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### Reunification: The Child Protection Worker's Perspective

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Running head: REUNIFICATION

Reunification: The Child Protection Worker's Perspective

by

Holly Gabby, B. CH FS

MSW Qualitative Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

**Abstract**

Family reunification is the preferred permanency option, and is the most common goal for families that have been separated. The purpose of this study was to explore various child protection workers' perspectives on family reunification. This project intended to gain an insider perspective using a qualitative research design. A semi-structured interview was used with six child protection worker's that participated in this study. These interviews revealed four major themes from the data collected: family factors, worker influence/bias, one size doesn't fit all, and the system prevents reunification. Within these themes there were many subthemes including: lack of parent involvement, trauma, safety, reunification barriers, lack of resources, after-care services, and outside professional resources. After analyzing the data and existing literature, suggestions for further research focused on the need for more after-care services and working within child protection timelines with parents struggling with substance abuse and mental health issues.

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Family reunification can be defined as the process in which children in temporary out of home placements are reunited with their parent(s) (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea, 2014). Research suggests children that spend a significant amount of time in foster care exhibit troubles in their education, employment, and mental health (American Humane Society, 2012). Generally, when a child is removed from their biological family members or caregivers, the primary goal is reunification within the family (Balsells et al., 2014). According to the Child Welfare League of America (2002), the reunification process focuses on the connection between the parent and child to ensure stability for the child and his or her development. About one half of out of home placements eventually lead to reunification (Wulczyn, 2004). Ideally, this temporary placement would be as short as possible; however that is not always the case.

Family preservation was largely discussed during the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (AACWA). The major objective of this act was to prevent the removal of children. Additionally, they created standards and a foundation that reasonable efforts must be made for the children to remain in the home or, if the children were removed, that they be reunited in a timely manner back with their parents (Wulczyn, 2004). This act allowed for the judicial system to identify whether or not reasonable efforts had been made, or allow the children to be returned home. The 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) instilled the value of family preservation in our child welfare system and the importance of a time-limited reunification plan. This law illustrated the importance of child safety, permanent homes, and support for families. This act identified a shorter timeframe for the permanency planning hearing from 18 months to 12 months (Wulczyn, 2004). Additionally, this led to concurrent planning which is a method that

analyzes all options of permanency for a child, to ensure that an alternative goal will be accomplished in a reasonable amount of time (Child Welfare Gateway, 2012). While reunification is the primary goal, concurrent planning is required to occur simultaneously until reunification is no longer a suitable option for the child.

Current research suggests that characteristics and experiences of the parent and child are one of the most important aspects in the likelihood of family reunification (Davidzon & Benbenishty, 2007; Lopez, Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2012; Wulczyn, 2004). The research defines family characteristics that are highly influential in the reunification process as: age of the child, race, services provided, length of stay in temporary placements, substance abuse by the parent(s), socioeconomic status, environmental challenges (such as finances, lack of food, learning environment), strength-based services, client engagement, and mental health issues (Akin, 2011; Balsells et al., 2015; Carnochan, Lee, & Austin, 2013; Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Lopez et al., 2013; Maluccio, Fein, & Davis, 1994; Marsh, Ryan, Choi, & Testa, 2005; Maluccio, Fein, & Davis, 1994; Wulczyn, 2004). Temporary placements can be defined as foster care, kinship or relative care, and guardianship (American Humane Association, 2012). Wulczyn (2004) suggests that the process of reintegration into the family environment can be very difficult for both the parent and child. Depending on the child and family characteristics, this process can either help or hinder this process. Additionally, many studies suggest that families with co-occurring issues may have a more difficult time with a successful reunification and have a higher likelihood of reentry (Wulczyn, 2004; Terling, 1999; Blakey, 2011; Connell, Vanderploeg, Katz, Caron, Saunders, & Tebes, 2009; Wulczyn, 2004; Terling, 1999). There is a lack of research on the process of

reintegration, more specifically, how reintegration can be completed successfully (Wulczyn, 2004).

Child protection workers are crucial to the process of successful reunification. It is their job and duty to protect the safety and wellbeing of children and eventually achieve permanency (Child welfare Information Gateway, 2013). Child protection workers respond to reports of child maltreatment from concerned citizens or professionals and make an informed decision regarding potential further investigation. Child maltreatment is defined by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) as, “any act or failure to act which presents an immediate harm” or “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation” (42 U.S.C.A. § 5106g). Therefore, a child protection workers’ job involves investigating reports of abuse and neglect, providing services to families, arranging temporary placements for children, and eventually, providing permanency for children through family reunification or adoption.

The child protection worker has a huge impact on the likelihood of family reunification, and often the worker influences the decision. Ultimately, a judge makes the decision, but understanding the perspective of a child protection worker is essential to understand the implications of family reunification. The focus of this qualitative research study is to explore child protection workers’ perceptions of reunification. Interviews were completed with multiple child protection workers’ to gain an in-depth understanding of their outlook on the reunification process.



## Literature Review

### Service Delivery

Parents' utilization of services provided by child protection is an important factor for reunification. Reports by Child and Family Services Reviews Process revealed that a critical aspect of reunification is the availability of services (DHHS, 2011 as cited in D'Andrade, 2015).

**Strength-based services.** The current research largely focuses on child protection's use of strength-based services. The Child Welfare Information Gateway (2008) concentrates on the importance of an individualized, strengths-based approach in the child welfare system (Freundlich, 2006). A strengths-based approach can be defined as, "policies, practice methods, and strategies that identify and draw upon the strengths of children, families and communities...[Strengths-based approach] involves a shift from a deficit approach, which emphasizes problems and pathology, to a positive partnership with the family" (National Technical Assistance and Evaluation Center for Systems of Care, 2008, p.1). This method allows the worker to focus on each child and family's strengths as well as their challenges, and engages them in a collaborative partnership (Carnochan, Lee, & Austin 2013; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008; D'Andrade, 2015; Fernandez & Lee, 2013).

Ayala-Nunes, Hidalgo, Jesus, and Jiménez (2014) identify ten practices that are utilized to gain a strength-based approach: "empowering orientation, cultural competence, relationship-based approach, family strengthening, active participation between family members and program staff, a community orientation, knowledge of community based approaches, a family-centered approach, a goal-oriented approach, and

individualization of services to address specific family needs” (p. 301). In terms of intervention, research supports using positive focused interventions and case plans instead of concentrating on deficits; this allows families to assume their responsibility as well as gain self-determination towards achievements once reunification has occurred (Balsells, Pastor, Mateos, Vaquero, & Urrea, 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013; Kelly, 2000).

Basells et al. (2014) identifies that utilizing a strength-based method generates positive results in reunification and prevention of reentry back into the system. Wulczyn (2004) suggests, “identifying, enhancing, and building family strengths into the service plan holds promise as a means of encouraging birth parent involvement, ownership, and compliance” (p.108). Using a family strengths perspective allows the family to be involved in their case plan (Balsells et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013; Freundlich, 2006; Wulczyn, 2004). Additionally, client engagement is a critical factor between child welfare practitioners and families (Carnochan, Lee, & Austin, 2013). An emphasis on individualized needs assessments and building strengths through service delivery are helpful factors in reunifying families and promoting family resiliency (Fernandez & Lee, 2013; Freunlich, 2006; Lietz & Strength, 2011). Underlying issues causing maltreatment or neglect can be overlooked when services offered through the child welfare system do not implement or promote permanent change within the family (Carnochan et al., 2013). Lietz and Strength (2011) focus on an approach during the process of reunification in which the family has a clear understanding of their role in working towards reunification so they can recognize the changes they have made, and create positive reinforcement towards the future.

