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Client perceptions of Child Protective Services

Jerry L. Rohleder
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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CLIENT PERCEPTIONS OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

by

Jerry L. Rohleder

Bachelor of Science
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
1998

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Arts Degree in Sociology
Department of Sociology
College of Liberal Arts

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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Jerry L. Rohleder

Entitled

Client Perceptions of Child Protective Services

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Sociology

Examination Committee Chair

Dean of the Graduate College

Graduate College Faculty Representative
ABSTRACT

Client Perceptions of Child Protective Services

by

Jerry L. Rohleder

Dr. Frederick W. Preston, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Sociology
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Inductive research methods are used to explore client perceptions of Child Protective Services in Clark County, NV. Interviews with fifteen persons who had experiences with CPS are discussed. The small sample limits the generalizability of the results, but there are indications the type of help offered or received is not always what a particular client perceives is needed, they are dissatisfied with the way they are treated, and they are not aware of any mechanisms available to register disagreements. Many of the clients express feelings of alienation and anomie. Suggestions for improving this relationship include changes in reporting procedures, showing more concern for the entire family and not just the child, not allowing officials to speak with a child before notifying the parents, and less secrecy. The use of an outside person, or ombudsman, to informally mediate disagreements is also suggested for improving communications between clients and CPS workers.
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PREFACE

A brief account of my experience with Child Protective Services (CPS) may help explain my bias, which is evident in this study, even though I attempted to be as objective as possible. It may also explain my first inclination to do a study entitled “Child Protective Services - The Gestapo Branch of Government.”

Late one night I came home from work and found my wife, Jeanne, sitting in the dark living room quietly crying. After a few minutes had passed, she finally told me what was wrong. She and my daughter had taken our baby granddaughter for tests because the seizures she was having since being severely injured a few months before seemed to be getting worse. The medication she was taking did not seem to be helping anymore. The doctor, the same person who had performed several operations on her, claimed there were signs of a new injury. Jeanne was afraid she would be arrested for child abuse. The baby was in her care and she would be blamed, though she was certain nothing had happened. I had no idea how to react to this. We have been married since 1964 and I know how carefully she handles children. Also, I don’t think there is anyone who could be more disgusted with those who mistreat children.

Our experience with CPS began about ten months previously. Our three-month-old granddaughter was severely brain damaged when her father accidently dropped her as he was setting her down. He said he was distracted by his other, three years old, daughter who was jumping around on the couch at the time. He was home alone with the children...
at the time and there were no witnesses. However, I do know he is a good father who 
cares about his children and would not harm them in any way. They had lived with us for 
a time and I know he was totally involved with them. He fed and bathed them, changed 
their diapers, and played with them constantly.

We hadn’t even begun to adjust to this tragedy when he was arrested and criminally 
charged with child abuse and endangerment. Jeanne and I were given custody of the 
children, but it was quite some time before the baby was released from the hospital. The 
case worker came to our home to do an inspection and talked to us in a manner that was 
very insulting. I don’t know how she thought we had been able to raise two children 
without her expert advice. She then told us that we should be aware our son-in-law was 
going to prison. I asked her what that comment had to do with the reason she had come 
into our home and if someone had appointed her judge and jury. That was the last time 
she, or anyone else from CPS, talked to me. During her next visits she directed her 
comments to Jeanne, and I became known in her report as the interfering grandfather.

For some reason, which was never explained, my daughter had to plead guilty to 
negligence, even though she had been at work at the time. She was told this was 
necessary in order to begin the process of regaining custody of the children.

The next few months were filled with visits to the hospital and doctor’s office, 
meeting with the attorneys we had hired for our daughter and son-in-law, and waiting 
outside the courtroom when they had to appear before a judge. They were both required 
to get counseling and anger management, as well as attend parenting classes. During this 
time there was no one who would talk to Jeanne and me about what was going on and we
were definitely not allowed in the courtroom. Everything was done in secrecy and we felt we were treated as complete outsiders rather than as part of the family.

We tried to see the situation from the point of view of the authorities, but it was difficult to understand why they treated us as they did. I pictured CPS as a mediaeval knight, hiding behind his metal armor and charging us on a huge white stallion. He was coming to save our grandchild from danger, but not caring what, or who, he trampled on in the process.

After Jeanne became afraid she would be accused of abuse, we called some of the people in the neighborhood where we lived when our children were growing up. We asked them to write a short note stating what they thought of Jeanne and me as parents, have it notarized, and send it to our attorney. We received more than a dozen replies and will always treasure the comments that were made about us. We hoped it might help let someone here know a little about us as parents; after all, we were strangers in a large, growing city. It must have had some effect, because our integrity was not questioned again.

This experience convinced me there must be ways the whole process of investigating and resolving incidents of child neglect and abuse could be improved. It is difficult to determine exactly what needs to be done because it is a complex problem. However, more open communication with the entire family and not just the parents involved would be a beginning. The intention of this study is to begin to explore the thoughts of others who have been involved with CPS. The goal is to identify areas of agreement and disagreement in order to consider possible changes in actions and procedures that could improve the relationship between the clients and CPS, possibly resulting in more.
complete and permanent resolution of problems through better cooperation among those involved.

The entire faculty in the Sociology Department at UNLV has contributed in more ways than it is possible to mention. A special thank you to Dr. Frederick W. Preston, who served as my committee chairperson, and to committee members Dr. Kathryn Hausbeck and Dr. Lynn T. Osborne. Also, thank you to committee member Dr. Randall Shelden from the Criminal Justice Department.

My most sincere thanks is reserved for my wife, Jeanne, who has completely, without reservations, supported me in my efforts to obtain an education.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Why would the Nevada State legislature consider it necessary to pass a bill that “makes it clear in Nevada law that parents can spank their children” (Vogel 1999)? At first it seems quite amusing, as well as a waste of valuable time, that lawmakers would even consider a bill which gives legal sanction to spanking a child. In an undergraduate Marriage and Family class at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, an informal show of hands resulted in 29 of 34 students agreeing spanking was a necessary part of raising children. According to more formal academic studies, the percentage of adults who believe it is an essential practice in child rearing ranges from 83% (Graziano and Namaste 1990) to 90% (Straus et al. 1997) even though many experts in the children’s development field do not believe in any form of corporal punishment, claiming it does more harm than good. Some go as far as stating it should even be criminalized as it has been in some Scandinavian countries (Finkelhor and Dziuba-Leatherman 1994). In our society it is normative behavior, a common and legitimate form of discipline practiced by a majority of parents. Most adults have internalized a belief in the well-worn adage “spare the rod, spoil the child.” Even those of us who are convinced other forms of discipline are more beneficial to a child’s development recognize the right of others to spank their children.
The reason given by Senate majority leader Bill Raggio for introduction of the bill in Nevada was that “too many kids thumb their nose at their parents and say if you touch me I will call the police or I will sue you” (Vogel 1999). However, I believe an important meaning behind this action by our lawmakers is not a fear of our children’s actions, but fear of the consequences of accusations which can be initiated by anyone who happens to observe us striking a child. It makes a strong statement about the potential abuse of power by the agencies we have assigned the task of protecting our children from mistreatment, while at the same time addressing the concern about the need for parents to be able to properly discipline their children due to the increasing rates of problems our young people are having.

Exactly what the passing of this bill accomplished is difficult to determine because of the ambiguous way in which it is written into the statutes. It states that an investigation of alleged child abuse or neglect by Child Protective Services is not warranted if the agency determines it “was the result of the reasonable exercise of discipline by a parent or guardian of the child involving the use of corporal punishment, including, without limitation, spanking or paddling” (Nevada Revised Statutes 2000). However, immediately following this, it states that the agency must determine that the “corporal punishment so administered was not so excessive as to constitute abuse or neglect,” meaning it did not result in physical or mental injury. This gives parents the right to spank, but maintains the right of government agencies to interpret each particular reported incident. The inherent ambiguities in this statute, which on the surface seems to be legislation intended to clarify parents’ rights, are an indicator of the complex relationships between government agencies and families.
In this study I investigate the interpretation of reported incidents of child abuse or neglect by Child Protective Service (CPS) workers in Clark County, Nevada, from the point of view of the clients, an important dimension of these relationships. The purpose is to identify areas of agreement and disagreement in order to consider possible changes in actions and practices that could result in more complete and permanent resolution of problems through better cooperation of those involved. Four questions are addressed: (1.) How do the clients perceive the nature of help offered or received from CPS? (2.) How do they perceive their relationship with the workers? (3.) Is there an awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or caseworkers? (4.) Do the clients have any suggestions for change that may be valuable in improving this relationship?

A need for this type of study is indicated by the existence of organizations with the purpose of protecting those accused of child maltreatment from the power of the agencies assigned the task of intervention when children are judged to be in danger. One of the most prominent of these organizations, recognizing several hundred chapters nationally, is Victims of Child Abuse Laws (VOCAL) based in New York.

The goals of this organization are similar to those of CPS, “to see children protected from all forms of abuse” (VOCAL 2000) and the preservation of the family. However, they also include protecting children from the abuse “being inflicted upon them as a result of so-called child protection agencies” (VOCAL 2000). They are concerned that the intent behind the child abuse laws is being disregarded and the present hysteria about child abuse is resulting in the same type of ignorance connected with the Salem Witch Hunts. Their concerns about the vagueness of child abuse laws that can easily be misinterpreted
include lack of due process, an immediate presumption of guilt, a disregard for constitutional and civil rights, unethical investigative techniques, the abrupt and often unnecessary removal of children, and the effects on families under investigation. They have a list of more than two dozen recommendations of what to do and not to do for those who are accused of child abuse (VOCAL 2000). We are very fortunate to live in a society able to invest a large amount of time and resources to ensure the safety of our children, but these expenditures have also resulted in a need to form organizations to defend against a large system of interrelated bureaucracies.

The Extent of the Problem

There is no question child maltreatment is a serious problem in our society, though it is extremely difficult to determine the exact number of incidents nationwide because of the many differences in defining what is being counted. Figures from a report published by the National Committee to Prevent Child Abuse in 1997 “estimated that CPS agencies received 3,195,000 reports of child maltreatment” (Wang and Daro 1998). This estimate includes all types of neglect and abuse, including both physical and psychological, indicating the overwhelming number of occurrences needing investigation.

According to the annual report from The Department of Family and Youth Services, Child Protective Services (CPS) in Clark County, Nevada received 35,156 telephone calls to the CPS Hotline in 1998 which resulted in 8,152 investigations. This represents a 33% increase in the number of investigations from 1994 to 1998, due to the dramatic population increase. In approximately 60% of the cases the complaint is determined to be unsubstantiated, but still reported because the initial screening indicated cause for
concern (DFSY 1999). One trend that seems to require further explanation is the number of calls to the CPS Hotline actually decreased from 40,609 in 1994 to 35,156 in 1998, yet there was a substantial increase in investigations. This could possibly be an indication of changes in the screening process.

CPS is one of seven interrelated divisions of the Department of Family and Youth Services, “a unique and complex public service agency” (DFSY 1999), providing intervention services, guidance and control for children age 18 and under that are involved in cases of neglect, abuse, and delinquency. CPS is the division that “fulfils the statutory mandate to protect children from abuse and neglect within their families or in foster or institutional care” (DFSY 1999). The stated goals are to provide services to “strengthen families; to enable children to remain safe in the home; to temporarily remove a child who is at imminent risk; or to assure the child’s permanency in a substitute family if the custodial family cannot be preserved without serious risk to the child” (DFSY 1999).

Every agency involved in child protection has similar goals and very few persons would find faults with the idealistic intent to keep children from harm. However, a mountain of controversial literature has developed around each written phrase. There is definitely not a lack of experts on the subject. The discourse takes innumerable twists and turns, with disagreements about everything from definitions of types of maltreatment to the daily activities of the investigators and case workers. There have been innumerable books and articles written by persons from every field imaginable. The media seems to thrive on stories about the atrocities committed against children as well as stories about caseworkers who are accused of negligence because a child is seriously injured or killed.
shortly after an investigation found nothing wrong. Added to this is the role of the Criminal Justice System and Family Court structure, the inherent rigidity and limitations imposed by bureaucratic organizations, and the extent of cultural diversity in our society.

