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Uniqueness of Parent Advocates: The Power of Lived Experience

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Abstract

This study highlighted the unique elements of the role played by parent advocates (PAs) with lived child welfare experience in supporting families affected by the child welfare system. These elements set PAs apart from other professionals and included non-professionalized peer support, experiential expertise, a strong sense of identification, authenticity, legitimized empathy and understanding, and critical consciousness. As parent peer support programs gain popularity in child welfare services, it is imperative to understand and define these distinctive elements that underpin the PA role, as they serve as the foundation for novel approaches to working with, supporting, and empathizing with parents navigating the complexities of the child welfare system.

The implications of this study emphasize the importance of PAs in engaging stigmatized and marginalized parents. PA experiential expertise, coupled with training in child welfare policies, positioned them as trusted sources of information and system navigators for parents. Shared experiences and cultural backgrounds helped create a strong bond and a sense of relatability. Through their authentic and legitimized empathy and understanding, PAs provided reassurance and fostered a sense of validation and acceptance. Finally, PAs exhibited critical consciousness, challenging power dynamics and inequalities within the child welfare system. Through empowerment and advocacy, PAs helped amplify parents' voices, countering stigma, discrimination, and bias. These unique elements of PA role can be invaluable and transformative to child welfare agencies. Integrating the voices of parent advocates could lead to a better understanding of the challenges families face and improve the child welfare system and services.

As a growing workforce in the field of child welfare, efforts to build, nurture, and advance the PA role are needed. Balancing between professionalization and maintaining the unique characteristics and authenticity of PA role is a critical consideration for the future of parent peer support in child welfare.

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Introduction

Innovative practices that promote meaningful family engagement and participation to address experiences of unjust and unequal treatment for parents affected by the child welfare system are of increasing interest (Featherstone, Gupta, & Morris, 2021). Parent peer advocacy, mentoring, and support programs, delivered by parents with lived child welfare experience to parents receiving child welfare intervention, are examples of more inclusive practices gaining attention nationally and internationally.

The role of a parent advocate (PA) is unique as it brings together a parent impacted by the child welfare system with someone who has effectively navigated through it. Individuals who have been involved in the child welfare system have a unique and valuable perspective and understanding that is critically important to the process of engaging and supporting families that are currently experiencing the child welfare system (Lalayants, 2014). This shared journey enables the parent advocate to establish a strong rapport with the parent, promoting trust and cooperation and positive outcomes (Berrick et al., 2011; Lalayants, 2012; Leake et al., 2012).

While the literature on parent advocacy programs in child welfare has been growing, there is a lack of knowledge on the characteristics that make their role unique and different from other, non-peer staff roles. It is crucial that we define those unique elements that lead to different ways of working and supporting parents and families, understanding, and thinking about their experience, and ultimately defining parent advocates' unique and valuable role within

the larger child welfare system. Furthermore, establishing the parameters for a unique and distinguishable peer support in child welfare will provide support and a clear framework for the PA role and help create a unique identity. This study is the first to delve into the deeper understanding of the uniqueness of parent advocates' role in child welfare and identify the distinctive characteristics of their peer support.

Literature Review

Lived Experience and Peer Support

Lived experience refers to having a personal experience navigating challenges akin to those faced by the client population being served. Literature notes that “the word ‘lived’ is used to differentiate from others who may have experience of working *with*... [certain challenges] but have not personally lived *through* those challenges” (Hart, 2023).

Across social service sectors, various terms have been used to describe people with lived experience who are employed to assist clients in their service/treatment planning, including “peer support workers,” “peer specialists,” and “consumer-survivors” (Miyamoto & Sono, 2012, p. 2). Others described lived experience as a unique “credential” that “peer supporters” bring to the work (Mead et al., 2001). Peer identity relies on a sense of “connection” or “sameness” between peers; and peer support requires the understanding and experiencing the sameness that derives from the shared lived experience (Gillard et al., 2014). Repper and Carter (2011) identify that “the peer support ‘approach’ assumes that people who have similar experiences can better relate and can consequently offer more authentic empathy and validation” (p. 394). Peer support is “...about understanding another’s situation empathically through the shared experience of emotional and psychological pain” (Repper & Carter, 2011).

Peer Support and Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare

Peer support has long been recognized as an essential component of service provision in the field of mental health and substance abuse treatment. However, in the field of child welfare, parent peer support has only begun to gain popularity and attention in the past decade, even though the parent advocacy movement started in New York City much earlier. In the early 1990s, parents with lived child welfare system experience came together to advocate for change (Tobis, 2013). They played a pivotal role in pushing for reforms within the system, elevating the voices of parents, and advocating for supportive and equitable treatment. The first parent advocacy organization in the United States, Child Welfare Organizing Project, was established in 1996 with the belief that parents with lived experiences are a valuable resource in child welfare cases and can be strong advocates for other parents impacted by the system (Castellano, 2021; Tobis, 2013).

Parent advocates, also known as parent partners, parent mentors, or parent representatives, are parents with a lived child welfare system experience who offer peer support and advocacy to parents currently involved in the child welfare system (Lalayants, 2014). PAs have personally experienced similar adversities related to the socio-economic impacts of poverty and underlying factors that often lead to child welfare involvement. Therefore, they possess a first-hand understanding of how these risk factors can affect families' lives and parenting. Additionally, they have knowledge of how to successfully address these challenges and navigate the child welfare system (Berrick et al., 2011; Cohen & Canan, 2006; Lalayants, 2014). Parent advocates are in a position to use their lived experience as a tool for engagement, empowerment, stigma reduction, and advocacy (Lalayants, 2012; Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2024).

