

Research Methods in Child Welfare

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Foreword This book is a welcome addition to the field of child welfare. The past several decades have seen an increased emphasis on research and evaluation in both public and private child welfare settings. This research and evaluation on child welfare issues is occurring in academic as well as public and private child service agency settings. It is incumbent on those of us who seek to improve the lives of children and their families to seek empirical evidence to support our practice. With limited resources, we must identify promising and evidence-based practices to serve as a basis for effective assessment, interventions, and policies. Whether information collection involves simple client satisfaction surveys, analysis of data in administrative databases, or more complex randomized control studies, certain processes and procedures are important to follow to know that the information produced is valid and reliable.

Research Methods in Child Welfare by Amy Baker with Benjamin Charvat is a well-written and comprehensive book that discusses the underlying philosophy of research, offers important considerations regarding research ethics, and provides easily understandable information related to different aspects of the conduct and dissemination of research and evaluation data. Early chapters provide an overview of the child welfare context within which research is conducted; later chapters provide step-by-step coverage of research issues on problem formulation, design, measurement analysis, and dissemination of research findings. The authors identify the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches and contexts within which research and evaluation in child welfare is conducted, providing useful guidance on the implementation of future research. Evaluation and research in child welfare settings is not as straightforward as research in a laboratory setting. In the social sciences, many factors influence both how data may be gathered and how that data may be understood. The Child Welfare League of America supports the goal of this book—to inform child welfare practitioners, researchers, and policymakers about issues related to research in a child welfare-specific context. This book will be of value to both the private and public child welfare sectors and will assist us all in better serving vulnerable children and families.

Christine James-Brown, president and CEO Child Welfare League of America

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[1] [Introduction to Child Welfare Research](#) In this chapter the following topics will be covered:

- The purpose of and audience for this book
- A brief

overview of philosophy of science • A brief history of child welfare policy and research

The Purpose of and Audience for This Book Welcome to the world of child welfare research. The purpose of this textbook is to provide a thorough discussion of the theory and practice of conducting social science research in a child welfare setting or with a child welfare population. Much of what is known about how to conduct child welfare research is based on basic research principles that apply to any social science field of study. However, these principles will be described in the context of child welfare research, consistent with the mission and purpose of this book. In addition, conducting research in a child welfare setting or with a child welfare population often carries with it additional considerations or nuances, and these will be highlighted throughout the book as applicable.

There are four primary audiences for this book: (1) social work and psychology students who need a comprehensive overview of how to conduct social science research, (2) graduate students and child welfare professionals who need to acquire research method skills in order to better understand published research so that they can integrate the findings into their practice, (3) professional researchers working in a child welfare context who need to understand how to apply the basic tenets of research practice into this particular setting, and (4) professional clinicians and administrators in child welfare settings who want to conduct their own research and need a thorough and practical guide for doing so. It is also quite likely that child welfare administrators, both public and private, will consult this book in order to sharpen their understanding of the research being conducted in their agency or under their auspices.

To set the stage for the book, this chapter begins with a brief discussion of the book's philosophy of science, followed by a brief history of child welfare research.

A Brief Overview of Philosophy of Science All research is conducted within a particular worldview about the nature of reality and the ability of scientific inquiry to discover and predict that reality. The worldview—also known as an epistemology—of social science researchers has evolved over the course of social science research and shapes the general paradigm that guides the researcher's projects. A paradigm is a basic model or schema that organizes the way a researcher views his or her world (Kuhn 1970).

The French writer and philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is widely credited with being the first to apply the methods of the physical sciences to the social sciences, an approach he termed "positivism." This approach became the dominant epistemology for scientific inquiry beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. As a philosophical system of thought, positivism maintains that the goal of knowledge is to describe systematically observed phenomena. In a positivist view of the world, scientific "truths" exist and the scientific method is the appropriate means for discovering these truths in order to understand the world well enough so that events and experiences can be predicted and perhaps controlled. Thus, the "objective" world exists independently of the perspectives of or measurements by researchers, and the goal of research is to disclose these "objective" facts. A distinguishing feature of positivism is the absence of any distinction between reality (as things that exist) and knowledge of reality (as things that are recognized). The universe is viewed as deterministic and controlled by the laws of cause and effect, which can be discerned through the application of the scientific method.

Described more fully in [chapter 2](#), the scientific method is the accepted framework for conducting social science research. This entails conducting studies in such a way as to ensure that empirical observations are systematic, samples are representative, and data collection methods are clearly specified, so that the project can be replicated (i.e., the same methods repeated would produce the same results). Replication is of great importance in social science research, as it can reduce both error and the misinterpretation of findings (Rosenthal 1991). The results of studies conducted with these guidelines can be used to confirm or revise theory in order to better describe and predict reality. In this way, the positivist approach is empirical, with observation and measurement (ideally through controlled experimentation and manipulation) as the core of the scientific endeavor.

By the middle of the twentieth century, positivism came under criticism for its assumption and acceptance of an independent reality that can be uncovered as long as the scientific method is correctly applied. In response to such criticism, postpositivism emerged as an alternative epistemology, one accepting the basic premise that there is an external, objective reality but recognizing that its complexity often defies accurate description and explanation. In

addition, postpositivism acknowledges the limitations of human observers, which often preclude researchers from developing anything more than a partial understanding of reality. In this view, the goal of science is to achieve consensus to the highest degree possible regarding the nature of reality.

