

1999

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### Recommended Citation

Holosko, Michael J. and Holosko, D. Ann (1999) "What Have We Learned from Articles Published in the Family Preservation Journal?," *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol4/iss1/5>

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# What Have We Learned from Articles Published in the *Family Preservation Journal*?

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Michael J. Holosko and D. Ann Holosko

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*This exploratory descriptive study presents a content analyses of all (N=22) Family Preservation Journal (FPJ) articles published from its inception (1995) until today. Three raters independently used an analysis template to ascertain trends from these articles and assessed information about their purposes, methods, and findings/implications. The main findings were less than half of the articles were deemed as 'research'; few used standardized or outcome measures; none compared family preservation to another method; descriptive knowledge was more likely to be generated; and the articles were primarily targeted to practitioners and other researchers. Given the relatively short history of FPJ, the majority of these findings were considered typical and consistent with the literature. The recommendations call for more comprehensive practice descriptions, more research, and more rigorous research-oriented studies.*

State-of-the-art reviews of social work journal publications have proven beneficial in discerning trends and issues about who reads the journals (Grinnell Jr., & Royer, 1983; Karger, 1983; Penka & Kirk, 1991); methodologies used by their researchers (Greenwood, 1957; Tripodi, 1984); practitioner treatment methods (Glisson, 1995; Gorey, 1996); and the role of journals in the development of the professional knowledge base (Fraser, Taylor, Jackson, and O'Jack, 1991; Lindsey and Kirk, 1992; McMahon, Reisch and Patti, 1991).

In general, all such reviews are based on the premise that professional journals are an appropriate forum from which a profession's research and knowledge base can be determined. The extent to which this premise is true is certainly questionable; however, such forums do provide for an objective (meaning checkable) point of departure for these analyses.

The reviews cited above scrutinized a number of professional journals over a time frame (5 - 20 years), and assessed social work publications in both core, e.g., *Journal of Social Service Research*, *Social Service Review*, *Social Work*, etc., as well as related affiliated journals, e.g., *Child Welfare*, *Families in Society*, *Administration in Social Work*, etc. Conspicuously absent in this literature were reviews of single subject journals over time, to discern their research trends, issues, and development.

The purpose of this study was to conduct an analysis of the *Family Preservation Journal (FPJ)* in order to answer the question—"What have we learned from FPJ publications?"<sup>1</sup> The editorial board of *FPJ* inspired this initiative as they wanted to determine trends reflected in the journal, given its relatively short history (4 years), and given the importance of family preservation in current social policy, programs, and practice in the U.S.A. The objectives of this exploratory descriptive study were

1. to assess the purpose, method and findings of studies in the *FPJ*,
2. to assess issues related to research and practice knowledge, and
3. to offer recommendations to authors based on this review.

## Method

### The Sample

Five *FPJs* were analyzed in this study. These included one published in 1995 (Summer), one in 1996 (Winter), two in 1997 (Volume 2, Nos. 1 and 2), and one in 1998 (Vol. 3, No. 1). These represented all of the *FPJs* published to date, and in this set, there were a total of 22 refereed articles (N=22).

### Analysis of Articles

The authors expanded on an analysis framework developed by Rosen, Proctor, and Staudt (1998), who reviewed 13 social work journals (from 1993-97), which included N=1,849 articles. This study [the present one] developed an analysis template of 19 structured and open-ended questions based on the three related phases of the research process: purpose → method → findings. The purpose was assessed according to its clarity and specification and whether it was stated or not. The method was assessed from the standpoint of research vs. non-research<sup>2</sup>, its clarity, instrumentation, design, replication, how data were collected, family preservation intervention comparisons, use of outcome measures, and degree of specificity of outcomes. The findings were analyzed according to specificity of implications, dissemination audiences, types of knowledge<sup>3</sup>, and the main things learned from the study.

### Data Collection

Three readers (N=3) were each given a set of all 22 articles [with the author's names deleted], definitions of terms used in the analyses, and a training session. The latter took about 1.5 hours and focused on using the template (with 4 social work articles not used in the present review), the importance of working independently, and confidentiality. None of the raters had previously read any of the *FPJ* articles they assessed. After all of the 22



articles were independently analyzed by the raters, a 94% degree of inter-rater reliability was determined across the 19 assessed items in the analysis framework. Subsequently, all members of the research project met and discussed the discrepancies. After some discussion, all unanimously agreed on the reassessed discrepancy items.

## Results

Table 1 presents the type of research and methods of the 22 articles assessed.

