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Evaluating Family Preservation in Nevada: A University-State Agency Collaboration

Christine Bitonti and Joy Salmon

In this paper, concepts from the emerging family-centered paradigm in child welfare and mental health are applied to evaluative research in family preservation: the ecological perspective, enhancement of competence, a consumer orientation, and collaborative relationships. The experience of family preservation research collaborators from the School of Social Work at the University of Nevada, Reno and the Nevada Division of Child and Family Services illustrate these concepts. The researchers apply the theory of isomorphism to the research endeavor to produce eight principles of effective research partnerships derived from family-centered concepts and their own experiences.

A critical shift in the conceptualization, organization and delivery of human services is taking place within many fields of practice, most notably child welfare (Kinney, Strand, Hagerup, & Bruner, 1994; Pecora, Whittaker, & Maluccio, 1992) and mental health (Knitzer, 1993; Rapp & Wintersteen, 1989). This paradigm shift has impacted practice at all levels: policy, administration, training, and client services. While little has been written about how these new ideas influence the research endeavor, the potential impact is considerable. This paper concerns the application of concepts from this new wave of thinking to the practice of evaluative research in the Family Preservation Services program in Nevada.

Sometimes termed family-centered practice in child welfare (Pecora et al., 1992) and the empowerment or strengths perspective in mental health (Rapp & Wintersteen, 1989), the paradigm represents both alternative ways of viewing and interacting with clients and new approaches to developing and implementing service delivery systems. While some aspects of the models differ from one field of practice to another, there are commonalities across disciplines and systems of care (Petr & Allen, 1995). A systems perspective provides a unifying framework for understanding the common themes in this new service paradigm (Becvar & Becvar, 1988).

The first commonality is an ecological perspective at all levels of practice and service delivery: the client, the family, the client-serving organization, and the community (Pecora et al., 1992). An ecological perspective involves the acknowledgment of the context within which one lives

and acts and the relationships that exist and impact upon one's well-being and life outcomes (Germain & Gitterman, 1980). Human services delivered within an ecological perspective are holistic, relational, contextual, reciprocal, and relativistic. The family, in particular, is recognized as the context providing relationship and attachment for its members. Cultural, economic, and social communities are acknowledged as contexts within which a family moves and defines itself. Service providers and systems of care are recognized as creators of the context for change.

A second commonality is a focus on the *enhancement of competence* (Harris, 1995; Kinney et al., 1994; Maluccio, 1981; Pecora et al., 1992). Client assessments in this model encompass not only the identification of risks and vulnerabilities, but also how individual and family strengths, resources, and capabilities moderate these risks and can be used to facilitate change. The assessments are descriptive rather than causally evaluative. They acknowledge the existence, complementarity, and utility of dichotomies--such as problems and possibilities--and thus, enhance a sense of hope and self-efficacy in both client and worker.

Third, the emergence of a *consumer orientation* to service provision insures that services are responsive to the individual needs of a client as defined by the client. This orientation is typified by the co-creation of service goals and methods by client and worker (Balassone, 1994; Center for Study of Social Policy, 1994) and often results in provision of services in natural settings (home and community) rather than the artificial environment of a worker's office. In addition, identified client needs and desired outcomes drive service delivery, not the worker's preferred therapeutic model or approach (Rapp & Poertner, 1988).

The fourth commonality across systems of care is the promotion of *collaborative relationships* throughout all phases of service design and delivery: between client and worker, among staff, between management and line staff, among social service organizations, and between universities and agencies, particularly in the evaluative phase of practice (Kinney et al., 1994; Knitzer, 1993; Kutash, Duchnowski, & Sondheim, 1994). Collaborations of this nature are characterized by reciprocity and recursiveness within a systems framework, a cornerstone of the new service delivery paradigm.

Consistent with elements of the paradigm shift in the human services, staff from Nevada's Division of Child and Family Services (DCFS) and the School of Social Work, University of Nevada, Reno sought to implement a model of collaborative research that would overcome problems encountered in typical "town and gown" partnerships of this nature. Historically, some of the difficulties have stemmed from differences in the organizational cultures of universities and service agencies and differing expectations and needs of the partners involved (Abramczyk, Raymond, & Barbell, 1992).

