to repeated involvement with child welfare. Large-scale issues included the cultural and social context of the client, including poverty, racism and poor housing. Individual issues that affected the client included a history of abuse and neglect, mental illness and substance abuse. Post MSW workers reported that they had a deeper understanding of these factors. Susan, a suburban worker with 23 years of experience, articulated how her understanding of a client's background could improve the relationship between worker and client:

...what happened was the previous caseworker, she was argumentative. When I met her and I started to kind of delve into her background, which I don't think I would have ever done before [my MSW]....I kinda of talked through all that...

Understanding the impact of mental illness and substance abuse. Participants found that many clients who were involved with protective services had an underlying mental illness, trauma or substance abuse issues. Post MSW workers recognized the barriers that these issues presented and found ways to relate empathically to their clients despite their difficulties. Several workers pointed out that a deeper level of understanding as to the nature and cause of problems did not necessarily mean that they could solve all of them. They recognized that the familial, social and cultural forces at work could go beyond the ability of the individual to solve alone.

Participants reported that chronic substance abuse often led clients, like the one below, to be referred to CPS on many occasions over time. Several workers explored their experiences of seeing the same family on multiple occasions over time. An understanding about the chronic nature of substance abuse and mental illness helped workers to remain neutral with clients that needed multiple attempts to accomplish change. Cathy's understanding of the complex nature of substance use helped her to remain empathetic and encouraging, even though she was not terribly optimistic that this client could remain abstinent:

Relapse is part of recovery. It's part of life for them... And the whole time I am encouraging and supporting her because we know her and she's such a good person when she is doing the right thing and she really is a victim of her family you know... we can only educate her so much ...it's like you just want to help but you also have in the back of your mind, were going to see her again.

Workers reported that many families came to the attention of child welfare workers following episodes of significant trauma or have underlying mental health issues. These issues posed difficulties for workers that sought to form and maintain relationships with clients that exhibited difficult or unusual behaviors. In this situation, Linda, a coordinator in a rural county, used her understanding of the aftermath of sexual abuse to help her supervisee develop empathy and communicate more effectively with her client:

> *...there has been this girl, she grew up in foster care and she's obese. [My supervisee said]...I am going to tell her that she is obese and she needs to lose the weight because she is so pretty and she has so much going for her. And I am like wait a minute let's look at this situation here...The girl was sexually abused...and is probably using eating as a comfort and does not want people to look at her in a pretty way...So we had a big conversation with the caseworker and she said, Ohhh, I didn't think of it that way.*

Several workers acknowledged that they were aware that they could not change the client's underlying issue or behavior, but found ways to develop alternative approaches to working with the client. Susan described how having an understanding of the pervasive nature of a personality disorder helped her to back down from her confrontational stance that only served to heighten this client's resistance:

> *She had no goals, no motivation, no willingness to change. I found it very, she actually was diagnosed...with personality disorder...And then it made sense. Because when I would make headway, the next day she would turn around "you don't know what you're talking about...*

Understanding the social and cultural context of the client. Participants in the study were working with families that came from many different social, economic and cultural backgrounds. They were aware that social and cultural issues impacted tremendously on the family and often tried to incorporate the social and cultural context of the client into their work. Instead of relying on stereotypes, in their post MSW practice participants tried to understand the cultural context of the family from the client's point of view. In this passage, Gail recognized that there may be variations in what families considered acceptable, but worked to educate them about what the predominant social standards were:

> *...You don't just go into a home and pretend like it's your home...You talk to them about their own culture and what their beliefs are and especially around the holidays what their traditions are...And you are respectful of their wishes.*

In this situation, Laurie demonstrated an empathetic awareness of how wary a client that is a recent political refugee may be of any government involvement:

> *...we are a resettlement zone for... refugees... actually so we get a lot of those cases because of cultural issues. And to go into someone's house who just came from a war torn country... and explain to them why some anonymous report that their kids were playing out in the street constituted a government authority walking into their home after they have only been here for four months, that is a tricky road to go down.*

She further recognized that any relationship with the client must be predicated on them feeling safe and did her best to reassure and empathize with their concerns:

...you have come from a place that is not like this at all and I understand why you might be afraid right now and I want you to know that I am not here to harm you and I am not here to hurt you or your children you know knowing that is an important thing to say.

Although many workers reported that they were unfamiliar with a given culture, being interested, curious and open minded allowed them to gain a deeper understanding of the client's perspective. Here Cindy, a rural worker with three years of experience, articulated the need to look at each individual while keeping the cultural context in mind:

...to really think about really where might they be coming from, what does normal look like for them... I don't want to label them ...

Susan described how she evidenced respect by asking questions about a culture and understanding it more deeply while educating clients about what is expected of them in the dominant culture in which they live:

I just had a family of gypsies. I had to go out and ask them why do you guys do this and that? Can we work on this? [I want to] help them understand our laws and what was required of you here but at the same time trying to respect your culture...

Managing interactions between client and worker. Child welfare workers reported that they were often met with clients that were angry, exhibited aggressive behaviors or were generally uncooperative. They could become frustrated and sometimes even fearful of clients. Participants noted that workers that reacted negatively to client anger or provocative behavior could unintentionally escalate conflict rather than de-escalate tensions. These reactions could

take the form of emotional outbursts, overly harsh directives, and one -way communication that left no room for client feedback. In this situation, Cathy described a situation in her pre MSW practice in which the intensity of the client was matched by an equally intense reaction from her:

> *...I would walk into a house and a client would be really upset and maybe start yelling and I remember a couple of times where I got flooded, when you get emotional, when someone gets emotional with you, you get emotional in response ...Through my Master's I would never, there are so many skills that you learn about how to... [calm] somebody down that I would never get that emotionally involved with a client.*

Post MSW workers reported that they interacted with clients differently than in their pre MSW practice. They sought to deescalate tensions between the client and the worker by managing their reaction to clients that were provocative or angry. There are several specific interventions that workers described they used in order to manage difficult interactions with clients more effectively. These techniques included the use of joining and communicating with clients in ways that are clear, honest and straightforward. Post MSW workers also tended to present themselves in a genuine and empathetic manner. This calm, clear style of behavior and communication helped workers to manage even highly charged situations with clients and work to form a collaborative working relationship.

Joining. Post MSW workers described ways that they attempted to join with clients in an effort to lower defensiveness and reduce tensions. Joining could be accomplished through verbal communication with clients. However, joining was also an attitude of workers who were conscious of "meeting the client where they are." Participants recognized that clients were often

fearful of child welfare intervention and did not automatically acknowledge problems or commit to working on mandated tasks. They found that by managing the defensiveness of the client they could form a relationship with a person who might be scared and angry at the intrusiveness of an investigation. Here Nancy is cognizant of lowering the defenses of the client by joining with them toward a shared goal:

> *I am on their side and I want to help them I am not there to make their lives miserable and I want to help. I tell them you know look my goal is to get us out of your life, ...I joke about it with people, I had this one woman as a preventive case and she had her kids in foster care ...she had like 8 kids so we were in her life for a very, very long time...I... successfully closed her and I showed up at her house with a cake...I said here, you and the kids enjoy, you got rid of us!*

Laurie remained joined with the client "meeting her where she was at" and found creative ways to open up communication under difficult circumstances. In this case the client was being asked to choose between going to a shelter or losing custody of her children:

> *I have a client that had five children under the age of six...She was deaf and mute and she was in a domestic violence relationship and...was homeless...You had to be very, very patient...she sat in my car for three hours and did not want to enter into the shelter. I sat there with her for three hours while she cried and hand wrote notes to her back and forth to her explaining to her...For me it was about being patient, about meeting her where she was at...Not where I wanted her to be...*

Workers reported that they could join with a client's underlying strivings and desires, even if their current behavior appeared to be in opposition to their goals. Frank described how he helped clients make connections between the problems that precipitated CPS intervention and their unmet needs by presenting himself as a person that was on their side and would be able to help them in a concrete way to meet some of their needs:

> *You're asking them what is the goal that they want because most individuals who are dealing with an issue want it to be resolved... so in that process of helping them find that out, they recognize that ...you're on the same side as them. Your goal is to help them and you have the resources to advocate for them and help them get towards a goal of resolution.*

Joining with clients could also be accomplished by helping clients with their concrete needs. In this example, Felicia helped to build a relationship with the client by reducing her sense of mistrust and meeting the client's needs:

> *... she thought when the children came into care she was on her own...it was us against them...And once she started seeing me as an ally, someone who she could call...when she does let's say need a ride to the foster home you know. She will give me a call and I am able to do that for her... in doing her favors that are really part of my job I think that they feels more comfortable and trusts me more.*

Communication style. Participants in this study tried to adopt a straightforward and honest style of communication. They felt that it could assure the client that the worker had fully disclosed their responsibilities as well as the clients. In addition, they were honest about the potential outcomes of CPS involvement but tried to do it in a non-threating manner. Participants

were not afraid of inviting feedback from the client, even if it was negative. In order to do that, workers reported that they tried to maintain a sense of neutrality. Anna demonstrated her post MSW approach to communicating with all types of clients:

> *To be able to see aspects from both sides...that allows me to have the same kind of conversation maybe in a different manner with the perpetrator as I can with the mom or the child, just meeting them on their level.*

Upon meeting clients for the first time, in her post MSW practice Gail, used non-critical language to lower defenses and arrive at mutual goals for work:

> *We don't say you know there is allegations about you we say that we received a report about some concern...We try to align with them in something that they might be concerned about too...and try right from the get go to not use the sort of blameful or critical language.*

Participants noted that communication could be especially challenging with clients who had special needs. In their post MSW practice, they found ways to communicate that were in sync with the ability and needs of the client. Linda revealed how she was able to communicate on the appropriate level with a couple with developmental disabilities and had their child placed in foster care:

> *They were very afraid and they didn't understand the information they didn't understand why things were happening um and I kind of was just very honest with them and told them why things were happening and when um they didn't like things. I acknowledged that Yes, this really sucks but this is where we are and how are we going to move through it. So I was very open and honest with them*

and I also you know um I kind of met them where they were at... and not being afraid or sugar coating things but doing it in a gentle way.

In several cases, workers described situations in which they felt threatened or intimidated by clients. Their ability to de-escalate potentially dangerous situations was crucial for their safety as well as the preservation of a working relationship. Mike allowed clients to vent their frustrations without becoming personally defensive:

[I] give them the opportunity to express their frustration in a way that might not be complimenting you but that's really not their problem (laughs).

Despite feeling threatened, Laurie was able to communicate her expectations to the client and set limits. She made a point to acknowledge that she would have to maintain a relationship with him over time and was aware of the need to set a firm but professional tone:

...I was inside this guy's apartment, it was a filthy apartment, a few weeks ago, and he was kind of a creepy guy ...and he was following me down the stairs and he said to me in a very strange tone, Are you ever fearful going into men's apartments alone like this?...I remember walking down this staircase alone you know and nobody was around and we got down the stairs ... and I was kind of half funny with him I said you know I really feel like when you treat people with respect you get respect in return and I kind of left it like that cause I knew that I would have to see him again...And he agreed with me...

Carlos described an initial encounter that could have escalated into a larger conflict if he was not able to de-escalate the tension by simply listening. He mentioned that this client had driven others workers out of the home in the past:

...when I went to his house he started yelling at me but I sat down I didn't take it personally, to me anybody can say whatever they want, this is a free country, especially that I was inside his home. So he can tell me whatever as long as he doesn't touch me or fight me he can say whatever. So that was my first encounter with this person he sat down and we started talking and then he opened up...he had a rough childhood.

Maintaining a strengths based perspective. Workers who maintained a strengths based perspective found ways to seek novel approaches to forming and maintaining relationships with their clients in their post MSW practice. When workers could identify positive aspects of the client, they remarked that they could achieve a better balance between working on mandated tasks and those that the client identified as important. Participants reported that it took a conscious effort to find client strengths, rather than getting caught up in problems. Pat exemplified this approach with clients:

...[I] get to know who they are and not just the negative reason that you have come into their lives...Keep focused on their accomplishments and what they are proud of and what they like...and who is important to them.

Participants voiced concern that a history of recidivism was often seen as a red flag that a family would be difficult to work with. Mike reflected on the need to look for strengths especially if it appeared that the work had not been productive in the past:

I stepped back and said, Ok I need to approach this with more of that open mind with this client and look again for those positive things and try to do the best with

what we have...there is a real balance, a real balance between what the agency mandates and how to work with...clients...Where are the strengths?