There have been several specific forms of criticism of positivism, each of which has led to the articulation of a more distinct “postpositivistic” epistemology and research methodology. A few will be noted here. The first criticism is that, in general, scientists and their work are more fallible than previously acknowledged. This is considered to be so for several reasons, including the fact that humans are only equipped to perceive certain aspects of reality, which can either be limited (i.e., humans cannot perceive the full range of lights, colors, and sounds) or in fact faulty (i.e., it appears to most humans that the sun is revolving around the earth when in fact the earth is rotating around the sun, and it appeared to many that the earth was flat when in fact it is round). A branch of science based on this tenet is known as critical rationalism (Popper 1971). It assumes that all knowledge is tentative and conjectural as opposed to definitive. In this view, the most that science can offer is guesses as to effective solutions to social problems based on the accumulated ability of the evidence to withstand falsifiability, the active attempt to demonstrate that the theory is not correct. Falsifiability stands in contrast to the goal of conducting research in order to confirm theory, an approach that is subject to what is known as confirmatory bias. The trial-and-error approach proposed ultimately results in the acceptance of a few theories that remain unfalsified and represent the best knowledge available at any given point. Currently accepted theories are viewed as always open to correction or replacement in the future.

A second criticism of positivism is that it fails to acknowledge that knowledge and reality are socially constructed and, therefore, do not exist as separate entities to be discovered by the researcher. From this idea came the school of thought known as social constructivism. Adherents of social constructivism believe that reality is constructed through human activity and that members of a society together invent the properties of the social world (Kukla 2000). For the social constructivist, social reality cannot be discovered per se, as it does not exist prior to its social invention (Ernest 1999; Gredler 1997; Prawat and Floden 1994). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with one another and with the environment in which they live. Intersubjectivity is the term used to describe the shared understanding among individuals whose interactions are based on common interests and assumptions that form the basis for their communication (Rogoff 1990). Within social constructivism there are a range of positions regarding social science methods. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985, 75) advocate multiple socially constructed realities that, “when known more fully, tend to produce diverging inquiry.” They argue that reality cannot be studied “in pieces” (for example, as variables) but only holistically and in a larger context. In addition, they reject the traditional relationship between knower (the scientist) and known (the object of a research study) and endorse instead the belief that scientists and their “subjects” develop a joint understanding through a process of dialogue and negotiation. There are no external objective truths that can be generalized from one setting to another, because all human behavior is bound by its specific context. This approach is also known as interpretivism. Interpretive researchers start out with the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is possible only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, and shared meanings. Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them.

Positivism has also come under fire for not being sufficiently critical of social realities such as class, race, and gender bias. Some have argued that social reality is historically constituted and, although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, their ability to do so is constrained by various social, cultural, and political barriers. The main task of research, according to this perspective, is to provide a critique of existing social realities. As such, studies are conducted in order to identify and bring attention to the limitations and constraints that prevent certain classes or groups of individuals from rising above their circumstances. This approach draws on the works of Karl Marx and is most closely associated with the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research.

The epistemological perspective of this book is squarely within the postpositivistic framework. That is, we recognize that there are limits in the human endeavor to uncover scientific truths. This process is viewed as a flawed and

imperfect enterprise due to the fallibility in a human's ability to perceive and measure reality. It is also recognized that often what is most of interest is not an objective reality (should that exist) but rather the experience of reality from the perspective of specific "others," such as clients and consumers and staff in the field of child welfare. At the same time, the book does not endorse a purely relativistic approach either. That is, we believe that some measures are better than others and that some truths can be converged upon. Thus, a humble approach is taken, in which the scientific method is used as the best approximation to capturing a version of truth and reality at any given time.

A Brief History of Child Welfare Policy and Research

Although there may be other definitions of child welfare in use, the one used for the purpose of this review and for the book as a whole is the set of services put into place (abuse investigations, prevention services to maintain families, out-of-home placement when children are deemed unsafe at home, and all efforts to achieve safe and permanent homes for these children) that are activated when government and voluntary agencies become involved in the concern about the safety of children in a home.

Initially, the work of child welfare was supported through charitable organizations offering informal assistance to vulnerable children and families, such as the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, poor and indigent children were routinely placed in alms houses alongside adults, with no recognition of their distinct needs. Eventually, there was a public demand to remove children from alms houses and place them in institutions in order to protect and care for them apart from adults. The first private agency to care for children in family settings or placing-out services was the New York Children's Aid Society (NYCAS), led by Charles Loring Brace. This organization was created in the 1880s in order to address the increasing problem of juvenile delinquency and the "moral degradation of society" that might result from poor youth who were abandoned. Brace and NYCAS began the now infamous transportation of inner-city children out west via the "orphan trains." The children were placed with farming families as a means of removing them from the dangers of the city and improving their morale and work ethic. It was also a way of providing free labor to families pioneering the American West. Other agencies joined this placing-out effort, including the New York Foundling Hospital.

Eventually, several seminal events converged to highlight the need for society to address the problem of abandoned children, the numbers of which had increased dramatically by the end of the Civil War. In 1889, the American Pediatric Society was formed to address the medical needs of children, and in 1904, Robert Hunter published his groundbreaking work, *Poverty*, in which he argued that poverty not only degrades adults but also hinders child development and thus has a long-term detrimental impact on society. In the same year, G. Stanley Hall (1904) published his influential book on youth development, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. President Theodore Roosevelt, in response to pressure from child advocates, most notably James E. West, Jane Addams, and Lillian Wald, convened the White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909. One eventual outcome of this conference was the formation of the Children's Bureau in 1912 by President Taft. The oldest government agency devoted to the needs of children, the Children's Bureau has the primary responsibility for administering federal child welfare programs. Its original mission was to investigate and report on infant mortality, birth rates, orphanages, juvenile courts, and other social issues of the time. Currently, its mission is to "provide for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with States, Tribes, and communities."