Although most actions by CPS are centered around the catch phrases “in the best interests of the child” and “family preservation,” there is wide disagreement about the effectiveness of government agencies in dealing with the problems of child maltreatment (I use this term to include both neglect and abuse). The various programs are seen by David G. Gil as ameliorative, rather than addressing the societal and institutional causes (Gil 1979). Some of them, such as foster care, may possibly do the children harm. It is argued that poverty, although only one of the reasons for these problems, “has proved to be the fertile soil that incubates and nourishes a variety of social problems” (Elmer 1979). Gil argues that we need to consider factors such as unemployment, bad housing, insufficient money, and inadequate food rather than create more programs specific to child maltreatment. Others argue from the perspective of “psycho dynamic theories (i.e. the medical model of disease, treatment, and cure)” (Pelton 1981). Add these arguments to those from “other perspectives such as the cultural (behavior out of context), social psychological, and ecological (adaptation to the environment)” (Gil 1979) and it is not surprising there is wide disagreement about the proper role of government in child protection.

In this study I explore the thoughts and feelings of the persons on the receiving end of the actions taken by the various experts. How do they perceive the help they are offered, the counseling, and the parenting classes? What are their thoughts about the relationship they have with the investigators or caseworkers? Are they aware of anything they may do...
when they have disagreements with the authorities? Perhaps valuable insights about preventing child maltreatment can be gained by considering changes they suggest.

In chapter two I review the existing literature about previous research on the clients’ point of view and discuss some of the problems with these studies. In chapter three I explain the methodology of this study and how it differs from previous research. In chapter four I discuss the answers received from clients of CPS about my four main questions. In chapter five I summarize the answers to my questions and suggest what further studies may be needed.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there have been numerous studies of child maltreatment and interventions by Child Protective Services, only four investigations of the clients' point of view could be found (Magura and Moses 1984; Bath and Haapala 1993; Hall et al. 1997; Hensley, and Fuqua 1997; Costello 1999). These research projects suggested three of the questions I address in this study. How do clients of CPS perceive the nature of help offered or received from CPS? How do they perceive their relationship with the workers? Is there an awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or caseworkers? I could not find a study that asked my fourth question. Do the clients have any suggestions for change that may be valuable in improving their relationship with CPS?

Steven Magura and Beth S. Moses conducted a study in an attempt to gain insight into client perspectives and to “identify areas of successful and problematic collaboration with protective services” (Magura and Moses 1984). They asked how the clients evaluated the success of the various programs and compared this to the evaluations made by the caseworkers. They also asked the clients about their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their caseworkers and the agency.

Their study was designed around the use of a standardized “Parent Outcome
Interview” developed in 1979 by the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) (Magura and Moses 1984). Used as the core of this study, it asked the clients to rate changes in problems such as disciplining their children, living conditions, and parental coping, using a standard Lickert scale indicating whether they were: A lot better, A little better, About the same, A little worse, A lot worse, or No problem then or now. Their sample consisted of 250 families who had been supervised from five to six months by agencies in Texas, Minnesota, and Florida. Only 35% of the eligible families volunteered to be interviewed, but non response bias was tested by using an independent outcome measure for those who were not interviewed, obtained from caseworkers.

They stated that “no statistically significant differences were found” (Magura and Moses 1984), which indicates caseworkers judged the perceived outcomes, within the eleven specific areas of concern for child well being asked about, much the same as the clients. The authors concluded that the child protective services studied “seemed moderately successful across a wide range of content areas” (Magura and Moses 1984) including parental improvement in disciplining and supervising their children, in their living conditions and financial situation, and in their abilities to care for their children both physically and emotionally. Improvement was also reported in the children’s conduct and ability to adjust to problems in school. These conclusions were supported by the results of the Parental Outcome Interview, but were somewhat contradicted by the one area in which substantial improvement was not reported: that of parental ability to cope with a variety of difficulties such as physical, mental and emotional health, social supports, employment, legal involvements and marital or relationship problems.
Parents reported an average of three problems each remaining in this area and were most typically referred to mental health services or received additional counseling or advice from caseworkers. When clients were asked about these coping problems, about one third “attributed the cause to insufficient income or financial difficulties - the continued inability to afford the necessities of life” (Magura and Moses 1984). Perhaps it is due to the lack of substantial resources available to these agencies, but the clients repeatedly testified to the deleterious influence of material deprivation on their children and, more indirectly, to the stress this put on the parents, resulting in increased anxiety and depression.

When the clients were asked about their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their caseworkers and the agency, “one quarter of the clients reported disputing an important fact or interpretation of fact with the agency” (Magura and Moses 1984) of which 42% disagreed with the alleged physical abuse or neglect. In addition 60% of the total sample had at least one important criticism of the agency, mainly that they disagreed with the caseworker’s ideas about how to handle problems and they disliked the caseworker’s attitude. This brought up the significant issue of available mechanisms to deal with disaffection and resentment, with the authors suggesting use of the worker’s supervisor or an outside ombudsman to informally mediate disagreements. However, the details of these disputes and disagreements were not discussed, perhaps because not probed by the interviewers, thus missing an opportunity to investigate the clients’ point of view more completely. Also, no one asked the clients what they thought could be changed in order to improve their relationship with the workers.
The second study was done by Helen Winefield and Jillian Barlow in 1995. In an attempt to identify the important factors in preventing further maltreatment of children, they asked clients of a multi-disciplinary Child Protective Service how they feel about the actions and attitudes of the workers toward them (Winefield and Barlow 1995). They used a written sheet of questions requiring short answers that focused on the nature and strength of worker-client relationships as well as brief interviews with the clients.

It was found that what parents at high risk of child maltreatment “valued most about the program was the reduction in their extreme social isolation rather than the teaching about how to become a better parent” (Winefield and Barlow 1995). The key to the outcome was their relationship with the caseworker, indicating the importance of how clients feel about the actions and attitudes of the workers toward them. It was concluded that one of the prime conditions for preventing further maltreatment is that parents trust the workers and feel valued and cared for, indicating that “emotional support builds a helping relationship within which the therapeutic change in behavior can be motivated” (Winefield and Barlow 1995).

The third research project was designed with the purpose of studying the “interactions in a triad” and “parental functioning, as reported by caseworkers and parents” (Hall et al, 1997). The ecological method, which focuses on individuals as they relate to their environment, interactions, and relationships, rather than on individual characteristics, was used. Caseworkers’ perception of mothers, the mothers’ perception of their own parental functioning, and the preschoolers’ self esteem and cognitive functioning was examined. A convenient sample of eighteen mother-child dyads and their caseworkers was measured, using research instruments designed to measure various aspects of relationships.
The authors found a high positive correlation between self appraisals by mothers and the ratings of parenting abilities by caseworkers, similar to the agreement found by Magura and Moses. They also concluded that there is agreement in judgements about cooperativeness and the sense of responsibility as it related to perceived improvements. These results may be important in the evaluation of the various programs, but this study neglects the aspect of areas of disagreement in this relationship.

Some indications of clients' perceptions in Nevada can be obtained from the results of a customer satisfaction survey conducted in five districts by the organization Action for Child Protection as part of a larger study entitled “Nevada Differential Response System” which hasn’t been completed yet (Costello 1999). The number of surveys mailed is unknown, but there were only twenty-seven responses to the survey in the entire state. It consisted of twenty-four statements designed to be answered on a five-point scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The intentions of each individual question are not clear and will have to wait for interpretation from the organization doing the study. However, responses to certain groups of questions suggest how clients perceive three of my areas of concern: the nature of help offered or received, their relationship with the workers, and their awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements.

The responses to the statements pertaining to the degree and nature of help received were mixed, averaging in the middle of the five point scale, leaving unanswered the question of whether or not the clients believed they were better able to deal with parental problems or if they thought the help received adequately addressed their needs. The statements receiving widely varying responses contained such items as “our family is better able to solve problems,” “we are better parents,” “we get along better,” and “we are
better able to cope with stress.” It would be valuable to understand the reasoning behind each of these responses in order to gain insight about the success or failure of the programs offered (Table 1).

The statements receiving the most agreement were those containing communication from the worker about the particular case. Clients agreed that the worker explained what the concerns were, what was happening in their case, and what was expected of them. They also agreed the worker understood the family’s problems and what had to be worked on. This suggests a perception of professional competency, but leaves it unclear whether or not the clients felt they were valued and cared for, trusted, or received emotional support, the indicators of a helping relationship Winefield and Barlow found important in gaining positive results.

Table 1  Summary of Results from 1999 Nevada Customer Satisfaction Survey

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Statements</th>
<th>Average Score</th>
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<td>Five statements about the degree and nature of help offered or received.</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four statements about clarity of explanations from the worker concerning what was happening in the case and what was expected of the client.</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two statements about knowing ways to express legitimate disagreements with the workers.</td>
<td>3.55</td>
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Note: The survey used a five point Lickert scale with possible responses of strongly agree = 1, agree = 2, not sure = 3, disagree = 4, and strongly disagree = 5. The averages are based on twenty-seven responses.
The greatest amount of disagreement was in response to the statements “I was told about ways that I could complain about my contact with my worker if I was dissatisfied” and “Even if my family did not agree with the problem identified by the worker, my family understood the reason for actions taken.” This points to a possibility clients felt there was no way to express their disagreements with the workers. If there are mechanisms in place for this purpose, they possibly were not explained to them in an understandable manner.

Comments from the respondents were not required but, of those made, only one was from a client who was completely satisfied with both the worker and the services received. Many others were a denial there was a problem in the first place, that any services were needed, or that the suggestions made by workers had already been tried. One respondent addressed the lack of needed financial aid, saying it should be based not on income, but on necessary expenditures. Others made negative statements about the workers attitude toward them and the inconsiderateness of missing or changing appointments without notice. Regardless of the quantitative results and analysis of this survey, these comments indicate a need for deeper probing of the clients’ perceptions of child protective services.

The connection to financial needs is one of the most recurrent themes throughout the literature on child maltreatment. In a study involving 530 families, designed to assess group differences within the two categories of child maltreatment, abuse and neglect, Howard Bath and David Haapala found that “the median family income level for the physical abuse groups was $10,000 -15,000 while it was $5,000 to $10,000 for the neglect groups” (Bath and Haapala 1993). This study was not about client perceptions, but it is
important because of the relatively large number of families involved and the low median income for both groups, supporting the statements from the clients who reported problems remaining in the area of parental coping in Magura and Moses’ study and “the well-documented poverty connection” (Pelton 1981), especially concerning neglect. It strongly suggests further investigation of the correlation between income level and child maltreatment is needed.

In 1980, Alfred Kadushin stated that the available studies “suggest that agencies have achieved some modest success” (Kadushin 1980), but these claims had been made with limited substantiating detail. The information was taken from case records and case workers, not from the clients. The reason given for the apparent lack of client perspectives was that there is a “tendency to see the parents involved as less capable, articulate, and objective than other human service recipients and to the considerable difficulties gaining the confidence of these parents for research interviews” (Magura and Moses 1984).

The problems encountered when researching clients of child protective services were addressed by E. Milling Kinard in the article “Methodological Issues and Practical Problems in Conducting Research on Maltreated Children.” Access to populations is extraordinarily difficult due to confidentiality laws and the fact that “if maltreating families have experienced investigations of maltreatment allegations, they may resent any further intrusions from outside sources” (Kinard 1994). It is highly recommended to make decisions based on ways to protect the participants rather than ways to make the study easier. Other researchers have also had problems sampling clients, finding they were
unable to contact about one half of child protective service clients that had closed cases and a large percentage of the others refused to participate (Winfield and Barlow 1995).