Parent advocates with shared experience remain a critical source of support for many parents. Studies have found that PAs provide emotional, informational, instructional, and advocacy supports while cultivating special feelings of connection, comfort, trust, and guidance

(Lalayants, 2012, 2014, 2020; Saar-Heiman et al., 2024). They play an important role as supporters, guides, and trusted confidantes to a vulnerable population of parents in need of multiple supports.

Parents, children, and extended family members report feeling distrustful, fearful, and overwhelmed by a confusing, complicated, involuntary, and authoritative system (Bekaert et al., 2021; Diorio, 1992; Lalayants & Merkel-Holguin, 2024). Parents may feel more comfortable and engage with peers who are familiar with the ins-and-outs of the child welfare system and who can state “I’ve been there” (Cohen & Canan, 2006). Navigating the child welfare system can be overwhelming and intimidating, especially for newly impacted parents. Having successfully gone through the system themselves, peer mentors can provide guidance, connect parents to community resources, encourage peer networks, and teach advocacy skills (Cohen & Canan, 2006; Lalayants, 2014).

According to a recent scoping review of parent peer advocacy and support programs in child welfare, a substantial variation exists in the settings in which these programs operate (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024). The most prevalent setting is within child welfare and protection programs, servicing and supporting families affected by the system. The second type of settings is multi-disciplinary legal representation programs, where PAs are part of an interdisciplinary team, alongside attorneys and social workers, representing parents with child welfare system involvement, including open dependency or family court cases, as well as more traditional court systems. Other settings with parent advocates include programs that address the intersection of child welfare with other systems, such as substance misuse, mental health, and parental cognitive disability programs. Lastly, there are regional system-level initiatives, which refer to time-limited, funded efforts to systematically implement collaborative and family-inclusive services and promote natural support networks in specific regions (Saar-Heiman et al., 2024).

Early evaluations of PA programs have demonstrated positive outcomes. These include increased parent engagement with services, reduced placement of children in out-of-home care, higher rates of children remaining with their families, prioritization of placing children with relatives, and improved rates of reunification while reducing the likelihood of re-entry into the child welfare system when out-of-home placement becomes necessary (e.g., Berrick et al., 2011; Chambers et al., 2019; Cohen & Canan, 2006; Gerber et al., 2019; Lalayants, 2012, 2014, 2020; Lalayants, Wyka, & Saitadze, 2021; Leake et al., 2012).

While the literature on parent advocacy programs in child welfare has been growing, there is a lack of knowledge on the uniqueness of parent advocates' role as they work with families affected by the child welfare system, particularly, what characteristics make their role distinctive and different from other, non-peer staff roles.

Theoretical Perspectives on Lived Experience

There are numerous theoretical frameworks that reinforce the uniqueness of lived experience as a distinctive characteristic of parent advocates in child welfare. Each framework emphasizes the connection between the unique relational qualities that PAs with lived experiences bring to parents and the enhanced outcomes in the lives of parents in the child welfare system.

Empowerment Theory

Empowerment is best summarized as, “a group-based, participatory, developmental process through which marginalized or oppressed individuals and groups gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals and reduced societal marginalization” (Maton, 2008, p. 5). Mutual help groups and community settings provide adults with authentic opportunities for emotional healing and recovery (Maton, 2008). Maton identifies that “fellowship” support, through the lens of a

shared experience, enhances individual well-being outcomes for members in an empowerment setting. Through interventions aimed at community organizing, constituents can successfully build solidarity and promote social change that improves their individual lives (Maton, 2008). Participating in “growth-fostering relationships” promotes psychological empowerment through bilateral transactions and processes (Christens, 2012). Christens (2012) also posits that “an empowerment orientation should be most concerned with the dynamics of power within interpersonal relations that enable and catalyze effective social action toward liberation and justice” (p. 116).

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) argues that humans inherently have three essential psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Autonomy comes into play as PAs empower parents to make decisions regarding their family’s and child’s welfare. Respecting and supporting the autonomy of parents navigating the system fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility in decision-making, which can lead to more effective and sustainable outcomes. Competence, the second core need according to SDT, plays a pivotal role in the work of parent advocates (Ryan & La Guardia, 2000). PAs draw upon their own lived experiences, knowledge of the child welfare system, and skillset to equip parents with the tools and information they need to successfully navigate the complexities of the system. Finally, SDT emphasizes relatedness as a fundamental human need, highlighting the importance of connection and social support. Parent advocates, often having walked a similar path, can offer empathetic and authentic relationships to parents involved in the child welfare system, thus nurturing a sense of belonging and emotional support that can be instrumental in the overall success of these families.

Social Comparison Theory

Social comparison theory holds significant relevance in the context of parent advocacy within the child welfare system. This theory posits that individuals tend to evaluate themselves and their abilities by comparing themselves to others (Cottrell & Epley, 1977). In the context of parent advocacy, parents who have lived child welfare system experience can serve as powerful role models and sources of support for those currently navigating the system. Through sharing their own experiences and successes, PAs can help parents facing similar challenges develop a more positive self-concept and sense of empowerment. By witnessing the accomplishments of PAs who have successfully overcome hurdles, parents may feel more confident in their abilities to navigate the system, make informed decisions, and advocate effectively for their children. This application of social comparison theory underscores the importance of parent advocates' lived experiences in offering instrumental support to parents within the child welfare system.

Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory asserts that individuals learn through observing the behaviors and experiences of others (Bandura, 1977). A large part of social learning is based on the idea of identification—people want to identify with others and their achievements (Maisto et al., 1999). Applied to parent advocacy, it becomes evident that parents involved in the child welfare system can benefit greatly from observing and learning from the lived experiences of other parents who have successfully navigated similar challenges. PAs can play a pivotal role in this process by serving as role models in the face of adversity. The social learning theory underscores the significance of creating a conducive environment to learn, grow, and work towards improved outcomes for families involved in child welfare (Bandura, 1977).

Helper Therapy Principle

Another theoretical perspective that provides a different insight on the role of parent advocates is the helper therapy principle (HTP). HTP suggests that people who help others often

experience psychological benefits themselves (Riessman, 1965; Shovholt, 1974; Solomon, 2004). On one side, parent advocates facilitate positive transformations within families involved in child welfare by guiding them through the complexities of the child welfare system (Lalayants & Saitadze, 2022). Simultaneously, there could be an element of a mutual exchange of support that takes place in peer relations, which may contribute to advocates' personal outcomes, such as increased competency, self-esteem and self-efficacy, fulfillment, and satisfaction, and feeling empowered (Shovholt, 1974; Waddell, 1983).

Study Purpose

While the literature on peer support and parent advocacy in child welfare has been growing, there is a lack of knowledge on the uniqueness of parent advocates' role as they work with families affected by the child welfare system. To fill this gap, the current study addresses the following research question: What characteristics make the parent advocate role distinctive and different from other, non-peer staff roles?

Method

Study Site

The New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS), which is the city agency responsible for the safety and well-being of children and youth, implemented the Parent Advocacy Initiative that deploys PAs to participate in Initial Child Safety Conferences with parents and child protective services staff. A child safety conference is the initial meeting with family members and child protective services to thoroughly discuss the case and associated safety concerns and make the best safety decision for a child (ACS, 2008). To staff each conference with a PA, ACS contracted with two not-for-profit organizations that were responsible for recruiting, training, and employing PAs across New York City's five boroughs. Parent advocates are parents with lived child welfare system experience who offer services such

as support to parents in preparation for and during the safety conference by helping them be informed about their rights and responsibilities within the child welfare system, better understand and navigate the child welfare system, as well as supporting them emotionally. They may empower parents to become engaged in decisions involving the safety of their children and provide parents with needed support including viable referral resources. In collaboration with ACS staff, the PAs may participate in decision-making about the needs, services, and safety plans being contemplated during the child safety conference. PAs usually meet with parents prior to the conference (on the same day), introduce themselves, explain their role and services, and with parents' acceptance, prepare them for the safety conference and attend the conference.

Design

The qualitative data for this paper were collected as part of a larger multi-method evaluation study of the citywide Parent Advocacy Initiative in New York City. The exploratory qualitative portion of the study was designed to maximize participant input by engaging parents, parent advocates, and CPS staff using in-person interviews and asking in-depth questions regarding their experiences as/with PAs. The use of qualitative methodology provided a deeper understanding and exploration of experiences of multiple respondent groups (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

Data Collection

The semi-structured interview guides that were used for various respondent groups consisted of open-ended questions followed by more specific elaboration probes. The questions were developed after consulting the relevant existing literature and the study Advisory Committee, comprised of child welfare workers, administrators, community representatives, and parent advocates. The interview guides provided a general framework, while allowing enough flexibility to keep interviews conversational (Patton, 2014). The questions focused on parent

advocates' role in general as well as the distinct aspects of their role, the types of unique supports they provided to parents, and factors that set them apart from other professionals. To validate clarity and relevance of interview questions, they were piloted during the first set of interviews with various respondent groups.

Respondent Recruitment and Characteristics

Recruitment and Sampling of Parent Advocates

A complete list of all PAs, containing names and contact information, was obtained from each of the two parent advocate provider organizations participating in the PA Initiative. At the time of the study, there were a total of 65 parent advocates employed at both organizations combined. Potential respondents were initially contacted by the research assistant with a phone call inviting them to participate in the study. The recruitment was done on a voluntary basis. Thirty-five advocates volunteered and were available to participate in interviews (others were unavailable for various reasons—scheduling conflicts, maternity/medical leave, etc.). All available parent advocates were interviewed; therefore, no sampling was applied. Interviews lasted about 40 minutes and were conducted in a private environment at the participant's office.

Among the 35 participants, 32 were female (91.43%); the age ranged from 25 to 66 years ($M=45.75$). About 66% ($n=23$) of participants identified as African American/Black; 22.86% ($n=8$) as non-White Hispanic/Latina; two (5.71%) as White; one (2.86%) as White Hispanic; and one (2.86%) as West Indian.

The duration of employment as a PA at the current organization averaged 1.6 years, ranging from 2 months to 3.5 years. Prior work experience in a human services-related organization was vast, ranging from under a year to nearly a decade-and-a-half. Roughly 51% of participants ($n=18$) indicated that they had advocacy or counseling experience prior to current employment (i.e., community representative, caseworker, HIV/AIDS counselor, and so on).