Fernandez and Lee (2013) focus on instruments that identify clients' needs, strengths, and areas of risk. For example, many child protection workers use the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale-Reunification (NCFAS-R) for planning and decision-making regarding children's safety, family protective capacities, enhancing strengths, and improving child and family problems (Fernandez & Lee, 2013). Another important measure is the Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), which measures agency performance with regard to family reunification (Carnochan et al., 2014). The scale measures three different factors pertaining to the timeliness of reunification, including, measuring the percentage of all children that were reunified within a year, the median length of stay in foster care, the percentage of children who entered foster care in the six month period who were reunified within a year, and lastly, the percentage of children who reentered foster care in less than 12 months (Carnochan et al., 2014). Strength-based services and social support co-exist as an essential tool for families' success in the child welfare system.

A form of strength-based services that is shown to be helpful for families involved in the child protection system is social support, defined as using social interaction and networks to cope with stress (Lietz, Lacasse, & Cacciatore, 2011). House (1981) (as cited in Lietz et al., 2011) describes four different types of social supports: "emotional concern (liking, love, empathy), instrumental aid (goods or services), information (about the environment), and appraisal (information relevant to self evaluation)" (p. 39). Social support has been shown to develop very positive affects, for example, decreasing the frequency of depression and emotional distress after traumatic encounters, which is a common response for families involved in the child protection

system (Lietz et al., 2011; Lietz & Strength, 2011). Similarly, social supports have been associated with positive behavior transformations (Lietz et al., 2011). Families that are lacking this social support are found to be “unsuccessful” in the system. Specifically, recurrence of abuse or neglect is higher for these families (Lietz et al., 2011). For every family, social support can be a variation of many factors depending on the family’s needs. Lietz et al. (2011), named support as both tangible and motivational needs, such as rental assistance and belief in their own abilities. These social supports can be seen in many facets, for example, familial, community, faith, support groups, and child welfare services; all of which are influential factors in achieving reunification (Lietz et al., 2011; Lietz & Strength, 2011). Empowering families will allow positive meaning in their time of need and also help them to gain confidence for the future (Balselles et al., 2014; Leake, Long-worth Reed, Williams, & Potter, 2012).

**Continued services.** Another important aspect outlined by the research is the importance of continued services during and after reunification has occurred (Amramczyk, Maluccio, & Thomlison, 1996; Davis, Fein, & Maluccio, 1994; Fernandez et al., 2013; Kelly, 2000). Few services, both with the child and the family, are maintained after involvement with child protection, which can lead to reappearance of the original issues, causing reentry into the child protection system (Bellamy, 2007). Many times services are only provided during the time of contact with child protection; however, services have proven most beneficial when they are available to families before, during, and after child protection case closure. Parents often fear to reach out to child protection when there is an issue, because of the terror of losing their child again. If services are continued, this fear may become less likely (Amramczyk, Maluccio, &

Thomlison, 1996; Bellamy, 2007). Research in this area would be helpful for future understanding of the potential impact of services after reunification.

Many families view reunification as termination with child protection and not as a continuation of support. This illustrates the lack of support for families following reunification, when previously they have received immense amounts of supervision by professionals for a significant amount of time (Balsells et al., 2014). Farmer (1996) suggests when children are placed back into the home it can be a huge transition as well as another change for the child. The researcher suggested that this process should feel like a continuation of services and it is therefore the social workers' responsibility to help ensure this occurs (Farmer, 1996). Future research should focus on follow-up services and the frequency of lowering reentry into the child protection system.

### **Influential Characteristics**

Influential factors towards achieving reunification include: practice and system related factors, child characteristics, and family or parent characteristics (Blakey, 2011).

**Child welfare.** Another factor of reunification is the child protection workers' attitude and characteristics. Arad-Davidzon & Benenishty (2007) suggests there are two clusters of child protection workers: one is pro-removal and the other shows more negative attitudes towards removal, while favoring shorter stays in out of home placements. The law requires every child welfare agency to make reasonable efforts towards reunification, and when that goal is no longer supported they will work towards alternative concurrent placements. Decisions on removal and reunification differ greatly by worker and are relied on discretion, which suggests the risks of bias and error are high (Arad-Davidzon et al., 2008). Aragon (2004) suggested it was imperative to understand

and become aware of how a child protection worker's values and characteristics can contribute to the child welfare process. Because child welfare workers have such a big impact on the decision of reunification, it is important to understand where these biases may take place throughout the process. Another concerning factor that Arad-Davidzon et al., (2007) discovered was, 80 percent of the workers interviewed stated they favored keeping children in foster care, with or without the input of the biological family. If the family opposed, most workers stated that they would pursue the matter in court. Another important component for child protection workers is feelings of conflict within their decision. Child protection is often scrutinized by the public for re-victimization which makes the decision to reunify much more difficult. The research also shows that there's a paradigm between child protection workers fear of public scrutiny and the importance of family reunification (Arad-Davidzon et al., 2007).

Many studies have focused on the impact of certain characteristics of workers and the eventual influence on reunification (Aragon, 2004; Arad-Davidzon et al., 2007). After interviewing various workers, researchers discovered workers who had more experience and years working in social work increased the likelihood of reunification, regardless of the unique family characteristics (Aragon, 2004; Blakey, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013; George, 1994; Walton & Fraser, 1993). Similarly, Goerge (1994) found that the longer a case is open, the less likely the worker will reunify the family. He suggested this is because the worker had more time to analyze the family, their parenting skills, and the complexity of the case (Goerge, 1994; Lopez, Valle, Montserrat, & Bravo, 2012). Additionally, there is substantial data showing that the longer amount of time a child is in an out of home placement, the possibility for reunification lowers (Arad-Davidzon et al.,

2007; Carnochan, et al., 2013; Farmer, 1996; Maluccio, Fein, & Davis, 1994). An important aspect of child protection is to understand the ramifications of long-term foster care and the importance of foster care as a temporary solution. With that, it's also critical for our policies to reflect the research and suggestions on the effects of long-term foster care and child development (Arad-Davidzon et al., 2007).

Research suggests that a worker's perspective and opinion on the family can have an effect on the overall outcome of the case (Maluccio & Fein, 1994). Depending on the worker, they may play the role of an enforcer, which will affect the family differently than if they acted as a social worker using case management skills (Aragon, 2004). If case plans are not family-centered, it can be difficult to achieve success throughout the case plan. Cheng (2010) stated that strong engagement between child protection worker and parent promoted reunification. A relationship between family members and the worker can be vital to reunification (Arad-Davidzon et al., 2007, Fernandez et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2012). Further research on child protection worker bias and utilization of social work skills would be beneficial.