Each of these four studies had problems obtaining a representative sample because of these reasons. More research is needed in order to increase the validity of our conclusions and improve relationships with those accused of child maltreatment which could lead to positive improvements in present policies and perhaps help prevent recurrence of incidents that endanger children. Also, each of the existing studies was designed to measure client perceptions quantitatively in order to evaluate existing programs. Although some brief interviews were done, there is a lack of in-depth, qualitative interviews that could give us insight into the problem of child maltreatment.

The existing literature thus suggests the three important areas requiring further exploration in studying client perceptions of a particular child protective agency. They are the nature of help offered or received, the perceptions of the relationships with the workers, and an awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or caseworkers. Positive responses in these areas seem to be the most conducive to obtaining the goals of preserving the families and preventing further maltreatment of the children. I have added a fourth question that seems to be totally ignored in the existing literature. Do the clients have any suggestions for change that may be valuable in improving their relationship with CPS?

In chapter one I identified the need to further explore the thoughts and feelings of the persons on the receiving end of the actions taken by the various experts. In this chapter I have reviewed the existing studies from the clients' perspective. In chapter three I explain the methodology of this study and the sampling procedure. In chapter four I discuss the
answers received from clients of CPS about my four main questions. In chapter five I
summerize the answers to my questions and suggest what further studies may be needed.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

I used semi-structured interviews in order to probe the perceptions of individuals who have had experiences with CPS in Clark County, Nevada. The reason I used this method was that I wanted to ask the questions suggested by the existing literature, yet leave them open ended to allow the clients to explain their answers, relate their experiences, and tell their story in their own way. Each of the studies I reviewed in chapter two concentrated on doing quantitative measurements and did not probe the meanings behind the answers given. Quantitative data obtained from the use of surveys is valuable because it gives us specific indicators of behavior and opinions. Surveys have “proven to be very useful for research questions about self-reported beliefs and behaviors” (Neuman 1997). However, survey questions do not explore subjective meanings behind the answers given and may miss some questions important to understanding the viewpoint of the clients.

Especially bothersome are the results from part of the research done by Magura and Moses. They found that “one quarter of the clients reported disputing an important fact or interpretation of fact with the agency” (Magura and Moses 1948) of which 42% disagreed with the alleged physical abuse or neglect. In addition, 60% of the total sample had at least one important criticism of the agency, mainly that they disagreed with the caseworker’s ideas about how to handle problems and they disliked the caseworker’s attitude. More specific information about the disagreements clients have
about how they were treated and how their case was handled could lead to positive changes in policies.

I developed interview guidelines and discovery questions (Appendix A) related to my four key research questions in order to initiate conversation and to encourage the clients to talk freely about their experiences. First, in order to answer my question about how they perceive the nature of help offered or received from CPS, I asked them to relate the circumstances of their experience. I asked how the incident was referred to CPS and what was their reaction to the charges? Did they feel the investigation was justified? Did they agree with the assessment of the issues or problems? What services or programs were proposed or required? Did they help? Was financial or other aid offered? Was it sufficient or was something missing? I also inquired if the incident created stress among family members. These open-ended questions helped initiate conversation and get the clients to stay on the topic of the ways in CPS helped them with their problems.

Secondly, to find out how they perceive the relationship with the workers I asked the clients if they were treated with respect and did they feel valued and cared for? Did the caseworker explain clearly what was expected of them? Did they listen to your side? Was someone you could trust available to answer your questions? In what ways were you helped by your caseworker? I encouraged them to talk about the nature of disagreements they had with the workers and whether or not they felt their opinions mattered.

In order to probe the clients’ answers to my third question about an awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or caseworkers, I asked their feelings about the experience they had with CPS and their interactions with the police, the courts, the counselors, and others who were involved in their case. I asked
them if they felt the power and resources of the agency was beyond their influence or if they had access to resources or mechanisms which proved helpful and knew what had to be done. I also asked them if they were able to discuss their problems with family members or friends. If children were removed from their home, I asked if they felt it was justified and if alternatives were completely explored. What difficulties were encountered in having the children returned? These questions were asked to enable me to relate their answers to the sociological concepts of alienation and anomie.

Ronald W. Smith and Frederick W. Preston discuss the numerous human experiences the term alienation refers to in terms of the five meanings of alienation given by sociologist Melvin Seeman, which are “powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement” (Smith and Preston 1977). If clients are not aware of ways in which to register disagreements it is possible they may feel various forms of this “subjective alienation” (Smith and Preston 1977) simultaneously. They may feel powerless to do anything to change their situation and feel as if they are alone, isolated from others because of the stigma attached to those accused of child maltreatment and the problems with self esteem and social identity caused by “the attitudes of those who are aware of the situation” (Goffman 1963). However, he may be describing “objective alienation” as Karl Marx did in referring “not just to individual subjective reactions but also to dehumanizing events and conditions of society” (Smith and Preston 1977). Max Horkheimer adds insight to the development of these feelings of alienation by discussing how critical theory aims to show how human history produced social institutions and practices that confront people as beyond their scope of action (Horkheimer 1982).
The concept of anomie can be described as “a situation in which social norms either
do not exist or have become ineffective” (Farley 1994). This is close to the definition of
alienation as normlessness discussed by Smith and Preston. The difference seems to be
one of degree. They describe persons facing an absence of rules making their own rules
of behavior to achieve goals. A person experiencing anomie simply does not know how to
act, the normal rules of behavior have broken down and there is nothing to replace them.
Persons experiencing the power and control of the bureaucratic organizations which are
supported by law could easily find they don’t know how to react. Their perceptions of
what are normal rules of behavior could become confused or completely inoperative.
They may find themselves in complete disagreement with something and have absolutely
no idea what to do about it.

In the extreme, a profoundly disturbing type of anomie in which nothing makes sense
could result from what John Heritage refers to as a failure of the methods for the
“production of cognitive order” (Turner 1996). He refers to Harold Garfinkle’s breaching
experiments to explain what he means by cognitive order. Garfinkle demonstrated the
presence of procedures for the accomplishment of interaction by violating, or
“breaching”, seemingly commonplace practices. “Seemingly trivial moves provoked
displays of confusion, frustration, and suspicion of hidden motives from his subjects”
(Turner 1996). Normal practices produce intelligible features of social organization, an
order in events that actors take for granted in their everyday lives. The intense reactions
Garfinkle’s experiments produced “suggest how deeply committed actors are to
procedures which, ordinarily, they never notice at all” (Turner 1996). It is possible a
client could experience this extreme form of anomie when faced with the demands and control of a powerful agency, especially if there are unresolved disagreements.

Finally, in order to find out what suggestions for change the clients may have for improving the relationship with CPS, I suggested a number of areas for them to think about. I asked them if they agreed the way in which incidents were referred to CPS including mandatory and anonymous reporting. Did they have any suggestions about the investigators or caseworkers? Are there any services or programs which could be improved? What about the procedures for the removal and return of children? Do they feel there are adequate checks and balances on the power of the agencies? Do they have any suggestions for the empowerment of the clients? Criticisms the clients have of CPS indicate they feel something is wrong with the way in which their case was handled. I encouraged them to consider what they thought should have been done differently.

Sampling Procedure

Before conducting research, approval for this study was obtained from the Social/Behavioral Committee of the UNLV Institutional Review Board on February 15, 2001.

In each of the four studies reviewed in chapter two the researchers obtained their subjects with permission from a particular CPS agency to contact clients. The sample used in this study is one of convenience, consisting of persons who volunteered to talk about their experiences. A short note (Appendix B) explaining a desire to talk to anyone who has had experiences with CPS was posted on the front counter and in the drive thru window of the Dairy Queen I have owned and operated since 1989. It was in place for
four months beginning in September, 2001. It was also placed on the front counter of another Dairy Queen for the month of October, but no response was received from that location. Only four of the fifteen subjects asked directly to speak with me, and they were people with whom I had become acquainted. The other eleven were persons whom I approached when I saw them reading the posted notice. I began a conversation by asking them if they had any experiences with CPS they would be willing to share. Eight more indicated a willingness to talk to me, but did not commit to a time and place for an interview, indicating the reluctance people have to talk to a stranger about these experiences.

When someone indicated a willingness to be interviewed, an effort was made to set a specific time and place as soon as possible. I obtained the names and phone numbers of those who could not do so immediately and called them the next day. After two unsuccessful attempts to set an appointment by phone, the names and phone numbers were discarded because of the sensitive nature of this subject. There were also a number of persons who admitted having an experience with CPS, but were not willing to talk about it, and some who simply shook their head or raised their eyebrows.

The sample consisted of eight males and seven females ranging in age from twenty one to fifty eight. The area in which the Dairy Queen is located could be considered an upper working class neighborhood, with mostly single family homes, although there is one large apartment complex nearby and a number of upper middle class homes not too distant. All except four of the subjects had a household income of over $30,000, with both the husband and wife working full time. Two of those under that amount were females who indicated they stayed home to take care of the children and household matters while
their husbands worked, one was a divorced single mother who wasn’t receiving child support from her ex-husband, and the fourth was a married male who had advanced technical training, but was temporarily having difficulty finding steady employment. Those who volunteered to be interviewed seemed to be more confident in how they are living their lives than others who admitted having problems with accusations of maltreatment, but refused to discuss their experiences. Perhaps this confidence and self esteem allowed them to talk about their experiences openly.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes and Number of Clients</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender: Male: 8 Female: 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race: White: 13 Hispanic: 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status: Married: 10 Divorced: 4 Never Married: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children: One: 5 Two: 7 Three: 1 Four: 1 Five or more: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household income: Under $30,000 annually: 4 Over $30,000 annually: 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education: No high-school diploma: 3 High-school: 10 College Degree: 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Demographics of the Fifteen Clients.

All of the subjects were White except for two of the younger females, who were Hispanic, and had been urged by their husbands to talk with me (Figure 1). Although a number of persons from different minority groups were approached, none of the others indicated a willingness to talk about experiences they may have had. It may have been difficult for them to identify with or trust a middle aged White male.
There were two cases in which both spouses desired to be interviewed simultaneously. At the time of their experience, ten of the subjects were married for a period of four months to nineteen years, two of whom had previously been divorced. Four of the subjects were divorced and one had never been married.

Five of the subjects had only one child at the time of their experience, seven had two children, one had three children, and one had four children. The other person had more due to a blended family, however, revealing this number may compromise the confidentiality of his/her identity. The ages of the children ranged from newborn infants to the mid teens, with most of them attending an elementary grade school.

There was very little difference in the level of education among the subjects and their spouses, although there was one person who had a college degree and a spouse who had not finished high school. In ten of the cases, including three of those who were divorced at the time of their experience, both the husband and wife had finished high school. In two cases, neither one had a high school diploma and in one case both had a college degree. The person who never married had not finished high school and the level of education of the children’s father is unknown.

Getting a representative sample in a study of clients of CPS is difficult because of the highly sensitive nature of this subject, the legal limitations on obtaining case information, and the stigma attached to those accused of child maltreatment. Many persons who said they had experiences refused to talk about it. Each of the previous studies had similar difficulties in sampling. The main difference in this study was that everyone who was interviewed was convinced I was not connected officially to CPS and my interest was in obtaining their point of view and not to justify the actions or policies of CPS.
A small convenience sample such as this limits the ability to make generalizations from the data, however, by addressing similar questions to those asked in the quantitative studies, a comparison can be made to begin testing the reliability of our findings. “Reliability means that the information provided by indicators does not vary as a result of characteristics of the indicator, instrument, or measurement device itself” (Neuman 1997). For instance, the answers to the survey questions about how successful CPS is in offering the help clients need can be compared to the answers given to the same question in an interview.

Comparing qualitative data to quantitative data about the same questions can also help test the validity of our findings. “Validity is part of a dynamic process that grows by accumulating evidence over time, and without it, all measurement becomes meaningless” (Neuman 1997). Closed-ended questions as used in the surveys are quicker and easier to use, but may miss something important when an individual’s beliefs and feelings are forced into a few categories created by the researcher. Using triangulation, or different types of measurement and data collection techniques, is a proven method to test validity (Neuman 1997). Because of the difficulties in obtaining a representative sample it is important that we compare the results of different studies that have used a variety of methods.