Recruitment and Sampling of Parents

At the end of each child safety conference with parents, parent advocates handed out fliers advertising this study and inviting interested parents to contact the researcher to participate in a face-to-face interview. Additionally, fliers were posted in borough offices in the reception areas. A total of 16 parents expressed interest in participating in the study. Theoretical saturation was reached after 15 interviews; thus, the sample size was considered adequate (Morse, 1995). The interviews lasted about 40 minutes and took place in a private environment at a mutually convenient location (e.g., a public library in the participant's neighborhood). Respondents were offered a monetary incentive for their participation.

Of 16 parents interviewed, 68.75% ($n=11$) identified as female. Most participants identified their race/ethnicity as African American/Black (68.75%, $n=11$), White/Caucasian (25%, $n=4$), and Hispanic (6.25%, $n=1$). Participants ranged in age from 25 to 59 years old, with an average age of 39 ($SD=8.14$). When asked about their relationship status, 25% ($n=4$) indicated being separated or divorced, 18.75% ($n=3$) were either "single" or "in a relationship," and 37.5% ($n=6$) were married; the rest ($n=6$) did not provide a response. Concerning levels of educational attainment, 31.25% ($n=5$) indicated some degree of high school-level attainment (i.e., 9th-12th grades); 18.75% ($n=3$) held a GED; 12.5% ($n=2$) held an associate's degree, 18.75% ($n=3$) stated "some college" or "college," and 18.75% ($n=3$) did not provide a response.

Recruitment and Sampling of Child Protective Services Staff

A roster of all child protective services (CPS) workers and supervisors/managers was obtained from each borough office. An initial screening process identified those who had exposure to a parent advocate (i.e., presence of a parent advocate at a child safety conference that the CPS staff person attended) at least once. A total of 41 CPS staff members were interviewed (25 caseworkers and 16 supervisors/managers). Theoretical saturation was reached after 15

interviews (both caseworkers and supervisors); however, a few additional respondents were interviewed as they were already scheduled and interested in participating. Interviews lasted about 30 minutes and were conducted at ACS borough offices, in a private environment.

Caseworkers' average length of time in their current position was 7.4 years ($n=25$) with a range of 15.8 years. The average length of time that supervisors/managers had been in their current position was 7.4 years ($n=16$) with a range of 30 years.

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed to identify and describe the most significant patterns and emergent themes central to this investigation. Researchers used thematic framework analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009) to identify and systematically apply both emergent and a priori codes in relation to various motivational factors expressed by parent advocates in the study. Consistent with this framework, the researcher and a research assistant employed the following steps: (1) Familiarizing themselves with the data—reviewing each interview transcript thoroughly and writing down the initial recurring themes. (2) Identifying a thematic framework based on the recurring themes and independently developing an initial codebook—these emerging themes came from a priori themes found in the literature as well as from the data. The researchers were mindful of allowing the data to dictate the themes. (3) Indexing—meticulously extracting sections of the data from interview transcripts that corresponded to each theme. (4) Data charting on each code to gain a deeper understanding of the information captured—the pieces of data that were indexed in the previous stage were now arranged in charts of the themes. (5) Chart review and agreement on common and unique themes across respondents.

Researchers used several strategies to enhance the rigor and validity of findings, including the use of memoing to document coding decisions and discussions, using multiple

researchers, and prolonged engagement with participants using multiple sequential interviews (Padgett, 2016). The themes were discussed with the study advisory committee members for the purposes of member checking and peer debriefing. Direct quotes from respondents were used in the reporting of findings to allow for a quick and explicit understanding of themes and concepts (Sandelowski, 1994).

Protection of Human Subjects

This study was approved by the Research Review Committee of ACS, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services Bureau of Evaluation and Research, and the Institutional Review Board of the researchers' university as part of the Human Subjects Protocol. Prior to an interview, each respondent signed a written informed consent form to participate in the study. The interviews were audio-recorded with the respondent's permission and then transcribed by the research assistant. Participation was entirely voluntary and confidential. Each interview participant was assigned a unique number. All identifying information about respondents was omitted or disguised.

Findings

The study findings revealed a combination of unique key factors that characterize parent advocates with lived experience working with families impacted by the child welfare system. While interrelated, these factors set PAs apart from others providing support and advocacy to families. They included: non-professionalized peer support, experiential expertise, identification, authenticity, legitimized empathy and understanding, and critical consciousness.

Non-Professionalized Peer Support

It was a common experience among socially isolated parents to acknowledge the absence of non-professionalized support systems. For these parents, the absence of familial or community-based support emphasized the significant influence of PAs, as expressed by one

parent participant (PAR) who said, “I don’t have any family members or people from my church... But the parent advocate was there for me.”

The support provided by advocates distinguished itself in terms of its scope and capabilities as compared to others, often labeled as “professional,” forms of support. PAs undertook tasks that surpassed the capacities of workers, such as providing emotional support, connecting individuals to community resources, offering tangible assistance, and more. Additionally, PAs conveyed a demeanor and manner that signified a more approachable and less intimidating level of support.