***Practice wisdom.*** Practice Wisdom can be defined as “an integrating vehicle for combining the strengths and minimizing the limitations of both the “objective”, or empirical, practice model and the “subjective”, or intuitive-phenomenological, practice model in the development of efficacious knowledge in social work” (Klein & Bloom, 1995, p. 799). This paradigm in social work practice plays a huge factor in child protection settings. Practice wisdom introduces two different methods of working with clients, the first being, working within their knowledge and reflective experience to respond to situations (Stokes, 2009). This approach emphasized that every situation is

unique and highly complex and therefore, reacting within that framework to bring a fitting outcome (Stokes, 2009). The other paradigm is an individual that reacts to situations using a scientific and rational approach, with an emphasis in the external results rather than the means to get there (Kaplan, 2003 as cited in Stokes, 2009). This approach is scrutinized because it does not always factor in individual uniqueness, the complexity of human relations, and autonomy (Stokes, 2009). In other words, practice wisdom is the compromise between technical versus practical practice or evidence-based practice versus intuition-based practice (Gilgun, 2005; Stokes, 2009). The decisions that child protection workers make are critical to the families lives but are rarely examined other than if a very serious outcome has resolved, like a child's death (Stokes, 2009). This view of that end scrutiny that has the potential to occur can play a huge impact on how a child protection worker works with families.

**Children.** Several studies have focused on individual child characteristics as being another prominent factor influencing reunification and permanency. Some of the most widely studied characteristics include age, race/ethnicity, child health/mental health, and gender (Akin, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013). Age can be seen as a predictive factor in that older children are less likely to exit foster care to permanency, and infants were less likely to be reunified and spend a longer time in out-of-home care (Akin, 2011; Blakey, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013; Esposito, Trocmé, Chabot, Collin-Vézina, Shlonsky, Sinha, 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013; Kelly, 2000; Lutman & Farmer, 2013; Wulczyn, 2004). Younger children should be quickly reunified for the purpose of attachment and stability, which can be developmentally harmful for them if not ensured



(Esposito et al., 2014). Fourteen to seventeen year olds are most likely to be reunified with their biological family, followed by ten to thirteen year olds (Esposito et al., 2014).

Race and ethnicity is also a determining factor in the child protection system. African American children are overrepresented in the child protection system, significantly more than any other race (Carnochan et al., 2013; Esposito et al., 2014, Lopez et al., 2012; Maluccio et al., 1994; McAlpine, 2014). African American children are also the least likely to reunify (Akin, 2011; Blakey, 2011). Additionally, African American children are less likely to reunify than Caucasian children, but are more likely to be adopted (Wulczyn, 2004). There are also contradictory reports that African American children are less likely to be adopted and reunified (Wulczyn, 2004).

Health and mental health concerns are also significant factors, which reduce the likelihood of reunification (Akin, 2011; Connell, 2007; Lopez et al., 2012). Similarly, children with disabilities are more likely to be adopted and less likely to be reunified because of the complexity of the case (Akin, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2012). Although gender was analyzed in many studies, all concluded that gender did not have a significant impairment to reunification (Akin, 2011; Blakey, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013)

**Family.** Research also looks closely at family and parent characteristics that may have an affect on reunification. Findings suggested that single parents were less likelihood to reunify compared to two parent households (Akin, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013). Parent's active cooperation in the case is seen as vital to the success of reunification (Lopez et al., 2012). In contrast, parental ambivalence throughout the process can also be a barrier to reunification (Wulczyn, 2014). Visitation and contact

between the parent and child have led to higher success rates towards reunification. A lack of visitation can prevent reunification from occurring (Akin, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2012; Wulczyn, 2004). It can be suggested that this allows the parent and child to continue to improve attachment and bonding. It is highly suggested that visitation be based on the child's age, development, and temperament (Carnochan et al., 2013). Additionally, parent's emotional well-being has also shown to effect family reunification. Families struggling to maintain and address their mental health concerns have proven to reunite at a slower pace than other families. (Wells & Guo, 2004 as cited in Carnochan et al, 2013).

Parental substance abuse is also an important factor and is proven to reduce the probability of reunification, especially if the reason for removal was substance use (Akin, 2011; Blakey, 2012; Carnochan et al., 2013; Fernandez et al., 2013; Huang & Ryan, 2010; Lietz & Strength, 2011; Lopez et al., 2012; Kelly, 2000). Marsh, Ryan, Choi, and Testa (2006) stated that non-substance abusing families achieved reunification about 42 percent of the time and substance-abusing families achieved reunification about 20 percent of the time (as cited in Blakey, 2011; Fernandez et al., 2013). About twelve percent of these substance-abusing families had co-occurring issues.

Co-occurring issues have also been shown in the research to have an enormous factor in regards to reunification. Many families are not struggling with just one barrier towards reunification; rather they are affected by many. Examples of barriers to reunification are: poverty, homelessness or housing barriers, substance abuse, limited parenting skills, domestic violence, scarcity of resources, and mental health issues to name a few, all of which have a negative impact on reunification, especially when more

than one barrier is present (Carnochan et al., 2013; Esposito et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013; Huang et al., 2010; Lietz & Strength, 2011; Marsh, Ryan, Choi, & Testa, 2005; Wulczyn, 2004). Co-occurring issues can be a huge determining factor towards reunification because many families are not receiving services for all issues, many of which go unrecognized. Many parents who struggle with substance use, also have difficulties with mental health issues, educational barriers, parental skills, unemployment, childcare, housing and transportation which impact their ability to be reunified with their children (Carnochan et al., 2013).

**Environment.** Environment can be a predictor for family success in regards to reunification. According to Wells and Guo (2004), for every one hundred dollar increase in the parents' income, the rate of reunification rises by 11% (as cited in Carnochan et al., 2013). Financial considerations may not be the deciding influence for removal, however when co-occurring with other issues it can prevent the solidity of a safe and stable environment (Carnochan et al., 2013; Esposito et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013). Family poverty due to being a single parent is a very common characteristic of many families in the child protection system and research suggests a negative relationship between likelihood of reunification and poverty (Esposito et al., 2014; Lopez et al., 2012).

Neighborhood socioeconomic factors are also relevant in the likelihood of reunification (Esposito et al., 2014; Goerge, 1990; Wulczyn, 2004). This research did not specifically examine the neighborhood socioeconomic value but rather the amount of children coming from low-income families with fewer resources (Esposito et al., 2014). Neighborhood socioeconomic factors are highly associated with a lack of resources,

childcare, employment, and community support (Esposito et al., 2014). Therefore, further research should focus on how to address family and community support and services focused on socioeconomic factors.

### **Re-entry Rates and Risks**

The process of achieving and maintaining connections and stability between child and parent is important towards reunification. When a family has not fully regained their stability before their child is returned home, a new process of reentry into the system may occur (Frame, Berrick, & Brodowski, 2000 as cited in Balsells et al., 2014). Reentry rates are as high as 17-50 % for families that return to the child protection system after two or three years, however, it has been stated that these numbers are decreasing. Although, Wulczyn (2004) states that about 25% of cases reenter within a year of reunification (Balsells et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013). Fernandez et al. (2013), suggests that due to the lack of post reunification services, many children are re-entering into the system. Although post-reunification services are seldom funded, they have been shown to help prevent reentry (Bellamy, 2007).