**Table 1**  
**Type of Research and Methods Used: *Family Preservation Journals (FPJs)* 1995 - 1998**

I. Type	Percentage (%)
a. Research	41
b. Non-research	59
II. Methods Used	
a. Quantitative	18
b. Qualitative	64
c. Both Quantitative & Qualitative	18

By further breaking down "research type" in Table 1, Table 2 subcategories the research designs used, as well as the non-research articles.

In regard to the research articles in Table 2 ('Research Designs'), in 77% of these articles, one could not replicate the interventions used [as described] in these studies, 23% used standardized measures (on average 2 per research article, when noted) and 41% used outcome measures (on average 3 per study, when noted).

**Table 2**  
**Research vs Non-Research Articles in *FPJs*: 1995 - 98 (N=22)**

<b>I. Research Design<sup>a</sup></b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
a. Exploratory	12
b. Quantitative-Descriptive	44
c. Quasi-Experimental	44
d. True Experimental	0
<b>II. Non-Research</b>	
a. Literature Reviews	15
b. Conceptual/Practice Frameworks	23
c. Case Analyses	54
d. Instrument Development	8

Table 3 presents the specificity of purpose, method, and study implications of the articles reviewed.

**Table 3**  
**Degree of Specificity of Purpose, Method and Implications of *FPJs*: 1995-98 (N= 22)**

<b>Specificity</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>	
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>NO</b>
a. Purpose	64	36
b. Method	45	55
c. Implications	59	41

Table 4 presents the types of knowledge assessed in these articles.

**Table 4**  
**Types of Knowledge Assessed in *FPJs*: 1995-98**  
**(N = 22)**

Types of Knowledge	Percentage (%)
a. Descriptive	55
b. Exploratory	9
c. Influence/Control	36

Table 5 presents the main target audiences rated by different groups for the studies assessed.

**Table 5**  
**Main Target Audiences for Overall Study Implications in *FPJs*: 1995-98 (N = 22)**

Audiences	Target Group (%)		
	1 <sup>st</sup> Group	2 <sup>nd</sup> Group	3 <sup>rd</sup> Group
a. Clients	-	6	7
b. Practitioners	62	19	-
c. Supervisors	-	6	7
d. Administrators	5	12	21
e. Policy-Makers	5	19	-
f. Agency Boards	-	-	-
g. Communities	-	6	-
h. Program Planners	5	6	21
i. Researchers	23	19	36
j. Funders	-	-	-
k. Prof. Assns.	-	-	-
l. Other Agencies	-	6	7

Finally, raters were asked to state in one [plain English] sentence, what was 'the main thing learned' from each study. These results were then summarized accordingly: 40.9% stated more research is needed; 31.8% stated better (more rigorous ) research is needed; 13.6% indicated that family preservation interventions were effective with specific client groups



or family situations (e.g., lesbians, family reunification processes, etc.); and 13.6% revealed 'other issues' (e.g., the need for more family preservation training, ethical standards, more theory to guide practice, etc).

### Discussion

The findings and generalizability of this study should be tempered with some preliminary comments. Foremost, family preservation principles have deep roots in the historical traditions of social welfare practice in the U.S.A. (Adams, 1910; Baker, 1910; Richmond, 1917). The extent to which the cohort of articles reviewed in this study actually reflect the research, knowledge, and practice issues in this field is unknown. Second, this study presented a content, not meta-analyses, of the respective *FPJ* articles [for an excellent meta-analyses of this subject, see Fraser, Nelson, and Rivard (1997)]. Although this analysis was perceived as thorough and inclusive, it is certainly limited by the criteria used in this study.

Turning to the results of the study, Table 1 reveals that 59% of the published articles were categorized as non- research. Although this may seem surprising to some, it is consistent with Rosen, Proctor, and Staudt's (1998) review of 1,849 social work articles, which revealed that 53% were similarly deemed non-research. The extent to which these non-research articles generate relevant knowledge for practitioners is certainly a debatable topic for the philosophers of science and beyond the scope of this discussion. However, few would deny, regardless of where they find themselves on the empirical-science continuum, that practice research developed by the core practitioners can do nothing more than enhance practice (Wodarski & Thyer, 1998). Table 1 also reveals that of the research articles published 64% were qualitative, 18% were quantitative, and 18% were both. The high percentage of qualitative articles, which included individual case analyses, would seem to reflect the exploratory level designs of practitioners working in this field. Additionally, the current research trend of both methods (quantitative and qualitative) reiterated the necessity for family preservation researchers to be both flexible with their designs and 'take the problem where it is at' (Holosko and Leslie, 1998). This is consistent with the uniqueness of much social work research and may be indicative of the fact that the primary authors of these articles were most likely to be social work academics.