Respondents described the support offered by PAs as “peer support with knowledge but no power over parents” (PA). This support dynamic effectively circumvented the inherent power imbalance often present between child welfare workers or other professionals and parents, fostering a more equitable and supportive relationship. By not being affiliated with the adversarial legal system, PAs were perceived by parents as “people on our side.” The fact that PAs were not associated with the child welfare system played a crucial role in earning parents’ trust and promoted engagement. One PA vividly recounted the reaction she received from a parent, who exclaimed with relief, “Oh, you’re not ACS, phew! Thank God!” The non-affiliation with ACS and the peer nature of the advocates were perceived as distinct and pivotal elements in effectively engaging parents. Unlike child welfare services staff, PAs possessed personal experiences within the system, not as service providers but as firsthand recipients. Furthermore, unlike CPS staff, PAs were not entrusted with the responsibility of making potentially life-changing decisions regarding the fate of families. As one PA explained, their support is “more person-centered and not authoritative, directive.”

Several respondents summarized the nature of such non-professionalized peer support as extremely valuable and unique, separating it from other child welfare staff. A few expressed fear

related to losing the grassroots, personal, and unique nature of the support provided by advocates if they were to become more formalized or institutionalized, requiring formal higher education, resembling other child welfare professionals: “The worst thing that I would hate to see is that ten years from now, parent advocates have become what ACS is, that they’ve become bachelor’s or master’s degree” (PA).

Experiential Expertise

Parent advocates were often described as making use of their experiential expertise, or “different knowledge” in their work than other, non-peer staff. Experiential expertise placed PAs in a unique position to build trusting relationships with families because of their shared experiences of the child welfare system and a firsthand knowledge and understanding of the associated stressors, emotions, and solutions. In other words, “people close to the issue are the closest to the solution” (PA). As one PA explained, “I know how this happened, how the parents got there, and how I got my children out of the system. I know the motivating factors, discouragement, feelings... I know certain things that would work and what would not work.”

PAs possessed deep knowledge, skills, insights, and understanding through their firsthand lived experience, which set them apart and established their legitimacy. It was compared to the more book-based, academic knowledge of other professionals: “They’ve actually experienced the system. They know what it is to lose your child to the system. They didn’t just read it from a textbook; they haven’t come fresh out of college. They have lived through this and came out of it” (PAR). Another parent added, “I’d take everything she said a little more personal than somebody who’s never gone through it. I would probably respect her opinion way more. She would be familiar with the situation. Somebody who’s not familiar with the situation, I couldn’t really understand them trying to help me. Just wouldn’t really make sense to me.”

The experiential expertise coupled with the training (e.g., child welfare policies, timelines, etc.) uniquely positioned PAs as a trusted source of information and system navigator. The dual “know-how” was seen as an asset especially for those parents without familiarity or understanding of the child welfare system. Such knowledge had the two-fold practical benefit of providing guidance and assuaging anxieties related to the uncertainty of child welfare system involvement. For instance, one parent described, “She had a lot of experience. Her experience of what she went through with ACS, also being an advocate in this system.... I believe she has been doing this for years. She knew the ins-and-outs” (PAR). Another parent summarized: “She [PA] is like a walking-talking pamphlet. She’s got all the information and knowledge you need” (PAR).

Finally, parent advocates’ experiential expertise served as a source of inspiration, hope, and motivation, and positioned them as role models of someone who has successfully overcome a similar situation. Using lived experience to demonstrate successful outcomes was seen as distinctive from other non-peer roles: “They speak from their own experiences and own successes. Whatever it was they were going through, they were able to overcome” (CPS).

Sense of Identification

Identification translates into perceived sameness and relatability due to the shared lived child welfare system experience as well as shared cultural and social background. Respondents highlighted two reasons explaining the powerful sense of identification. The first reason was the strong sense of identification that parents receiving PA support experienced when connecting with someone who had gone through similar challenges. This created a powerful bond and understanding between the two parties. Parents felt a sense of perceived sameness when relating to someone who had grappled with similar experiences “whether that be that they have been through the system somewhat themselves or their knowledge of the system and the resources that

are out there for the families” (CPS). Parents related to advocates because of shared experiences and understood that “they became an advocate because they experienced something themselves. They’ve been through the family court system, and they know it. That made me comfortable knowing that. It makes you feel relieved that this woman knows what she’s talking about because it happened to her, she had a case herself” (PAR).

Information from advocates seemed more palatable primarily “because they are usually members of the parent’s community and may know the hardships that parents face. A parent advocate is someone who may have experience with ACS and may know the frustrations of someone probing in their life and questioning their parenting skills” (CPS).

Second, many advocates hailed from the same communities and had similar ethnic and cultural backgrounds as the parents they represented which “ups the relatability factor to the parents” (CPS). Such cultural and experiential relatedness made the relationship between the parents and PAs stronger, supported and facilitated mutuality and sense of understanding, and built solidarity. Furthermore, the first-hand knowledge of neighborhood culture, resources, and potential challenges, often at a granular level, created a more comprehensive understanding and practical approach to assisting families navigating the complexities of child welfare. The advocates’ rootedness in the community not only made them more relatable but also positioned them to provide more targeted and effective support tailored to the specific needs and challenges faced by those they were helping.

Authenticity

Authenticity of PAs was represented by their ability to be genuine, sincere, and “real.” Authenticity meant expressing their true thoughts by employing straight-forward and “real talk” to convey their genuine concern. One PA elaborated:

I talk real to them. I meet parents where they are. The thing is I have a true genuine concern for the families in our communities. A person knows when you're genuine opposed to you doing your job. Simple as that. You know when somebody is just talking, and you know when somebody is talking from the heart. It's two different things. So, I'm able to engage parents because "I really need you to get yourself together girl..." I genuinely want the parents and the families to succeed.