Interviews

Fifteen interviews were conducted and all were taped, with the permission of the clients, and lasted from an hour and fifteen minutes to three hours. Each interview began with a thorough review of the informed consent form (Appendix C), which none of the
subjects hesitated to sign. Then the simple demographic questions were asked, designed to not only gain information, but to relax the subject and initiate conversation. The person was then asked to “tell me about your experience”. Surprisingly, all of the subjects talked about their experience for an extended period with very little prompting, indicating a need for someone to listen to them. In fact one client made the statement at the end of the interview: “I know you can’t do anything about it, but thank you for listening. I really needed that”.

When they finished talking, using the sheet of discovery questions, an attempt was made to ensure each of the subjects had given his/her perceptions of the main areas this study is concerned about. Most of them had already answered many of the questions, but had to be prompted to explain what they meant by certain statements. For instance, many of them felt they were denied “due process” and “were immediately judged guilty before the investigation began” and were asked specifically what that meant to them and what procedures they felt would correct it. None of the interviews followed the exact order of the questions and the data had to be placed in the categories after transcribing the tapes. It seemed more important to let them tell their story in their own way, without unnecessarily asking them leading questions. When they would use an ambiguous term, such as “the system” or “the authorities”, they were asked to explain more fully what agency or persons were involved in what they were relating.

Due to the length of the interviews and because I allowed the clients to talk about their experience in their own way, I received numerous comments that are not pertinent to my four main research questions, such as stories about their military experiences, previous marriages, and family activities. For my data analysis in chapter four I chose specific
statements about their experience that seemed to best answer my research questions. I used the most interesting and informative examples of comments and, at times, extended quotations that I felt described their feelings about the help that was offered or received, their relationship with the workers, their awareness of mechanisms to register disagreements, and their suggestions for change.
CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data, I have used the most interesting and pertinent quotes from the clients to adequately represent the range of responses to my four main research questions. Once again they are: (1.) How do the clients perceive the nature of help offered or received from CPS? (2.) How do they perceive their relationship with the workers? (3.) Is there an awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or caseworkers? (4.) Do the clients have any suggestions for change that may be valuable in improving this relationship? Due to the open-ended nature of the questions, some of the statements could be placed differently. For instance, when expressing their thoughts about the help they received, many of them would make comments that referred relating to their relationship with the workers. Also, many times I used extended quotations to create a more complete understanding of a particular client’s perception of his/her experience. It is difficult enough to attempt to grasp a person’s point of view much less trying to do it simply from isolated statements taken out of the context of the complete story.

My main concern was to protect the identity of the clients. In order to do this, yet minimize confusion when using quotes in answer to each question, I assigned fictitious names to the fifteen clients. In the two cases that both the husband and wife were present
during the interview, I gave the names Alice and Al to the first couple and the names Betty and Bob to the second couple. The two subjects who had college degrees were named Charlene and Charlie. The four clients who were divorced were named Don, Dean, Denny, and Donna. The remaining five clients were named Helen, Kathy, Susan, Frank and James.

Due to the small convenience sample I obtained, no attempt is made to analyze the data quantitatively. Numerous, more representative, samples will be needed in order to acquire statistical validity. However, both substantiated and unsubstantiated incidents are represented. Some of the subjects felt they were unjustly accused, others blamed the problem on a spouse or ex-spouse, and some admitted they had problems that may have interfered with their ability to properly care for the children at the time. None of them had formal criminal charges brought against them, however, some of them did have other problems with the criminal justice system which affected their ability to care for their children.

In this study I focus on the clients' perception of the reality of the situation and, since it is impossible to be completely objective, I accept the truthfulness of their statements and try not to be judgmental. Although the intervention of CPS in many of the stories related in the interviews may well have been justifiable, the purpose of this thesis is not to judge the behavior of the parents, but to present their perceptions of the situation and how it was handled.
The Nature of Help Offered or Received from CPS

Most of the clients were required to receive counseling, including anger management, and attend parenting classes. There were mixed feelings about both the classes and the counseling received, however, a few of the only positive comments throughout all the interviews were in this area. The comments indicate most of them did not resent either requirement, but some of them thought the help offered was not the type of help they needed.

Some of the more positive comments were:

Al: “Parenting class I thought was good. They went over some elementary information, but at the same time they had other families in there talking about how they interact with their children. I have plenty of ideas about how to deal with the children. The main thing is they had a subject matter and allowed the people to talk about the problems.”

James: “The counselors helped a lot. They saw my wife had some needs, totally apart from the kids or anything else. I think they really tried to help. Looked past the surface problems and get at the root of things. What they did was try to forcefully suggest.”

Kathy: “They provided counseling for each member of the family through the victims of crimes funds. The children were allowed to stay in my home as long as my stepson was no longer there. The counselors they sent us to were great.”

Bob: “They came with the van and took the kids to Child Haven, we had to go to parenting classes which wasn’t so bad. I got more out of it than my wife because she didn’t take it seriously.”
Bob’s wife made the following comment about the parenting classes:

Betty: “Parenting classes were a joke. I went through six of them though. They tried to get us to do more stuff, but they knew I was stubborn. And the lady was really nice, the counseling lady. They would have had me do more stuff, but she stopped it.”

Three of the clients did not give their opinion about the classes or counseling except for how the mandatory attendance created problems for them:

Frank: “They made us go through parenting classes and counseling. We had to pay for the counseling. They didn’t offer any financial aid. They told us we had to do this and this and this program. We had to have supervised visits, because our son was at Child Haven.”

Charles: “They made me go to counseling. It hasn’t done anything for me. It is difficult for me to meet their schedule because I don’t have a car. They set up meetings at times when it was impossible for me to make it. I don’t need parenting classes, but if I have to go, let me take my children with me. They just ripped them out of my arms to show me I had no authority.”

Helen: “They made me go to a family class. That created another problem. I had to do that, and I just wanted to take care of my sick baby. They never understand me. They just kept telling me. I don’t have a problem taking care of my children, but I have a problem with CPS wanting to take my time and trying to take my kids too. They threatened me always. It caused the problems between me and my husband because he said I prefer these people and do what they say and not giving him a chance. I had to choose to protect my kids. It’s either you or my kids, so I chose my kids.”

Helen’s and Charles’ story are two of three incidents related by the clients that indicate there is a substantial amount of confusion about what type of help, if any, is available and
how to obtain it. The third story was related by Donna, who, when asked about the type of help offered or received, simply made the comment: “Absolutely no help at all.” These three are persons who had needs that went beyond what they perceived was being offered.

Helen is a young mother with one child in school and an infant who was critically ill at the time. She had been reported for leaving the infant alone at home while she went to pick up her daughter from school. She disagreed that she had done anything wrong, thinking what she had done was not bad behavior.

Helen: “I left the baby at home to go pick up my daughter. I couldn’t take all the needed equipment along. When I came back, the nurse was at my house and asked where is she? I said I had to leave her here to pick up my other daughter. I am alone, and cannot take all this stuff. And she said, well this cannot happen again. If you do that I will report you to CPS. I said why report me to CPS, I think that as a mother what I did was good! I know she will be safe here at home, she will be better here at home than in my car, while I go into school to get my daughter. It’s more dangerous in the car. She did not agree. And I said fine, but I still felt she wouldn’t report it. A week later she did it. People from CPS visited me. They told me how to take care of my child; I couldn’t leave her here. They called it neglect. They kept coming and leaving a business card in my door, all the time and giving me calls. They were in my life a lot after that happened.”

“My child is sick and I have to take care of her. There is nothing I can do at the time. I need people to help; I don’t need people against me. I felt like they were all against me. They didn’t offer any help. These people were telling you how to live your life, how to do it. But do not give you any offers how you can do better. No help with a sitter or anything. Three people were calling and visiting me, and I had to do everything they say. And I was
so afraid that they --- so alone. Then when they found out about my husband they said you need to get rid of your husband because he wasn’t good, because he is in drugs. This is when the problem became bigger. A friend of our nurse saw him with the baby, and he was asking the doctor for pills. My nurse asked if I knew he was abusing prescription drugs. I said I knew. He was never arrested for it. But that is something I cannot do anything about, but I am always home and I am the one taking care of the baby. But she said she was going to report that to CPS. Now it’s him. But he is my husband and I cannot control him. He was working and I was working also and we used to switch taking care of the children. Then one day the man from CPS say it’s either him or the children. They said I have to decide, and they came to the house and said I had to get rid of him.”

“They notified everyone in the school about my husband’s situation. I was so embarrassed. He was supposed to pick up” . . . our daughter “and he took my little one with him. The school had been told he couldn’t pick up my older daughter from school. CPS took my child from the school and took her to Child Haven. They didn’t take my sick daughter, because she was so difficult to take care of. I went over there to find out and I was so mad. They had her there two days. The next day I found out they wanted me to get rid of him.”

“My daughter is very attached to me. After two days I went over there and they gave me my daughter. In those two days I had to do so many things. I get him out of the house. A lady came to make sure all of his clothes were in a bag. We went to court and he had to be out of the house and they left the kids with me. How come? He was working and helping with the kids and paying the bills. After that he said I am out of your life. I am not helping you with nothing because you allowed these people to throw me out. I have no
Helen was not convinced she endangered her infant by leaving her alone and was very bitter about how the situation escalated and ended in divorce. She did not specify what help, if any, she thought she needed except for mentioning they didn't help with a "babysitter or anything." She recognized her husband had a problem but did not think it was in any way connected to maltreatment of the children. Her point of view was there was no reason the authorities made her get him out of the house in order to keep her children.

The second story was related by Charles, who has a college degree, but was unemployed at the time of this incident. It indicates he had serious problems that could not be resolved simply through counseling and parenting classes. He blamed the abuse on his wife and her personal problems, but also admitted having problems of his own that interfered with his ability to provide for his family.

Charles: "The first time they knocked on my door, I was just cleaning up the house, with this many kids it gets messy. My wife had just left for counseling for some problems she was having. She takes medication which makes her sleep a lot and I can't wake her, and like an idiot I try to lead a normal life. They, a man and a woman, identified
themselves as CPS and I told them to come in. They started to search the house from room to room. The woman said they had a complaint about child abuse. My four-year-old son had bruises on his leg. My wife had hit him with a wire coat hanger. He had some tremendous bruises. I don’t know what happened there. I never confronted him about it. I couldn’t see any reason to be hostile about it. I had no idea he had already been interviewed at school.”

“We were charged with physical abuse and neglect, an inability to properly care for the children. Initially, my wife was accused of hitting my son and causing bruises, but the investigators went quickly from there to me needing counseling. There were also questions about our psychiatric and emotional stability, housing, our parenting skills, gambling habits and filthy home conditions. The next thing they are telling me is that I have to go to counseling. What the fuck, how did we get from a resolved issue with my wife, because within two weeks it was resolved, to this.”

“When my wife comes home, she thinks I am just trying to get her to clean the house. She hasn’t seen CPS. I told her they were here and complained about the dirty house. CPS called again, my wife was not home, and said we checked and you are the only adult there who is mentally capable to stand trial. If you do not stay with your children and they are harmed, you will be prosecuted. I said my wife is not going to harm the children. I talked to my wife about this. She is the type of person that if you threaten to take her children, she will never punish them again, she will never hit them. She will not discipline them at all, no matter what they do.”

“We lost our place to live and had to make temporary arrangements with the help of some friends, but it was inadequate for the size of my family and only made our problems
worse. I was told I have to stay home and care for the children, but if I needed money, not to worry about it. CPS lied to me about getting financial aid and help from the housing authority. The woman from CPS promised the housing authority would help with our house payment. I was in contact with her and I called about two weeks later and said its getting close to winter. She said “Charles. I would never have told you that.” I then received a one day, on the seventh day of the ten days, which means you cannot pay the house payment. I had argued with my wife about helping me because I had to get down there. They would pay it but I had to get down there. She thought it was all a joke.”