Thus three important benchmarks related to the needs of children were established in the early part of the twentieth century: (1) the debate regarding dependent children was raised to a national level; (2) a federal agency was established, acknowledging that the government had a responsibility to care for children in need; and (3) the government also acknowledged the utility and need for research-based knowledge about dependent children. To this day, much of the funding available to conduct child welfare research and efforts to compile data regarding the problem of child abuse and neglect is provided by the federal government.

Over the years, research, legislation, and public opinion about the needs of children and families have intertwined to move the field forward and shape specific areas of concern and emphasis. In 1959, Maas and Engler published their account of the lack of

stability of out-of-home placements, coining the term “foster care drift” to describe children who stay too long in the foster care system without any plan for a permanent home. These findings were echoed and expanded upon in other seminal works (e.g., Fanshel 1971; Fontana 1968), which, along with public support, led to the enactment by the United States government of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in 1974. CAPTA provided additional federal dollars for increased child abuse prevention and created a legal mandate for states to track and report the number of suspected and confirmed cases of abuse and neglect. A primary goal was to prevent as many children from entering the system as possible and, ideally, avoid the problem of foster care drift.

In 1980, the United States government enacted the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA), which established the need for preventive services as a means of avoiding placement. In addition, AACWA legislated that children who were in the child welfare system were to be placed in the least restrictive setting possible and were to receive casework, documented with a detailed case plan, aimed at achieving permanency. Reporting requirements were expanded to include a statewide information system to account for children in foster care. AACWA also allowed for subsidized adoptions in order to increase the number of children with special needs (i.e., medical and/or mental health needs) adopted by families, by providing financial assistance and support.

The concerns of the public and federal policymakers about length of stay in the system and lack of permanency have been echoed in the efforts of researchers in the field of child welfare. In response to this legislation, research in child welfare turned to uncovering why children remain in foster care for a longer period of time than necessary. Gibson, Tracy, and DeBord (1984), for example, studied the effects of various types of contacts between the family, child, and agency providing foster care services. They found that intensive and frequent contact, especially in the initial month of foster care placement, could potentially reduce the amount of time a child was in care. Testa (2001) examined whether kinship placements (with relatives) were more likely to achieve permanency than nonkinship foster care. He found that kinship placements were more stable than nonkinship placements but that these differences diminished over time. Also as a result of the 1980 legislation requiring the collection of administrative data, large-scale data sets were created and became available to researchers for multistate studies of the dynamics of foster care (Vogel 1999). For example, Wulczyn (1996) applied newly developed statistical techniques such as survival analysis and the use of entry cohorts to a multistate study of the length of stay in foster care. By using survival analysis and an entry cohort, all data can be used—even if some of the children in the sample had not yet exited care—to document length of stay in care and to link reductions in stays to program or policy changes. Building on this work, Baker, Wulczyn, and Dale (2005) used survival analysis to examine factors associated with rate of discharge from a residential treatment center. For youth who were transferred or reunified, mental health issues were the strongest factor that slowed down the rate of discharge.

Beyond questions related to length of stay, researchers have also focused on placement stability and its relationship to permanency, in response to evidence that multiple placements while in foster care negatively impact the likelihood of a child being reunified (Landsverk, Davis, Ganger, Newton, and Johnson 1996). For example, Wulczyn, Kogan, and Harden (2003) found that the initial six months in care were crucial for a child in foster care to make a connection with his or her foster family.

Level of care was also examined as a factor affecting length of stay and stability of placements. Using data from the state of California, Berrick, Barth, Needell, and Reid (1998) found that younger children in group care settings had less stability, lower rates of adoption, and longer stays in care.

Other researchers have focused on the impact of reunification and the potential for recidivism back into foster care. Festinger (1996) studied 210 children in New York City who exited foster care (either foster boarding home or group care). For those children who returned within twelve months (12.9 percent of the sample), the strongest predictors of reentry were four characteristics/experiences of the biological parents: lower parenting skills (as rated by caseworkers), less social support, more unmet needs (as rated by caseworkers), and less organizational participation in community groups.

Legislation and research has also been concerned with preventing out-of-home placement of children. The 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act required states to make “reasonable

efforts” to prevent children from entering foster care and to reunify children who were placed out of the home. As part of the legislation, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was authorized to set aside funds to evaluate a range of family preservation and family support programs.

Several related but distinct models of prevention have emerged as the focus of research, policy, and practice (Nelson and Landsman 1990). One particularly well-known model is crisis intervention, of which the Homebuilders Program is the most prominent example. The program calls for short-term, time-limited services provided in the home to families with children at imminent risk of foster care placement. Key program characteristics include contact with the family within twenty-four hours of the crisis, caseload sizes of one or two families per worker, service duration of four to six weeks, and provision of both concrete services and counseling, up to twenty hours per family per week. Several evaluations of the Homebuilders Program model have been conducted, most but not all of which have produced generally positive results, that is, low rates of placement of the children served (e.g., Fraser, Pecora, and Haapala 1991). Summaries of other research on Homebuilders can be found at

http://www.institutefamily.org/programs_research.asp. The principles of Homebuilders are largely incorporated into what is now referred to as Intensive Family Preservation services. Other models of family preservation provide longer-term and more family systems–focused services or services with a specific emphasis on substance abuse or delinquency in the children. In reality, many states and agencies offer an eclectic mix of program elements in their prevention efforts.