Peterson (1993) has identified four areas of potential conflict between human service agency and academic cultures: priorities, values, processes, and focus of results. He found agencies

to be oriented toward service rather than research and education. Agencies tend to value immediate answers to questions and short term vision rather than durable answers and long term vision. They tend to be bureaucratic and multidisciplinary, rather than entrepreneurial and undisciplined. Approaches to problem identification and resolution are comprehensive and pragmatic in the agency environment, narrow and theoretical in academia. Research results are utilized by agencies to implement entire systems of care within a political context. Universities utilize results to demonstrate the effectiveness of a specific model of intervention in a non-political arena.

Recognizing and honoring the validity of these differing cultural perspectives provides a foundation for effective working relationships between service agency personnel and academics. To ignore the differences or minimize their potential impact on the collaborative research process is to invite frustration at best, failure of the endeavor at worst.

Background

Much of the literature concerning agency-university collaborations has focused on the joint provision of staff and student training and development of field placement opportunities (see, for example, Briar, Hansen, & Harris, 1991; Rabin, Savaya, & Frank, 1994). A renewed commitment in social work education to improve services to public sector clients has fueled the growing interest in collaborative efforts of this nature (Grossman, Laughlin, & Specht, 1992).

Less attention has been paid to research collaborations than to those focused on training and placement. However, the growing demand for accountability in human services has provided the impetus for new partnerships in this arena as well. There is little question that research is critical to policy and program development (Wodarski, 1994). While a substantial research base is available to guide practice and decision-making in the child welfare arena (Pecora et al., 1992), much more is needed.

Successful agency-university research collaborations have occurred in the health and mental health fields, among others. Across the country, schools of social work are engaged in collaborative research ventures in a state hospital (Mokuau & Ewalt, 1993), a Department of Veterans Affairs medical center (Rathbone-McCuan, Harbert, & Fulton, 1991), and a variety of health care settings (Bogo, Wells, Abbey, Bergman, Chandler, Embleton, Guirgis, Huot, McNeill, Prentice, Stapleton, Shekter-Wolfson, & Urman, 1992). Reports of these projects emphasize shared decision-making and governance in the design and implementation of research, developmental stages in the collaborative process, and the importance of research utilization.

Specific problems that have emerged in public sector-academic research collaborations include, among others, insufficient lines of communication between public agencies and universities.

"Few states have consistent systems or processes whereby communication linkages are established and nourished" (McFarland, Diblasio, & Belcher, 1993, p. 429-30). Even when these linkages occur, miscommunication between researchers and program staff is common. The language of academia and research is often confusing to agency personnel, whose concerns about program implementation may seem trivial to a researcher hoping to obtain important theoretical findings.

Past involvement in research on the part of agency staff has proved, at times, a disincentive to collaboration when workers' efforts (often considerable) have gone unrewarded and few attempts have been made to utilize research findings in any practical way (Rathbone-McCuan, et al., 1991). While academic researchers are often focused on publication of findings, workers want results that can be translated into improved practice. If findings are too esoteric for application in the field, workers may feel used and unlikely to participate in future research.

What appears to be missing in the literature relating to agency-university research collaborations is a unifying conceptual framework. The authors are proposing that features of the emerging family-centered paradigm be adapted to the research context. The concept of isomorphism is useful in conceptualizing this application of practice principles to research.

Isomorphism in Practice and Research

The concept of isomorphism suggests that connecting systems have parallel interactional processes that both mirror and influence one another. "Sequences of interaction and more broadly, contexts themselves, become replicated at different levels of a system" (Liddle & Saba, 1985, p. 37). Liddle and Saba describe the isomorphic nature of training and therapy by the following questions, "'What is there that is the 'same' about training and therapy?' and 'How are the elements of each contained in the other?'...the 'sameness-in-differentness' principle" (p. 30).

When research and practice are viewed systemically, each informs the other. The same isomorphic questions posed for training and therapy can be applied to evaluation and practice: "What is there that is the same about evaluation and practice?" "How are the elements of each contained in the other?"

One could argue that each enterprise entails phases of assessment and intervention and that communication within both the practice and research arenas involve metamessages--covert meanings not always consistent with articulated policies and procedures. Both consumers of evaluation research and consumers of child welfare practice have experienced their respective services as deficit-oriented, intrusive, and punitive/blaming, resulting in defensive and self-protective responses.