In the meantime I went to jail for an outstanding traffic ticket. I begged them to not mess with me, I will come in, but I just got this job and was already late two times. But they took me to jail. I’ve still got twenty six hours of community service hanging over my head, or an eight hundred dollar fine. Then my water main breaks. I’m out there trying to fix it because all my money went toward bills and to people I owed money and not to gambling like the people from CPS claimed.”

“I made three thousand dollars one month, which made it difficult to get financial aid. Broke the next month and was told I must have a gambling problem. I asked them if they could go two months without an income and not be broke. I gamble, but don’t have a problem. I know where all the money went and it didn’t go to gambling. They didn’t make me go to gamblers anonymous.”

“Then I borrowed my friend’s car and was going to pay the water bill so they wouldn’t shut it off and my cell phone rings. I pulled over to answer it, and soon the police were behind me. Asked if I had outstanding warrants, and I answered yes. They again put me in jail and after five days, I didn’t have the four hundred dollars bail, CPS comes to see me.
These people are notorious liars. I told them I wouldn’t talk to them unless they had a witness present. They were completely hostile and adversarial. They did not help me. They never gave me a clear reason for taking my kids. I was told initially I would have to choose between my wife and children; that I was in a loveless marriage and should just let her go. We have been married for fourteen years and every marriage has problems and are constantly adjusting.”

Charles admits his family has a number of problems that cannot be easily resolved, however, from his point of view, he was not given the help he perceived his family needed and he was being unnecessarily persecuted by CPS. He thought financial aid would solve his family’s problems.

The story told by Donna is somewhat different because she asked CPS to intervene in her situation, but they told her there was nothing they could do. She was separated from her husband and he had obtained legal custody of their daughter. CPS told her they had investigated his home and did not find anything wrong. He then moved and did not let Donna know where they had gone. She said she was told her only alternative was to hire an attorney and take him to court, but she could not afford it.

“I called the police after receiving a call late at night from my six-year-old daughter who was left alone in the father’s residence. He was at work and the woman, who was supposed to watch her, had gone out to gamble and left her alone. The police got there before I did, and my daughter answered the door; she was in fact home alone. They called him at work and were going to call CPS, but gave me custody that night and said they would investigate tomorrow. He later admitted to leaving her alone, pleading he didn’t know any better. They just gave him a slap on the hand, but anyone with common sense
would know you can’t leave a six-year-old alone, especially in the middle of the night. She was terrified half out of her mind and this wasn’t the first time. CPS didn’t bring any charges against my ex-husband. No court or anything, they just dropped it. They said she’s not hurt or anything. I’m sure this lady sees horrible things every day; so this was minor, but not in my mind. They interviewed my daughter at school and my ex, but just talked to them over the phone.”

“I called CPS a number of times, especially since my husband took my daughter away and I don’t have any idea where she is. She said just because she has been taken somewhere doesn’t mean she is in any danger. She has to be in danger before we can help. And I said “hello!” What has to happen before you people will do anything? The child is not being cared for. I left a message for her superior to call me, but the same person called me back. It’s like her boss told her to call me so she wouldn’t have to deal with it. The last time I talked to her she said it was closed, I would have to get an attorney, which I can’t afford, and we would have to go to court and it would be a terrible ugly thing. She said it would be in the best interest of all of us if we would work it out between us. She is making a judgement call on my daughters life and there is nothing I can do. I don’t have any money for an attorney. As far as she can see my daughter is in no danger. I got so emotional over the whole thing that it just interfered with my thinking. I have to shut it down, close it out. I don’t know where she is or if she is ok. Officially it is closed even though he admitted to leaving her alone.”

Denny had only one brief comment: “They didn’t help in any way, shape, or form.”

Two of the clients interpreted the question of help only in financial terms and were not interested in making any comments about what they thought about the counseling or
parenting classes. They considered this question only briefly and wanted to talk more about how they were treated by the workers. Susan: “CPS is dictated to by the courts and legislature and can only do so much. The court orders family mediation and you have to pay for it, which is expensive.” Dean: “It seems they could make financial help more available. They make you get counseling and you have to pay for it. I was working, so it wasn’t a big burden for us, but for some it is.”

This particular group of subjects evidently did not agree to talk with me to discuss how CPS possibly helped them become better able to cope with parental problems. Rather, as the answers to the next two questions illustrate, they wanted to talk to someone who was willing to listen to their frustrations with the workers and their disagreements with how the incident was handled. Their statements indicated counseling and parenting classes were considered only as things they had to do, not as services designed to help them in specific ways.

The Relationship with the Workers

Each of the clients had something negative to say about their relationship with the workers. They said they were not treated with respect, whether or not the incident was found to be a substantiated case of child maltreatment. They were told what they must do in order to resolve their case, but were treated with suspicion and as if their opinions did not matter. Many of them thought the initial investigation could have been handled differently, some resented the constant threats of having their children removed from their homes, and most felt they were not treated as intelligent, caring parents. None of the subjects indicated they disagreed that CPS had not only the right, but the obligation to
investigate complaints of abuse or neglect. Some were totally surprised they were the objects of the investigation, while others could understand why CPS was concerned about the welfare of their children. The issue was not the fact of being investigated, but the attitude of the workers toward them as parents.

Don, Charlene, and Dean each related why the incident upset them even though the allegations were completely unsubstantiated and there was no action taken by CPS after the initial investigation.

Don: “My son told me some people came to the school, to the nurses’ office and asked him to disrobe. When he refused, they scared him with taking him away from me. They left and called me later and threatened me with taking him unless I brought him down immediately to be examined. They had received an anonymous phone call that my son had bruises around his ankles, up his legs, and across his back. So I agreed to take my boy down to juvenile.”

“Yes, they had a complaint, but it should have been a minor investigation. After finding the charges unfounded, they asked if he was a normally active child because he didn’t have any bruises at all. I really thought that took a lot of nerve, like they were really looking for something! There is a need for CPS, but they are overbearing the way they talk to you. You are guilty, period. There is no due process here. You are guilty until proven innocent. That puts pressure on both the child and the parents. They can be taken on only suspicion, and the parents are going through Hell wondering what happened to him. They were overbearing with the threats to take my child, both to him and myself. But as a former police officer, I didn’t see or hear of any discrimination. You were guilty
regardless of race or creed. The basic concern is for the child, you see a child in trouble and you take the kid.”

Charlene: “My daughter came home from school and was very upset. She said, "Mom these really weird people came and pulled me out of my class and asked all kinds of questions about you and whether anyone ever did anything bad to me.” In my job it is really to protect kids and here they are pulling my daughter out of class. Never contacted me at all. I may not have known about it at all if my daughter hadn’t told me. So I called the school and CPS because I worked with them reporting people, and it’s terrible because they won’t tell you who reported it. You can’t speak to anyone about it. I was just totally frustrated and helpless. If I reported someone, I don’t care, I can sit down. I am a grown up. I can look the person in the eye and say I’m sorry, but this is what I saw. I was trying to protect your child. If you can respect that, fine, I thought it was my job to do that. You should be able to face your accuser. Absolutely! To have your child pulled out of class and questioned, I don’t think is appropriate, I really don’t. They never contacted me. I called them and wrote them letters and said I want to see what is in this report, what your resolution is. I am a person involved with children and want to know. I was told nothing, except after about three weeks I was told it was nothing, it was a baseless thing. But, now, is my name down there in some file? I don’t know. I just remember feeling so upset and so helpless in that situation.”

“I was finally able to get someone I knew on the phone. I knew her from reporting others, and she is the one who told me it was dropped. If I didn’t have that personal contact with her I don’t know if I ever would have gotten any information. What bothers
me is that it is the teacher’s duty to report things, and you can’t tell me they don’t gossip. So I think there is a better way."

Dean: “I was shocked and upset, I could not believe it. They came out to see me, checked my cupboards, and watched me play with my daughter. They showed me handwritten copies of the terrible things my ex-wife had written about me. I would take showers with my daughter and allowed her to fondle me. They came unexpectedly and by the grace of God my mother was there and we were having a great day. I broke down in tears, I could not believe it.”

“They absolutely did not treat me with respect. I was the bad guy. There was a male and female investigator and the female was much more assertive. The male never said anything. The female was out to find out what was wrong. Something had to be wrong!”

The subjects in the cases in which child maltreatment was substantiated all indicated the workers had no respect for them and the situation created a lot of stress within their families. I have already quoted much of what Charles and Helen said about their incident with CPS. However, Charles, in addition to saying “these people are notorious liars”, also said “There was no one to talk to. I contacted the supervisor, but there was no one I could trust. The court is able to do what it wants. When they take your kids, your parental rights are suspended and they can put them up for adoption if they want. They were justified in their investigation, but don’t have enough man-hours to do it thoroughly. I see a need for CPS, but the parents should not automatically be ostracized. They caused irreparable financial and emotional stress to my family.”

Kathy, who had reported to CPS that her stepson sexually abused her daughter from her first marriage, said: “I just felt CPS was a little forceful and manipulative, especially
in getting my stepson to tell them what happened. They made it sound a lot worse than it really was. He was in the room by himself. The authorities were a little bit on the power trip type of thing."

Kathy: "I felt the authorities were very dictating. I didn’t feel we had a choice. I wish I had spoke up and said no, she’s my child and I am not going to let them do the examination. Pediatricians, and possibly knocking them out for the examination. The doctor that examined all of my kids was used to working with adult women, not young children. When the doctor examined her she was screaming so loud in the room that our ears were ringing. It’s supposed to be a real gentle thing, but it wasn’t. He determined there was no penetration. I had two clients who worked for CPS and I thought I had an “in” and they told me to call a supervisor and tell them what the doctor said. So I did and was told, “I’m sorry but that is the doctor we use.” I just think it was terrible the way they handled it, making more out of it than it really was, although any molestation is terrible. The trauma they put my young daughter through was unforgivable. There was nothing I could do about it.”

Alice and Al, whose son had reported them for physical abuse, were very upset with the evaluation and resolution of the incident. They interpreted the situation differently than CPS workers and were angry that no one seemed to want to listen to their side of the story.

Alice: “At first, yes, they should investigate because my son had unexplained bruises. But even after that was resolved, they kept trying to find things that were wrong.”

Al: “There is a big difference between abuse and spanking a kid. They need to quit jumping to conclusions and grabbing the kids out of the home. They told us we had to do
this and this and this program. We had to have supervised visits, because he was at Child Haven. They said there is no way this kid could be that bad. He knew exactly what he was doing. He was manipulating the justice system. He knew what he wanted to say, what they wanted to hear. And they listened to him. They didn’t want to listen to what the parents had to say. They treated us like crap, like we were criminals. We did what we saw fit to discipline the child. Like they say, spare the rod, spoil the child.”

“They didn’t want to hear any excuses. They told us about this time out bullshit and it doesn’t work. The kid’s attitude becomes, I can do anything I want to do and all that is going to happen is that I will be stuck in a corner for five minutes. In court, they basically dictated to us. The judge, after hearing the beating this and the beating that, finally did say where are the pictures? I don’t want to hear another word about beating from you. They did a psychological test on our son it showed he was heading for problems. They also said my son was in love with his mom, not as mother and son, but as man and woman.”

Alice: “We had to go to court. They ended up sending my son, a very impressionable teenager, to my sister’s. Took him and made us pay child support. Now mind you, my sister has been in counseling for years, she had sexually molested her boy and the state of Nevada does not check her out, even after we brought it to their attention. They asked us if we had any relatives and I told them about my two sisters and they chose her without doing any type of investigation on her. They didn’t want to listen to us and he continued to have problems. Then he went to a group home, ran away from there. Ended up injuring a little girl in one of the foster homes. He had problems with the police. He got busted for carrying a concealed weapon. Broke into a motor home, with the excuse that he needed a
place to sit down and rest. When asked, he told his counselor the reason he is doing this is because he can’t believe how easy it is, and it’s fun.”