Table 2 reveals that when research designs were used, they were likely to be quantitative-descriptive (44%) or quasi-experimental(44%)—in short, the correlating/associating or testing of variables. The complete absence of true experimental designs most likely reflects the reality of their lack of appeal, suitability [ethically], and feasibility to researchers working this field [a point with which we certainly concur]. Table 2 also reveals a small

percentage (8%) of the *FPJ* articles devoted to instrument development in this field—again reflecting a developmental evolution of research in this field, as was previously noted.

Surprisingly, in 36 % of the articles reviewed, the purpose was not clearly stated (see Table 3). Similarly, neither was the method (55%), nor the implications (41%). This is not to suggest that these articles had unclear purposes, methods, and/or implications, but it is to suggest that these features were unclearly stated. Given the necessity for specification in research and the fundamental relationship between the component parts of any research process: purpose → methods → findings → implications, authors in this field should heed these caveats. In addition, given that a basic social science research tenet is replicability and generalizability, these deficiencies become even more magnified. A further confounding issue is that in 77% of the studies reviewed, one could not replicate the intervention(s) specified.

Regarding the use of standardized or outcome measures, few research studies reported their use. Specifically, only 36% used any standardized measures, and 41% of the studies reported the use of outcome measures. The latter were further assessed according to their degrees of specificity on an ordinal scale. In this regard, 54% were deemed as "low" or were "unguided observations, content analyses, or self-reports" (Proctor, 1998 p. 16); 23% were deemed "medium" specificity or were "non-standardized rating scales developed for the study whether by clients, workers, or researcher (e.g., goal attainment, satisfaction, improvement), or definition-guided observations (e.g., client behavior records)" (Proctor, p. 16). Furthermore, it was surprising that in 100% of the articles reviewed (research and non-research) in *not a single case* was family preservation intervention compared with any other intervention or method. It would appear that the critical necessity to specify intervention and outcomes in research (Wodarski & Thyer, 1998), is indeed a necessary first step in testing the efficacy of any intervention. However, in this cohort of studies reviewed, neither specification nor testing efficacy with other interventions was apparent.

Given the above methodological shortcomings, it was not surprising that the majority of knowledge (type) generated from the *FPJ* articles were (as indicated in Table 4), 'level 1' or descriptive knowledge (55%). This type of knowledge "guides the classification of phenomena into meaningful conceptual categories" (Proctor, 1998, p.7). The second ranked knowledge type was 'level 3' or influence/control knowledge (36%), which "identifies means of influencing events or behavior; the direction of influence can be maintenance (prevention) or change (intervention -increasing, decreasing)" (p.7).

In regard to the latter finding, Rosen (1993) and Proctor, Rosen, and Straudt (1998) make a compelling argument for the necessity of more influence/control knowledge to enhance



the practice knowledge of the social work profession. The review of these *FPJ* articles found that more than a third of them achieved this goal. This figure was more than double the 15% that Protor, Rosen, and Straudt (1998) reported in their comprehensive review previously cited. As a result, it was interesting to note that despite the methodologic shortcomings previously stated (re: low specificity, lack of standardized measures and outcomes, lack of intervention specificity or comparative testing, etc.), these features did not deter from their ability to produce practitioner influencing types knowledge. This was indeed a commendable feature of the *FPJ* articles reviewed.

Table 5 reports on the target audiences of these studies (ranked 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, or 3<sup>rd</sup>). From a cumulative (frequency) standpoint, practitioners would rank first, followed closely by researchers, then administrators and policy makers. Conversely, no implications were directed at all to any agency boards, funders, or professional associations—the very groups who tend to hold the most political clout for public accountability and social policy. Further, only 6% of the articles reviewed were targeted toward communities, and 13% had implications for clients, supervisors, or other agencies.

From the standpoint of an overall review, Table 5 can be interpreted as follows: since this is a "practice journal" [in every sense of this term], *FPJ* authors are compelled to target front-line practitioners as their main target audience. Indeed, this an editorial policy of the journal. The extent to which family preservation practitioners actually read these articles and incorporate this knowledge is questionable and warrants further research. We make this point because these *FPJ* authors are primarily social work academics, and it has been well documented that collectively this group tends to write for other academics and researchers as their primary audience (Grinnell Jr. & Royer, 1983; Karger, 1983). Such a convention does not, and will not, improve and/or refine the overall practice conceptual frameworks and skills of its front-line practitioners. As family preservation grows into a more widely accepted practiced intervention, it will be imperative that family preservation practitioners stay current via research to build and maintain a certain standard of practice. The probability that this journal may fall into the trap of researchers writing for researchers was also clearly evidenced in the recommendations for "more research" and "more rigorous research" as being the number 1 and 2 rated things "learned from each study." And so, the longstanding schism identified between practitioners and researchers prevails in these articles (Holosko and Leslie, 1998). That is, it is researchers who are most likely to read the research published in professional journals, not the practitioners for whom the articles are intended (Rosenblatt, 1968; Penka & Kirk, 1991).