Actively constructing a model of evaluation that supports the development of self-efficacy and actual competence and is both friendly and useful to consumers--in this case, line workers, supervisors, and program managers--may contribute to the replication of this pattern in the arena of practice. The reverse may be true as well. Practice paradigms that are ecological in perspective and consumer-driven, competence-based, and collaborative in nature invite evaluative models that reflect the same principles. An understanding of isomorphism is critical to the intentional creation of systems of care and systems of evaluation that are complimentary rather than conflictual. In the field of family preservation, where the family-centered, strengths-based paradigm is applied almost universally, evaluation approaches must mirror practice to be effective.

Family Preservation Research in Nevada

The development of Nevada's family preservation research project followed the sequence of events identified by Harris (1995) in a study of social work school-agency partnerships, beginning with a significant event that prompts communication about the possibility of collaboration. A university researcher at the School of Social Work, University of Nevada, Reno approached personnel in the Division of Family Services, inquiring about research needs of the Division.

Possibilities for joint projects were identified. Key leaders engaged in dialogue, negotiating elements of the collaboration. The purpose and vision of the project were articulated: a study of the nature and impact of the state's four year-old family preservation program would be undertaken. Resource needs were defined; timelines were established; and the resources were obtained. In true collaborative fashion, both the university and the state agency contributed substantially to the fledgling effort. Funding was obtained by the researcher through a faculty research development program, and the Division provided management and clerical staff to assist the university researcher in conceptualizing the project and obtaining access to data (in the form of closed case files).

The partnership was implemented formally through a memo of understanding between the Division and the School of Social Work. Supervisory and line staff were apprised of the project's intent and methods, although they were minimally involved at this stage due to the nonobtrusive nature of the research design. They were asked at various points to provide information that would enable findings to be interpreted within an appropriate context. The final report of the first phase of the project was shared with staff at all program sites and was subsequently utilized in program decision-making.

Division staff and the university researcher had agreed that the initial study would focus on the considerable data that had been collected in the program's first four years, since not much was known about characteristics of those families who successfully avoided placement and those who did not. A systematic review of closed case records revealed useful information within a

formative research framework. However, summative-level questions--those of most interest to policy-makers--could not be answered in a retrospective, cross-sectional study of this nature. Additional prospective research would be needed to accomplish this aim.

The second phase of research was planned in connection with a grant application submitted by the Division to the National Center on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCCAN) for enhanced family preservation services in Nevada. The grant was subsequently awarded for a 17-month demonstration period. The evaluative component of this project includes experimental and follow-up elements and calls for collection of a variety of outcome data in addition to out-of-home placement, the only outcome measure possible in the original study. The following outcome measures are being utilized: the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983), Family Satisfaction Scale (Olson, McCubbin, Barnes, Larsen, Muxen, & Wilson, 1992), and the Family Risk Scales (Magura, Moses, & Jones, 1987).

A third stage of this collaborative research will involve integration of the project into the state's five year plan for family preservation and support services with a longitudinal design. At this stage of development, the most useful of the outcome measures will be built into an ongoing system of monitoring and evaluation.

Because of increased rigor of design in the second phase of the project, the university researcher and Division staff faced new challenges--chiefly, how to involve supervisory and line staff more directly in the research effort, since they would have to collect much of the data. Communication and joint problem-solving became all that much more critical to the success of the collaborative venture. Unfortunately, the federal grant application timeframe (approximately six weeks) allowed for little involvement of direct service staff in the conceptualization of the research project. In retrospect, this circumstance proved a critical (but not fatal) flaw in the implementation of this collaborative effort.

Principles of Effective Research Collaborations

To identify key principles in agency-university partnerships, the authors drew on the concept of isomorphism in relation to the four overarching themes in contemporary child welfare practice as well as their own collaboration experiences--both positive and negative. Although far from exhaustive, this set of guidelines is meant to stimulate discussion of the issues involved and, hopefully, motivate others to seek out joint research opportunities.

Ecological perspective. Just as effective family preservation practice must take into account the contexts of family and community, *a successful research collaboration must be systemic and holistic in approach*, taking into consideration the macro environment in which it is embedded. Nevada's NCCAN demonstration project involves seven partners, all of whom have been involved in various ways in the evaluation process. These partners include three county agencies (a child protection agency, a county juvenile services department, and the health district) along with two state agencies (the Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Abuse and the Bureau

of Community Health Services) in addition to DCFS (the state child welfare agency) and the UNR School of Social Work. All of these entities have an investment in the development of family preservation services. The three frontline investigative agencies play key roles in the identification and referral of families in need of intensive home-based services. Their active participation in defining the project's target population and referral procedures was critical to the implementation phase of the project as was their support and sanctioning of staff training in a new risk assessment tool to be utilized in the research.