Participants revealed that they were able to maintain a sense of optimism using a strengths based perspective despite client setbacks. Finding strengths and offering positive feedback to this family and allowed Linda to help them to stay motivated and see the possibility of success:

... I need to...look again for those positive things and try to do the best with what we have... They were kind of doing some of the things, but I was giving them credit for doing those things... but acknowledging that there is still work to be done and the impact of their decisions on their children.

Participants noted that when they could identify client strengths they were likely to find creative approaches to help clients. They reported that they deliberately and tenaciously looked for strengths, even when others did not see them. In her post MSW practice, Nancy showed that when she could identify client strengths, she was in a better position to advocate for the client with the agency in effective ways:

...[the client was] young like 26 or 27 , she had seven kids, eight kids ...and she was all by herself. She moved herself here from the city to get away from the negative environment trying to do things on her own, very little education...but I saw real strength in her. She was trying to make a better life for her kids but she was having a hell of a time raising these kids on her own... she really truly wanted to learn... different ways of handling her daughters behavior ...she was

self- aware of what kind of needs that she had ... and somewhere she was aware that she had this need to find to find people in her life that treated her poorly.

Summary. The participants in this study placed great value on the relationship between worker and client and sought ways to improve the relationship with their clients. They believed that forming and maintaining relationships with clients was an integral part of their job. Participants also reported that they believed that maintaining a positive relationship with a client could lead to better outcomes. Many participants revealed their desire to help clients achieve long term change, not just short term compliance. They sought to develop approaches that honored client self-determination and also that took into account the reality of the power differential between worker and client. Although post MSW workers still faced the same types of stressors they had in their pre MSW practice, including the obligation to enforce mandates and deal with contentious clients, participants reported that they could manage these issues more effectively.

Participants in this study also made a concerted effort to collaborate with their clients. Their goal was to help promote change that was consistent with the client's goals as well to complete the tasks that were mandated by court. They expressed awareness that simply completing the required mandates was rarely enough to create long term changes. Participants reported that understanding the issues underlying the client's behaviors was a great help to them. Maintaining a psychosocial perspective allowed participants to assess the client in the context of their past, their family and their culture and develop interventions that were in keeping with the individual client's needs. Participants noted that when they had a deeper understanding of the client and the context in which they lived, they were less likely to feel frustrated or angry and

they did not take client behavior personally. This allowed them to maintain a relationship with clients during periods of conflict as well as during times of cooperation.

Self- reflection and increased self-awareness

Self- reflection is a skill as well as an attitude that workers brought to their post MSW interactions with clients. In the context of the worker client relationship, participants found that when they could step back from a discussion or interaction with a client and examine their thoughts they could deliberately construct responses to clients, especially during challenging interactions. Participants reported that they were less likely to react with frustration and anger to client provocation. Participants also found that being able to identify their personal triggers helped them to refrain from acting on them. Felicia revealed how she used internal dialogue to rehearse her responses before she spoke:

> *...I'll stop and I'll think about what I really want to say and I will phrase it the way that I think is best and I think that that helps me a lot...*

Self-reflection. Almost every participant reported that they identified issues that trigger responses for them. They found that being self-reflective allowed them to separate their issues from that of the client's. Linda described how she managed a situation in which she felt a sense of mistrust of a biological father's intentions toward his daughter. She reflected on the difference between her own personal feelings about the issue of child abandonment and the expressed intent of the client. Her ability to create an internal dialogue helps her communicate in a neutral way by asking questions and beginning to form a relationship with the client:

> *[I was thinking]...if you wanted this child and you wanted to rescue her from foster care than you should be at your visit ...there are always certain people that*

are hard to work with...hard to relate to...I remember... saying [to myself] Ok, you can't act like this or say this... I think asking questions helps...and then maybe validate or [find] some other way to start to form a relationship.

In this case Nancy was able to use her ability to reflect to teach a client with little ability how to use self-reflection to help her to see how she may come across to others:

[I am] helping her to learn to communicate effectively so that she is heard and understood because when she communicates her concerns and her frustrations, she puts people on the defensive...so I am able to do a lot of that work with her and she is so receptive to it ... and its really nice to see her growing, reflecting on her past and applying it to her future.

Workers found that they could use their reflective capabilities to delay or resist responding to their internal emotional states. Joyce described reflecting as sitting down with herself:

My thinking has changed so much...on a professional level... at one point I was very sensitive um I felt that some things I would take too personal I would get too emotionally involved at the beginning of my cases...I make a point now to sit down with myself and sit back and watch things unfold...

Self-awareness. Improved self –reflection can also lead to increased self-awareness. Having self-awareness enabled workers to identify issues that tended to trigger them and allowed them to develop ways to manage their reactions effectively. Workers who were self-reflective could identify those issues that had the potential to trigger negative feelings or responses. Laurie drew a link between having self-awareness and an improved ability to modify her reaction to

issues that triggered her. She further suggested that self-awareness could also improve her ability to evaluate situations more objectively and listen to clients with an open mind:

> *[regarding trigger issues]...I think that a lot of times when we first start out we want to absolutely pretend that they don't exist and we want to completely ignore them... and we think that by doing that they are not going to have an effect on us... So I think that being able to identify that is something that really triggers me is able to prevent me from maybe reacting in a way that is not helpful.*

Workers reported that with heightened self- awareness helped them be cognizant of their behavior and attitudes. Here, Nancy described how her self-awareness enhanced her empathy:

> *I do a lot of relating to myself, which is not always great. I have to keep myself from doing it. I try to come to a basis of understanding I really try to walk in peoples shoes to really try to understand them...But the only person I have had experience with is me, you know what I mean...I try really hard not to react to any countertransference because I do find myself relating to my own experiences maybe more often than I should.*

Repairing relationships. Workers found that all relationships could inevitably involve some kind of conflict or misunderstanding. However, post MSW workers could better recognize when there was a problem in the relationship and take steps to repair it. Workers also discovered that the process of repair could benefit help the client learn that conflict could be worked through and that relationships could survive and even be stronger after the conflict was resolved. In her post MSW practice, Cindy recognized that she avoided communicating to the client about her reporting obligations. This resulted in the client feeling betrayed. Dealing with the issue opened

the door for her to apologize for her lack of clarity and the hurt that it may have caused the client in order to repair their working relationship:

> *I had one client in particular that had a lot of animosity and resentment about what CPS quote unquote had done to them or whatever, and I try to step away from that...I guess that I hadn't made it clear to her that I was still monitoring things and that didn't mean that I could say she was doing everything wonderfully... And she felt that was the kind of support that I should have...been able to give her. So just recently um she sat down with a counselor and I and she was able to verbalize that ... and I was able to accept it and was able to not get defensive ... not take that personally...and to say I'm sorry and to listen to those feelings.*

Post MSW workers reported that they could repair a relationship after incidents in which they become angry or overtly frustrated. Here, Felicia was able to construct a response that de-escalated the conflict and brought it back to the best needs of the children:

> *... there was one occasion where just she said things that shouldn't be said and I lost it for a second and I said wait I should not be doing this but she um...I said well, listen you can't talk to me like that. It took me like a good 30 seconds to realize, Hey, you are yelling at her...[afterwards] I said listen, you can't, you can't talk to me like that, I am not going to yell at you, please don't yell at me, you have to calm down before your visit because I don't want the kids to see you like this.*

Summary. Post MSW workers describe an enhanced ability to self-reflect that creates an internal dialogue to help guide their responses and interactions with clients, especially when faced with challenging situations. Self-reflections also tended to lead to greater self-awareness. Workers that are self-aware are able to see themselves as others may see them, they are aware of their own personal triggers and avoid acting on them when possible. This allows them to recognize their own behavior and take steps toward recognizing the needs of the client.

The Impetus for Change: Graduate Social Work Education

Educational experiences fueled learning that enhanced the ability of workers to form and maintain relationships with their clients. Participants described influential educational experiences that occurred both in the class and in the field. There were two major themes that emerged regarding the role of education that were most influential for workers. The first theme was the ability of education to change ideas and beliefs of workers. Some of the most powerful moments in education occurred when the worker's pre-existing perspectives and beliefs were challenged. These experiences enhanced their skills, knowledge, and most of all their ability to self-reflect and heightened the empathy they have for clients. Workers' often described these experiences as inspirational, however uncomfortable they may have felt in the moment. Gail reflected the attitude of many participants that were not enthusiastic, perhaps even resistant, at the beginning of school but became more open to learning and change as the process of education proceeded:

> *...[at the beginning] I so hated writing those self- reflection things but I think it so helps you be cognizant of what you're bringing... and what triggers are for you...And so I think that helps me a lot in the work that I do.*

The second theme was the importance of learning experiences, particularly in the field, that enabled them to transfer skills and knowledge from the field or classroom to the workplace. Participants found that they could easily use a variety of social work theories and techniques quite well in child welfare practice.

Change of ideas and beliefs. Participants reported that their graduate education influenced their ideas and beliefs about many aspects of their work in child welfare. Some workers reported that they re-examined beliefs that they held about people, particularly the behavior of clients. But others had more a more personal reaction to education. They reflected that education actually changed the way they thought about crucial aspects of themselves including their political beliefs and personal behavior. Ultimately, these workers connected personal changes to improvements in their work with clients, making them more aware of the needs of others and the difficulties many clients face. A class that focused on human rights was able to increase Cindy's sensitivity to the value of self-determination on both a personal and professional level. She connected this value to her ability to balance individual rights with mandates in child welfare:

> *...one of my favorite classes... was human rights... that really opened up a lot for me and my personal values...[I am] able to ... work with those [values] and to know how I could make an impact...individual rights are an issue when you are working with mandated clients.*

Cathy recalled a pivotal experience in a social welfare class that forced her to question what she believed about individual responsibility and eventually to incorporate her new ideas into her practice. The challenge posed by the professor initially created a sense of extreme

discomfort. However, she was able to become less critical and more empathetic to the plight of those she worked with as an end result of her new perspective. She lamented that although she felt that a veil was lifted, without reinforcement, it could be lowered as well:

> *...actually the most pivotal class was actually ...social welfare policy [it was] life changing at the time (laughing)...I hated it at first (laughing)...That's why it was life changing cause I remember the professor ... she wanted to out people about their beliefs right in the middle of the class...[I thought] you know what is she trying to do, she is trying to take away my belief, my belief system, and it was extremely uncomfortable, discomfort physically basically on your body, emotionally on you....and what happened was...I completely flipped and it became one of my favorite classes and it was like a veil being lifted.*

Several participants revealed that classroom experiences began a process of profound personal change and self-discovery. In this detailed passage, Joyce described a moment of self-awareness triggered by classroom instruction on domestic violence and its affect on her life and her practice:

> *Social work...kinda changed my life because I had a hard childhood and I was in a bad marriage and it was being in social work school that I learned...it opened my eyes. Oh my God you are in an abusive, you are in a bad situation! And I didn't know that, I didn't know that! It was a class... and I sat there and I'm like oh my God like... She was talking about the cycle of abusive relationships... and the honeymoon period and she put this wheel on the board and it was just like, this light bulb...went off in my head like wow my, honestly, my whole way of*

thinking really changed...now that I am out of this situation people ask me what made you change and I said it was school it was something in school that showed me what I was in, you know?

(I)It happened like (snap) that?

...that moment made me seek a counselor and help me get things together and helped me organize my thoughts...one of my professors told me you have to make sure that your stuff is taken care of before you can be a counselor to people and because I wanted so bad to work with people I felt I owed it to clients and people I come into contact with to fix myself first...and that's helped me a lot too since I have addressed so many issues inside myself...Its made it I can see a client for their situation as opposed to mine, not the triggers that come up and push away.

Anna connected how her own sense of personal powerlessness negatively affected her ability to use power and authority effectively with clients. She revealed that the catalyst for change for her was a human behavior class in which she realized that her tough demeanor was a product of her own past experiences. When she was able to reflect on herself, she was then able to integrate a more nuanced use of power and authority in her work with clients:

I took it to heart and I really can't answer for everybody else but um I really dug deep and (tearful) and that allowed me I guess to know myself and drop some of the baggage and other things that I was carrying as protection for myself you know...

(I)When you look back at your work, do you see that it changed your work?