The literature examined children's behavioral issues after reunification. Studies found that children tend to have more behavioral issues after reunification with their caregivers, than if they were to continue in foster care (Bellamy, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2013). Bellamy (2007) also suggests the very opposite, in that children that were reunified, had lower rates of behavioral issues than children in foster care settings, although, many factors impact this such as, parenting issues not addressed completely, re-exposure, socioeconomic risk factors when compared to placement caregivers, stress, and possibly the trigger of a new environment after reunification. It was also shown that these

behavior issues lessen over time (Bellamy, 2007). Connell (2007) suggested that children that exit from a familial foster care setting have less risk of re-maltreatment than families where the child was in a non-relative foster care placement. Terling (1999) also found many factors associated with a higher risk of reentry: type of abuse, previous referrals, substance abuse, parental education levels, and social support.

Another area of emphasis that has an effect on reunification is placement change. The more placement changes for a child, the less likely reunification will occur (Esposito et al., 2014; Farmer, 1996; Fernandez et al., 2013; Lopez et al., 2012). Webster, Shlonsky Shaw, and Brookhart (2005) reported that children with three or more placements were 75% less likely to reunify (as cited in Esposito et al., 2014). As children change placements, they increasingly become less likely to reunify with their biological family. These children may experience difficulties forming attachment in the future, which can lead to the development of emotional and behavioral issues (Fernandez et al., 2013).

### **Positive Predictors**

There are many predictors that research suggests have a positive influence on reunification. As stated above, having strength-based services and a collaborative relationship with their child protection worker has a significant impact. Many researchers suggest that the most substantial predictor is family contact (Berry, McCauley, & Lansing, 2007; Fernandez et al., 2013). That is, the more the child and family interact during separation, the more likely they are to be reunified. Kinship placements also lead to a higher likelihood of reunification and show a more positive impact on the child (Akin, 2011). Lopez et al., (2012) suggests that this may be because families are able to

visit and communicate with children more. Although, other research suggests that kinship care has an adverse affect (Goerge,1990).

Another element that impacts reunification is early stability. This suggests that the importance of permanency in a timely and appropriate fashion, meaning, less placements can be a factor for family reunification (Akin, 2011; Carnochan et al., 2013; Wulczyn, 2004). Families that have acknowledged their positive changes and feel accomplished by their successes have had more positive results with reunification (Balsells et al., 2014; Carnochan et al., 2013; Lietz & Strength, 2011). Client engagement is a critical aspect because it is essential to success that parents are involved and participatory in the reunification process (Carnochan et al., 2013; Fernandez et al., 2013). Closely related, a strong client-worker relationship has been attributed to success (Fernandez et al., 2013).

Many factors and systems contribute to the success of family reunification. In order to gain a better understanding of the research question and study, it's important for the researcher and reader to understand the conceptual framework impacting the study.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The research study was grounded in theory-based frameworks. Using Strength-based perspective will help gain an understanding of the topic within a theory perspective. The focus of this qualitative research study is to explore child protection workers' perceptions of reunification.

#### **Strength-Based Perspective**

Strength-based perspective emphasizes a collaborative relationship between parties and identifying goals and objectives as a partnership (Robbins, Chatterjee, Canda, 2012). This perspective focuses and appreciates individuality and autonomy, positive attributes, and capabilities of an individual (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, Kisthardt, 1989). Believing in individuals potential gives them the opportunity to feel encouraged and supported in sharing their talents, skills, capabilities, and goals. All of which, can be done in a collaborative approach. The important piece of a strengths-based approach is that the practitioner closely focuses on areas of gains, rather than failures, which helps ensure that when the strengths are being recognized, the individual will continue to develop in this area (Weick et al., 1989).

As stated in the literature review, research has suggested that utilizing this approach within child protection has been very affective in working with families and implementing long-term changes. As Weick et al. (1989) states, "instead of asking, "why is this person...abusive?" the question can be, "What do they need to develop into more creative and loving adults?"" (p 354). This approach helps practitioner's work and utilize the resources and abilities that are already available within a client.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

This researcher used a qualitative research design method to explore a child protection worker's perspective on family reunification. This exploratory research design sought to gain an insiders perspective on the topic. The researcher established the interview questions (in Appendix B) using the literature review. The research question for this study is what is a child protection workers perspective on family reunification?

### **Sample**

The researcher interviewed six child protection workers in the twin cities area. The researcher used purposeful sampling and snowball sampling to find research participants. The researcher utilized committee members' connections to child protection workers. The decision for whom to sample is directed from the researcher's research question and goals of the study. The researcher asked potential participants to become involved in the study through email.

Of the participants, all had their master's degree varying from social work, social welfare, counseling and psychology, criminology and business administration. Five of the six participants identified as women. The participant's years of experience in child welfare ranged from 12 to 36 years.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The researcher developed a consent form to provide for the participants (see Appendix A). The Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved this form. The consent form complied with exempt-level University of St. Thomas IRB and Protection of Human Subject guidelines. The consent form stated the research topic and informed the



participants on the length of the study and the audio recording. The interviewer reviewed with the subjects the consent form and informed the respondent's that all records would be kept confidential and in a secure locations for their anonymity. It was also assured that the records would be destroyed within three years, after the research study has been finished.

### **Data Collection Instrument and Process**

The data was collected through a semi-structured interview with the participants. The respondent's agreed to participate by signing the consent form before the study. The interviews lasted on average about an hour and were recorded and transcribed for accuracy. The eight questions were pre-set and approved by the research committee to meet the UST IRB and Protection of Human Subjects guidelines prior to the interview.

The questions were specifically ordered to create a deductive approach, becoming more specific as the interview continued (see Appendix B). The respondents were first asked background information regarding their degree attainment and years in child welfare. All participants were sent the interview questions beforehand to prepare, if they wanted. After completion of the interview, I uploaded the interview onto my computer to transcribe and later code.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

The analysis of the data involved a grounded theory approach, which is a method that is based off of raw data to create theory (Padgett, 2008). The eight questions were open ended and designed for follow up questions to be asked. The interviews were audio-recorded which allowed the researcher to analyze and transcribe the data. The researcher then used open coding to identify specific themes, and coded for global themes.

### **Results/Findings**

The goal of this study was to gain an understanding and awareness of the perspective of child protection workers analyses of family reunification. During the research process, four themes were discovered: family factors, worker influences, one size doesn't fit all and system prevents reunification. Throughout the codes and themes, the researcher discovered many subthemes.

The researcher discovered the first theme of family factors that contains two subthemes: lack of parental involvement and trauma.

#### **Family Factors**

Throughout the interview process the researcher discovered the common theme of the family, more specifically the parents, and how they affect and determine family reunification. Many participants discussed the effect of parents participation or lack there of, and the effects and potential for trauma during the removal and reunification process.