In sum, child welfare research has both spurred and been guided by various public concerns and federal legislation. A review of the current body of policy-and practice-related research reveals seven major tenets. The first is concern for children’s safety. The child welfare system was developed primarily to ensure that when a child is at risk for maltreatment, services can be brought to bear to determine whether the family and child can remain together safely (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, and Plotnick 1993). This is accomplished by a child protective services (CPS) investigation of a family based on a call made to a state central registry from an anonymous person or a mandated reporter who suspects child abuse. It is important to understand that these reports of child abuse are made based on suspicion, as opposed to evidence. This policy ensures that the largest possible safety net is created to protect children.

The second tenet is to keep families together whenever possible. Thus, if the CPS investigation substantiates the abuse, attempts are made to maintain the child safely and appropriately in the child’s home so that familial and community bonds can be maintained and strengthened and out-of-home placement avoided. This is done by offering preventive service to the child and family in the community in which they live. (In addition, a family may request prevention services on their own based on their perception of need or as advised by professionals, friends, or neighbors). In all cases, maintaining the child in the home and in the community is the preferred option for families and children that come into contact with the child welfare system.

If the CPS investigation determines that the child cannot be maintained in the home, the child is placed into out-of-home care. The third tenet of child welfare practice is that children should be placed in the least restrictive level of care necessary to maintain the child’s safety. The least restrictive setting is family foster care and kinship care, in which children live in families and attend schools and receive services in the community in which they live. Therapeutic and specialized foster homes are somewhat more restrictive, because children are provided with a structured behavioral management program and may attend specialized schools. Nonetheless, they are still living with a family and are cared for by parent figures. Group homes are more restrictive, in that children live in a group setting, are cared for by rotating shifts of professional staff, and are typically subject to a series of “house rules” and restrictions regarding their activities and movement in the community. Even more restrictive are diagnostic reception centers (DRCs) and residential treatment centers (RTCs), in which children receive a regimen of treatment and often participate in behavioral management reward and punishment systems to control and shape their emotions and behaviors. It is important to bear in mind that even at the highest level of restrictiveness, DRC and RTC facilities are not secured (i.e., locked), and children are able to leave the premises at any time (although it is likely that there will be consequences for leaving without permission).

The fourth tenet of the child welfare

system is that once a child is placed in care, the length of time a child remains in foster care should be as short as possible in order to maintain family-child bonds. As noted above, considerable research has focused on identifying factors associated with length of stay, and several legislative initiatives have spurred efforts to shorten stays for children in care. A fifth tenet is that children in foster care should achieve permanency, either by reunifying them with their family of origin or through adoption into an alternative permanent family. The early research on foster care drift highlighted the problem of children spending too many years in the system, moving from one foster home to another with no efforts made toward achieving a permanent home. In response, concurrent planning, which involves the simultaneous pursuit of reunification and adoption options, is now mandated casework practice. The sixth tenet is the emphasis on placing children with relatives whenever possible. This is known as kinship care. Although figures vary by agency, nationwide approximately 30 percent of all children in family-level foster care are currently being cared for by relatives (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Kinship care represents the fastest growing category of foster care (Wulczyn and Goerge 1992). The push for utilization of kinship care was shaped largely by a 1979 Supreme Court ruling that encouraged greater use of kinship care by allowing government payments to be allocated for the support of children cared for by relatives. And finally, the seventh tenet is that children should be prepared for life after foster care, regardless of their permanency plan. A spate of studies conducted with foster care alumni documented their difficulty in achieving self-sufficiency following emancipation from the foster care system (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith 2001; Festinger 1983). Currently, states must provide training in independent living skills to all youth in the system who are fourteen years of age or older in order to help prepare them for adulthood. All of these major principles of child welfare practice are dynamic, meaning that they occur at the same time and interact with one another. This necessarily complicates research efforts aimed at isolating the effects of one principle on outcomes for children and families. The complexity of child welfare research will be considered throughout the remainder of the book.

[\[PART 1\] Planning and Developing Research Studies](#)

[\[2\] The Philosophy and Logic of Research](#)

In this chapter the following topics will be discussed:

- Child welfare research: similarities to and differences from social science research
- Overview and principles for planning a research study
- The blessings and the curses of agency-based child welfare research
- Tensions in the field of child welfare research

In this chapter, an outline of planning a research study in a child welfare setting is provided, along with the enumeration of some overarching principles. These principles are **bolded** in the text for easy reference. From the outset, it is essential to clarify the ways in which child welfare research is similar to and different from other social science research. **Child Welfare Research: Similarities to and Differences from Social Science Research** Most importantly, like other empirical research endeavors, research conducted within a child welfare setting or on a topic related to child welfare is based on the scientific method. Social science research—regardless of setting—adheres to the conventions of the scientific method, which contains the shared wisdom about how to conduct research that will result in reliable and valid findings. The scientific method represents the closest approximation to a systematic, disciplined, logical, and unbiased search for knowledge obtained by examination of the best available evidence, although theory is always subject to correction and improvement based on subsequent research findings. The scientific method has historical roots in the philosophy and teaching of Roger Bacon (1214–1292), Francis Bacon (1561–1626), and Al-Biruni (972–1048). This method contains the blueprint that scientists use when conducting research, and it comprises the following components:

- Observation of a phenomenon of interest
- Development of theory to explain the phenomenon
- Creation of testable hypotheses
- Implementation of an experiment/study to test the hypotheses
- Analysis of data in order to reach a conclusion (accept, revise, or discard the theory)

From this outline, two key points should be noted. The first is that hypotheses (and theories) are never proven. All research is based on recognition of the fallibility of both theory and measurement, and thus the

method acknowledges that rarely are there definitive answers to research questions. At best, social scientists can conclude that the findings confirm the hypotheses with a certain degree of confidence and that such confirmation supports the theory. The second point is that knowledge-based theory is continually being revised and elaborated upon. There is rarely a definitive endpoint in the scientific study of a particular phenomenon, and it is recognized that the search for truth is a continuous process. Monette, Sullivan, and DeJong (2005) highlight five key aspects of the scientific method: (1) it is empirical (based on observation), (2) it is systematic (using an organized methodology recognized by colleagues), (3) it seeks to identify and understand causal relationships, (4) it is provisional (all conclusions are tentative and subject to revision or rejection upon further evidence and knowledge), and (5) it is objective (scientists aim to avoid bias and judgment).