I look back at, well I look back at my life and I see why I carried that authoritative with me for so long because there were issues in my own life when I wasn't the authority and somebody else had that authority over me and it seemed to work well for them and I think that was the reason I was the way I am and I protected myself by... I didn't know it at the time...

Interaction with students and professors was another avenue that promoted a change of ideas and beliefs in participants. Although initially uncomfortable, the process of role playing and exposing their work to other people enabled participants to change the way they saw themselves. In her classroom, Pat was encouraged to examine the impact of her own behaviors on clients thus improving empathy and self –awareness:

We were doing kind of some role play counseling exercises and we were critiqued by our class and by ourselves. Well that was very profound! (Laughs)...Oh my gosh!! It was just to see you know how you come how you would be seen by somebody else with talking and interacting and those sorts of things... I learned how I wanted to be seen by others...even down to small mannerisms and those sorts of things.

Transfer of skills and knowledge. Participants noted that some of their most influential educational experiences were not directly related to child welfare. Field placements in non-child welfare settings and classroom activities provided workers an opportunity to transfer newly learned skills to their work to the agency. Participants found that an influential and talented field supervisor could help workers to enhance their self-reflective functioning, develop a system

perspective and increase empathy. Several years after the end of her placement, the influence of the supervisor has continued to impact Cindy's thinking process:

> *I think that the experience that stuck with me the most was my work with one of my field supervisors... I used to call her a social work psychic...I think to myself now, what would... say about this... she just really helped me...to really thinking more dynamically with families. Like it's not just the individual, its complex series of things going on that really affect a person or a family. Having her as a supervisor, it really impacted who I am as a social worker.*

Participants noted that field placements in areas unrelated to child welfare such as substance abuse treatment centers, group homes and hospice were highly influential in improving their child welfare practice. The ability to relate to clients in general transferred to being better able to form and maintain relationships with child welfare clients. In this example, Gail was able to generalize her learning about loss from her fieldwork in a hospice and skills of self-reflection to her work with clients in child welfare:

> *...at Hospice...I did bereavement counseling ...[it] has helped me a lot with the work that I do because there is so much loss that goes on...for children and for families, just a move or you know um a split or a divorce there are just so many things.*

Fieldwork experience in a clinical setting allowed workers to practice skills and techniques learned in the classroom and transfer them to child welfare practice. Felicia recalled feeling a sense of astonishment that the beliefs about practice that she learned as a caseworker were in fact not accurate:

...I used those reframing techniques[in a clinical field placement] and the fact that they actually worked kind of blew my mind (laughing)...I kind of almost thought that it was just made up stuff you know because seeing them in practice was so different than seeing them in a notebook or a sheet of paper or something like that...it also was my preconceived notion from the job... because there are a lot of caseworkers that came before me that said that all that stuff is useless because nobody gets to actually use that when they interact with a client...but when you are working with a family long term like CPS ongoing or foster care I think those tools are so essential and ...it would it's almost a disservice not to use them.

Susan was able to transfer theoretical knowledge from human behavior class to better understand the client's perspective. She is then able to adjust her expectations and behavior accordingly:

...you know what captured it the most ...it's attachment theory...because I really felt like most of our clients need to go back, and I know that it is impossible to go back, but they need to start over. Like all their attachments are poor... they have the trust issues that stem from that so when you're coming in your coming in as an authoritative figure, not someone who is really concerned and really wants to help them... it's always something, a poor boundary or deprived childhood.

Gail found that she was able to transfer skills from her social work practice class directly to agency work to improve her relationship and promote change:

Two things that I really drew a lot on were motivational interviewing and solution focused practice...I mean I not only enjoyed it but I really tried to use some of

that stuff in my work...for example, basically every single time I sit with someone I have them try to identify one small tiny thing that they can change, in solution focused it would be like to bring them from a five to a six or a five to a five and one half or wherever they are...

Summary. Participants in this study reported that graduate social work education was a powerful influence on them and the way they formed and maintained relationships with their clients. The experiences that were most influential enhanced their self-reflective capabilities and translated into greater empathy for clients. Workers found that educational experiences in class and in the field provided participants knowledge and skills that enabled them to intervene with clients more effectively. Most notably however, was that participants were able to use experiences and information that were not directly related to child welfare and transfer their learning to their practice with their clients.

Discussion

The client worker relationship is one of the cornerstones of social work practice (Perlman, 1985). The skills needed to form and maintain relationships with clients are part of the advanced practice expected of MSW level social workers (CSWE, 2008). This exploratory study was done in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding about how MSW level child welfare workers perceived the impact of their graduate education on the way they formed and maintained relationships with their clients. Research has consistently demonstrated that the relationship between the worker and client is an important element of work with mandated clients including those involved in child welfare (Altman & Gohagan, 2009; Littell, 2001; Lee and Ayon, 2004; Perlman, 1985; Platt, 2008; Skeem et al., 2007; Snyder & Anderson, 2009).

There were three research questions chosen to explore how workers perceive the impact of their graduate education on the worker client relationship.

1. How do graduate MSW workers perceive the impact of their education on their ability to form and maintain relationships with their clients?
2. What specific parts of their education do MSW workers perceive to have had the most impact on the interpersonal parts of their practice?
3. How do MSW level workers think that the skills they have learned and developed in graduate school can be used in child welfare work best?

The participants in this study were child welfare workers with between six months and twenty-two years of experience in the field of child welfare before they decided to return to school to pursue a master's degree in social work, while maintaining their employment in child welfare. The researcher did not differentiate the types of funding or method of paying for

graduate school among each participant. Although each participant had their own individual motivation for returning to school, they all found that their education was an overall positive experience. All participants found that they modified how they thought about clients and how they formed and maintained relationships with their clients and credited their education with a change in their practice. Workers also developed a greater appreciation for the value of the worker client relationship itself. They articulated a new awareness that developing a relationship with a client was a critical part of their work. One participant, Cathy, summed up the influence of graduate education on worker client relationships by simply stating that MSW workers were *"trained to build and cultivate relationships."*

Previous research has found that in general MSW level child welfare workers were satisfied with their education and found it helpful to them (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte, 2007; Franke, et al., 2009) but did not help to illuminate how education was helpful to them. This study was designed to fill a gap that exists in the literature that helps understand how graduate education for child welfare workers impacts on worker client relationships through the eyes of the workers. It is hoped that the results of this study will add depth to our understanding of how education influences workers and what workers perceive to be the most influential aspects of their educational experience and help further the discourse regarding the value of MSW level workers in child welfare.

According to the Casey Foundation (2004) the direct cost of turnover including training, unemployment and benefits for each child welfare worker is approximately 70% of each workers yearly salary (approximately $25,000). On average, a 26% rate of turnover was reported per year. In an agency with an average workforce of 100 workers, the direct cost of turnover could cost as much as $650,000 per agency per year (Casey, 2004). This cost does not include lost

productivity, experience and cost of advertising involved in replacing each worker. Some estimates would raise this cost to 115% of each worker's salary (Casey, 2004). In comparison, the cost of training and education through Title IV-E can vary greatly but have been noted to result in reduction of turnover, improved satisfaction and outcomes (Gomez et al., 2010, Landsman, 2001, Leung & Willis, 2012). Some programs that utilize Title IV-E funding include tuition and stipends for students pursuing graduate and undergraduate social work education. However, workers that are educated using Title IV-E funds are recognized as having improved rates of retention (Gomez et al., 2010) and in some cases improved outcomes, especially among workers with a social work degree (Leung & Willis, 2012).

Ellet and Leighninger (2007) warn against the practice of adopting the latest quick fix program in child welfare in favor of hiring professional social workers that have the skills and training to manage complex social and familial issues. Although federal funding for training of child welfare workers through Title IV-E is available, there has been an overall reduction in the amount of funds used and the number of university-agency partnerships that have taken advantage of the funding (Stoltzfus, 2012; Social Work Policy Institute, 2012).

In a 2012 survey, the Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI, 2012) found that there was a reduction in the number of universities and agencies participating in Title IV-E funding, the federal program designed to help support training and education for child welfare workers by creating university agency partnerships. Their survey indicated that over the past three years 70% of participants either did not increase or decreased their participation in Title IV-E funding, most often citing confusing policy or budget cuts as the reason. Although Title IV-E training funds have been available for over 30 years, they alone have not been able to turn the tide away from de-professionalization in child welfare. Since 2002, Title IV-E federal funding for training

alone has steadily decreased from a high of approximately 350 million dollars in 2002 to 220 million in 2011 (Stoltzfus, 2012). The Congressional Research Services (CRS) noted that some of the decrease may be as a result of having fewer children eligible for Title IV-E funding. There were approximately 168,000 eligible children in 2011 down almost 86,000 from a high of over 250,000 children in 2002. In an era of ever tightening budgets and emphasis on cost effective outcomes, the social work profession would be well positioned if we can justify a claim that the cost involved in training a professional child welfare workforce has dividends in safety, effectiveness as well as long term cost savings. It is hoped that the results of this study provide information to begin to think about the benefits of an MSW workforce for the agency as well as the clients that they serve.

The previous chapter provided illustrations regarding the ways that workers viewed their relationships with clients and what parts of their education they found to be most influential. In this chapter, these issues will be discussed as they relate to current theories and literature. Although each issue discussed represents a unique feature that contributes to the worker client relationship, they are also interactional in nature. This chapter will endeavor to lend clarity to each concept as well as help the reader understand how they interact in practice. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the discussion.

Professional Social Work Identity

The results of this study are in keeping with other studies that found that child welfare workers with a graduate degree in social work identified themselves as social workers and indicated a strong commitment to the values of social work (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte, 2007). In addition, research indicates that child welfare workers with a master's degree in social work evidence a greater commitment to the field of child welfare and that this commitment may be a

key to reducing high rates of turnover in the field (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007; Mason et al., 2012). Although the question of retention was not explicitly asked in this study, the participants voiced both a desire to remain in child welfare work as well as urges to leave the field of child welfare but find employment in other areas of the social work profession.

The problems related to high levels of staff turnover and employee retention in child welfare have been well documented in recent years (Mor Barak, Nissly, & Levin, 2001;Ellett & Leighninger, 2007; Zlotnik et al., 2009). These include high cost of turnover and training, reductions in continuity and decrease in the quality of care provided to families involved in child welfare (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Solutions to the problem of professionalizing the child welfare workforce have included attempts of retain and recruit master's level social workers through educational incentives and stipends, most often through university and agency partnerships funded by Title IV-E. Mason et al. (2012, p. 1736) stated that, "having a strong professional identity, commitment to the work, and belief in social work values were factors found to be associated with remaining in child welfare work." Although the question of retention and intent to stay in child welfare was not directly asked in this study, the responses of the participants indicated that an organizational climate that values social work skills and endorses social work values is very important to workers and may be a factor in their desire to leave or stay in the field.

Even if workers verbalize a desire to stay employed in child welfare, the organizational climate can play a role in their ongoing professional growth and overall satisfaction with the job. In keeping with research that found that MSW level workers often voiced a sense of dissatisfaction with the resources needed to help families (Zlotnik et al., 2009). Having an organizational climate that valued social work, provided ongoing supervision and gave workers

opportunities for advancement were most often cited as ways to help workers remain professionally satisfied (Mor Barak et al., 2001). Gail addressed this issue as part of her ongoing need to learn and grow. She stated, "*I think that that is really important in the work that we do to continue to refresh to continue to go to classes, because we get stuck in our old habits of doing things.*"

The findings of this study are in keeping with the principles of adult learning theory that understand that education can alter the perspective of adult learners and fundamentally change the way they see their work (Mezirow, 2000). However, without opportunities to take provisional action, build competence and reintegrate the new information into their practice, workers can become dissatisfied with their work resulting in the abandonment of their new ideas, a return to old habits or even increasing a desire to leave the job (Mezirow, 2000). In an unpublished 2011 study of child welfare workers that participated in a specialized MSW program, Cohen, Altman & Chernack (2011) found that 100% of MSW level child welfare workers remained employed as child welfare workers after completing their degree. However, the study also found that job satisfaction fell at three years post-graduation. The authors (Cohen et al., 2011) suggested that a sense of "professional frustration" (p. 16) may account for this decline as workers may have too few opportunities to use their new skills and knowledge and "too few organizational rewards" (p.16).