**Lack of parent involvement.** Many of the interview participants discussed the impact of a parent's involvement throughout their case plan and in some scenarios, how their lack of participation contributed to the discontinuation of reunification. All participants discussed parent's impact within the process, although, many of the statements were a better fit under the systemic barriers theme. Five of the six participants discussed parent's lack of involvement in their case plan as a significant factor in the process of reunification. When participants were asked, "What do you perceive as factors that contribute to the discontinuation of reunification as a goal?" many responses involved the parents impact on the process and how their involvement can potentially

affect whether a family is reunified or not. The following theme is supported by the following quote:

*And there doesn't appear to be an effort by the parent or there's an inability of the parent to be able to rectify their behavior or emotional status.*

Some interview participants also considered that some families that are given great supports and resources are not always capable of providing the safety and care their child may need:

*And I think that there are absolutely parents who could be provided with the most skilled, most amazing worker ever and are just not in the position emotionally and mentally whatever to be able to make changes necessary to safely parent*

Along with the parent's lack of involvement, another participant expressed the importance of the child protection worker allowing the parents the decision to reunify and giving them the opportunity. This allows a process of ownership for the family and that ultimately, it was up to them if they wanted to reunify. For example, one participant stated:

*I think that decisions are you know, made hopefully by the parents themselves. If they truly want to reunite than they make the decision to reunite or not reunite but we have to give them the opportunity. If we don't give them the opportunity, we take that decision away from them and that's an ethic thing to me. We should allow self-determination and make decisions themselves if they want to reunite then we're going to get behind them and reunite and if they don't and then we might have a conversation about what's in the best interest of the child and maybe you can do this and you just don't think you can, but I think you can*

**Trauma.** Another very common subtheme presented by participants was the potential and often the understanding that when a child is removed from their home the process is very traumatizing and at times, if the child is reunified too soon, then the potential of another traumatic experience for that child is likely. Many of the participants focused on this paradigm between what is in the best interest for the child and the current trauma that they're experiencing and whether a removal will be an overriding additional trauma that they would be inflicting. Three of the six participants discussed the effects of trauma on the family and child. One participant stated:

*I think that families are most equipped to be with their kids and I think that it's more traumatic for kids to be separated from mildly abusive situations than to stay in a mildly abusive situation. So avoiding that separation of placement is important.*

This quote suggests there is a difficulty in that balance between what is in the child's best interest and how they can decipher between which situation will be more traumatic for the child and family. Another example that suggests difficulty of inflicting trauma while trying to reduce trauma is in response to what their overall opinion is of out of home placements,

*Optimal duration is as short as possible, we want to get those kids back in their families as soon as possible because removal is a trauma, no matter how unsafe or scary or dysfunctional their family life may be, it's their family. And it's what they know-even if it's scary to them, it's still what's familiar to them. So any removal, virtually any removal is a trauma to a child.*

Other participants discussed the process of reentering the child back into the home can be just as traumatizing as removing them. Many of the participants talked about the reentry process and how important reentering children slowly and very carefully so that old dynamics are not triggered:

*But the reality is in reintroducing that child into the household, recreates and retriggers old dynamics and old patterns.*

### **Worker Influences/Bias**

Another theme that was frequently discussed throughout the interviews was workers input and values that may have an affect on family reunification. Throughout the child protection process a workers opinion or viewpoints have a very distinct and direct impact on the reunification process. Within this theme, there was one subtheme: values and ethics of the worker/worker bias and within that subtheme, the researcher found another subtheme of safety.

**Worker values/ethics.** Throughout the interview process, every participant presented the theme of worker's values/ethics or bias and how that may impact family reunification or their practice. The researcher used this theme when participants would give responses that was based on their own values or responses that showed how workers use their personal viewpoint or instincts throughout the case. Throughout the interview process many participants discussed how they were "pro-reunification" or would likely keep children in the home over removing them because that trauma can be so detrimental. All of the child protection workers that I interviewed considered themselves to be more likely to reunify than not. The following quotes support this theme:

*I value family reunification enough that I'm willing to take a calculated risk to reunify...And so I would risk keeping a kid in a situation where there are still risks like everything isn't fixed I might not be convinced that there isn't going to be any neglect or abuse but there is a back up plan in place if you will.*

Another participant discussed their pro-reunification bias as well as, “sometimes it's necessary um, I'm sort of infamous of being the social worker least likely to place. I'm very-sort of-slow to remove. I'm actually-you can ask anybody if I'm removing, it's pretty serious”. Similarly, another participant defined themselves as a “family preservationist”, “You know I have always struggled with out of home placements I would consider myself to be a family preservationist”.

A few of the respondents discussed characteristic differences between child protection workers or differences within practice methods that eventually affect the outcome of the case.

*I do think that different social workers look at it differently and it really does depend on your own personal experience. As a social worker and as a person. Every worker kind of looks at it differently. I mean there are workers who I feel remove kids more often and I think that if you did some research on it you would see that that's true*

Two of the respondents also talked about the varying social work skills and therapeutic methods that the child protection worker may utilize in regards to engagement and strength-based skills and how that may affect the parent's ability to engage and ultimately, the outcome of the case. The following quote demonstrates this,

*I think there are workers who are able to engage with families with strength-based ways and engage them in positive change, build trusting relationship, you know all of those things-core skills and values of social work and I think that having strong skills in that absolutely, positively impact the outcome of the case*

Another important concept of worker bias that most of the respondents discussed was a “safe enough” approach. This approach was discussed throughout the interviews that things at home didn’t need to be perfect and as a child protection worker they should be looking at houses as safe enough instead of perfect or ideal. This quote suggests this safe-enough approach:

*Um well I think that it’s the ideal ah for kids and for parents and families. And I think that it’s ideal for kids to reunify um, when safely able to do so. And I think that even if things are not, even if things in the family aren’t ideal, as long as things are safe, I think kids need to go home*

Lastly participants discussed how important it is for child protection workers to be working hard for their clients and giving families the opportunity to succeed.

*“She just took over and so families who are protective should have that ability and we should be busting our asses to make sure that that little guy gets to see other family members before they go to foster care or emergency placement”.*

**Safety.** A subtheme of the workers opinions and value-based responses was the concept of safety. The safety of the child is the most important component for a removal, and a safety risk has to be present. One of the most difficult and important jobs of a child protection worker is determining the safety of the child in their home and whether they need to intervene with services or remove the child from that environment until changes

can be made. Much of that determination comes from statutes and laws that outline child maltreatment, but additionally the child protection worker is able to determine if that situation is safe enough for the child to stay or be removed. All six participants discussed safety throughout their interview. Some interviewee's considered that some parents will never be able to provide a safe environment for their children and even with great supports, it still can't be a safe environment:

*Um, those are the-and well sometimes we just recognize that we can't safely return them even if they do everything. Um, you know there's a recognition that they can't safely be returned so parents are just-the word in the palpably unfit. And it's hard to quantify but some people are just not equipped to parent without incredible supports but that's realistic to have someone live with them basically to support them.*

The following quotes touch on the various aspects of safety including the misunderstanding about what safe looks like from the parents perspective, the necessity to keep the children safe no matter what, and what safety looks like to the child protection worker and how that affects them in a personal way.