Second, *internal organizational support for research is a prerequisite to successful collaboration*. This principle is so basic it can easily be ignored, creating problems in research implementation in the future. Both university support for faculty involvement in this applied research effort and agency support for staff participation in data collection were obtained prior to project implementation. The researcher held discussions with both the School Director and College Dean about the difficulties inherent in publishing applied research findings. Possibilities for scholarly output were identified, and the project was justified on the basis of its consistency with the university's newly articulated policy on community outreach.

At DCFS, discussions were held between the mid-level manager charged with implementing the demonstration project and the Division's Deputy Director who approved both the intent of the research and the staff resources necessary to carry it out. The Deputy Director verbalized support for an ongoing evaluation of Family Preservation that would be carried out in stages.

Enhancement of competence. Typically, external program evaluations are perceived by staff as a means to monitor professional activities and uncover evidence of the program's failure to obtain desired results. Even when program successes are observed and noted, the identified deficiencies seem to draw the most attention, particularly on the part of management and policy-makers. Further, workers perceive that research tasks bearing little relevance to their daily activities are imposed upon them at great inconvenience.

A competence-based research collaboration suggests that *the focus of inquiry should be on program strengths and successes and the identification of opportunities for program enhancement*. Workers should be drawn into the process of defining research objectives as early as possible. Their information needs should be considered throughout the conceptualization and design phases of the project. Whenever possible, outcome instruments selected for use in the study should be useful for practice.

In the Nevada NCCAN project, the Family Risk Scales (FRS) were selected as a means of documenting reduction of risk when it occurred in families and to help workers focus on key areas for intervention that would likely increase their success. It is as yet unclear to what extent the workers find this instrument helpful. Early feedback suggests that some staff are neutral toward the FRS, completing the form in a perfunctory way. While it may not add to their sense

of competence, the instrument does not appear to hinder their work. The use of another instrument, the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) is far more controversial. The CBCL is viewed as intrusive (because a parent must provide the information) and inconsistent with the program's solution-oriented framework (because it focuses on problem areas).

Had existing line and supervisory staff been more actively involved in the process of selecting outcome measures for this project, perhaps instruments could have been located with greater perceived clinical utility, thereby enhancing worker competence and, at the same time, improving the reliability of data collection. Continued training in the both the intent of the research and application of the solution-focused model of treatment may help to change staff opinions about the use of standardized outcome measures. In time, discussions about the meaning of study results may help workers see the benefits of their participation in program evaluation.

Consumer orientation. As practice moves toward a consumer focus (Tower, 1994), so must evaluative research. No longer can academics focus solely on the publication possibilities inherent in a particular endeavor if they are to achieve effective collaborations with public sector agencies. The needs of a number of distinct audiences must be considered: administrators, policymakers, clients, other professionals, and service funders (Ballasone, 1994). *Collaborative research must be consumer-oriented and user-friendly.*

One of the ways in which academic researchers can become more consumer-oriented is to recognize the political environment in which human service agencies operate, preparing data in many different forms, depending on the audience. In the case of Nevada's NCCAN demonstration project, the information needs of the federal funding agency differ in some respects from those of the Division's top management who must sell the program to the legislature on the basis of cost effectiveness and those of program staff who are interested in maximizing their effectiveness with particular clients. Chambers, Wedel, and Rodwell (1992) suggest that consumer-oriented research must fit the program objectives, be realistic, and incorporate both quantitative and qualitative measures of effectiveness.

Researchers should adopt a developmental approach--long advocated by Whittaker and Pecora (1981) and others in child welfare--recognizing that agencies need time to develop their capacities to conduct and utilize research. This approach entails planning studies in phases that correspond to the expanding information needs of the organization and to growing research sophistication among staff. Thomas (1978) observed more than a decade ago that developmental research represents "the single most appropriate model of research in social work because it consists of methods directed explicitly toward the analysis, development, and evaluation of the very technical means by which social work objectives are achieved--namely, its intervention technology" (p. 480).

The first phase of family preservation research in Nevada involved an exploratory, nonobtrusive study of closed case records--not as rigorous a design as some university researchers might desire, but clearly responsive to the agency's immediate needs and level of readiness for research. Asking such questions as: "What are the characteristics of clients served by the Family Preservation program?" and "What are the differences in patterns of service delivery for successful versus unsuccessful cases?" provided valuable formative-level insights on which subsequent, and more sophisticated, phases of research are now being planned and executed.