Developing Deeper Understanding of Dynamics of Human Behavior

Research (Auerbach, McGowan & Laporte, 2007; Hopkins et al., 1999; Mason et al., 2012; Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003) found that child welfare workers report that social work education increased their understanding of human behavior and improved their ability to effectively manage many different types of worker client interactions. This study added to this

knowledge in several critical areas of child welfare practice including the use of power and authority, maintaining a strengths based perspective, and understanding the complex determinants of human behavior.

The use of power and authority in child welfare practice. Current theories regarding the use of power and authority in social work practice suggest that the way workers use their power and authority affects the development of the working relationship with the client (de Boar & Coady, 2007; Gladstone et al., 2012; Rooney, 1992; Spratt & Callan, 2004). As with other populations that are mandated for services, the power and authority of the child welfare worker may be perceived by the client as a threat. Conversely, the worker with power can also be perceived as someone with expertise, authority to help and power to help accomplish goals (Gladstone et al., 2012; Spratt & Callan, 2004). Similarly, participants in this study also reported that although workers could use their power in abusive ways, they could also use their power and authority to evidence a sense of professionalism and competence for the benefit of the client. In keeping with research regarding the use of power as a way to collaborate with clients (Dewane, 2006) participants reported the ability to reframe power over client to power to help clients could help clients engage with the worker and see him or her as competent and trustworthy. Frank articulated this stating, "*I can use this power that I have ...to help get ...you treatment or whatever need be so that you can be a better functioning family.*"

Participants in this study reported that another way that they managed issues of power and authority was by replacing harsh and threatening communication with empathetic and collaborative communication when working with parents. Previous research has found that the ability of the social worker to be empathetic and communicate clearly were highly valued attributes by parents (Altman, 2008; Littell & Tajima, 2000; Maiter et al., 2006; Platt, 2008;

Skeem et al., 2007; Spratt & Callan, 2004). In their post MSW practice, participants found that they could better empathize with the difficulties clients faced and recognized that being involved with child welfare was scary for many families. Like other workers in this study, Pat was able to connect her enhanced communication skills and empathy for how the client may perceive her power. When meeting a new client she begins with empathy telling them, "*I know that you are probably worried about me standing here.*"

Participants attempted to communicate expectations and potential consequences to parents in a clear and non-threatening way. As opposed to telling clients what to do, they were able to engage clients in a discussion about expectations and try to set goals that were mutually agreed upon. Workers reported that they were conscious to try to tie their expectations into child safety or improving the family, rather than simply repeating the mandates of the court. Most importantly however was that they also discussed what the client could expect the worker to do. Research (Estefan,Coulter,VandeWeerd, Armstrong, & Gorski, 2013; Gladstone et al., 2012; Spratt & Callan, 2004) found that clients benefitted from having input into their service plan and would only appear superficially "cooperative and compliant" if workers did not collaborate with them to create a service plan and goals (Estefan et al., 2013, p.2359).

Participants reported that empathy and communication skills were learned and practiced in classes as well as in their field placements. Of particular help to many participants were opportunities for role play in class with professors that encouraged open and active participation in activities, regardless of how uncomfortable they may have felt at the time. These experiences allowed workers to have a first- hand experience of how ill- timed interventions could provoke negative feelings and reactions. Research (Dewane, 2006; Kolb and Kolb, 2009; Taylor & Cheung, 2010) supports the benefits of hands on experiential learning on developing self-

awareness as a key factor in facilitating effective communication with clients. In particular, the process of experiential learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2009) that connects classroom and field experiences enables child welfare workers to use and transfer knowledge into practice.

In child welfare, the worker clearly has explicit power over crucial aspects of the client and family. Although the relationship is not balanced, it can still be mutual and collaborative (Maiter et al., 2006). In this study, workers recognized that their ability to empathize with clients and communicate clearly were important ways that they could engage with clients and begin to set goals and tasks collaboratively. Mike stated, *"I really...have an empathetic approach and try to do my best to put myself in those shoes and treat them as I want to be treated."* This sentiment was widely echoed throughout the interviews. Carlos stated, *"I'll try to show the client that I listen to what they have to say and I sympathize with them and It's not a good position what they are in, it is always a very difficult position."*

Spratt & Callan (2004) found that workers use of power fell into two major categories. One group of workers could maintain a pattern of covert surveillance and high engagement with families, meaning that they could keep their eye on safety while fully engaging the family their self-identified needs and issues. The other group, high surveillance and low engagement, focused almost exclusively on "policing possible child protection risks with only perfunctory attempts made to engage the family" (p. 218).

In this study, participants reported that by becoming comfortable with own power they were able to utilize authority without becoming authoritarian. They found that their education was a crucial part of this ability. The experience and knowledge gained through their education allowed them to empathize, collaborate around setting goals, communicate clearly and join with the client while still setting clear limits. Mike stated, *"I have been able to manage people and I*

think that is from my education, where as some people turn people off, they can never get in the front door."

Participants articulated a sense of respect and understanding of how to practice the value of self-determination, to literally accept the client's choices, even if they may not agree and have to intervene as a result. This style most closely reflects the covert surveillance/high engagement style advocated by Spratt and Callan (2004) that encourages workers to assess risk and intervene when needed but places emphasis on engaging a family around their concerns and needs in the longer term.

In contrast, workers recalled that in pre MSW practice, they often felt overwhelmed by the power and authority that came with the position. They stated that they used the power and authority of their position in a coercive manner with a single minded emphasis on gaining client compliance to satisfy court or agency requirements. They described these interactions with clients as *"aggressive", "combative", "dictatorial" and "harsh"*. This type of power was experienced by workers as a *"burden", "a shield that you wear"*, something that you *"wield", "flaunt" or "use like a threat"*. Participants reported that they threatened families with removal of children or taking a family to court, also referred to as violating the client. Participants recognized that this style of interaction was not conducive for good worker client relationship nor good outcomes. One worker lamented that workers using this style of interaction, *"put family members on the defensive."* Several workers expressed grave concerns that this approach could actually lead to poorer outcomes and unnecessary removals.

This style most closely reflects the overt surveillance/low engagement style that according to Spratt and Callan (2004, p. 218) places greater emphasis on investigation with the

"consequent estrangement of families" as an unintended result. Workers consistently commented that short term attention to risk and safety issues only resulted in high rates of recidivism and a continued risk of child endangerment. Mike articulated the concern that this short sighted approach objectifies clients and turns them into numbers of cases closed rather than focusing on people. He stated, "*that, to me is the band aid fix and you don't want that, you're not selling a product you're dealing with people's lives.*"

Overall the participants in this study reported that their use of power and authority in their post MSW practice balanced the short term need for safety with a more holistic understanding of the needs of the family that they were working with. Workers acknowledged their power, used it without becoming threatening or authoritarian and adapted their power to better serve the needs of the client. They reported that their graduate education was a crucial factor in developing these skills connecting both classroom learning and field experiences to their enhanced skills. This finding is in keeping with research (Spratt & Callan, 2004) that found the covert surveillance/high engagement type of workers were able to communicate more effectively with parents and went "beyond the procedural requirements of their work" (p. 217) to develop a good worker client relationship.

Adopting a strengths based perspective. Research suggests that adopting a strengths based perspective counters the tendency for workers to see themselves as having power over clients rather than power to work with the client (Dumbrill, 2006). The strengths based perspective was initially developed as an alternative to a problem based approach that focused primarily on client deficits and needs (Min, 2011; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). The problem based approach also tended to place blame and responsibility for problems on the individual without taking into account the person and their environment. Weick et al. (1989)

reported that a problem focused approach tended to "encourage individualistic rather than social-environmental explanations of human problems" (p. 351). Several participants noted that child welfare work tended to focus on problems at the expense of strengths. In particular, Laurie reported that "*in CPS it is all about problem language...*"

In contrast, the strength based approach emphasizes the abilities of the client and while not ignoring problems, believes that control over change is in the hands of the client (Min, 2011). In the strengths based model the role of the social worker is to facilitate, encourage and explore possibilities for change with the client but recognizes that it is the client, not the social worker that is the expert in their own life (Min, 2011; Weick et al., 1989). Frank exemplified the idea of client as expert and worker as facilitator stating, "*You know your child very well...but it [education] does help me in understanding how children operate.*" While not ignoring the legal power and authority of the worker, the strengths based approach necessitates that workers put power in the hands of the client. Oliver (2011, p. 6) described the approach as, "a complicated relational dance in which the worker's reinforcement of client strengths and self-determination co-exists with transparent use of authority." In order to adopt a strengths based perspective workers had to change the way they thought about and acted with clients. Susan articulated the process that many workers went through. She stated, "*I realized that if I wanted to kinda promote change and ...assist them with growth I would actually have to change my perspective into I'm going to* ***help*** *you do this.*"

Research indicates that adopting a strength based perspective in child welfare work could positively impact the worker client relationship (Littell & Tajima, 2000; Oliver, 2012) Littell & Tajima (2000) found that workers' ability to see client strengths was associated with better cooperation and compliance among parents enrolled in family preservation services. Many

participants in this study tenaciously held onto a strengths based perspective, even in the face of pressure from the agency, workers or even the clients themselves to see deficits. They reported that maintaining the perspective demanded that they actively voice the question "Where are the strengths?" when faced with negative feedback about the client and their progress.

Workers that were more successful in maintaining a strengths based perspective were also able to apply a level of creativity to their interventions that captured strengths that were not apparent to others. For example one participant, Gail, obtained a wagon, then a sled to help a mother that had no transportation but a desire to get her child to school on time. Interestingly, although the family she was working with ultimately placed the child in the care of a relative, Gail considered her work a success because the family made the plan, carried out the plan and were able to support each other and the child through the process. Rather than seeing the goal as short term compliance with mandates, Gail maintained that her ultimate goal was to support family strengths by helping the mother get the treatment she needed in order for her to support and nurture her daughter in order to create long term change.

Participants noted that using a strengths based approach could lead to conflicts with administration and other staff. Susan articulated the concern of many workers that she would have to "bump heads" with her administration to advocate for a client for services that were requested by the client rather than the court. Susan stated, "*we are not used to assertive clients ... she advocated too well...I said why am I sending her to parenting? ... She needs to learn how to attach to her children!*"

Using a strengths based perspective to promote change. Participants also noted that educational experiences that focused on practice and human behavior theory that emphasized both individual and environmental resilience and strength were very influential in their thinking

process. Of most value were classes that included both motivational interviewing and solution focused treatment.

Motivational Interviewing (MI) was developed by William Miller and Stephen Rollnick as a way for counselors to help direct and facilitate client change while remaining non-judgmental. Rather than a specific technique, Miller and Rollnick (2009) define MI as "a collaborative, person-centered form of guiding to elicit and strengthen motivation for change" (p.137). It utilizes a method of communication that relies heavily on reflective listening and responses. According to Miller and Rollnick, (2009) the counselor, "strategically listens for, elicits, and responds selectively to certain forms of speech that are collectively termed "change talk" (p.135). The goal of MI is, "to increase the client's strength of expressed motivation for a target behavior change, and to diminish defenses of the status quo" (Miller and Rollnick, 2009, p. 135).

Many participants found that simply persuading a client to change was generally futile. In keeping with the principles of MI, workers tried to shift their responses to meet the motivation level of the client. Often clients receiving unwanted services may begin with little or no motivation to change or even awareness of a need to change. Prochaska, Norcross and Diclemente (1994) understand that change may be a recursive and circular process rather than a linear one. Their stages of change model (Prochaska, Norcross & Diclemente, 1994) help workers understand the stage of readiness for change that a client may have and develop interventions to meet the client at the stage they are in. The first stage of change is referred to as precontemplation. Precontemplation indicates that a client is neither aware of a need for change nor ready to engage in change. Prochaska et al. (1994) state that "precontemplation indicates in many cases an active resistance to change" (p. 75). Traditional behavioral interventions geared at

motivating action are of little help to people in this stage. Instead, (Norcross, Krebs and Prochaska, 2011) advocate the worker take on a "nurturing parent" type of stance that joins with resistance yet remains aware of the need to raise awareness without raising defenses.

Wahab (2005) found that the spirit of motivational interviewing that discourages use of direct persuasion and encourages tolerance of ambivalence is well suited for child welfare work. Workers were first exposed to these ideas through practice classes that focused on issues generally unrelated to child welfare. They reported that they were able to translate their knowledge and skills back to child welfare work quite readily.