The adage that "honesty is the best policy" rang true for several parents who felt that the "best quality for an advocate is that they gonna tell you the truth. They not gonna sugarcoat it" (PAR). The "real talk" both forewarned and instructed parents: "I am straight up with the parents: 'I don't need you jumping up...I need you to behave. I need you to listen and I need you to respond. I need you to speak up' because a lot of the parents feel voiceless..." The "real talk" was often informative as recalled by one parent: "The advocate was basically telling me, 'Don't go in there teary eyed and upset, be confident and relax.' I was still upset going in there, but I took her word for it" (PAR).

Legitimized Empathy and Understanding

Having the lived child welfare system experience set the parent advocates aside from other professionals and/or persons and allowed them to "empathize with almost any parent that comes in there because I have an understanding of what the parent is going through. Having that experience dealing with ACS allows me to better help the parents" (PA).

Parent advocates were uniquely positioned to demonstrate understanding and support to parents, having been in their shoes, and they did this outside the traditional child welfare worker/social worker-client relationship. They were there to walk alongside the parents, helped them navigate the complex system, and advocated for them. PAs were also able to model the idea of hope: "To see somebody who's come through the other side ... it's really inspiring, and I think it instills that sense of hope" (PA).

All respondents agreed that lived experience led to a degree of empathy that strengthened the bond between them. Advocates provided reassurances to parents by emphasizing “I’ve been through your position before, so I know exactly what you are going through, and I am here to support you” (PA). An advocate shared, “I think it is extremely helpful on the parent advocate side to have had some contact with ACS because it’s really hard to empathize with someone. If you’ve never been homeless, you don’t know what homeless is. You can have a general idea what it is, but if you’ve never truly been that, then you really do not know” (PA).

Possessing a theoretical understanding of the experience was likewise not enough for some respondents: “I know what the parent went through, so it kind of puts me in touch with some of the things that parents are going through... It helps because I can understand them better” (PA). Their ability to relate from personal experience extended beyond theoretical or academic knowledge, providing a more nuanced and profound level of support. This shared experience allowed the advocates to not only empathize but also guide and advocate for parents in a way that might not be possible for someone without similar personal experiences.

A crucial component of successful engagement for many advocates was demonstrating empathy for the plight of parents by “talking and listening” or stating, “I understand how you feel.” A parent emphasized that empathy was necessary “because when you come to cases like that, you are already feeling down and depressed cause it’s your children. And you know, not every ACS worker has children in hand, so I don’t like coming in places alone” (PAR). An advocate related: “I look like the guy who understands, the guy who gets it, the big brother, or whatever you want to describe me as...if you use drugs, I know because I used to sell drugs before. If you’ve been locked up, I’ve been locked up, I know, I’ve been through the system, I’ve been in foster care, I’ve been in group homes...” (PA).

One advocate shared their empathy, “I understand that you are going through some stuff. I don’t even have to...sometimes I don’t have to ask them what their situation is, I could read it by how they are feeling. And I show them that I am there for them and the safety of their child.” This sense of validation and acceptance and feeling of being understood were frequently experienced and mentioned by the parent participants.

An advocate’s own personal experience furthered the camaraderie established between them and parents since “an advocate who has personal experience, who has personal hurt, who’s been hurt from ACS” could relate to parents on a deeper level and make parents feel like “she’s still one of us” (PAR). The perceived sameness of an advocate also communicated passion and sincerity since “you have to be a parent...if you haven’t been through that pain of, you know, being a mother, being a father, you know what I’m saying? Where are you to feel somebody’s pain?” (PAR).

Parent advocates’ personal experience within the child welfare system added a deeper level of understanding, with one parent articulating, “they [PAs] lived through some of the things I am going through. To me, it makes a difference” (PAR). Parents especially found their experiences resonant with those of an advocate because “it would be kind of hard for someone to be empathetic if they didn’t have kids...dealing with a system that deals with kids and families” (PAR).

Critical Consciousness

PAs embodied critical consciousness, which entailed recognizing the power dynamics and inequalities within them, challenging them, and recognizing their role in effecting change. PAs challenged unacknowledged stigma, discrimination, and bias by advocating on parents’ behalf, empowering parents, and highlighting and elevating parents’ voice.

Given the numerous professional representatives present at the safety meeting, including “the caseworker, the supervisor, and another person who is recording, facilitating the meeting,” parents could feel outnumbered and helpless without the support of someone able to advance their interests, especially as “you feel like you’re going in there alone and everybody’s sitting across that table from you, and they’re not there for you” (PAR). The comfort of having competent support available was articulated by one parent who admitted, “At the time, in my mind, CPS was against me the whole time. So, him [PA] to be in my corner was a great thing” (PAR). Another parent recalled, “It was like me having a voice.” A CPS worker similarly added,

The parent advocate can be [a] parent’s voice. Sometimes they can kind of lose their voice when there are so many players at the table. So, to really have someone very vocal and strong regarding the parent, it gives the parent a little more power to feel a little more powerful in the situation.

CPS workers generally agreed that PAs made a “tremendous difference” by helping clarify a family’s predicament and “make sure that [their] rights are not being violated.” PAs were remembered for “sticking up and fighting for the parent, not just going along with everything ACS is saying. It makes me happy to know or see an advocate actually fighting for their client” (CPS).

Relying on their lived expertise, PAs coached parents to voice their concerns and empowered them to speak up. One advocate revealed the instruction they offered parents:

You don’t allow any conference to go on without you being there. You don’t let anyone make decisions for you without you being there, so it’s important that you be in the conference to voice your opinion, or to tell exactly what happened—your side of the story.