A consumer-oriented approach also suggests that *researchers should demonstrate flexibility in the implementation of designs*. Modifications may be required in response to unanticipated field constraints. In fact, Nevada's NCCAN project experienced one of the serious implementation problems identified by Haapala, Pecora, and Fraser (1991): lack of full participation and support from referring workers, which resulted in an insufficient case flow to insure an adequate comparison group. It became necessary to reduce expectations about the possibility of achieving an experimental design, emphasizing the longitudinal aspects of the study instead.

Collaborative relationships. In the new child welfare paradigm, collaboration is not simply a new "buzzword." It defines the essence of practice, just as it must for effective research, particularly in the family preservation arena. The old model of university-based research in which the academic selected tools, imposed them upon staff, collected and analyzed data in isolation, and drew conclusions with little consideration of context is unlikely to yield useful information for those who need it most. Now, *academic researchers and program staff at all levels must communicate openly and directly* to identify researchable questions, design studies, and solve problems that emerge along the way. They must forge a common language--sufficiently technical, but free of unnecessary jargon--that facilitates direct involvement of all parties at each stage of the process and promotes two-way communication.

In Nevada, ownership of the process and products of family preservation research is shared jointly by DCFS and the UNR School of Social Work as Mokuau and Ewalt (1993) suggest they should be. When information about the research project is needed--as it was recently in statewide planning meetings for comprehensive family support and preservation services, the DCFS program manager and the university researcher presented jointly. Each partner has a unique role to play, of course, but both perspectives are needed to convey an accurate picture of this research endeavor. In collaborative presentations, the DCFS manager generally focuses on the purpose of the study, how results will be utilized in planning, and how the project fits into the Division's long-range vision for program evaluation. The researcher addresses technical aspects of design, measurement, and data analysis.

The university researcher in Nevada's family preservation research project is not isolated from line and supervisory personnel as is sometimes the case in university-state agency collaborations. Time and distance constraints do pose challenges in this regard as programs are

approximately 30 to 50 miles from the university. However, research team members have visited all program sites and have met on several occasions with supervisors as a group. Initially, the researcher trained staff directly in the use of outcome measures and returns to the field periodically to reinforce their proper administration and to answer questions about the project. In addition, staff members have called the university directly with pressing issues and questions. Staff have been vocal and honest in expressing observations about the data collection process in which they are significantly involved.

The final--and perhaps most important--principle of effective research collaboration is the notion that *all parties involved must engage in an overt process of negotiating needs and interests*. While the university researcher may adopt a consumer orientation in relation to agency management and staff, such a stance does not preclude a focus on issues and needs important to the academic. On the contrary, in an effective collaborative process, those needs will be acknowledged and addressed.

The process of negotiation is made easier when the academic has participated significantly in the practice world and understands the culture of the agency and when agency staff have taught courses or served as field instructors in academic programs. Regardless of the past experiences of the parties involved, however, recognition of the differing cultures of state agencies and universities is essential to the success of the research endeavor. Nothing can substitute for honest discussion and debate about the technical, ethical, practical, and political issues involved in research and the expectations of those who are most closely involved.

Summary

The recognition within child welfare practice and policy development that new models of intervention are needed--models that involve clients as active partners in the helping process and forge new collaborations in the macro environment--is a refreshing trend in the field. The authors contend that the paradigm shift occurring in the practice arena must be mirrored in the evaluative process in order to maximize research effectiveness.

Researchers and agency personnel have only to look to the specific components of the changing ideology to find guidance for creating vital, relevant research collaborations. Adopting an ecological perspective and a competence-based, consumer-oriented research strategy that recognizes the respective research partners as equals appears a potentially useful strategy for breaking down traditional barriers in state agency-university research collaborations.

Novel solutions for emerging problems in these collaborative efforts must be sought: 1) how to effectively involve direct line staff who must often carry out the data collection in an outcome-oriented study, 2) how to recognize all the likely consumers of the research and anticipate their questions and information needs, 3) how to communicate effectively despite considerable geographical distances between partners, and 4) how to respond to changing

conditions in the macro environment. Nevada's partners in family preservation research have not found all the answers to these questions, but the commitment to do so propels the long-term research project forward and keeps investment in the process high.

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