Al: “There was no one we could talk to and we were not helped at all; we feel we were just persecuted. They could do whatever they wanted to, throw you in jail unless you had money for a high priced lawyer. But I am just a working man. I tried talking to the case worker and her supervisor and all of them had the attitude there is no way this kid can be that bad.”

“It created a lot of stress on our marriage. We took out our anger on each other. They treated us like dirt. They didn’t want to hear any excuses. They didn’t want to hear anything, nothing we had to say.”

The other couple I interviewed together, Betty and Bob, didn’t seem to have problems with the workers at CPS but disagreed that the children had to be taken out of the home. The incident created a lot of stress in their marriage. Bob had experiences with CPS as a child and did not trust anyone involved and Betty talked about her probation.

Bob: “I was working a lot, about seventy hours a week, but Betty wasn’t going home after taking me to work.”

Betty: “I would stop and put a couple of nickels in the machine. I had a run-in with the cops the night before. I ran from them. My brother and I were working on his van at three in the morning. A neighbor who had it in for me had called the police and said someone had a pistol. They found out I was on probation and called my probation officer. He was going to try and violate me.”
Bob: “The police and the probation officer showed up at the house the next morning. I start work at six and she wasn’t home. The kids answered the door and there was no one there.”

Betty: “When they came, they came early because they knew the kids would be alone. My dad was there before CPS came and said he would take the kids, but they wouldn’t let him. They came with the van and took the kids to Child Haven”.

Bob: “I didn’t find out about it until that night. They had set the court hearing for the next morning. I knew what to expect. She was screaming at me that I didn’t know anything. I told her I had already gone through that, so just shut up. We went in there and to tell you the truth, I lied to them. I knew she wasn’t home. We had dressed up, my best suit and her in a nice dress and I could tell that we didn’t look like what the caseworker thought we going to look like. She expected scum. I told them I had missed my ride and she had taken me to work and that’s why she wasn’t there.”

Betty: “Then my kids admitted to the counselor, so it came out in the wash. She was nice.”

Bob: “They then decided they were going to keep the kids until we took a blood test. The magistrate didn’t say they were going to release the kids, that was an agreement the caseworker had made with us. I told her that no matter what they tell you, don’t believe them because they are not telling the truth. I told the caseworker that you told us that if we took the drug test, we would get our kids back today. I think she was new because she relented and let the kids come home that night, which was surprising to me.”

Betty: “I don’t think our experience was really a bad one. It is scary. The cop said if I wouldn’t have run we wouldn’t have had to go through all this. CPS wanted to know
about our relationship, how we get along. They talked to the kids the first day when we weren’t there, then with our permission. My daughter almost got me in trouble, because she is such a talker. I did what I was supposed to but I think it had a lot to do with my probation lady why we didn’t have a harder time. We still went through the wringer. I don’t agree with them taking the kids when there is another adult right there who can take them.”

Bob: “The way our relationship was going and the way we were living I am surprised they didn’t latch onto us a lot longer. I honestly felt we weren’t being intruded upon, but brought it on ourselves. They didn’t add to it. Just the stress over the possibility of losing the children. I feel they had every right to step in, considering the circumstances. I think they handled it quite well. My concern is how it affected the children. The police being there, we had to console them. I think the police shouldn’t be able to determine whether a family member can take them before CPS. If there is a family member on the scene, I think they should have to let them go with that family member, unless they can prove something. They took the kids to force my wife to come to them.”

There is one other story which I feel must be told more completely because, although it describes a definite point of view, it involves more extreme circumstances than the other stories. It was obvious Denny had been drinking just before I interviewed him because there was a very strong smell of alcohol on his breath.

Denny: “I came home from work one day and the children were gone. Security at the apartments had called the police and they found my wife passed out with a marijuana pipe on her chest, on the couch. Two kids in the kitchen playing with butcher knives, no
clothes on. My four year old was running around out in the parking lot with just his underwear.”

“CPS was going to give me the kids. My ex-wife went off the wall and the person I was staying with, we were doing things wrong here too, so she sent the SWAT team over here. I was on probation at the time and even though they didn’t find anything, it was enough to get me violated. I went to prison. While I was there I tried to keep in contact with CPS. Finally I wrote the court and they said they had to give me all the records. The court sent me a packet. She had been arrested. The kids had been taken from her three times in a year. She had twelve counts of felony child neglect. So when I got out of prison I contacted CPS and they were totally against me. She has them believing I am going to kill her and I am actively stalking her. They had the children, so I called them about a month ago and asked them where are they going to go and was told that in about a week or two they would be going back to their natural mother. I said with twelve counts of neglect and abuse and you are going to give them back to her. I said what are you guys, stupid. I was pissed! I didn’t even get a chance to get in there and tell them my side. I said the police went to the house and found blood and the little one with marks on his face. Said she smacked him. I said I have the reports in my hand. And she said well this is the first time they were ever placed in foster care. So I said the first five years of their lives they were never involved with the police, CPS, or Child Haven, because I was there making sure they were taken care of. To keep her under control, you know, she used to punch me. You are going to discount me because of what she says. They not only ignored me, but absolutely refused to give me any information. They wouldn’t assist me in any
way unless the court ordered it. I would have to file a petition and didn’t have the money to do that.”

“What I am frustrated the most about is not the fact they won’t deal with me, but possibly my kids had to go through more pain until they open up their eyes and see there is a problem there. How many drug counseling and anger management classes had she completed in a year? Obviously she had to do it three times. The first two times didn’t work, what makes them think the third time is going to work? And they showed me no respect. They are supposed to be concerned for the welfare of the kids, but it seems they are focusing on what the mother wants and not what is best for the children.”

“This is the first time they have been in foster care, and they should change that too. They should look on the whole case. How many times have these kids been neglected, not how many times have we had to find somewhere to put them. I would like a chance, but I know with the drugs and if foster care or adoption is best, there is really nothing I can do about it. My main concern is the environment they are in right now. Maybe she is going to be good for six months, maybe a year, but when is she going to start abusing them again? There is nothing I can do about it until I go to court and buy the system. They should treat you with respect. They treated me as if I am a piece of dirt. I had no rights in that case at all.”

It is his point of view that there is a definite lack of communication between CPS and the parents involved. He is concerned about his children and despite his personal problems feels he should be treated with respect and given the chance to care for his children rather than his wife. He is concerned about how foster care will affect his children. When reviewing Denny’s account I was reminded of what Magura and Moses
stated as the reason given for the apparent lack of client perspectives: that there is a
"tendency to see the parents involved as less capable, articulate, and objective than other
human service recipients and to the considerable difficulties gaining the confidence of
these parents for research interviews" (Magura and Moses 1984).

Some of the other clients gave a much less detailed account of their experience but
made some isolated statements pertaining to their view of the relationship with the
workers.

James: "They went to the school where my younger son was and had him totally
terrified that they were going to take him away from us. They didn’t talk to me until about
a week later. They never notified us that they were going to talk to him. They should at
least arrange to have the parents present, even in another room when they talk to a child
because then they wouldn’t be so terrified they were going to take him from his parents.
We should have been notified immediately, so we could be there."

Frank: "They didn’t treat me as a person who was trying. They didn’t give me respect
as a human being as far as I’m concerned. The lasting impression that I and my family
have is that when the state puts it’s nose up your ass they don’t take it out."

Susan: "We had meetings at my house and I tried to tell them and they said no, no, its
not the way its supposed to be. They said I don’t care about you, but about the kids. But
the kids can’t support themselves. You need to care about the parents also. You know, if
the mother gets sick, who is going to care for the kids?"

No one seemed to have had a trusting relationship with any of the workers. It seemed
to be thought of as an adversarial relationship based on control and threats of taking the
children from the parents. Most of the subjects expressed anger at the way they were
treated. They thought their treatment reflected the attitude of the authorities that they were bad persons, knowingly doing wrong. It was as if their opinions of the situation didn’t count, they were just told what they had to do. They especially resented the constant threats of having their children removed from their home. All of the subjects felt no one listened to them; no one wanted to hear any opinions that contradicted the judgements of the investigators, case workers, or the judges.

Awareness of Mechanisms Available to Register Disagreements

Most of the subjects indicated they were extremely intimidated by the power over them and how helpless they felt. The only resource, or mechanism, they were aware of was to hire an attorney, which many of them could not afford. Indications of alienation and anomie as I described in chapter three were recognizable in many of the statements made by the clients. Of the five meanings given by sociologist Melvin Seeman (powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement) the two that were most prevalent were feelings of powerlessness and isolation. No one indicated that the situation was meaningless; all of them were concerned about the welfare of their children. Also, there didn’t seem to be feelings of self-estrangement, with the possible exception of Denny who seemed well aware that he had numerous personal problems. One client, Donna, seemed to have experienced the extreme form of anomie (normlessness) described by John Heritage as a failure of the methods for the “production of cognitive order” (Turner 1996). She indicated that she absolutely did not know how to react or what she could do about the situation.

Some of the statements that indicate feelings of powerlessness were:
Al: “There is no one to talk to, no one to complain to that they treated you badly. The only alternative is to hire an attorney.” “Our son was sent to my sister’s house, then to foster homes, then they wanted him back with us. They should have sent him away. He wanted to go and now he is still having problems.”

Bob: “Whenever we would go to court, it was already decided before we walked into the courtroom what was going to happen. We didn’t have an attorney because we couldn’t afford one.”

Frank: “I knew from the very beginning that the way it works is you do it their way or you get the consequences. It’s their way or no way. They exerted their authority. A lot of manipulating. It’s what they want, not what is best for the kids. There is nothing you can do about it.”

Donna: “I was all alone and felt totally helpless.”

Helen: “I was absolutely powerless. I was very miserable”

Charlene: “I just remember feeling so upset and helpless in that situation.”

Susan: “Their power is extremely overwhelming. They have the power to come and take my child. The threat is either you cooperate or we take the child. You have no choice.”

Dean: “CPS is only a part of it, but their hands are tied. The courts see the woman as the primary care givers, I don’t care if she is doing drugs, not home, alcohol, she gets primary custody. I don’t care if I was the Pope, I wouldn’t get primary custody.”

Charles: “The court is able to do what it wants. When they take your kids, your parental rights are suspended and they can put them up for adoption if they want. I was constantly threatened with the removal of my children and that is what they ended up...
There was a male and a female and told me to put the children in the car. They were crying and I refused to do it, but they took them anyway.”

Dean: “When they first came, they were prepared to take my child. I am thankful my mother was there, because I was emotionally weak. If my mother hadn’t been there, they would have taken my child. You don’t know how bad this system makes a man feel. A man doesn’t deserve to be with his child, that child belongs with the mother and how dare you as a man that you think you can take the place of that mother? Don’t you love your child enough to know that?”

Many of the clients also made statements about how they felt they couldn’t discuss their problems except with people very close to them, verifying feelings of social isolation:

Alice: “We didn’t feel we should discuss our problem with others, just with each other. Family matters should be kept between the two of us. In a sense it didn’t make us feel bad, because we know we didn’t do anything. What we did was right. They threatened us.”

Helen: “My friend supported me a lot. The only person I had besides grandpa. My husband was very mad at me because I listened to CPS and chose my kids.”

Kathy: “Only some really close friends know what happened.”

Don “Only very close friends. It leaves a stigma on you, so strong that unless they know you real well they may look at you and say, Well, I don’t want my kid to spend the night over there.”

Susan: “Neither one of us has family nearby and we have no really close friends we could share our problems with.”
Changes Suggested for Child Protective Services

Throughout the interviews the subjects were talking mostly about their disagreements with the evaluation of the situation and the judgements of those in authority. Suggested changes could be inferred from many of their previous statements, but the following comments were elicited by asking them specifically for changes they thought would be beneficial. I have used extended quotations here also because some of the clients explained the reasons they thought the changes should be made. Many of them could not think of any specific changes that might be helpful. As Susan put it: “You don’t want to go there.” When asked to explain further she refused to say anything except “I just don’t want to talk about it”.