In this study, workers reported that being able to identify client strengths helped them to maintain a sense of optimism about the client and help motivate clients to overcome serious challenges in their lives. Workers believed that clients could change but understood that change could take much longer than the time allotted by the court. Research (DeBoar & Coady, 2007; De Jong & Berg, 2001; Yatchmenoff, 2005) suggests that a strengths based approach requires therapeutic skills such as being able to communicate clearly, showing curiosity and respect, reframing, joining, and negotiating. When faced with apparent client resistance, De Jong and Berg (2001) advised workers to remind themselves of the competence of their client and ask instead why "we have not yet found a way to cooperate with them" (p.373). They warn against adopting a stance that artificially gives the illusion of choice to the worker only to be tricked into expectations that the worker cannot fulfill (De Jong & Berg, 2001). Workers in this study were aware of this potential and expressed concerns that they had at times unintentionally mislead clients about their role. However, they were often able to go back and repair the relationship by being honest and genuine.

Although participants in this study were realistic about the challenges that clients faced, they were able to hold judgment in abeyance and remain hopeful and encouraging with clients. They often credited their education to their improved ability to see beyond the current situation and look at the possible. Felicia stated, "*I think that I always thought that people had the ability to change...I think that I was* ***more*** *skeptical... before my competing my MSW, I think it...kind of shifted my way of thinking*. However, participants also lamented that their education often focused on the need to let people change at their own pace over time, a luxury not afforded to clients or workers involved in child welfare. This finding is in keeping with research that found that relationship building and behavior change tends to be a long term process and having insufficient time only serves to further the imbalance of power between worker and client (Darlington, Healy & Feeny, 2010). Frank summed up the concerns of many participants regarding the amount of time people need to make lasting change as well as the differences between a social work and child welfare perspective. He stated, "*I think that the time issue is what impairs most social workers from doing their job in a casework world.*"

Strengths based supervision. Participants reported that they faced many challenges when trying to adopt and maintain a strengths based perspective with clients including issues of time but one of the most commonly discussed issues was a lack of support from organizations, supervisors and even peers to engage in the thought process and dialogue necessary to find strengths and support them. Workers often found themselves a lone voice in the midst of many calling for immediate and often drastic intervention. Susan described her way of countering organizational pressure to take a client to court due to lack of compliance in attending anger management classes. She stated, *"I had to fight, let it, you know, I guess to slip it under the radar... we don't meet people where they are, we tell people what to do and then we wonder why*

it doesn't work." Susan, like other workers in this study, perceived herself as able to balance the dual demands of providing safety for children and forming a relationship with the client. However, she did not feel that she had the power or authority to advocate for her client without repercussions from her administration, despite almost two decades in the organization. This is in keeping with research that suggested that MSW level workers may seek to make independent decisions without feeling the need to gain the approval of superiors (Coleman and Clark, 2003; Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003). Research (Spratt & Callan, 2004) found that many workers were able to balance issues of risk and protection with forming and maintaining relationships with their clients. The participants in this study echo those results.

Many workers in this study reported that the experience of clinical supervision during their master's program was one of the single most helpful ways that they could maintain a strengths based perspective when faced with challenges. Research (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Lietz, 2010) suggests that supervision that focused on the relationship between the worker and client rather than just on the administrative aspects of child welfare work was important, perhaps even necessary, for child welfare workers to maintain an optimistic strengths based stance with clients. In dealing with a feeling of despair, Goddard and Hunt (2011) suggested that organizations often fail "to acknowledge the complexity of the relationship between the child protection worker and the client" (p. 418) and thus do not provide supervision that addresses the special needs of workers trying to form relationships with clients that could be hostile or even threatening in the field.

Lietz (2010) found that a parallel process existed between the use of power in supervision and in the worker's use of power in the field. Lietz stated that the "balance between supervisor authority and a desire for collaboration was important in that it paralleled the very struggle of

their workers to increase collaboration while acknowledging a level of authority in the lives of families" (2010, p. 133). Although the question of supervision was not addressed directly in this study, participants clearly articulated a desire for supervision that focused on the relationship with the client rather than just on procedural or administrative matters. They voiced a need for an ongoing professional format, training or supervision that could enhance and solidify their skills and help them explore their ideas about their relationship with clients in a safe format. In fact, several workers in this study reported that they only intended to stay in their current job as long as they could continue to work with their current trusted supervisor. Other participants suggested that without supervision that was clinically or relationally oriented, they felt that they were just going through the motions each day and were at high risk of disengaging from their clients.

Understanding the complex determinants of human behavior. Although workers in this study noted that there were some families that were immediately receptive to child welfare intervention, they also noted that many clients were not. MSW level workers understood and made sense of why clients engaged in negative behaviors that appeared to be in opposition to their own best interest and goals. At times, clients seemed to thwart their own progress. Workers reflected that these seemingly non-compliant and irrational behaviors could produce a sense of personal frustration in the worker and lead to an even greater impasse with the client. The power and authority of the worker were more likely to be used harshly in these circumstances.

Participants noted that in their post MSW practice these situations were less likely to produce a sense of anger or frustration. They found that having a deeper understanding of the forces that affect human behavior was particularly helpful to maintain a good working relationship even during periods of conflict with the client. Participants also found that the skills

and knowledge they obtained in their MSW programs were highly influential in maintaining their ability to differentiate between the client's feelings, responsibilities and reactions and their own. Cathy exemplified the connection between the relationship with the client and a deeper understanding of the complex issues that may drive their behavior. She stated, "*...it's a bigger picture, not just this one person with this one child...If I can see it that way, maybe I can relate to them differently, not feel so upset with the person.*" An improved understanding of human behavior and advanced skills of intervention helped workers in this study to have an improved ability to manage interactions with clients, especially during periods of heightened stress or conflict.

Reactance theory. Reactance theory can help explain the negative or oppositional behavior of clients that is in reaction to a perception of threat to their freedom. Behaviors motivated by reactance tend to keep clients involved with child welfare services or place their children at risk of removal. According to Brehm and Brehm (1981) reactance can be described as, "a motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened with elimination" (p. 37). Dillard and Shen (2005) added the role of affect and cognitions to the theory. They found that reactance was in part driven by anger and negative cognitions that were raised by messages and messengers that people perceived as threatening. In order to restore their sense of freedom, people often engaged in behavior that was contrary to what others may consider to be a rational response to the demands of the situation. (Rains & Turner, 2007). These seemingly contradictory responses are referred to as "the boomerang effect" (Rains & Turner, 2007) and are actually an attempt to help the client to regain a sense of control and choice.

Client reactance. In child welfare work, reactance can be seen when a client passively or actively defies a court order or persists in continuing undesirable behaviors such as substance use. Despite the fact that they may voice a desire to maintain or regain custody of their children, they act in ways that perpetuate child welfare involvement. The client's negative cognitions about the source of the threat (the worker or agency) and resultant anger are key drivers of reactance and only serve to increase their resistance to conforming to the expectations of the court or agency (Rains & Turner, 2007; Rooney, 1992). Reactance theory posits that persisting in the undesired behavior is the client's way to maintain a sense of control and freedom, despite the potential consequences (Rains & Turner, 2007).

Although there is little research regarding the most effective ways to reduce reactance, Rains and Turner (2007) suggest that limiting the magnitude of the request had a positive impact on reducing reactance but the severity of the consequences did not. This finding can be applied to child welfare work. Participants reported that they were aware that imposing a lengthy set of tasks on a client was more likely to provoke anger in clients. In addition, verbal threats of removal were generally seen as ineffective with clients. Instead, participants reported that they worked to be clear with clients, particularly about the risks of removal without threatening. Reflecting on their pre MSW practice many workers noted that they saw themselves as inpatient with clients that exhibited resistance. Discovering more about the clients' underlying strivings and fears and joining with them also tended to improve collaboration and reduce anger. Rather than focusing on only negative behaviors, workers were conscious of the need to find strengths and something that they and the client could agree upon. When they helped to break down tasks into manageable pieces that made sense to the client, they felt that they were less likely to have a negative response. Laurie described this skill stating, *"just identifying one small thing that they*

can do to make the problem underlying a little bit easier for themselves or for their family ... has been pretty successful."

Participants reported that the knowledge and skills gleaned from classes that included solution focused treatment, substance abuse treatment and motivational interviewing were crucial in developing skills needed to help move the client forward while maintaining support for the client where they were. Of course, not all clients were ready to change their behaviors. Many participants reported that despite their best efforts, clients did not always comply with expected behaviors resulting in negative consequences for them and their families. Literature supports the idea that workers should rely upon the social work value of self-determination to, "respect and accept clients' choices, regarding their behaviors; including the choice not to change" (Wahab, 2005, p.51). Workers found that even negative experiences were understood as part of a process that could eventually lead to a positive outcome if they helped clients to recognize their ambivalence and eventually resolve it. Cathy articulated the idea that ultimately control was in the hands of the clients, not the worker, *"I mean that I think a lot of workers have a sense that they are in control and I think that it is more of an illusion than anything else."*

Worker reactance. There is some indication from the participants in this study that workers may also have tendencies toward exhibiting reactance in response to messages from the organization to force clients to comply with mandates. Participants reported that failing to make clients comply with their mandated tasks resulted in fear of punishment or judgment from the organization negatively impacts upon their freedom to work with clients. Workers voiced frustration with the pressure from the agency that they experienced to push clients to comply. Frank stated, *"it's almost its almost viewed as a punishment for both parties, that you as a worker were not able to resolve this in a timely way...and the client is not progressing at the*

normal ...whatever defines pace." Laurie voiced concern that fear and pressure could push workers to react without fully appreciating the consequences for workers or clients. She stated, "*it was more or less something that is pushed on you from administration, like if you have the slightest fear of something bad happening, take it to court."* Nancy echoed this sense of organizational pressure. She stated, "*They perpetuate that idea that somehow you could do more or if the client is not doing what they are mandated to do that somehow you could do more."*

In response to pressure some workers reported that they became even more harsh and punitive with their clients in an effort to motivate them to comply, only serving to increase client reactance. Anna noticed that the harsher she became, the more the client "*shut down and became unreceptive and unavailable."* This parallel process between worker and client reactance could have the potential to escalate with workers ultimately using their power and authority to take client to court or remove children in an effort to alleviate the threat to their own freedom. Several workers commented that there was also organizational and peer pressure not to "look weak" in the eyes of clients, reinforcing an authoritarian approach with clients. Participants reported that in their pre MSW practice, they were less aware of the negative impact of their behavior and attitude on the clients and more focused on possible consequences from the agency if they did not get clients to comply. Although not an original topic of this study, one wonders if having the MSW credentials might increase a worker's sense of professional competence and perception of professional freedom. Reactance theory would suggest that the more workers perceive themselves to have the right to a sense of professional freedom, the more organizational intrusion may be perceived as a threat to that freedom and the more likely they may be to resist efforts to control their behavior.

In their post MSW practice, workers struggled to balance a collaborative vision of interaction with clients with organizational pressure for compliance. Dillard and Shen (2005) cautioned that the experience of threat is a property of both the message as well as the judgment made by the receiver of the message (p. 162). In the pre MSW practice participants recognized that when they experienced pressure from the organization they transferred it on to the client. This could come with negative results for the client and for the worker. In their post MSW work participants noted that they were more likely to push back at the messenger and advocate their perspective rather than to simply comply. However, Laurie cautioned that without education and training, *"most likely the people who you are going to listen to are the people who are writing your reviews and the people that are showing you possibly the wrong ways of doing the job."* In their post MSW work several workers reported that they strongly advocated for their point of view. Nancy stated, *"sometimes... you have to...I don't want to say battle but you have to sort of debate with superiors."*

Participants suggested that the experience, knowledge and skills gained through their graduate education could create a conflict between their view of the client's needs and that of the agency. Some workers may have the ability and authority to fight back while others may not. Conflict between worker and supervisor or agency can lead to the worker exhibiting reactance with the client thus creating a greater chance at impasse.

The findings regarding the behavior of clients and workers are in keeping with research on reactance (Dillard & Shen, 2005) that suggests the use of authoritarian language or dominance defined as the belief, "that the source can control the message recipient" (p. 163) increases anger. In contrast, the use of reason, defined as, "justifications that are offered in support of a claim" is "less likely to provoke anger/reactance" (Dillard & Shen, 2005, p. 163). In

a parallel process between workers and clients, messages from the agency that are perceived by workers as threatening and intrusive are more likely to provoke harsh and negative responses toward clients, that in turn, exacerbates reactance. Perhaps, as many workers suggested, supportive supervision and empathy for the client can at once acknowledge the reality of the client's situation while providing alternative ways for clients to succeed.