*So there's been a safety threat or egregious harm that has happened. You know so parents are either unavailable for safety planning or unwilling to safety plan at that time. Um, or it doesn't occur that there's an identified safety concern, they have a different value about the particular incident or what's safe and what's not.*

Another participant discussed the bottom-line duty of their job, to keep children safe:

*Well sometimes it's absolutely necessary to keep the child safe. I mean it's not necessarily how I feel about it. It's about, I have to access safety, that's my job, I*



*have to make sure that child's in a safe environment where they're not going to be physically, sexually, emotionally abused. Because that's what we're about keeping kids safe, bottom line.*

Another example of a participant's emphasis on safety first:

*"So I do everything I can prior to you know, but if it's a safety issue and I can't sleep at night worrying about the responsibility um, you know, that's the biggest thing for kids when it's a safety issue".*

### **One Size Doesn't Fit All**

The theme one size doesn't fit all seemed to be mentioned throughout all of the interviews and didn't seem to fit specifically to the worker or systemic influence themes. Therefore, the researcher generated a theme for just individualizing services as the bridge between worker influence and systemic influences. This theme was used whenever participants expressed the importance of making every case and decision dependent on each family and their unique circumstances. For example, one participant stated, *"It's all different for every child-and every child and every family should be considered separately. So there really isn't an optimal out of home placement time it's different for every family"*. Looking at each case individually is often correlated with the strict timeline that child protection workers are working within. One participant focused on individualizing the client's goal plan to ensure client-centered practice and allowing more or less time depending on the case, *"but the reality is um, safety, really the designation should be the progress people make on their goals and not how long it will take"*.

Another participant discussed the importance of goal and case plans being individualized

as well as allowing families to make enough progress for reunification and then continuing that care as the children are at home:

*We should not be in the position where a) they've had to do everything and get to end their case plan before a child can be reunified and a child should be reunified when it's safe and then ongoing support and sort of ongoing recovery systems should stay in place for a period of time.*

Similarly, many of the participants discussed the difficulty of working with families that have either substance abuse or mental health issues that are not easily treated within six months. These concerns are often the primary reasons that a child is removed from the home and participants suggested that they should not be treating these issues the same as other issues and individualizing the timeline for that. The following quotes demonstrate this concept:

*You know, substance abuse and mental health stuff and that those are not things that are easily fixed within 6 months so the other is fully well and in recovery and fully able to move on from that I mean I think it's difficult and I think 6 months is a really long time for kids who are in care and in limbo.*

Another participant discussed the role of the child protection worker in advocating for these families for more time. The participant stated, *“There are few cases that I think we should be arguing and I think we have that parents need more time because you know it didn't take them 6 months to become meth addicts it took them years”*.

Another way that the theme one size doesn't fit all was revealed throughout the interviews was as participants were explaining that child protection and the change process can be so different for every family, one family may need more time than

another. Many of the participants talked about how the families they work with often have co-occurring issues that make having a “one size fits all” approach nearly impossible. This particular participant shared an example of how as professional’s, we don’t always know what is right for the family and every family is so different with their own pace:

*So the moral of the story is sometimes we’re wrong and I don’t think I was wrong about who did the abuse but wrong about um, families being able to figure it out Because again, addressing issues, making life changes, you know happens at it’s own pace not necessarily in the [omitted county name] juvenile’s court time.*

Another participant’s response,

*I go back to that piece though that you can’t put time frames on some of these situations and are so complicated and are so layered but I think those are few and far between for the most part.*

### **System Prevents Reunification**

The last theme that was found throughout the interview process was how much outside systemic factors and barriers influence family reunification. This theme title was created from one of the participant’s quotes, “*but also the system prevents reunification too*”. There were many times when the participants would discuss the barriers of their job, the difficulty for clients to complete their case plan within the timeline, or the gap in services that were influenced by overall systemic factors. Within the systemic factors theme, there were four subthemes: reunification barriers, improvements/lack of resources, after-care services, and outside professional influences.

**Reunification barriers.** Throughout the interviews, participants mentioned many barriers parents face that have made it more difficult for families to reunify. For example, most participants mentioned chemical use, mental health, domestic violence, criminal history, and financial barriers as very significant obstacles to their success. The following quotes demonstrate some of these barriers mentioned. The most significantly mentioned of all of these were families that were having difficulties with substance use and how that can be very difficult to make significant progress in the timespan they're given.

*Addiction and mental health-that are not treatable in 6 months. I think that those are the two main factors that I ran into. And I'll just add to that that even with all efforts that is not achievable and that's not because of-even if all the resources were there and all of everything we wanted in a magic world, I still don't think it would necessarily be achievable. The healing process of recovering from addiction or recovering from that severe of a mental health condition is a long-term process that requires a lot of intricate support.*

Another participant stated a similar observation, “*but I do think that 6 months...if you're seriously chemically addicted you know, your brain isn't even going to clear, um, in 6 months to where you can functionally make decisions*”. Another participant discussed the concept of “mitigating factors” and the role of the social worker in arguing for more time for these specific families:

*There are a few cases that I think we should be arguing and I think we have that parents need more time because you know it didn't take them 6 months to become meth addicts it took them years. And change-chemical abuse and mental illness I would consider as mitigating factors to people needing more time.*

Other participants mentioned barriers such as mental health and short timeframes.

*I know the struggles are I know there is a struggle with the time frames not lining up very well with practice standards and expectations about you know, other types of social services issues, you know, substance abuse and mental health stuff and that those are not things that are easily fixed within 6 months so the other is fully well and in recovery and fully able to move on from that I mean I think its difficult. And I think 6 months is a really long time for kids who are in care and are in limbo.*

**Lack of resources.** Many participants discussed the impact that resources or the lack there of, and how that affects family reunification or the course of the case. Participants discussed varying limited resources for example, monetary means, chemical and mental health resources, childcare assistance, and in-home supports. One of the biggest resources that were discussed by four of the six child protection workers in the study was the lack of childcare resources that we provide to families. This quote demonstrates this sub theme, *“the main thing that I wanted to bring up is that one of the single greatest things that I think families need to make happen is affordable childcare”*.

Another topic that was commonly discussed throughout the interviews was having more in-home services and continuing in home supports after the child is re-entered in order to prevent reentry back into the child protection system. For example, one participant stated, *“partly because we don’t have the resource—I always say that I can’t live with them. And that’s always a challenge I wish that we had more, even before they reunify, I wish we had more um, in home services that we, in home support for families”*.

Additionally, many participants discussed the lack of financial supports as a huge barrier for families and the reunification process. One participant stated, *“you know, and for a while, just to support them through that transition, we have a tendency to pull the rug out from people, even our financial assistance does that too. They get a job and then they take away their daycare, their health care, you know”*. Participants suggested that financial supports were the root cause behind many other issues such as childcare, homelessness, transportation, and the ability to meet the child’s basic needs. This is especially evident when children are taken out of the home when they lose much of their financial stability and have a hard time getting stable enough to reunify.

*I also think there’s a gap around financial supports because often families that are receiving benefits or economic stability from the county lose a big portion of their benefits or economic stability from the county when the child is out of the home which then becomes a barrier for them to either obtain or maintain the basic living requirements in order to provide for the kids. So I think there needs to be a better way of filling that gap around um, around getting parents the supports that they need to create the lifestyle that provide for the basic needs for their kids, it’s kind of a set up.*

**After-care services.** *“The biggest thing that we don’t do very well is the supports in the home after reunification”*. This quote captures the frustration workers experience with the lack of after-care services and supports in the child protection system. All participants discussed this as the biggest area of improvement and ultimately, would help prepare families more for new family dynamics that may arise when the child comes home. One participant stated, *“Well I mean there are gaps in the area of*

*maintaining support post-reunification. And I mean it happens, but I don't know if it happens with the same level of intensity that are provided when the child is out of the home".*

Many of the participants compared the child protection process and family reunification to the recovery process after going through a treatment program. Participants discussed how with both the child protection process and treatment there are incredible supports in place throughout the process, but the difference between the two is that when you exit a treatment center you still attend services and have the supports in place throughout that transition. Unlike treatment, families within the child protection system are working with many providers and services and once their reunified and the case is out of the court system, some of those services are no longer required and all of those supports leave at once.