Don: “Professionals should be able to report suspected abuse anonymously, you know, doctors, dentists, teachers, etcetera. Anyone else should not be anonymous, you should be able to face your accuser. Anyone can call them and the next thing you know you are being investigated. They come to your house to check your child. Physical abuse they can see, but if they say you are using drugs, no food in the house, or always yelling and screaming, poor kids mentally retarded and run down, then you are really in trouble because there is no way they can look at those things. But they are required to investigate, and what happens is the child is taken out of the house while they are investigating. The child is taken out of the house with no proof. Just because someone is mad at you. To me this develops child abuse. Taking a child, they create a terror in the child. So instead of protecting him, they are actually hurting him to some degree. They are taking the child away from the parents, locking him up, it might be a day or two before the parents ever see him. So you are creating a terror in him.”
“Non professionals should be required to give their name and told “look, if you report this, it better be true”. If the investigators feel it is valid, then they should remain anonymous, but if it is unfounded they should be subject to having their name released. This should be the major change in the reporting policy. It would stop unwarranted taking of the children out of the house, the mental abuse and anguish to the parents, stop the waste of manpower and money on juvenile services to investigate unwarranted calls. It would save so much for both the juvenile and police departments. People are charged with a felony if they fail to turn in a report of abuse, they should be charged with the same crime if they turn in a false one. That would stop that and give more credence to the ones that come in.”

“To this day my ex-wife has never been punished for any of this. It was an outright lie. If I was to come after you with a lawsuit you could get back at me. There is some kind of penalty. There really should be some kind of penalty for false accusations.”

“Doctors are required to report things, but they don’t. The parent can change doctors any time abuse is brought up. Kids don’t have any rights. If the guardian is the abuser, no one is going to listen. CPS don’t have the authority if the police have already discounted the allegations. People acknowledge that professionals, like health care providers, can see problems. And if someone is to verify that, the court should have no right to stop the child from being taken from the home. People shouldn’t be able to buy their way out of it.”

“As a police officer you are only involved at the beginning. You take them out, go to court, and from there it is all secretive, saying the juvenile’s rights come first. There should be one set of standards. To someone who never strikes a child, you hit him on the butt or spank him, you are abusing him. There is no way to set an absolute standard
because everyone looks at abuse differently. If you have a single police officer a few TV dinners and a six pack of beer, maybe some peanut butter, seems adequate. But if you have a house with four or five people a lot more is needed. Or one person will see clothes lying around as no big problem, but to a real clean person it seems filthy. In reality it may not be that bad, but to a real clean freak it is totally unacceptable. Both parents might work and not have time to keep things perfect, or the babysitter may have left a mess. The values of the persons investigating are different.”

“The authorities err on the side of cautiousness when it comes to taking children. If there is the least thought that there might be a problem, they take them. If the child looks all right at the house, it should be left to social services to follow up. The problem with it is there is not a police officer or a case worker that I know of who is willing to go to a house and see anything questionable about a child and not take him. Because if that child gets hurt or dies during the night, they are going to catch the brunt of it. So if you get called to the house you are held responsible. So in these extreme cases, I can see a lot of heat placed on the police officer.”

“The chances are, if you go to a house and it is fairly clean, no marks on a child, the child is not sick or whatever the case, you are reasonably safe in leaving him. But let’s face it, you go to a hundred houses and you leave, chances are one of them might get hurt during the night because, you know, they are children. I have no doubt I have taken children from a home that shouldn’t have been taken, but I wasn’t going to run the risk. You have to remember, if an officer or case worker takes a child, it’s no skin off their nose. They did their job. Take the child and let them worry about it and get their act together.”
Alice: “They should do a lot more checking before they start judging. If there is physical evidence, but even then, there are many times children get banged and bruised. They fall. It’s normal. My granddaughter fell and got a bad mark on her face. Someone at the grocery store saw me. I was trying to get the children in the car and they saw the bruise, and they took my license plate number and sent the cops to my house. They talked to my son and my father, everyone told them what happened, including the three year old girl. If they actually see a child being abused, then it’s a different story. There is a big difference between abuse and spanking a kid. They need to quit jumping to conclusions and grabbing the kids out of the home.”

“They have to make a quick diagnosis and it is not always correct the first time. The child should come out of that house immediately if there is any doubt. The police need more training, to judge the allegations.”

Helen: “My little baby passed away, and that’s when they let go of me. That’s sad, they let go of me when she died. They just signed me off. They just care about the kids, not me, not to help. They could care about the parents also, not just the kids, The whole family. They saw someone in my family they said was no good, and they said get rid of him. Instead of getting help for that person who they say is not good for the kids. He was into medications, and I think he got worse. Pressure on the whole family. They are not too good in that way. A person with a sick baby and a husband with a problem. There was no help. I think the way they can manipulate people makes them feel power. I did it for my kids. I wasn’t happy at all. The school called me once and said can I come to get my daughter. I said can you keep her for one hour, then I can get off, but they said if you don’t come right away we will call CPS.”
Charles: “I see a need for CPS, but the parents shouldn’t automatically be ostracized. There should be a community team, not just the judge and CPS, and it should be ethnically balanced. If you have a black family, you should have a black case worker.”

James: “The court should have no right to stop the child from being taken from the home. People shouldn’t be able to buy their way out of it. You go to court and they don’t want to listen to recommendations. CPS, the police, can restrain for only a short time, forty eight hours, but don’t have the long lasting power. It is the judge. The family courts in this state stink. The whole system is flawed. Who knows what to do about it? More education for CPS and the police, but who is going to pay for it? Children are not important enough, they are not producers. You cannot stop all child abuse, but make sure CPS workers are educated and give them the power to take a child out of a home, and make sure the court cannot change the decision. Now they can only take the child out temporarily, and when they go back to the same house they are abused even worse.”

“One part of the system blames its failures on another part of the system. It’s all about money. They can shove you off to any part of the system they want to. Power has a lot to do with it and the courts have all the power.”

Dean: “I would like to have gone through this experience with more men. When they came, he was just tagging along, I would rather have had her just tagging along. I am grateful he was there, you like to see one of your own kind, but he said nothing, she was in charge. He was just a shadow.”

The following extensive suggestions were made by the woman who is a well educated professional person who has a large staff helping in her child care business. She had been reported anonymously and was investigated because whoever reported her thought her
behavior toward her child was questionable. Although the allegations were unfounded, her experience disturbed her deeply.

Charlene: “I have thought about the system. There are many who don’t want to report things. It has to be done. But then what do they do? They either do nothing or they take the child away and then give them back to the parents, into an abusive situation, who then go on to kill the kids anyhow. I would feel better, being so secretive about it, if they would really do something and follow through when they found a legitimate case. But when they are so sensitive I have no rights to defend myself, I don’t get my day in court. They feel the child is always better off with the parents. No! There are some parents the child is not better off with.”

“When I have reported a situation, I never got any feedback from them.”

“Then again, that’s the other frustrating part of the system. I never know what they do or don’t do. I will say if I had a nickel for every time a client threatened to report me I would be a wealthy woman. They don’t want to pay their bill and use that threat to try to get us to not make them pay us. I tell them, great, report it and we will sit down in my office and discuss it. There is a whole subculture of people out there, just trashy people, who think they can scare you into not making them pay their bill. I’m like go for it. We do a thorough background check on our staff. We have never had any problems, because once you say, go for it, they think they are not going anywhere with it.”

“I’ve been at this fifteen years and know my staff. They get the best training around. I have confidence in my staff. It does seem that in the past few years things have calmed down. For a while it seemed everyone was reporting everyone else every five minutes.

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I’m not sure if people are not reporting it as much or if they aren’t pursuing it as aggressively or what.”

“I suspect a lot of the cases come out of divorce. Using CPS as a weapon against their spouse to gain custody.”

“I teach parenting classes to my staff, and it’s intensive for 20 weeks, and at the end of twenty weeks, I can’t turn out a product that is perfect. I work with them in a hands on, group setting and give them instructions on how to handle children, moment to moment. You can’t do it in three or four weeks. You can’t just sit there and listen to someone talk, you need to be hands on. People learn by doing.”

“The way children are raised has changed. I was old enough and educated enough to not just do as my parents did. You get these young persons, who have been in situations children should never be in, and to them that’s a normal lifestyle. So what you have to do is create a whole new subculture and move them out of that so they realize that is not a normal lifestyle.

“I would like to be able to face the accuser.”

“If I report I would like to be able to follow through. When you report it you never hear anything again, There seems to be an attitude of we know it all. I am not saying I am the expert, but I work with children every day of my life, and who is going to pick it up better than me? There needs to be more collaboration with people who work with children and more training.”

“I hate the secrecy. It should be absolutely one hundred percent open. Because people will gossip anyway and people who have been accused incorrectly will be looked at, you know, funny. Where there’s smoke there is fire kind of thing. Completely open is much
more preferable, because it would cut out a lot of the unnecessary reporting. Because now a person has something to lose by reporting. Make it a non-sue-able offense, but now you are going to know who reported it, make them stand up for their conviction. Make them face the person they are accusing.”

To summarize, it was suggested the reporting procedures be changed to be less secretive and to enable those charged to face their accuser. It is felt those who are accused have the right to know why they are being investigated. There should be some kind of penalty for false accusations and the investigators should do more checking before making judgments. There also should be feedback to the person doing the reporting so they know how it turned out. Another suggestion was that CPS should care more about the parents, not just the kids. It was also suggested that there should be more education for CPS and the police. Parenting classes should be for longer periods, not just a few weeks, in a group setting with hands on instructions on how to handle children.

This study is of a very small number of the clients of CPS and thus can only be considered as exploratory. However, some tentative comparisons between the answers I received to my questions and the findings of the studies reviewed in chapter two can be made. These questions are only a few of the possible inquires that could be made. However, asking similar questions, in different ways and with many different groups, can give us a better understanding of the best ways to approach the problem of child maltreatment. As I pointed out in chapter one, there is an overwhelming number of occurrences of child maltreatment that need investigation and there are many different expert views about the causes and solutions of this problem. Understanding how the clients’ perceive the help offered or received, their relationship with CPS workers, and
their awareness of any mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or workers could lead to positive changes in our policies. Listening to their suggestions for changes is also important because they are the people most closely involved in the situation and may have a better understanding of what may be needed to prevent further child maltreatment.

In chapter five I summarize the answers received from interviewing this group of clients, tentatively compare the findings to those studies I reviewed in chapter two, and suggest what further studies may be needed.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

This study addresses only one small aspect of the numerous dimensions of child protection. I asked three questions that were suggested as important in the existing literature: How do clients of CPS perceive the nature of help offered or received? How do they perceive their relationship with the workers? Is there an awareness of mechanisms available to register disagreements with the investigators or caseworkers? I also asked if they had any suggestions for change that may be valuable in improving their relationship with CPS. More studies are needed of the clients’ perspectives in order to obtain a wider variety of experiences and thus more generalizable data. An important consideration in any study of this type is that those involved with CPS cannot be expected to speak freely about their concerns unless the threat of removing the children from their home is eliminated and they are treated with respect.

The Nature of Help Offered or Received From CPS

A few of the only positive comments made were in the area of perceptions of the nature of help offered or received. The comments seemed to indicate those who were required to attend parenting classes or receive counseling accepted it, even though some of them had difficulties making it to meetings or had to pay for the counseling. Only one
person had a suggestion about how the parenting classes could be improved, which was to include longer periods, in a group setting, with hands on instructions on how to handle children. The answers to this question were mixed, which agrees with the results of the state wide survey done by the organization Action for Child Protection (ACP). They found the answers to the questions pertaining to the degree and nature of help received were mixed also. Part of the reason for this inconclusive finding could be that some of the clients perceived that they needed help that was not offered.