Self-reflection and self-awareness in practice

The participants in this study universally reported that their graduate education enhanced their ability to self-reflect, and improved their self-awareness and empathy. They found that they could manage the reactions of clients better when they were aware of their own triggers and responses, which allowed them to differentiate their feelings and that of the client before reacting.

Enhanced self-reflection provided the necessary conditions for workers to maintain connections with client, to find strengths, to collaborate and to use power without becoming authoritarian. The development of an internal voice guided workers through difficult emotional and behavioral interactions. Research has also found that self-reflective and empathetic workers are key to building solid client worker relationships in child welfare (Forrester, McCambridge, Waissbein & Rollnick, 2008;Taylor & Cheung, 2010; Urdang, 2010). However, participants reported that they often found the process of becoming reflective difficult and emotionally taxing. Gail stated, "*I think that I was resentful to have to revisit life experiences that I had but I think that now that I came out on the other side and have processed it... I am in a better place to work with people who have for instance domestic violence or other things like that.*"

Transformational learning theory postulates that self-reflection is a first but necessary step in learning that begins to alter the learner's perspective and may eventually lead to a change

in worker behaviors and beliefs (Snyder, 2008). Transformational learning goes beyond knowledge acquisition to promoting personal and professional changes in the worker. Mezirow (1991) describes the connection between self-reflection and transformational learning as "the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions have come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world...and making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings" (1991, p. 167). Ward (2008) found that a learning environment that encourages open self-reflection and challenges the student to explore areas of personal and professional discomfort provides the tools necessary for students to engage in self-reflective practice with their clients. Ward (2008, p.70) states, "The learning has to be experienced, reflected upon, integrated into the self and owned by the participant in a gradual process which is quite different from the simple acquisition of intellectual knowledge or practical skills." This type of learning is also consistent with the process of grasping and transforming experience to create new knowledge as postulated in Kolb's experiential learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Every participant in this study found that their education had a powerful and positive effect on their ability to critically self-reflect. Some even found that self-reflection was a step in a process that changed their perspective on themselves and their beliefs in fundamental ways. Laurie exemplified many participants experience of how an influential professor or supervisor could influence the self-reflective process. She stated, "*She was able to make you look at yourself and kind of the way you think about things in a way that didn't make you feel bad about yourself.*"

When participants reflected on their work with clients prior to their education, they reported that they simply reacted to the client out of frustration or fear, often without awareness

of how they were impacting on the client. Joyce described difficulties relating to men in her pre MSW practice, "*I think that my early reactions to males were so much influenced by my fears and avoiding making them angry.*" However, in her post MSW practice, she stated that now, "*I can see a client for their situation as opposed to mine.*" Research has linked worker self-reflection to improved ability to set effective limits and show empathy, especially during times of heightened tension or conflict with clients (Maiter, Palmer, Manji, 2005; Urdang, 2010).

Many participants reported that self-reflection was nurtured through contact with a field supervisor that helped to process their feelings and responses in a non-judgmental way. Joyce stated that her supervisor, "*pointed out to me through my progress reports...my interactions with males as opposed to interactions with females, things that I didn't realize I was doing.*" Current research strongly supports the need for ongoing reflective supervision in child welfare that addresses the workers needs and conflicts (Goddard & Hunt, 2011; Lietz, 2010) and is not just "directed at defending the organization" (Goddard & Hunt, 2011, p. 428). The findings of this study are in keeping with a call for ongoing supervision that supports the worker in his or her attempts to engage the client's strengths and work through the inevitable conflicts to maintain a relationship.

Enhanced self-reflection also created the conditions necessary for workers to develop a professional sense of self that was both differentiated from as well as integrated with the personal. This finding is in keeping with research (Taylor & Cheung, 2010) that suggests self-reflective practice enables workers to differentiate their personal from professional reactions. Participants noted that they continued to have strong feelings about the behavior of clients that was upsetting or even anger provoking for them but using reflection they were able to modify

their reactions. This ability is a key factor in forming and sustaining positive worker client relationships (Dewane, 2006).

Summary

Overall, this study found that many of the skills and attitudes that contributed to forming and maintaining positive worker client relationships were developed as a result of graduate social work education. First, MSW level social workers strongly identified with the values and skills of the social work profession. These skills included the judicious use of power and authority, the ability to maintain a strengths based perspective with clients, the ability to manage negative client behaviors, to help clients change and to maintain an attitude that values client self-determination even during periods of conflict. These skills tend to be interactional in nature. For example, workers that developed a strengths-based perspective also tended to rely on a non-authoritarian approach to power and authority with clients. This approach relied upon the worker using communication that was clear and non-threatening. This type of communication signaled to the client that the worker supported their right to self-determination even if they did not agree with the clients' choices or behaviors. Thus, the worker's ability to form and maintain relationships was based on a set of skills and attitudes that did not seem to be present in isolation to one another but rather presented as a transactional series of attitudes and skills that workers relied upon to guide their work with clients.

However, it appears that these skills were predicated on the ability of the worker to engage is self-reflection. Self-reflection includes having knowledge about oneself as well as awareness of how the self impacts upon others (Dewane, 2006). The capacity to stop, think and to internally ask the necessary questions before reacting, supplied the preconditions needed for

the development of other skills and attitudes that improved worker client relationships. Self-reflective workers were able take a step back from interactions and examine their own role in conflicts, and when necessary adjust to the needs of the client. Participants repeatedly used self-reflection to check their own reactions to ensure that they were based on the needs of the client rather than their own triggers. Without the ability to self-reflect workers reported that they simply reacted to client demands and organizational pressures without understanding the potential impact of their actions on clients or themselves.

Graduate social work education supplied many opportunities for workers to develop self-reflection as well as the other skills that contributed to improved worker client relationships. Participants reported that before their education they were not aware of the impact that their attitudes and skills had on clients or that clients could affect them. Participants found that the inspiration of professors that designed experiential classroom activities and field supervisors that engaged in reflective supervision were particularly powerful for them to learn about the interactional nature of relationships. For some workers, these experiences went beyond the acquisition of new knowledge to begin a process of personal and professional transformation. However, all workers found that education motivated them to think about their work, their clients and their role with clients in a way that improved their work with clients and their own sense of competence. Many believed that their outcomes were better as a result.

Although workers reported that a new habit of engaging in self-reflective practice began as a result of their education, they often warned that without nurturing, their attitudes and skills would not be sustainable over time. In this study, post MSW workers in supervisory positions promoted and practiced supportive strengths based supervision that focused on the relational aspects of practice not just on procedural or administrative issues. Other MSW level workers

voiced a strong desire to have ongoing supervision that addressed their experiences with clients and helped them grapple with their strong feelings and reactions before they acted upon them. Several participants in this study valued their current supervisor and the unit that they worked in to such an extent that if transferred, they planned to leave child welfare work completely. Although not the original topic of this study, the support of the organization to encourage and facilitate self-reflective practice was a common theme and one that should be heeded by organizations seeking to develop and retain talented child welfare workers.

Limitations

Implicit in the qualitative research process is the idea that the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the larger population. Similarly, this study did not attempt to discover large patterns of behavior but instead sought to have a more in-depth understanding of how education impacted on the worker client relationships among a few child welfare workers.

The results of this study were based on interviews of 14 child welfare workers from various areas throughout New York State. The researcher found that the recruitment of participants was difficult through the channels that she anticipated such as graduate schools of social work and child welfare agencies. The researcher expanded the search for participants from local New York City and Nassau County areas to include workers located throughout New York State.

Those workers that responded to outreach efforts may have been quite different than those that did not chose to respond. If workers that responded were more enthusiastic about their work and more motivated to improve their practice than those who did not respond, it could create an unrealistically positive view of the impact of graduate education. However, the

geographic expansion also allowed the researcher access to workers in urban, suburban and rural areas, including workers that worked along with Native American nations. These varied experiences provided the researcher a rich opportunity to understand how child welfare workers in vastly different regions form and maintain relationships with their clients.

Social desirability bias may also pose an additional limitation to this study. The researcher noted that participants rarely offered any negative appraisals of their post MSW work with clients or the clients themselves. Upon review of the journal kept by the researcher, it appeared that workers avoided making negative comments about clients and were careful to describe even their negative behavior in as neutral terms as possible. The relationship between the researcher (who was identified as a PhD student) and subject may also have inadvertently promoted responses that were artificially positive in an effort to appear positive to a professional that might have been perceived as The alternative understanding of this phenomenon may be that MSW level workers were indeed better able to reflect on their work and see the nuances of how they changed their practice with clients.

Researcher bias is another limitation to this study. The choice of research topic and the specific questions posed by the proposed study have embedded within them a bias toward the belief that graduate education is useful and beneficial for child welfare workers and ultimately for clients. This bias is based on the researcher's positive experience as an instructor of undergraduate and graduate students in a social work program as well as interactions with child welfare workers in the field.

The micro focus on education as an influence on worker behavior with clients is also a limitation as it leaves out the influence of macro issues such as organizational pressures, social policies and large scale social problems These issues demand large scale social and policy

changes. Perhaps even the best trained, most empathetic workers will not be effective if the social problems and policies that they work within are not addressed.

Implications for practice

The implications for practice outlined in this section are predicated on the belief that skills, knowledge and values that social workers bring to worker client relationships are an asset to the child welfare agency and its' clients. The value of relationships between workers and clients is at the heart of all social work practice (Perlman, 1979; CSWE, 2008). Research has consistently found that the relationship between the worker and client is an essential part of child welfare work and impacts on the outcome of services (Forrester et al., 2008; Kemp et al., 2013: Lee and Ayon, 2004; Maiter et al., 2006; Mullins, 2011; Tempel, 2009).

The participants in this study found that their ability to form and maintain relationships with clients was a valuable part of child welfare practice and was greatly enhanced by their education. Prior to their education, workers rarely considered issues related to the relationship with the client and did not see the relationship as a valuable element of their work. Relationships were generally based on the worker's ability to coerce or direct the client to comply with court orders. However, after their education they developed a more mutual and collaborative approach. An essential practice implication of this study is that child welfare agencies must place value on forming and maintaining a collaborative relationship between the worker and client in order to fully utilize the strengths of their MSW level workers as well as optimize the strength of their clients. Although the Common Core training provided to all new caseworkers specifically focuses on family centered practice (Miller, 2012), it does not always seem to translate into practice after training.

This section will discuss several different ways that child welfare practice can increase its focus on the worker client relationship including changes in the use of power and authority by child welfare workers and the impact of supportive and relational based supervision. These

proposed changes in practice have implications for all child welfare workers, not just those with an MSW.

The impact of power and authority on the worker client relationship. This study found that issues of power and authority were present all relationships between workers and clients in child welfare work. MSW level workers acknowledged their power and authority but were able to use it in ways that were collaborative and non-authoritarian. This ability helped to build relationships with clients that were based on self-determination and strengths rather than one based on coercion and control. This finding was in keeping with research on the use of power in child welfare that found a low surveillance/high engagement style of practice (Spratt & Callan, 2004) was preferred by clients and workers. By putting control in the hands of the client, participants in this study believed that they could help families achieve better long term outcomes and reduce recidivism. However, they also noted that a collaborative approach recognizing the client's right to self-determination was not uniformly encouraged in child welfare. It is important for agencies to recognize that worker efforts at engagement and relationship building are not wasted time taken away from protection but rather a strategy that helps to facilitate long term change and reduction of risk.

One way that agencies may modify their practice to support the worker client relationship is by encouraging MSW workers to use their knowledge and skills to help other workers approach clients differently. Several participants reported that they were called upon by colleagues to help them better understand the puzzling behavior of a client or help engage a family that was described as difficult or hard to reach. MSW level workers also noted that they tended to be given cases that were considered to be more complex. Workers generally regarded this practice as a compliment to their work, not a punishment. One way to enhance child welfare

practice in the short run is for agencies to consider MSW level workers as the lead caseworkers in cases that are identified as particularly complex and allow them to mentor and guide other workers through the process of assessment and relationship building. In the long run, policy changes that prioritize relationship building along with safety may encourage a shift from short term fixes to longer term change among clients.