Another PA aptly communicated the sentiment behind empowering parents as follows:

They have a voice and...they have a right and that they will be heard. Regardless of whatever they think, they will be heard, and that’s important. You want to make sure that when you go to a meeting that pertains to your child, your opinion does matter.

Rather than allowing parents to languish in defeatism, PAs wanted to:

...make sure the parent understands what's going on in the conference and to empower them a little bit, get them to advocate for their kids. Not to go thinking that is such a bad thing that their kids have to be taken away and they can't do anything. Because sometimes they don't realize that they could do something, and to encourage those that are struggling (PA).

Bringing their own experience to assist parents, PAs could reflect in their own, non-professional way and transform the shaming, stigmatizing, and disempowering experience to one that was empowering parents and building them up. A PA shared the following: "I try to express to parents that it's nothing shameful about it, that you can look at it in a positive view." Such words had positive effects on parents who felt they were "empowered" and "provided a sense of confidence..." (PAR).

Discussion

This study is the first to delve into the deeper understanding of the uniqueness of parent advocates' role as they work with families affected by the child welfare system. The study identified several aspects of the parent advocate role which made it distinctive and different from other, non-peer staff roles. This uniqueness was characterized by a combination of interrelated aspects, such as non-professionalized peer support, experiential expertise, unique identification, authenticity, legitimized empathy and understanding, and critical consciousness. Parent advocates were distinctively positioned to build trusting relationships with families because of their shared lived experiences with the child welfare system and associated stressors. Lived experience manifested as a multi-dimensional factor encompassing parenthood, direct involvement with the child welfare system, specific socio-economic status, and geographic (locale/neighborhood) background. Such experiential relatedness made the relationship stronger, supported and facilitated mutuality and sense of understanding, and built solidarity.

The themes identified in the study findings are supported by the empowerment theory and a strength-based approach that position parent advocates as an important source of support to parents affected by the child welfare system. Advocates embodied critical consciousness, which entailed recognizing the power dynamics, empowering parents, strengthening their abilities, and elevating their voice, needs, and concerns. Furthermore, the unique qualities of parent advocates—experiential expertise and the sense of identification—could be explained through the self-determination theory that relies on unique competence and skillset of parent advocates and emphasizes the relatedness, connection, and support.

As evidenced by this study's findings, parents valued advocates' non-professionalized peer support, which was rich in experiential expertise and knowledge, exerted no power over parents, and was not seen as part of an adversarial legal system. This support dynamic circumvented the inherent power imbalance often present between child welfare workers or other professionals and parents (Dumbrill, 2006; Saar-Heiman, 2023) and fostered a more equitable and supportive relationship. These findings align closely with previous research, indicating a consistent recognition of the value of non-professionalized peer support among parents and highlighting its ability to authentically engage and support parents (Berrick et al., 2011; Cohen & Canan, 2006; Lalayants, 2014; Lalayants et al., 2015; Saar-Heiman et al., 2024).

Furthermore, authenticity, empathy, and understanding made parent advocates a credible source of support. The value of PA support was evident in providing a point to which parents can turn to feel understood and supported. The powerful sense of identification with the PA—somebody who has been there, somebody who has experienced whatever the parent is going through, was unique and critical to the PA role. Their support was strength-centered and parent-focused to elevate parents' voices. Their distinct critical consciousness led to empowerment and advocacy on behalf of parents while challenging stigma, discrimination, and bias within child

welfare. This finding was similarly acknowledged by international scholars, who emphasized that forming partnerships with parents with lived experience was empowering and created opportunities for transformative change, with a central focus on power dynamics (Saar-Heiman & Gupta, 2024).

Implications

Several benefits were apparent in the unique role that PAs played within the child welfare agency, pointing to important implications. For example, their role in engaging parents that are stigmatized and marginalized, by the way of their experiential expertise, unique identification, authenticity, and legitimized empathy and understanding, can be of ultimate importance.

PAs with lived child welfare experience could add value to child welfare agencies by providing personal input and insights into important issues and challenges that families may be experiencing. Integrating the voices of parent advocates with lived experience can help agencies understand how their decisions affect those receiving services. Parent advocates touched by the child welfare system have a unique insight into the resources and supports needed to create thriving families; they know what it feels like to move through a system, to be scrutinized, and to be expected to comply with system requirements. They know what helped them and what would have helped them. Having on-going, active access to feedback provided by parents with lived experience (i.e., parent advocates) would serve as a rubric for child welfare reform, efficacy, and accountability. Their feedback can shape and scope child welfare program and policy design. This would further elucidate the positive impact that PAs could have on the child welfare field.

As a growing workforce in the field of child welfare, efforts to recruit, build, nurture, and advance the PA role are needed. Child welfare agencies should prioritize genuine engagement and representation of parents with lived experiences and proactively recruit candidates with such unique experiences. The circumstances that shape a parent advocate's lived experience often

involve arduous and complex challenges that can significantly impact their life trajectories. These challenges may include court involvement, family crises, personal instability, and obstacles to employment. Jurisdictions must advocate for the repeal of statutory regulations that prohibit parents with previous court involvement from seeking employment in child welfare services. Given the variation in state law and hiring policies across jurisdictions, addressing this issue may require legal advocacy. Initiatives aimed at recruiting parent advocates with lived experience should be multifaceted to facilitate effective scouting and engagement.