A final concern was the lack of attention devoted to the ultimate consumers of our helping efforts—clients and also the lack of attention to funders, agency boards, communities, and

professional associations reflected in the articles. In this age of relevance and accountability, as well as consumer empowerment, such groups certainly should be more meaningfully addressed in future research endeavors of this nature (Holosko, 1997).

### Recommendations

The recommendations from this review will be listed summarily with a brief rationale for each. They are presented as non-mutually exclusive research suggestions emanating from the previous review.

#### Practice Descriptions

1. *Day to day practice descriptions:* Clear descriptions of simple day-to-day family preservation practices should be offered, preferably in case analyses form. Such descriptions should be used to guide and inform practitioners working in this field.
2. *What doesn't work?* Family preservation researchers should be willing to bare their accounts of what didn't work in practice for the same reasons noted above (#1). In this same context, the limitations of this approach should be clearly specified to inform others of strengths and weaknesses in different practice contexts.
3. *Practice accounts with diverse client groups:* A broader range of research on family preservation practice with diverse client groups is needed. The *FPJ* journals reviewed [here] imply, for the most part, that these are lower income families, white, with one "problem child," and they all desire to have family preservation intervention to prevent 'disrupting' the family unit. The incorporation of more diverse client-based perspectives into all such accounts is recommended—as these are the ultimate consumers of our efforts.

#### Research and Research-Oriented Studies

1. *Comparing Family Preservation interventions:* Studies comparing family preservation to other interventions are sorely needed. The ability to generalize about family preservation is increasingly enhanced when it is compared against another interventions.
2. *More rigorous research -* More controlled studies using larger sample sizes, comparison groups, standardized and outcomes measures, and longitudinal designs are recommended. Better quality research not only enhances the ability to produce better



knowledge, but it cultivates a research-knowledge orientation to the field, which can only enhance its credibility.

3. *Program evaluations:* More systematic and comprehensive evaluations of family preservation programs are recommended. These include process (ongoing program functioning), outcome (assessing impacts), and efficacy studies (assessing cost effectiveness data). Both the public and funding bodies should have a vested interest in evaluations of this nature.
4. *Community and interorganizational studies:* Given the fact that family preservation interventions are so intimately tied to communities, other agencies and their resources, such studies are recommended. Given the government's devolution of social welfare programs back to communities, neighborhoods, family and personal networks, such studies would bode well in the current political climate.
5. *Policy analyses:* Critical macro, meso, and micro analyses of family preservation policies are needed. These should include local, regional, statewide, or federal auspices.
6. *National data bank:* Finally, it is recommended that a national bank of all family preservation programs be developed to serve as an information and research repository of such programs. This would centralize and make accessible a variety of information and data about family preservation programs to anyone, anywhere in the USA or worldwide.

### Endnotes

1. A preliminary draft of this study was presented at the Family Preservation Annual conference in Sept/98, Houston, Texas. Suggestions from this presentation were incorporated into this article.
2. Research vs. non-research - Research articles were classified as ones containing the usual components in research reports, such as study questions, or systematic methodology and data gathering procedures, and report findings. If some of these components were missing, yet the author referred to the article as a report of a research study and presented original findings, the article was classified as research. Reports on single-system studies were included as research articles, we were replicable, systematically conducted meta-analyses of prior research reports. Not considered as research articles were non-systematic reviews or syntheses of the literature, narrative-



only case studies, and articles dealing with research methodology only, without a substantive focus (Proctor, 1998, p.10).

3. Type of knowledge: Descriptive: Guides the classification of phenomena into meaningful conceptual categories, (e.g., rates of poverty, prevalence of child abuse).  
Explanatory: Guides understanding of phenomena—their interrelationships, factors influencing their variability, and their consequences, (e.g., relationship between depression and functioning, factors associated with hospital readmission).  
Control: Identifies means of influencing events or behavior; the direction of influence can be maintenance (prevention) or change (intervention—increasing, decreasing), (e.g., studies of prevention, demonstration of effects of intervention).
4. Based on the main design typologies developed by Tripodi, Fellin & Meyer (1969).

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