Participants described one program that captured the spirit of collaboration in many of their interviews. The differential response program, often referred to as FAR (Family Assessment and Response) was described as an innovative, exciting and professional fulfilling way to practice child welfare work using the skills of relationship building that they learned in their MSW education. In practice, a FAR unit takes referrals of clients with allegations of child abuse and neglect with the exception of those calls that involve immediate threat to safety such as allegations of sexual abuse, assault and family violence. (OCFS, 2012).

For workers in the differential response unit, the goals are to engage families more effectively and develop goals and services that address their specific needs, provide an opportunity for earlier intervention and prevention of abuse or neglect, reduce recidivism and enhance worker satisfaction. For families the goals included increased access to services, increased involvement in needs assessment and service provision, increased sense of family empowerment and reduction of stress due to fact that there is no finding or investigation, rather an assessment and intervention (OCFS, 2012). Research suggests that differential response services appeared to meet their objectives of maintaining child safety while reducing rates of removals of children (Marshall, Charles, Kendrick and Pakalniskiene, 2012). Marshall et al. (2012) found that differential response, "contributes to family well-being because more children

are able to remain in their homes if provided with the appropriate level and type of support" (p.73).

Participants in this study were enthusiastic about the ability to design interventions with clients rather than simply fulfilling mandates. Laurie described her experience in the FAR unit as fitting with her professional social work identity.

> *...I am able with the support of my administration able to give up that control, give up that court card... The model states that it should be a collaborative process...Not necessarily, go to treatment, go here do that...There are no cookie cutter menus. Basically you sit down with the family and facilitate and identify what it is that they want.*

Supportive relationally based supervision. In order to maintain a strength based perspective, workers must have the support of supervisors that share a common vision of the value of the client relationship in child welfare practice. Research found that supervisors that were hopeful and believed that families were "capable of growth and change" (Leitz and Rounds, 2009) were best suited to model the strengths based perspective for workers. All workers, not just those with an MSW degree may benefit from the experience of relationally based supervision to help them manage the feelings and reactions that they may have to clients without acting on them in a negative way. In order provide relationally oriented supervision, supervisors must also have the support of the administration (Leitz and Rounds, 2009). Cohen (1999) suggested that agencies must provide regularly scheduled supervision time for workers that is proactive in nature, rather than waiting for a crisis or regulatory issue to meet with a supervisor.

MSW level child welfare workers are well suited to take on a supervisory role in child welfare. Coleman and Clark (2003) found that MSW level workers were often at a stage of cognitive and emotional development that allowed them to make critical decisions, use their own self-awareness and integrate knowledge into practice. Several participants in this study were promoted to supervisory level positions during their education or upon completion of their MSW work. They enthusiastically supported workers in their pursuit of improved relationships with their clients. In addition, they were cognizant that they could not simply force workers to adopt their perspective. Instead, they offered opportunities for workers to see alternative perspectives and client strengths, thus emulating the type of relationship between worker and client that they hoped to promote. This type of supervision does not completely replace the need for procedural or regulatory oversight. Instead, perhaps agencies should distinguish between the oversight of regulatory and administrative issues and supervision that focuses on relationships and helps workers reflect on their practice.

Summary. The skills and knowledge of MSW level child welfare workers and supervisors can be a great asset to the agencies that they work in. Their nuanced use of power and authority has the potential to change child welfare practice from one that is focused only on short term risk and compliance to one that is focused on assessing short term risk while encouraging long term change. In order to accomplish this however, agencies must place as much value on the relationship between the worker and client that MSW workers do. Organizational constraints such as time limitations and mandates are a reality in child welfare practice, but do not have to be the sole focus of the worker.

Implications for policy

The findings of this study suggest that MSW workers may pose challenges to the hierarchy of the agency by advocating for their client and their point of view. These finding are in keeping with literature (Hopkins, Mudrick & Rudolph, 1999; Scannapieco & Connell-Corrick, 2003) that suggested that organizational leaders and supervisors were ambivalent regarding the benefits of MSW level workers in child welfare practice due to supervisory and organizational issues. Coleman and Clark (2003) found that MSW workers are more likely to use their own value judgments rather than defer to authority when making decisions. If child welfare agencies would like to recruit and retain workers to with an MSW degree, they will need to find ways to value and honor their strengths so that workers can do the same for their clients. Without those opportunities, workers described a sense of disappointment as well frustration that can result in dissatisfaction and disengagement.

Current federal law dictates funding and specifies guidelines and regulations for practice in child welfare. However, at the state and local level child welfare agencies are charged with implementing these guidelines through programs and policies at the local level. Organizational commitment and retention of qualified workers can be accomplished without changing federal law or policies. According to Landsman (2001), "Belief in the importance of social work makes the single strongest contribution to job satisfaction and second greatest contribution to occupational commitment." (p.409).

A congressional report on the use of Title IV-E funds cautioned that despite a broadened authority to request funds in 2011 there has been a reduction in the use of Title IV-E funds and reimbursement for training was returned to 75% in 2013 (Stoltzfus, 2012). This may be related to several factors including the state's reluctance in requesting funds due to fiscal cutbacks, a

reduction of the number of eligible children and perhaps even a perception "that the need to train staff may appear less immediate" than the need to comply with policies such as the number of times a family is visited (Stoltzfus, 2012, p. 31). In 2011 the state's share of training costs was approximately 80 million dollars. The results of this research suggest that organizations that would like to increase retention and improve the workforce quality will find avenues that access Title IV-E funds and continue to partner with universities to provide a path for workers to obtain an advanced social work degree to both reduce the cost of turnover as well as improve services.

Implications for research.

This exploratory study was designed to illuminate how graduate social work education impacted upon the way that child welfare workers formed and maintained relationships with their clients. The study was informed by working alliance theory (Horvath and Luborsky, 1993) that helped to understand the complexities of the worker client relationship. Transformational learning theory (Mezirow, 1991) was used to help explain how education can impact the ability of adult learners to change their beliefs as well as change the way they practice.

The results of the study indicate that education can be a powerful catalyst in a process that improves the workers ability to self-reflect and positively impacts the relationship between child welfare workers and their clients. However, due its exploratory nature, there are questions that have emerged from the results that lend themselves to further qualitative as well as quantitative research, specifically focusing on the outcomes of child welfare interventions and education.

Given the large investment made in federal programs such as Title IV-E, it is important to design research that provides information on the effectiveness of Title IV-E programs on many

levels. These include the outcomes of training on workers, their clients and organizations. The Social Work Policy Institute (SWPI, 2012) estimates that only half of the students receiving Title IV-E funds in 2012 reported that they were employed in public child welfare during their education. The first recommendation for research involves understanding how employees in public child welfare agencies can be encouraged to pursue an MSW. The participants in this study cited various motivations for returning to school including opportunity for enhanced salary, reimbursement for educational costs and a desire to improve their professional status. However, at the onset of their education, many workers were skeptical that education could improve their work in the agency. Participants found that their initial perception was incorrect, but it leads to the question of how many other workers have the same perception and do not follow through on education as a result. Research can identify the barriers to attaining an MSW degree how to help remediate them, including worker attitudes toward education.

Future research can also explore how the policies and attitudes of the leadership of child welfare agencies can affect a workers' and supervisors' decision to pursue education. What are the leaderships' attitudes about graduate social work education? What organizational incentives can be implemented that encourage workers to attain a graduate degree in social work and maintain employment past their two year commitment period? How can organizations develop work that is meaningful for employees with advanced skills and knowledge? The participants in this study seemed to suggest that the organizational and political climate in child welfare can produce a negative reaction in workers that perceive a threat to their professional competence and freedom by courts or supervisors. Further research into this phenomenon and its implications has been called for in the past (Rooney, 1992) and should be revisited if we would like to better understand how to retain competent professional child welfare workers.

The SWPI (2012) reports that the number of institutions seeking funds has steadily decreased due to "inadequate availability of funds to cover program costs, difficulty of identifying sufficient match to the federal funding and as well as inconsistent policy interpretations." Therefore, research that helps to clarify the benefits and justify the costs and effort of obtaining funding is needed in a timely fashion.

Another goal for future research is to gain a better understanding of the impact of specific educational strategies on the outcome of child welfare work. The SWPI (2012) has called for, "rigorous, multi-site evaluation of Title IV-E educational partnerships to better ascertain their impact on social work education, staff recruitment and retention and child welfare outcomes." The participants in this study identified several aspects of their education as most influential to them but further studies can help to define which strategies are most beneficial for students. It is also possible that the positive impact of education may be attributed to another unknown factor in the educational process that has not been articulated by the present study.

In addition to examining the impact of Title IV-E funds, the findings of this study can be enhanced through future studies that look at worker client relationships from the point of view of both the worker as well as client. There is a dearth of research into the connection between the quality of the relationship with the worker and the outcome of services. The participants in this study suggested that having a deeper understanding of the complexities of client behavior and positive working relationship with the client can reduce recidivism and help clients make durable changes but further research is needed to determine if their anecdotal experiences are typical of other MSW level workers and their clients. Specifically, research may examine the role of culture and race of the worker and client in contributing to the working relationship and how to best understand these variables. Studies may help to quantify outcomes from an organizational

point of view such as rates of client recidivism, number of children placed in care, and even the amount of time children spend in care.

The voice of the client is important but often under-represented in research. Future studies should also focus on the connection between the quality of the relationship with the worker and the outcomes from the clients' perspective. Social service programs are increasingly viewing their clients as consumers of their services and seeking their input into how to design and implement services that better meet their needs. Future research can embrace the strengths based approach that understands that the client is the expert in their own life and seek out their knowledge regarding their experiences with child welfare agencies from investigation through conclusion of services.

Implications for education.

How can institutions of social work help talented child welfare workers maintain the professional perspective and skills that they have worked so diligently to acquire during their MSW education? How can institutions of social work education help improve the practice of all child welfare workers, not just those with advanced social work degrees? How can institutions of social work education help the social work profession solidify its commitment to child welfare as a core social work service? These are core questions that the findings of this research suggest need to be looked at more deeply.

This study found that graduate social work education was a powerful and influential experience for child welfare workers participating in this study. Their classes and field work provided numerous opportunities to teach them how to reflect on themselves and infuse new skills and attitudes into their practice. In keeping with research on adult learning (Mezirow,

1991) participants in this study found that their education could act as a catalyst that creates shifts in both personal and professional perspectives and beliefs. The graduate social work experience in its entirety helped develop the workers' ability to reflect, a skill essential for developing collaborative relationships with clients. In keeping with transformational learning and experience learning theory (Kolb & Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991) field and classroom experiences were transferred to child welfare work creating opportunities to put ideas into action and incorporate a new sense of competence in their own practice.

Child welfare workers that completed MSW programs benefitted greatly from field experiences and classes that were generally unrelated to child welfare. These included classes such as social work history, policy and oppression. This is in keeping with research that suggests that learning that focuses on building reflection, understanding the complexities of human behavior and maintains a systems perspective (Jones, 2009; Taylor & Cheung, 2010) produces child welfare workers that are better prepared to manage challenging client situations and honor the values of client self-determination. In this study, workers readily transferred knowledge gained from classes and field experiences in areas such as substance abuse treatment and hospice care to child welfare work.

In order to reinforce their new perspective and incorporate the skills that they have acquired through their graduate education, schools of social work and child welfare agencies should find ways to collaborate to provide ongoing education and support for workers. One time training opportunities may provide workers with new information but do not assist workers or the organization to fully implement new ideas, gather evidence of efficacy of new programs or support workers to maintain new practice innovations. Ellet and Leighninger (2007) warn that, "By endorsing the latest popular intervention as a new *elixir* to solve child welfare problems,

social work professionals may have inadvertently contributed to the wider perception that social work is not a knowledge-based profession, but rather a series of fads" (p. 26).

Graduate schools of social work in partnership with agencies using Title IV-E funds can offer ongoing on site supervision for workers that focuses on their relationships with clients, their reactions and their feelings in a group setting with other workers. Although family focused practice training in the common core curricula focuses on relationships between client and worker (Miller, 2012) the evidence from this study indicates that workers do not implement these ideas uniformly. There appears the need to find support to change the focus of daily practice from compliance to one that places due importance on the relationship with the client.

Although not meant to supplant task oriented interactions with agency administration, supervision of this type can reduce the impact of traumatic experiences on workers that come from exposure to difficult situations and increase workers ability to engage with clients and may even improve outcomes over time (Gladstone et al., 2011). This type of collaboration can be financially sustainable if schools can work with child welfare organizations to collect data on client and worker outcomes in order to evidence that the cost involved is mitigated by improved outcomes and improved retention of well trained workers.