Three of the clients in this study seemed to be looking for help beyond what CPS offered. Helen thought she needed help with a baby sitter to allow her to pick her up her daughter from school and not leave her sick baby home alone. She also recognized her husband had a problem abusing prescription drugs and needed help, but thought of it as a separate issue, not pertaining to the welfare of their children. Charles thought he needed financial aid, but what he wanted either wasn’t available or he was confused about how to obtain it. Donna needed help in locating her daughter and convincing her that her child was safe.

Magura and Moses concluded that the child protective services studied “seemed moderately successful across a wide range of content areas” (Magura and Moses 1984). But they also reported the one area in which substantial improvement was not reported: that of parental ability to cope with a variety of difficulties such as physical, mental and emotional health, social supports, employment, legal involvements and marital or relationship problems. The three stories in this study begin to explain the reasons for this. It could be that the clients perceived they needed help that was not offered.
A number of subjects claimed CPS did not help them in any manner, but only created unnecessary stress within their family. It was surprising that only one referred to the Department of Family and Youth Services, indicating a lack of awareness that CPS is only one of seven divisions within this organization. CPS, Child Haven, and the courts were all mentioned separately, never as an interrelating network. Some of them did not understand the purpose of CPS nor the limitations on the type of help available to them. It is also surprising no one mentioned any suggestions coming from their caseworker about solving their problem. The only comments made were that they were dictated to and threatened with the removal of their children, not helped. The help offered was in the form of demands and was not what they wanted or thought they needed.

The Relationship with the Workers

The statements in this study pertaining to their perceptions of the relationships with the workers were all negative. The ACP study found that the clients agreed that the worker explained what the concerns were, what was happening in their case, and what was expected of them. This suggests a perception of professional competency, but leaves it unclear whether or not they felt valued and cared for, trusted, or received emotional support, the indicators of a helping relationship Winefield and Barlow found important in gaining positive results. The statements from the clients I interviewed also indicated they knew what was expected of them and what the concerns were, but there was a lot of anger expressed about the manner in which they were treated. The ACP survey provided space in which the clients could write their comments, but very few did so.
Many of the subjects I interviewed said they were treated as bad persons, criminals, like dirt, or as less than human. Those involved in the cases in which the accusations were judged to be unfounded claimed they were judged immediately as guilty and had to prove their innocence. Those who admitted wrongdoing were unhappy with the way they were treated and claimed no one was willing to listen to their side of the story. The only recourse they considered available was to hire an attorney.

Magura and Moses reported similar results received from clients when they asked about their satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their case workers and the agency, specifically that “one quarter of the clients reported disputing an important fact or interpretation of fact with the agency” (Magura and Moses). In addition 60% of the total sample had at least one important criticism of the agency, mainly that they disagreed with the caseworker’s ideas about how to handle problems and they disliked the caseworker’s attitude.

Awareness of Mechanisms Available to Register Disagreements

In this study there was also a strong indication these clients felt there was no way to express their disagreements with the workers; contacting a supervisor did not seem to do any good. This also agrees with the findings of the APC survey to statements about being told about ways to complain about the workers or the evaluations of the problems. There seem to be no mechanisms for this purpose available to the clients. All of them had no idea what they could do other than attempt to fulfill the demands placed on them.

In chapter four I related specific statements to the sociological concepts of alienation and anomie. There were feelings of social isolation, helplessness, and not knowing what
to do about the situation. The clients agreed CPS should investigate allegations of abuse and neglect, but when it happened to them they were put into a situation which upset their daily routine, changing their lives in an unexpected way. More research is needed in this area, not just to describe these feelings, but also to discover how to prevent them and develop a relationship in which those involved feel as though they are being treated as valued, intelligent, and caring adults.

Perhaps a solution suggested in the literature from VOCAL should be considered. They “believe a review board independent of the Social Service Department is imperative for individuals to air their grievances (without a repercussion). In our system of democracy there are checks and balances which attempt to insure that the inherent power of governmental units does not corrupt their purposes” (VOCAL 1999). Or perhaps, as Magura and Moses suggested, using an outside ombudsman to informally mediate disagreements would be a solution to this problem.

Summary

There is no question there are numerous factors to consider when discussing child protection and those working in this area have one of the most difficult tasks imaginable. It is well documented that those who work in this field are constantly criticized both for over reacting and under reacting. Every day they must use their best judgement in situations that are far from clear. There are countless stories both about the difficulties innocent parents had with the unnecessary removal of their children and about children who were seriously injured or killed because investigators failed to remove them. It is
important we understand the difficulties faced by those given the responsibility of protecting children from irresponsible adults.

However, it is equally important the point of view of those accused of child maltreatment is understood. This study was an attempt to address this important, but neglected, dimension in the discourse on child protection. Although far from conclusive, there is evidence for a need to consider possible ways to improve the relationship between CPS and those accused of child maltreatment. The persons interviewed for this study suggested a few specific changes they think would be helpful.

The first suggestion was in the reporting procedures. You should be able to know who reported the incident and face your accuser, especially if the allegations are unfounded. There should also be some type of penalty for false accusations and the person who reported the incident should receive feedback on the incident so they know how the case was resolved.

Secondly, the workers should show more concern about the parents, and not just the kids. This is related to the suggestion of more education for CPS and the police. The client who suggested this did not know what type of education was needed. I personally think some type of sensitivity training could be helpful. It may be a good idea to ask the clients what type of help they thought was needed and accommodate them as much as possible. If it was beyond the resources of CPS or if it disagreed with the caseworker’s evaluation, just talking to them about it could help create an atmosphere of cooperation and alleviate the feelings that CPS was only there to dictate to them and not listen to their side of the story.
During the interviews, some of the clients expressed concern about officials talking to a child about suspected maltreatment without first notifying the parents. They acknowledged CPS has the right and the obligation to investigate, but felt the parents should be immediately available to reassure the child that he/she was not going to be taken from them. This may not be possible in all cases, but should be considered as a general operating procedure.

Finally, the suggestion was made to extend the parenting classes to include longer periods, in a group setting, with hands on instructions on how to handle children.

The first step in considering any changes in actions or procedures is to admit there may be a better way of doing things. The goal is to reduce the number of child maltreatment incidents, not just to punish every parent who is involved in an incident, whether it is substantiated or not. More studies of this nature are needed in order to be able to compare expert opinions with the opinions of those who are on the receiving end of accusations of child maltreatment. Not only surveys, but extended interviews with clients from different agencies are needed. Questions about perceived discrimination involving race, income level, and religious affiliation need to be addressed as well as cultural differences in child rearing beliefs. Larger, more representative samples than those used in this and other studies are necessary to increase confidence in our conclusions.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDELINES AND DISCOVERY QUESTIONS
Interview Guidelines and Discovery Questions
for
Client Perspectives of Child Protective Services

When incident occurred? _______ Number and ages of children? _______
Marital status at the time? _______ Education?: Mother___ Father___
Occupation?: Mother_____ Father_____ Household income?__________
Relationship to the accused? _______

A. Description and circumstances of your experience.
   1. How was the incident referred to CPS?
   2. Do you feel the investigation was justified? If not, what was your reaction?
   3. What were the charges?
   4. Do you agree with the assessment of the issues or problems?
   5. What services or programs were proposed or required? How did they help you?
   6. What were your financial costs? Sufficient aid offered?
   7. Did the incident create stress on the relationships among family members?

B. Relationships with the workers. (Investigators – Case Worker – Others)
   1. Were you treated with respect and felt valued and cared for?
   2. Did they explain clearly what was expected of you?
   3. Did they listen to your side?
   4. Was someone you could trust available to answer your questions?
   5. In what ways were you helped by your caseworker?
C. Issues of Alienation and Anomie

1. Did you feel the power and resources of the agency was beyond your influence? In what ways did you feel threatened?

2. What resources or mechanisms to which you had access proved helpful?

3. Were you able to discuss your problem with family members and friends?

4. Did you feel you knew what had to be done?

5. Were children removed from your home? If yes:
   a. Do you feel it was justified?
   b. Do you agree with the manner in which they were removed?
   c. Were alternatives completely explored?
   d. What difficulties did you encounter in having them returned?

D. Changes suggested for Child Protective Services?

1. Referrals? Mandatory and anonymous reporting?  2. Investigations?


6. Removal and return of children?  7. Checks and balances on power of agency?

8. Mechanisms of empowerment for clients?
APPENDIX B

NOTICE USED TO RECRUIT SUBJECTS
Speak up!!

Your point of view is important. Our children need and deserve protection, but is it being handled properly??

I am a graduate student at UNLV doing a study on client perspectives of Child Protective Services. I would like to talk to you about your agreements and disagreements with their actions and services, your compliments and frustrations, and the effects your experience had on your family. What do you think needs to be changed, if anything?

Everything will be kept strictly confidential.

Please ask for me at counter

Or call me at 367-8047 (10am to 10pm).

Thank you,

Jerry Rohleder
APPENDIX C

UNLV INFORMED CONSENT FORM
UNLV - Informed Consent Form

Client Perspectives of Child Protective Services

I am Jerry Rohleder, a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas.

I would like to ask you to participate in my research project on Client Perspectives of Child Protective Services. The purpose of this research is to determine the strengths and weaknesses of present practices of Child Protective Services in Clark County, NV. It will involve a number of interview questions about your experiences and take about one hour to complete.

The benefits of this research include better understanding of the relationships between Child Protective Service workers and those who have been accused of child maltreatment, possibly leading to favorable changes in procedures and more substantial aid.

Some questions may make you uncomfortable. Please be aware of the following:

1. Your participation is completely voluntary.
2. If you agree to participate, you only need to answer the questions that you feel comfortable with.
3. Your identity will be kept completely confidential.
4. Nothing that you say will be repeated or reported in a way that will reveal your identity.
5. You may withdraw your participation in this research at any time.

Also, to minimize the risk of breaching confidentiality, any information obtained which may create a possibility of revealing personal identity will not be used. Descriptions of individual experiences will be generalized as types of incidents rather than specific occurrences. These consent forms will be kept for three years in a locked filing cabinet, separate from the interview data, at the researcher’s residence located at 3029 Half Shell Way, Las Vegas, NV, 89128.

If you have any questions regarding this research or your participation in this project, please feel free to call Dr. Frederick Preston at the UNLV Department of Sociology at 895-3322. You may also contact the UNLV Office of Sponsored Programs with any questions regarding the rights of research subjects at 895-1357.

I have read and I understand the information above. I agree to participate in this research:

__________________________________________________________________________
(Please print name) (Today’s date)

__________________________________________________________________________
(Signature)
DATE: February 16, 2001

TO: Jerry Rohleder
Sociology
M/S 5033

FROM: Tina M. Wininger
Human Protections Administrator
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (x2794)

RE: Status of Human Subject Protocol Entitled:
"Client Perspectives of Child Protective Services"
OPRS# 115s0101-199

This memorandum is official notification that the Social/Behavioral Committee of the UNLV Institutional Review Board approved the protocol for the project listed above and work on the project may proceed. This approval is effective February 15, 2001 and will continue for a period of one year.

Should the use of human subjects described in this protocol continue beyond a year from the approval date, it will be necessary to request an extension.

If you have any questions or require any assistance, please contact the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 895-2794.

cc: OPRS file
REFERENCES


Nevada Revised Statutes: Chapter 432B.260. (3,d) (1). & (2). And NRS 432B.150.


VITA

Graduate College
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Jerry L. Rohleder

Home Address:
3029 Half Shell Way
Las Vegas, Nevada 89128

Degrees:
Bachelor of Arts, 1998
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Special Honors and Awards:
Alpha Kappa Delta, 1995

Thesis Title: Client Perceptions of Child Protective Services

Thesis Examination Committee:
Chair person, Dr. Frederick Preston, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Kathryn Hausbeck, Ph.D.
Committee Member, Dr. Lynn Osborne, Ph.D.
Graduate Faculty Representative, Dr. Randall Shelden, Ph.D.