*I mean have the right support systems in place; I think reunification should be viewed like after care from a treatment program. Um, you know once people who have substance abuse issues finish treatment they're not just done they need ongoing support and services to maintain their recovery. I think reunification is similar.*

Another participant discussed this same theory,

*Yeah I think it's analogous to someone with substance abuse problems going through treatment I mean the work isn't done when they leave treatment, the work isn't done when the kid comes home, how often just a new phase of the work needs to be done. They need active follow-up care you know, active support to follow those transitions and it brings new stresses and new challenges.*

Continuing to work with families much after reunification seemed to be a very common theme throughout my interviews and within the research. Many participants discussed this as an important aspect to prevent reentry; yet, many of them are not able to work with families at the intensity that they were before reunification. Many participants similarly stated this quote below:

*Um, you know, I really think for at least as long as we worked with them prior is kind of what I have in my head seems reasonable. I mean if it takes a year and a half to reunify, I think it should take us a year and a half to go away.*

**Outside professional influences.** The last subtheme within the systemic factors theme is outside professional influences. This subtheme was discussed throughout the research process. Four of the six participants brought up areas where they felt that there were other significant players within the reunification process that either made it more difficult for them to reunify, or the decision to not reunify. In particular, this participant discussed times of feeling unheard within the court process, *“So I go at it with these are the reasons why and it didn’t matter. I wasn’t heard. My clinical expertise wasn’t taken into account and you know all the years that I did it”*.

When child protection cases have court involvement there are many different key players including the county attorney, guardian ad litem, parent attorney, and the person with the ultimate decision, the judge. Many of the participants discussed the difficulty of working with the county attorney and guardian ad litem specifically, all of which are representing the best interest of the child. The participants discussed this process as being most difficult when all players did not agree on whether or not reunification should



occur. Many of the participants also discussed the lack of education between all party members which can make the process much more difficult.

*At the court level there are some gaps that are pretty obvious, you know, um, sometimes the courts aren't educated enough to know or understand how we can do reunification successfully and they aren't willing to take that risk. Guardian ad litem sometimes they haven't worked with child protection can be overprotective, don't have the understanding or belief in the system, so it's system stuff that makes gaps in our system which has to do with lack of education and coordination of services at a systems level.*

Another significant point was made about county liability and the paradigm of taking chances with parents but if they are wrong, they face the potential to be scrutinized for that decision.

*Sometimes working with county attorneys as a team um, it's a higher standard where it may be good enough if it's your neighbor but it's not good enough if it's involved in juvenile court because there are social workers concerned about liability and the department's liability. Sometimes that's a barrier—seeing your name in the newspaper as oppose to, are we going to take this risk with this parent this time?*

Finally, participants discussed the lack of trust within our court system and that in reality; the legal process doesn't always match up with social work ethics and practice models.

*I had a lot of judgment and issues about the fact that our court system just doesn't always work and here I am as a trained social worker and there's all of this*

*evidence and all of this reason why we shouldn't send that baby back into the lions den as it were—and yet, I had to, so I really struggled with that.*

Finally, this quote further describes the systemic barriers that child protection worker's face in regards to social work practice.

*I know there is a struggle with the time frames not lining up very well with practice standards and expectations and you know, other types of social service issues.*

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to understand the perspective of a child protection worker on family reunification. It was also the intent of this study to determine implications in social work practice, policy, future research, and strengths and limitations of the study. There were many similarities between the previous research published and literature compared with the findings that the researcher obtained from this study. The most apparent of those were: service delivery, after care services, and worker and parent characteristics.

The research suggested that a huge factor of reunification is the relationship between the child protection worker and the client. This includes the practice skills that the child protection worker utilizes within their worker-client relationship. Both the research and this study suggested the importance of using strength-based approaches with clients. Researchers (Carnochan, Lee, & Austin 2013; Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008; D'Andrade, 2015; Fernandez & Lee, 2013) suggested that focusing on the family strengths and challenges and engaging in a partnership with the family is essential. Both the research and this study discussed the importance of child protection

workers utilizing strengths-based intervention techniques while working with clients. The research suggests that this approach allows families to be more involved in their case plan and progress and therefore, feel more ownership over their progress (Bellsells et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2013; Freundlich, 2006; Wulyczyn, 2004).

All of the participants in the study discussed the need for after-care services and mentioned how significant and important services after the family is reunified are for family reunification and decreasing reentry into the system. Both the research and the study discussed the reunification process as often being a trigger for old dynamics to reenter the family and how imperative it is for there to be supports in place already. Farmer's (1996) findings were very similar to the results of this study; Farmer discussed the importance of services after reunification because of the immense amount of supports that families receive when the children were out of the home. Within this study, every participant expressed the absence of after-care services and supports. Several of the participants mentioned that reunification and the child protection process is comparable to chemical health treatment. This implied that both with chemical health treatment and child protection, after care supports and services to complement their successes thus far are very important and pertinent to the prevention of relapse or reentry. However, within child protection and family reunification, there are little to no after-care service, leaving families with little support during this transition.

Another really important finding from this study was how difficult it was for child protection workers to work within a firm timeline. As most participants expressed, every family is different, with different barriers and life experience, and it can be difficult to expect every family to address these issues within the same time frame. In addition to

this, the participants suggested that this timeline is very much needed for the children and providing stability and permanency.

Another finding from this study that was similar within the research and this study was worker characteristics and the effects of value and bias on family reunification. Much of the research discussed the discretion that the child protection worker holds throughout the case and the impact that the worker's values and ethics may come into place during this process (Aragon, 2004). The research showed that workers that have more experience tend to reunify families more. All participants in this study had 12 or more years of experience in child welfare or child protection and a majority of the participants stated that they were more likely to reunify than their peers. One participant even indicated that they rarely sought removal of a child from the home.

Additionally, parent involvement and systemic barriers were shown by both research and supported by this study to have an affect on reunification. The research suggested that parents with chemical or mental health concerns were less likely to reunify especially if they have co-occurring issues (Carnochan et al., 2013). The study's findings on barriers that often affect family's likelihood of reunification were consistent with the research in being: substance abuse, mental health, domestic violence, financial concerns, criminal history, and scarcity of resources.