Despite a shared utilization of the scientific method, there are also ways in which child welfare research—especially agency-based research—differs from other social science research. The first difference is that many child welfare research samples are composed of individuals who are mandated to participate in the services that make them eligible for the research. Two key implications flow from this fact. First, most child welfare research samples involve highly vulnerable individuals and families who are dealing with economic and emotional and psychological hardship. All of the ethical issues involved in conducting research with vulnerable populations are magnified, because the stakes are unusually high (removal of a child, lack of family reunification, harm to the child). Second, the family's relationship with the researcher is likely to be affected (positively or negatively) by the family's experience with the child welfare service programs. Even under the best of circumstances, child welfare clients are likely to have conflicted feelings about the child welfare agency by which they are being served. The families (and children) may resent anyone associated with the agency and may resist involvement in the research as a form of (conscious or unconscious) protest. Another possibility is that they may decline to participate out of concern that the results might create additional obstacles to treatment and reunification goals. On the other hand, they may feel compelled to participate in research out of a (hopefully) misguided concern that lack of participation could result in negative consequences for their treatment. Issues of informed consent and avoidance of coercion must be uppermost in the researcher's mind at all times. These and related ethical considerations are elaborated further in [chapter 3](#).

A second way that child welfare research is set apart results from the complexity of the child welfare system itself. In child welfare, variation exists within and among agencies and within and among programs even within a single agency. Certain aspects of the system are determined federally (timelines for termination of parental rights, need for concurrent planning), some are determined at the state level (e.g., funding streams and resources for aftercare and independent living), and others are set by local social service agencies (mandates of city and county accountability systems). Even the placement of child welfare services within the governmental bureaucracy varies across states. For example, in some but not all states, mental health, child welfare, and juvenile justice systems are situated within one umbrella agency. Even within the same state there is variation across agencies. Each child welfare agency offers its own unique blend of services. Some offer different levels of care within the child welfare system (foster homes, group homes, residential treatment centers) and others provide services across different systems (child welfare, mental health, office of mental retardation and developmental delay, juvenile justice). Other sources of variation include the philosophy, staffing structure, and mix of actual services offered. For example, Baker, Fullmore, and Collins (forthcoming) found that the type of mental health services offered to youth in residential treatment centers varies across programs (which staff offers such services, the philosophical orientation of these services, the role of the mental health providers within the treatment team, and so forth). It is also possible that a sample within a single program may be heterogeneous in unexpected ways. For example, within a child welfare agency's maternity shelter, a significant portion of the girls served by the program may have had no prior child welfare involvement; in a residential treatment center, a portion of youth may be referred from the juvenile justice system; and within a prevention program, not all families may be mandated for services. These are the kinds of differences that—if not understood and addressed—can seriously compromise the integrity of the results and the generalizability of

the findings. This variation can affect the types of families served and the types of programs agencies can offer, and it needs to be understood from the outset, as it affects the sociopolitical context within which any study can be conducted and interpreted. In some cases, certain questions would be absurd, such as studying the socioeconomic backgrounds of families served by a program mandated to provide services to only families from a particular socioeconomic background. Likewise, it would not make sense to study the continuum of care in an agency that only offers family-level programs. Variation across agencies is also important to understand, given that some findings can only be generalized to other agencies (geographic areas) that operate under the same opportunities and constraints relevant to the issue at hand.

What this means for the child welfare researcher is that each agency and each program needs to be understood prior to the development of any research plan. No assumptions should be made about the sample or the service. There is simply no shortcut to getting to know the agency and its programs prior to planning a research study.

Research Study *Problem Formulation* **Overview and Principles for Planning a Research Study**

Research is the search for truth or an answer to a question (or the best approximation of truth or an answer that is available given existing knowledge and methods). Thus all research starts with a problem or a question—something that needs clarification, explication, or elucidation. Research questions come from a variety of sources, including prior research (all studies raise more questions than they answer), from a gap in theory or the knowledge base, or from practice experience. Questions can be asked about processes (for example, why and when do children who move from an institution to a group home return to the institution?), about change over time (for example, how does the impact of sexual abuse express itself in therapy over the course of treatment?), about differences between groups (for example, are youth who were placed into care as teens more likely to age out of care than youth who were placed into care as infants?), about effects of interventions (for example, is therapeutic foster care an effective program for aggressive teens?), and about various combinations of all these types of questions.

Ideal questions for agency-based child welfare research are those that address a pressing need of the agency staff (administrative or program) and that make a significant contribution to the scientific knowledge base. **Principle 1: There are two primary audiences for agency-based child welfare research (the agency and the field), and studies should be designed to simultaneously address the needs and concerns of both.** Adhering to this principle increases the likelihood that an agency will approve and support the study (i.e., allocate staff time and other resources) and that the findings can be submitted to a peer-reviewed publication. If the researcher works within a child welfare agency (is an employee of the agency), it is quite likely that only those studies that address pressing agency needs will be approved. Even if this is not the stated condition for agency approval, studies that address the needs and concerns of the agency will certainly be more likely to garner staff support. If the researcher is not an employee of the agency (that is, he or she is employed by a university or an independent research center) it is also highly likely that only those proposed studies that are consonant with acknowledged agency concerns will be approved.