Moreover, offering support groups and tailored training and coaching for parents while they are still receiving child welfare intervention scaffolds the building of community, collective voice, and individual efficacy. Participating in community advocacy networks invites ongoing alliance between child welfare agency staff and advocates with lived experience. Operationalizing these intentional intersections bolsters recruitment and familiarizes agency staff with the lens and language of child welfare advocacy. Additionally, providing resources to parent advocates employed within child welfare agencies, such as responsive leadership and advancement opportunities, would support retention.

To retain and support the authenticity of parent advocates' lived experience, there is perhaps an inevitability of greater professionalization and formalization of roles. However, the question remains: What are the evolutions that would keep the authenticity of the parent advocates role without losing its value or its purpose?

The debate about professionalization and formalization of peer support is complex and has been ongoing in the field of mental health (Mead & Macneil, 2004). The formalization of the parent advocate workforce may give status and recognition to the invaluable role and that their role should become part of service provision in child welfare. Furthermore, as in other fields, professionalization and a dedicated union have enabled many workforces to advocate for

training, fair pay and working conditions, recognition of their expertise, and the development of educational opportunities, which could also benefit the PA workforce.

Yet, the advantages of such a “professionalized” role should be carefully considered alongside the potential risk of diminishing the identification and equality in the peer-to-peer relationship (Mead & Macneil, 2004). It is extremely important to keep the uniqueness of the PA role so that it does not lose its identity and degrade into a support role for case workers and other child welfare staff. Having a staff identity could work against the notion of peer support and “sameness.” There is a fine line between professionalization and maintaining authenticity and credibility. Professionalization could create a perceived difference between parents and advocates, with parents feeling less of a kinship with advocates. With increasing attention given to implementing parent peer support programs, it is critical that lived experience work is appropriately understood to ensure ongoing development protects the authenticity of the roles and focuses on best practice.

Nevertheless, the reality of advancement in child welfare settings often requires completion of collegiate coursework as a prerequisite for professional promotion. Without a comparable rubric to verify and validate the skillset and acumen related to peer support, a conundrum arises: either peer support must be formalized, or those engaged in the work are precluded from advancement opportunities. Adaptable strategies to maintain the effectiveness and authenticity of parent advocates despite this conflict could include providing access to comprehensive training and support, offering subsidized and individualized professional development, as well as establishing a universally accredited peer support curriculum.

Study Limitations and Strengths

The study findings should be considered in light of several important limitations. It should be noted that the purpose of this study was exploratory, relying on a convenience sample

and qualitative self-reports of participants. While convenience sampling offers practical advantages such as accessibility to the study population, it may introduce several limitations that are important to acknowledge. For example, the sampling bias inherent to convenience sampling may affect the representativeness. Parents who were willing to participate in the study may not reflect the diversity of the entire population of parents affected by the child welfare system. Furthermore, participants who self-selected to participate in a convenience sample may possess certain characteristics or experiences that differ from those who did not participate. This sampling bias could affect the validity and generalizability of the study findings due to the lack of randomness in participant selection.

Even though the qualitative design, sample size, and convenience sampling method inherently limit the data, we were able to interview groups of diverse key stakeholders and gauge their perceptions of the unique characteristics of PA roles and reached thematic saturation. A notable strength of this study was that the qualitative design and the in-person data collection allowed for open and honest discussion and thus permitted for a substantial amount of rich data to be collected and analyzed. This study was the first to explore the unique characteristics of parent advocates' role as peer supporters in the field of child welfare. There are many valuable insights gained about the value of their lived experience and the uniqueness of their role. Implications of advancing the PA workforce by formalizing and professionalizing its role within the child welfare field are discussed, which could be relevant and useful to other child welfare agencies in their decisions and efforts to establish, support, and grow their parent peer support workforce. Nonetheless, further research on the impacts of parent advocates' unique contributions is needed. Building solid research evidence will further provide validation and recognition of the value of PAs' unique contributions. The ongoing research, evaluation, and

sharing of experience and service descriptions is needed to inform further development of PA workforce.

Summary

Given the increasing popularity of parent peer support programs in child welfare services, it is crucial to understand the unique role parent advocates occupy, rooted in the elements identified in this study. Child welfare agencies need to define and make efforts to sustain those unique elements of the PA role that leads to different ways of working with, supporting, understanding, and thinking about parents' and families' experiences in the child welfare system. It is important to establish mechanisms for integrating PA insights into policy development, program design, and decision-making processes, as well as strategies for ongoing feedback and collaboration with parent advocates. This will support the continuous improvement of services and ensure that the needs and experiences of families are accurately reflected and addressed.

Empowerment and advocacy are pivotal tools that PAs bring to the field of child welfare. Their role is expected to stimulate constructive dialogues, necessitate the deconstruction of parents' experiences, and facilitate the exchange of insights with child welfare staff. Parent advocacy carries the transformative potential to dismantle stigma and bias inherent in child welfare and propel the much-needed cultural change within these agencies. By nurturing the growth of a parent peer support identity, agencies and systems can create a platform for PAs to share their unique perspectives. However, it is crucial to remain steadfast in upholding the core elements of peer support while embarking on the journey to expand, formalize, and professionalize the parent advocacy workforce. Striking a balance between professionalization and maintaining the unique characteristics and authenticity of the PA role is a critical consideration for the future of parent peer support in child welfare.

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