Another important piece that was discussed throughout both the research and literature was the concept of practice wisdom and the ability for child protection workers to utilize their own skills and practice with these families and within the legal system. Many of the participants discussed how difficult it can be working within child protection to exercise practice wisdom when they're restricted by policies and the legal system.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

This research study explored the different perspectives of child protection workers on family reunification. Since family reunification is the goal in every case, it's important for child protection workers to know the implications, barriers, and importance of family reunification. Because many child protection workers are also social workers and are considered social workers within the child protection system, it is important for social work practice to reflect the research findings. Counties in Minnesota can utilize this research information to guide their practice and gain awareness about what factors and barriers are affecting the families they work with in achieving family reunification. The findings from this suggested that substance abuse and mental health issues are huge barriers for many of their clients, and the reunification timeline does not always allow a full recovery. Social workers could use this information to advocate on their clients behalf on extending timelines due to mitigating factors. Additionally, the findings and research suggested that a social worker or child protection workers' engagement and interpersonal skills with clients affects their overall success with reunification. The participants in the study suggested that the workers' attitude and social work skill base was very much dependent on the families success, although, many participants stated that this isn't the case for every family. Some families can receive all the support and interventions possible, yet may not still succeed. This research could help counties train their social workers in order to provide best practice for their clients.

### **Implications for Research/Policy**

This study exposed areas that need further research in regards to this topic. There were some areas throughout my study that weren't mentioned or consistent within the

research. Many of the participants in this study discussed both the importance and difficulties of working within the strict timeline given to the workers during their case. In general, it seemed that participants thought that the timeline was in the child's best interest and if it was extended it would be even more damaging to the family and child. Additionally though, participants discussed how this timeline is nearly impossible for parents struggling with chemical abuse or severe mental health issues to be able to recover in this short of a timespan. Future research could focus more on this timeline and how they can make that process more attainable for specific families.

Additionally, both the research and this particular study focus on the need for after-care services once families are reunified. Many of the study participants suggested that they are not providing as many services or supports to these families after reunification as they were when the children were outside of the home. It would be interesting and helpful for future research to focus on how impactful after-care services are on lowering recidivism rates.

In regards to implications for policy, this study suggested that more after-care services are needed for family reunification to be successful and it would be beneficial to add after-care services as a policy agenda item. It would also be beneficial to have more training and education for various parties that are working within the child protection system, such as, the county attorney, guardian ad litem, and the judge. Lack of resources and financial assistance were discussed throughout the study and literature implying that funding is necessary to support these families as well.

**Strengths and Limitations**

There were both strengths and limitations to this study. The strengths of this study were that much of the research lined up with the results of this study. With this being a qualitative study, it allowed the participants to openly discuss the barriers and limitations that they are observing and challenged by within their own practice.

There were also limitations to this study. The sample size of this study was small which implies that these findings cannot be generalized to all child protection workers. Another limitation to this study was that many of the participants worked for the same few counties. Because all participants had worked for two Minnesota counties, there are many other counties and areas of Minnesota and the twin cities that were not accounted for. Each county operates differently in regards to caseloads, services, client population, and client barriers, so these results could vary drastically in other counties. The two counties that I interviewed were in urban cities and these results could be different in a rural community. Lastly, this study interviewed participants only in the state of Minnesota and child protection varies drastically from state to state, in result, this study cannot be generalized for every state. Conversely, the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth perception of child protection workers' and family reunification.

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## Appendix A:

**Consent Form*****Reunification: A Child Protection Workers' Perspective***

You are invited to participate in a research study about a child protection workers perspective on family reunification. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because as a current child protection worker, you likely experience family reunification. You are eligible to participate in this study because you have experience working with this topic of reunification. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision whether or not you would like to participate. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Holly Gabby, an MSW student through University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine's University and is supervised by Renee Hepperlen. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of St. Thomas.

**Background Information**

The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of what reunification looks like from the perspective of a child protection worker. I would like to interview 8-10 child protection workers to gain an understanding of family reunification and attain the purpose of this research study.

**Procedures**

If you agree to participate in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: participate in a 60-70 minute audio-recorded interview in a confidential space of your choosing. The researcher is hoping to gain about 8-10 research participants for this study. There will be no follow-up needed after the interview is finished.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study**

The study has minimal risks with the anticipated risk being a potential breach of confidentiality. This study will be kept confidential and secured in a confidential environment. In order to safeguard each risk presented above, my phone will be password protected. Within 12 hours of the interview the audio recordings will be uploaded onto a University computer and then deleted from my personal cell phone. The University computer is secured by a major server and will allow the data to be secure. Once the audio recordings are transcribed, they will be deleted from the University computer.

During transcription, identifying information will be deleted. The transcription will be secured on the University computer and saved in a password-protected file and deleted after three years in May, 2019.

There are no direct benefits to this study.

### **Privacy**

Your privacy will be protected while you participate in this study. As stated above, the interview location will take place in a quiet, confidential space of your choice.

### **Confidentiality**

The records of this study will be kept confidential. In any sort of report I publish, I will not include information that will make it possible to identify you. The types of records I will create include recordings, and transcripts. As stated above, all research records will be kept in a secure location. This interview will be saved on my password-protected phone and transferred to the server-protected University computer and deleted from my cell phone within 12 hours of the interview. I will then transcribe the interview and delete the audio-recording. The transcribed interview will be secured in my University computer and saved in a password-protected file. All identifying information will be deleted. All signed consent forms will be kept for a minimum of three years upon completion of the study. Institutional Review Board officials at the University of St. Thomas reserve the right to inspect all research records to ensure compliance.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with University of St. Thomas, St. Catherine's University or the School of School Work. There are no penalties or consequences if you choose not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty or loss of any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will not be used. If you choose to withdraw you may contact me at the number below. You are also free to skip any questions I may ask.

### **Contacts and Questions**

My name is Holly Gabby. You may ask any questions you have now and any time during or after the research procedures. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (612)554-6016 or [GABB0005@stthomas.edu](mailto:GABB0005@stthomas.edu). You may also contact my research advisor, Renee Hepperlen at (651) 962-5802. You may also contact the University of St.

Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-6035 or muen0526@stthomas.edu with any questions or concerns.

**Statement of Consent**

I have had a conversation with the researcher about this study and have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study. I am at least 18 years of age. I give permission to be audio recorded during this study.

**You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.**

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**Signature of Study Participant** **Date**

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**Print Name of Study Participant**

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**Signature of Researcher** **Date**



Appendix B:  
**Survey**

1. What is your position as a child protection worker?
2. What do you think are the most common reason removal occurs?
3. How often is family reunification a goal in your case plan? How often does that goal change throughout their case?
4. What do you perceive as factors that contribute to discontinuation of reunification as a goal?
5. In your opinion, how useful is out-of-home placements and what is the optimal duration?
  - a. (Follow-up question, if needed) What is your overall opinion towards reunification? Where do you think there could be improvements?
6. Do you see gaps in the child protection system regarding reunification? Can you describe a scenario where you thought reunification was appropriate and that didn't occur, or vice versa?
  - a. (Follow-up question, if needed) Do you encounter situations where your values/ethics impact your judgment towards family reunification? If yes, how so?
  - b. (Follow-up question, if needed) Do you feel as a child protection worker that you have control or power over whether a family is reunified? If yes, how so?
7. What has been your experience of explaining concurrent planning to parents, do you feel as if this is effective?

- a. (Follow-up, if needed) Given the timeframes, how well do you think you can fully implement reunification efforts while concurrent planning is occurring?
8. How long do you follow-up with families after reunification occurs? How do you see maintenance services as helpful or not?

**Background Information****Degree Attainment**

- Associate's
- Bachelors
- Masters
- PhD

**Degree** \_\_\_\_\_

**Years in Child Welfare** \_\_\_\_\_