At the same time, the researcher needs to be cognizant of the concerns and interests of the field in general (outside the needs of any one agency) in order to craft a study that is designed to make a contribution to the scientific knowledge base. In this way the findings can be submitted to a peer-reviewed publication, garnering significant benefits for the agency and for the researcher. One benefit of the peer-review process is that it screens out studies that are ill conceived and/or poorly executed. Thus, acceptance by the panel of peer reviewers of a journal offers the researcher increased confidence that the findings should be considered sufficiently reliable for the agency (and the field) to make changes based upon them. In this way, the peer-review process offers the agency-based researcher access to professional colleagues who can provide assurance that the work merits consideration by the agency. Without this screening process, the agency-based researcher risks providing the agency with findings that are theoretically or methodologically flawed. Thus, **Principle 2 is: Clinical and practical implications of agency-based research should only be considered after professional colleagues have had the opportunity to provide a thorough critique and ultimate approval of the work.** Ideally, this is achieved through the peer-review process of a

journal but could also be provided by professional colleagues in the field. Publication in a peer-reviewed journal also confers benefits to a sponsoring agency by garnering prestige and credibility for their support of research and can assist the researcher and the agency in attracting future research colleagues and funding. Thus, in designing agency-based research it is important to begin with a set of research questions that—all else being equal—will be sufficiently unique and important to result in a paper that can be submitted to a scholarly peer-reviewed publication. Note the twin criteria of unique and important. Both are necessary for submission of an article to a scholarly journal. A study must produce findings that have not been published before (i.e., are unique), because, unfortunately, it is the rare replication study that is published, and the study must also produce knowledge that has scientific weight/import (i.e., is of significance to the field).

Several avenues exist for the identification of research questions that will result in unique and important findings. The first avenue is related to **Principle 3: Determine whether data exist within the agency that lends itself to a research study**. This is an unorthodox approach and stands in contrast to the traditional avenue of question development via literature review and discussion with practitioners. These other avenues are described below (and at length in [chapter 4](#)). However, one should not discount the fact that an agency-based researcher has access to a large and varied preexisting database that could be mined for possible research studies—prior to developing studies that entail collection of new data. Existing data in child welfare agencies are composed of two primary sources: paper records (charts) and electronic data files. Most agencies have both. Records entail paper data produced over the course of a client's participation in the agency. They typically include a form from the referring agency explaining why the client is receiving services, an intake form summarizing the client's psychosocial history, medication and psychiatric history, and family history. The record also might include progress notes from therapy sessions, family visits, and treatment planning meetings, as well as an account of medications, hospitalizations, criminal activity, court hearings, and perhaps summaries of participation in other services such as special education, substance abuse treatment, and mental health counseling. Most agencies also have an electronic administrative database tracking "movements" within the agency of the clients served. These data are relatively accurate, especially when tied to the agency's payment/reimbursement systems, and, although not broad, have great specificity regarding each client's movement through the agency (admission date and dates of all running away episodes, hospitalizations, vacations, home visits, discharges, and reentries). For agencies that provide services along a continuum of care (such as foster homes, group homes, residential treatment centers, diagnostic reception centers, and so forth), clients can be tracked across this continuum. Although imperfect, these agency databases can be mined for research purposes and it is well worth the researcher's time to consider conducting studies with these data. Benefits of doing so include it being virtually cost free, immediately available, and unconstrained by the limits of ethical concerns related to consent (since the data already exist). One caution in doing so is that the researcher must demonstrate complete competence in retrieving and interpreting data from the agency data systems/charts. These data and systems can be idiosyncratic and inconsistent in ways not at all obvious. Specific discussions with the agency staff/people who operate and manage these systems should precede any data retrieval and/or analysis to ensure that the researcher has a thorough grasp of the meaning and coding of the variables (more detailed information about using existing data can be found in [chapter 8](#)).

In the event that a researcher decides to conduct a study that is outside the scope of the existing database, one avenue for identifying meaningful research questions is prior research conducted by the researcher. **Principle 4: Child welfare researchers should develop a series of related studies**. This principle recognizes the economy involved in conducting more than one study on the same general topic. To begin with, only one literature review and analysis of available assessment tools is required in order to identify viable measures and develop a thorough understanding of the existing knowledge base. Further, a series of related studies affords the researcher the opportunity to become recognized as an expert on the topic and brings prestige to the sponsoring agency as a leader in that area. A third avenue for developing research questions is collaborations with researchers in other agencies, universities, and research centers. **Principle 5: Collaborations with other agencies and other**