Research has found that current child welfare workers come from a wide variety of academic backgrounds and disciplines (Ellett and Leighninger, 2007). Collaboration with schools of social work is made more challenging due to the fact that child welfare workers do not identify themselves with the social work profession. Traditionally social work was the driving professional force behind child welfare work (Ellett and Leighninger, 2007). In the past several decades, the de-professionalization of child welfare has resulted in "reducing or eliminating the

minimum educational qualifications" (Ellett and Leighninger, 2007, p. 5) for child welfare positions and agencies operate on the assumption that all degrees are interchangeable.

While some diversity could widen the lens with which child welfare understands the dynamics of families and children, a lack of unified focus only serves to create an overreliance on following procedures to insure both worker and client compliance. The benefit to the current state is that child welfare work that is focused on procedural functions that can be codified and enforced. Workers with a vast array of backgrounds can all be taught to perform the same routine tasks. However, this version of child welfare leaves out an important variable, the complex nature of human behavior.

Initiatives such as the differential response program have been developed in an effort to reform child welfare practice. Implementation of these programs will increasingly rely more on the ability of the worker to understand the complexities of human behavior and maintain collaborative relationships with clients and less on procedural compliance. Although the educational requirements for workers may not change, the goals of these new programs necessitate staffing by workers that have advanced social work skills. These skills include the ability to maintain a reflective stance and have a psychosocial perspective to understand, engage and work with clients as partners in the process of change, not adversaries. The need for highly skilled workers may begin to shift the tide toward re-professionalization more effectively than trying to legislate the change.

Schools of social work can help the re-professionalization of child welfare by actively infusing child welfare issues into the larger curriculum on both the BSW and MSW level. Infusing child welfare issues throughout the curriculum can offer students that are not involved

in child welfare opportunities to learn about the field in an effort to encourage more students to explore child welfare as a viable career option for MSW level social workers. Although it is unlikely that a MSW degree will be required for child welfare work in the near future, if the focus of child welfare work is taken off the procedural and placed on the relational aspects of the job, more MSW workers may find child welfare work professionally appealing.

On a larger scale, schools of social work can take part in training initiatives through Title IV-E funding. There has been a large multi- state focus on recruiting and retaining qualified child welfare workers. This research supports the idea that all efforts to change whether it is on the client, worker or organizational level require ongoing attention in order to take hold and grow but emphasis should be placed on the values and skills of the MSW worker in child welfare.

Conclusion

There were three research questions chosen to explore how workers perceive the impact of their graduate education on the worker client relationship.

1. How do graduate MSW workers perceive the impact of their education on their ability to form and maintain relationships with their clients?
2. What specific parts of their education do MSW workers perceive to have had the most impact on the interpersonal parts of their practice?
3. How do MSW level workers think that the skills they have learned and developed in graduate school can be used in child welfare work best?

In answer to question one, the participants in this study found their education to be useful and at times inspirational. Graduate social work education helped workers learn techniques and tools that facilitated relationships with their clients. Many participants also reported that education fundamentally changed the value and importance that they placed on the relationship with the client as an integral part of child welfare work. Rather than simply a technical endeavor designed to gain short term compliance and completion of court ordered mandates, child welfare casework became an interpersonal endeavor whose goal was to foster long term change.

In answer to question two, participants in this study found that many types of learning impacted on their interpersonal practice, both in the field and in the classroom. Of particular interest were several participants that were able to transfer knowledge and experience gained in areas of social work that are largely unrelated to child welfare work. Field experiences and supervision in hospice, substance abuse and domestic violence provided workers with skills such as reflective listening and clear communication that were applicable to their child welfare

practice. In addition, classroom instruction in courses such as social welfare policy and history along with practice classes greatly influenced workers to see human behavior as well as social work itself in a new light. Several participants reported that classroom activities lead by a valued professor radically changed their view of themselves and ultimately their clients. These experiences encouraged workers to be more empathetic, reflective and ultimately find ways to relate to clients even during times of conflict.

Finally, in answer to question three, participants had varied views of how to use their skills and knowledge best in their work. Several workers were involved in new programs, most notably the FAR initiative. They reported that involvement in programs that valued their skills and gave them a sense of autonomy was key factors in their satisfaction with their work. Other workers who were promoted to supervisory positions also found that they could use their skills to help their supervisees improve their practice. However, even workers who completed their degree and remained in the same position as they had prior to their education reported that they felt they were more competent at their job. They often provided information and insights to others in their units. However, they also discussed a sense of frustration regarding the differences they may have with other workers or administrators that may not share their new skills or values and lack of opportunities to grow professionally and clinically.

Decades ago Selma Fraiberg wrote that all kinds of casework were "an awesome kind of responsibility and perhaps an attitude of awe toward such undertakings is a proper one for us" (Fraiberg, 1987, p. 410). She further cautioned, "There are no elementary tasks in casework" and therefore "elementary education" does not suffice (Fraiberg, 1987, p. 410). Unfortunately, ongoing calls to professionalize child welfare casework and prepare workers with the best knowledge and skills available have largely gone unheeded (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007).

It is hoped that this study and others that demonstrate the benefits social work education for caseworkers and for families will begin to turn the tide and support ongoing education for workers in graduate school as well as in the agency itself. In their study of child welfare workers that were taking graduate classes, Mason et al. (2012) concluded that, "We would like to think, but we cannot know, that taking courses made child welfare workers adopt an enhanced professional identity and behave in a more professional manner in their daily activities" (p.1739). The results of this study lend credence to that hope.

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Appendix A

Interview Schedule - #1

1. Can you describe a case in which you felt that you had a positive working relationship with a parent-client?

Probe: What made the working relationship a positive one?

Probe: How do you think your graduate education may have helped you to:

   a. form a bond with that person
   b. deal with any conflicts that arose between you
   c. handle issues of power and authority
   d. work collaboratively to set goals and accomplish tasks?
   e. understand people of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds?

2. Do you think that your work with that person would have been different if it happened before you had a graduate degree?

Probe: If so, how so?

If not, why not?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I would like to continue this study and meet again in 2 weeks on _____ if you are interested in continuing. Do you have a preferred time or place?

I am going to give you a few sheets of journal paper (there are extra sheets if you want to change your responses or start again). On the journal paper, please respond to the following questions. A few sentences for each question should be sufficient but you may write more if you wish to elaborate on your ideas. Please return the completed pages when we meet again in two weeks:

1. What do agency administrators and policy makers need to know about the skills MSW workers bring to an agency (that they do not seem to know now) in forming and maintaining relationships with their clients?
2. How do you think an agency can best use those skills?

I will contact you by telephone in between our meetings to confirm our next meeting time and place and answer any questions that you may have.

Interview Schedule #2

Introduction: As you may remember from our last meeting, I am interested in learning more about how child welfare workers perceive the impact of their graduate education on how they form and maintain relationships with clients.

1. Have you given any thought to our earlier conversation?

Prompt: Do you have any things that you would like to add or change or any questions?

2. How did you feel about writing the journal passage?

Prompt: Did writing the passage bring up any feelings or issues that you would like to share now or any additional information?

Prompt: If you did not have time to complete the journal do you have a few minutes now to do so or would you be comfortable talking about the questions instead of writing?

3. I would like you to think back to the experiences that you had as a graduate student and describe some experiences that you may remember that impacted on how you form and maintain relationships with your clients.

Prompt: Experiences can include readings, class discussions, projects, interactions with others etc…

4. Can you recall any times during your graduate education that your experiences made you question your own beliefs or behavior regarding worker client relationships?

Prompt: If so, what were those experiences?

Prompt: What did you do when you felt a sense of doubt or disequilibrium, like you questioned what you thought you knew or believed?

Prompt: Looking back now, do you feel that the process of questioning your previous

behaviors and beliefs prompted a change in your current practice?

Prompt: If you cannot remember any impactful experiences: what do you think might be the reason?

5. Can you share with me what it was like to be a part of this study?

Prompt: If you do not wish to share, it is perfectly fine but it is helpful for me to know how people may be reacting to this process.

Again, I would like to sincerely thank you for your time and effort. Here is the gift card promised earlier and my contact information. If you have any questions or would concerns, please feel free to contact me again.

Appendix B

Demographic Information Form

1. My gender is _____
2. My age is _____
3. I describe my ethnicity as _____
4. I have worked for a total of _____ years in child welfare
5. I worked for _____ years before completing my master's degree.
6. I completed my Master's Degree using advanced credits (OYR) _____

   Part time _____ Full time _____
7. I work in a public _____ or private _____ agency setting.

Thank you

Appendix C

Research Study on MSW level Child Welfare Workers

Would you like to participate in a research study focusing on

Child Welfare workers who have an MSW?

This study is being conducted by Janet Kahn-Scolaro, LCSWR as part of her research toward completion of her doctoral degree at Adelphi University School of Social Work.

If you would like to participate, you will be asked to complete two interviews lasting a total of approximately 2 ½ hours. You will also be asked to write a short journal passage. Upon completion of the second interview, you will receive a $30.00 gift card in appreciation for your time and effort.

Please contact me through email or by phone

Janet Kahn-Scolaro, LCSWR

kahnscolaro@adelphi.edu

(516) 582-6241

(516) 377-5416

Appendix D

Please respond to the following questions and return it to me (a few lines or a paragraph will be fine). I have provided a self-addressed stamped envelope for you or you can return during our next meeting. Thank you.

1. What do agency administrators and policy makers need to about the skills MSW workers bring to an agency (that they do not know now) in forming and maintaining relationships with their clients?
2. How do you think an agency can best use those skills?

Appendix E

Garden City, NY 11530
Informed Consent

IRB Protocol Title: The Perceived Impact of Graduate Social Work Education on The Worker Client Relationship in Child Welfare: The Workers Perspective

Principle Investigator: Janet Kahn-Scolaro, LCSWR

This study is being conducted in order to fulfill the research requirements toward a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Social Work at Adelphi University. The goal of the study is to better understand the impact of graduate social work education on worker client relationships from the point of view of child welfare workers.

If you agree to take part in the study you will participate in two interviews (approximately 60 to 90 minutes each) as well as writing a short journal passage. Interviews will be arranged at a time and place that is convenient for you.

There are some small risks in participating in this study. You may be asked questions that provoke feelings that are upsetting or remind you of difficult parts of your job. There is also a chance that discussions will reveal information about the behavior of a client that may require you or the researcher to file a report to Child Protective Services. The researcher is a social worker and by definition a mandated reporter in New York State.

The benefits to participating is that you will have a chance to express your thoughts and feelings about working with clients and hopefully help others learn more about child welfare work and the role of graduate social work education.

Upon completion of the second interview, you will receive a $30 gift card in appreciation for your time and effort.

Should you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact the principle researcher Janet Kahn-Scolaro, LCSWR by email at: kahnscolaro@adelphi.edu. or by phone 516-582-6241 or Julie Cooper Altman, PhD, faculty advisor, at altman@adelphi.edu.

Ensuring your confidentiality is important. The identity of all participants in this research study will be kept confidential in any publication of the results of this study. The information obtained during this research (research records) will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. However, this research record may be reviewed by government agencies(such as the department of Health and Human Services), the agency sponsoring this research, individuals who are authorized to monitor or audit the research, or the Institutional Review Board (the committee that oversees all research in human services at Adelphi University) if required by applicable laws or regulations. The material will be maintained for **up to 7 years**. Interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. These written transcripts will be stored in a secure cabinet for use

by the researcher only. No employee, supervisor, director or administrator of any agency will be aware of your decision to participate or decline participation in this study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. The decision to participate or to decline participation in the study will not affect you in any way.
Any new information that develops during this study which might affect your decision to participate will be given to you immediately.
A signed copy of this consent form will be given to you.

This research has been reviewed and approved by the Adelphi University Institutional Review Board. If you have any questions, concerns or comments, please contact Dr.Carolyn Springer, Chair of the Adelphi University IRB at 516- 877-4753; springer@adelphi.edu .

Signature

Study Coordinator
Print Name_____Signature_____Date_____

Study Participant
Print Name_____Signature_____Date_____

Consent for audio recording

My participation in this research project will be audio recorded. I consent to the recording of my voice. The recording will be used for research purposes and the data will be treated in the same manner as the aforementioned data.

Signature of Participant _____