researchers can extend the generalizability and enhance the credibility of child welfare research. Although collaborations are notoriously difficult to do well, the value for an agency-based researcher may outweigh the challenges. One way to reduce the likelihood of friction is to resolve “hot-button” issues in advance, such as ownership of the data and order of authorship on published papers and reports. Professional guidelines developed by the American Psychological Association (APA) can be used to guide these discussions. The fourth avenue for developing research questions is discussion with key program staff who have developed practice wisdom and deep knowledge of the client base and know what they need to know in order to improve their practice. This is especially true for program staffpersons who attend professional conferences and participate in collaborations with practitioners at other agencies. They have a keen sense of the burning questions for the field. One way to tap into this practice wisdom is to schedule a meeting at which staffpeople working at different levels of a program’s operation are invited to brainstorm possible research questions. It might be advisable to ask them, “What do you really wish you knew about your clients?” or “What keeps you up at night when you are thinking about your program?” or “What do you need to know in order to better serve your clients and meet your program’s objectives?” It is important that these discussions are not perceived as a criticism or an implication that the staff must be doing something wrong. It is quite likely that, if handled tactfully, such a discussion will generate several possible research topics. Program participants themselves can also constitute a source of inspiration and ideas about possible research questions. Inclusion of the clients in the development of a research study is part of a model of research in which all stakeholders who have a vested interest in the study play an equal role in the development of the study and in the interpretation and dissemination of the findings. Traditional roles of researcher as expert and client as merely a subject in the study are reshaped into more equitable and collaborative relationships in which each partner is viewed as having something valuable to contribute to the research process. After the researcher has engaged program staff (and possibly clients as well) in brainstorming sessions that identify potential research questions, it is important to confirm that the questions are in fact unique. A review of the existing literature in the field will reveal whether previous studies have addressed the same question. If so, either new questions will have to be identified or the proposed study will need to be modified in order to take into account the existing knowledge. That is, even if the same study has already been done, it is possible that it would be important for the field (and the agency) to know whether the same results could be obtained with a different sample (ethnicity, age, type of abuse experience, and so forth), in a different geographic location (e.g., urban as opposed to rural), or in a different service context (one kind of program participation as opposed to another). It is usually possible to frame a research question to be unique and significant regardless of the existing knowledge base. For this reason, a literature review is a necessary part of the process for question development and refinement and should be conducted on the “front end” of the study. Although rarely done, it is advised here that the researcher utilize what is learned in the literature review to draft the introduction section of the manuscript that will eventually be submitted for publication to a peer-reviewed journal. Usually the paper is written *after* the study is completed. However, writing the introduction *prior* to the study will help illuminate inconsistencies in the logic of the study and should clarify the links between existing theory—as offered in the literature review—and the research questions developed for the study. Solidifying these links prior to data collection can spare the researcher considerable inconvenience later: it is considerably more difficult to fix this kind of problem after the data have been collected. Once the primary research question has been identified, a series of hypotheses can be generated. These are the prediction statements about the nature of the relationships between the variables that will be tested in the study. The development of these statements will also begin to flesh out the necessary design of the study. Taking one of the questions suggested above as an example (“Is a therapeutic foster boarding home [TFBH] a more effective program for aggressive teens than residential treatment?”) the primary hypothesis might be: “Youth who were placed in a TFBH will exhibit greater improvement in social skills and affect regulation than youth placed in a residential treatment center (RTC).” From this primary hypothesis, a series of specific hypotheses follow,

based on how the construct of “social skills” is operationalized (turned into measurable phenomena) and whether the hypotheses are directional (one group is hypothesized to be different than the other group and the nature—direction—of that difference is specified in advance) or nondirectional (the two groups are hypothesized to be different from each other but the nature—direction—of that difference is not specified). Whenever possible, directional hypotheses should be developed, as they demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the theory underlying the study. If the hypotheses for the study of therapeutic boarding homes are all directional in that it is expected that the youth in a TFBH will have better social skills than the youth in a RTC, and if the construct of social skills is operationalized as the number of peer conflicts, caretaker perception of youth as cooperative, teacher ratings of youth aggression, and youth-demonstrated social cognitive skills, then the following specific hypotheses could be tested: (1) youth placed in a TFBH will show greater reduction in peer conflicts than youth placed in an RTC, (2) youth placed in a TFBH will show greater improvement in teacher ratings of cooperativeness than youth placed in an RTC, (3) youth placed in a TFBH will show greater improvement in teacher ratings of aggression than youth placed in an RTC, and (4) youth placed in a TFBH will exhibit a greater degree of improved social cognitive skills than youth placed in an RTC.

Sample These hypotheses logically lead to the identification of a series of decisions that will need to be made about the sample, such as (1) How will youth be “placed” in an RTC versus TFBH, randomly or not? (2) What is the age group of interest (how will “teen” be defined)? (3) Are there some youth who would not be appropriate for the study (i.e., have psychosis, are too old at the start of the placement, have cognitive deficits)? Fleshing out these and related questions about the study will lead to the development of the sampling plan. There are three main considerations pertaining to sampling: (1) who specifically is the study about, (2) how will they be found and identified, and (3) how many subjects are needed.

The first issue, who the study is about, is theoretical in nature and can be answered by considering the population to whom the study findings will be generalized. Most research involves the collection of data on a sample, which is then deemed to be useful for making inferences about the population. In the study of youth in therapeutic foster homes, sampling issues could revolve around age of the youth, length of time in the foster care system, gender, ethnicity, type of emotional problems, type of TFBH programs, and city in which the program is located. Once the population has been identified (i.e., all youth in TFBHs in New York City in 2001 who are between ten and fourteen years of age), then sampling strategies can be developed, including random selection of a sample from a list of all members of the population, a convenience sample of youth from TFBHs operated by cooperating agencies, a purposive sample of the highest and lowest functioning youth, or a snowball sample in which TFBH families are asked to nominate other TFBH families to participate in the study. The advantages and disadvantages of these different sampling strategies are described in [chapter 5](#), which also discusses how to determine the desired size of the sample for conducting analyses likely to reveal meaningful statistical effects should they exist.

Design Strategies There are two main types of designs utilized in child welfare research: within-group correlational designs and between-group quasi-experimental or experimental designs. In a study that is correlational in design, both the independent and dependent variables are naturally occurring and are measured on a single sample, usually at the same point in time. A key requirement for such a design is that there is sufficient variation on both variables. If one or both are constant (all cases in the study have the same value on the variable), then the appropriate analyses cannot be conducted. Assuming sufficient variation on both variables, questions about associations between two or more variables can be answered with a correlational design. Of course, conclusions about causation cannot be made regardless of the strength of associations found. That is, even if two variables (e.g., severity of abuse and length of stay in foster care) are found to be statistically related, it cannot be concluded that one actually caused the other. This is so for at least two reasons. First, a third and unmeasured variable may actually be “causing” both. For example, in the above example, it is possible that younger children were more severely abused and more likely to stay longer. Such a pattern would produce a significant correlation between severity of abuse and length of stay although the real explanatory variable is age of the child. That being said, it

might still be of interest for agencies to know that youth with greater severity of abuse stay longer regardless of whether such an effect is actually caused by a third variable, in this case, age. The second reason for caution regarding causality pertains to the directionality of the findings. In a correlational design, the measure of the two variables is taken at the same time. While the research question may be framed in such a way that one variable is the presumptive independent variable (cause) while the other is the presumptive dependent variable (effect), in actuality, the relationship might be in the other direction. As an example, take a study in which an association was found between the number of social workers a youth has and length of stay in an RTC. Researchers may be tempted to conclude that youth with more social workers have longer stays, perhaps because turnover in social workers slows down the work of treatment and reunification. On the other hand, it is equally plausible that youth who stay longer (for other reasons) will have more social workers because they are in the system longer and have more opportunity for social workers to leave and new ones to be assigned. Despite these cautions regarding correlational designs, they are often used in child welfare research as a means of establishing associations among variables.

Correlational designs do not necessarily require that statistical correlations be conducted. The statistic correlation is appropriate only when the independent and dependent variables are both continuous (and meet the assumptions underlying the use of continuous variables, such as being normally distributed and having a linear association). In this case, a Pearson product moment correlation would be conducted to determine whether variation on one variable is associated with variation on the other. Results range from -1.0 to $+1.0$, with positive correlations ($.01$ to 1.0) indicating that individuals ranked high on one are also ranked high on the other, while negative correlations ($-.01$ to -1.0) indicate that individuals ranked high on one are ranked low on the other. More than two variables can be measured at the same time in a correlational design, in which case multivariate analyses can be conducted to determine the combined association among the set of variables. This is still considered a within-subject correlational design because all of the variation is naturally occurring (i.e., none of the variables are manipulated). Another variation of the correlational design is when one or more of the variables are categorical or dichotomous rather than continuous. In this case, different statistical tests are conducted (chi-squares, t-tests, or logistic regressions), but the design per se is still considered correlational because none of the variables were manipulated.

The second frequently utilized design is quasi-experimental. This design involves the comparison of two groups, one of which received an intervention of some sort while the other group did not. The "quasi" nature of the design refers to the fact that participation in the intervention was not randomly assigned. For this reason, the study does not qualify as a "true" experiment. There are many variations of this design depending upon the number of groups compared and the timing of data collection (for example, before and after the intervention or only after the intervention). Program evaluations, a special class of quasi-experimental and experimental designs common in child welfare research, are explored at length in [chapter 17](#).

The key to a good quasi-experimental design is consideration of ways in which the two groups might be different that could affect the measure of the dependent variable other than involvement in the intervention. These variables are called plausible alternative explanations for the findings. By way of example, consider the hypothesis that families who participate in a voluntary prevention program will—after participation—have better attitudes toward parenting than families who do not participate in the prevention program. The key to this study will be the identification of the group of families who do not participate. If it is composed of families who were recommended to the program but chose not to participate, then if the intervention group scores better on parenting attitudes it is possible that they were already more positive parents because they chose to participate in such a program. Thus, it is possible that initial differences rather than the program itself accounted for the differences between the groups on the measure of the dependent variable (in this case, parenting attitudes). Likewise, if the group that did not participate in the program is composed of people on the waiting list, then it is possible that they would score worse simply because they were not as positively inclined toward the program or as organized or committed as the people who signed up for the program early. It is also possible that the groups might vary on

race or age or proportion of single-parent mothers or teen mothers or any other number of variables that might be associated with differences in the dependent variable. All of these potentially important variables need to be identified (based on theory and prior research) and measured in both groups to establish that the two groups are similar on these variables or to allow for the statistical control of any differences between the groups that are identified. Using the example of a study of improvement in TFBH youth as compared to RTC youth, it would be vital to know the ways in which the two groups differed at the time of placement. Of relevance might be studies showing that RTC youth are more likely to have serious mental health and behavioral problems as compared to TFBH youth (Baker, Kurland, Curtis, Papa-Lentini, and Alexander, forthcoming). Theory and practice underlying use of quasi-experimental and experimental designs are described in greater detail in [chapter 7](#). *

Social service agencies are facing the same expectations in quality management and outcomes as private companies, compelling staff members and researchers to provide and interpret valid and useful research to stakeholders at all levels in the field. Child welfare agencies are particularly scrutinized. In this textbook, two highly experienced researchers offer the best techniques for conducting sound research in the field. Covering not only the methodological challenges but also the real-life constraints of research in child welfare settings, Amy J. L. Baker and Benjamin J. Charvat present a volume that can be used both for general research methods and as a practical guide for conducting research in the field of child welfare.

Baker and Charvat devote an entire chapter to ethical issues involved in researching children and their families and the limits of confidentiality within this population. They weave a discussion of ethics throughout the book, and each chapter begins with a scenario that presents a question or problem to work through, enabling readers to fully grasp the methods in the context of a specific setting or area of concern. Special sections concentrate on the value of continuous quality-improvement activities, which enable the collection and analysis of data outside of the strictures of publishable research, and the implementation of program evaluations, which can be helpful in obtaining further research and programmatic funding.

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