[1]

Introduction to Child Welfare Research

In this chapter the following topics will be covered:

- The purpose of and audience for this book
- A brief overview of philosophy of science
- A brief history of child welfare policy and research

The Purpose of and Audience for This Book

Welcome to the world of child welfare research. The purpose of this textbook is to provide a thorough discussion of the theory and practice of conducting social science research in a child welfare setting or with a child welfare population. Much of what is known about how to conduct child welfare research is based on basic research principles that apply to any social science field of study. However, these principles will be described in the context of child welfare research, consistent with the mission and purpose of this book. In addition, conducting research in a child welfare setting or with a child welfare population often carries with it additional considerations or nuances, and these will be highlighted throughout the book as applicable.

There are four primary audiences for this book: (1) social work and psychology students who need a comprehensive overview of how to conduct

social science research, (2) graduate students and child welfare professionals who need to acquire research method skills in order to better understand published research so that they can integrate the findings into their practice, (3) professional researchers working in a child welfare context who need to understand how to apply the basic tenets of research practice into this particular setting, and (4) professional clinicians and administrators in child welfare settings who want to conduct their own research and need a thorough and practical guide for doing so. It is also quite likely that child welfare administrators, both public and private, will consult this book in order to sharpen their understanding of the research being conducted in their agency or under their auspices.

To set the stage for the book, this chapter begins with a brief discussion of the book's philosophy of science, followed by a brief history of child welfare research.

A Brief Overview of Philosophy of Science

All research is conducted within a particular worldview about the nature of reality and the ability of scientific inquiry to discover and predict that reality. The worldview—also known as an epistemology—of social science researchers has evolved over the course of social science research and shapes the general paradigm that guides the researcher's projects. A paradigm is a basic model or schema that organizes the way a researcher views his or her world (Kuhn 1970).

The French writer and philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is widely credited with being the first to apply the methods of the physical sciences to the social sciences, an approach he termed "positivism." This approach became the dominant epistemology for scientific inquiry beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century. As a philosophical system of thought, positivism maintains that the goal of knowledge is to describe systematically observed phenomena. In a positivist view of the world, scientific "truths" exist and the scientific method is the appropriate means for discovering these truths in order to understand the world well enough so that events and experiences can be predicted and perhaps controlled. Thus, the "objective" world exists independently of the perspectives of or measurements by researchers, and the goal of research is to disclose these "objective" facts. A distinguishing feature of positivism is the absence of any distinction between reality (as things that exist) and knowledge of reality (as things that are recognized). The universe is viewed as deterministic and

controlled by the laws of cause and effect, which can be discerned through the application of the scientific method.

Described more fully in chapter 2, the scientific method is the accepted framework for conducting social science research. This entails conducting studies in such a way as to ensure that empirical observations are systematic, samples are representative, and data collection methods are clearly specified, so that the project can be replicated (i.e., the same methods repeated would produce the same results). Replication is of great importance in social science research, as it can reduce both error and the misinterpretation of findings (Rosenthal 1991). The results of studies conducted with these guidelines can be used to confirm or revise theory in order to better describe and predict reality. In this way, the positivist approach is empirical, with observation and measurement (ideally through controlled experimentation and manipulation) as the core of the scientific endeavor.

By the middle of the twentieth century, positivism came under criticism for its assumption and acceptance of an independent reality that can be uncovered as long as the scientific method is correctly applied. In response to such criticism, postpositivism emerged as an alternative epistemology, one accepting the basic premise that there is an external, objective reality but recognizing that its complexity often defies accurate description and explanation. In addition, postpositivism acknowledges the limitations of human observers, which often preclude researchers from developing anything more than a partial understanding of reality. In this view, the goal of science is to achieve consensus to the highest degree possible regarding the nature of reality.

There have been several specific forms of criticism of positivism, each of which has led to the articulation of a more distinct "postpositivistic" epistemology and research methodology. A few will be noted here. The first criticism is that, in general, scientists and their work are more fallible than previously acknowledged. This is considered to be so for several reasons, including the fact that humans are only equipped to perceive certain aspects of reality, which can either be limited (i.e., humans cannot perceive the full range of lights, colors, and sounds) or in fact faulty (i.e., it appears to most humans that the sun is revolving around the earth when in fact the earth is rotating around the sun, and it appeared to many that the earth was flat when in fact it is round). A branch of science based on this tenet is known as critical rationalism (Popper 1971). It assumes that all knowledge is tentative and conjectural as opposed to definitive. In this view, the most that science can offer is guesses as to effective solutions to social problems based on the accumulated ability of the evidence to withstand falsifiability, the active

attempt to demonstrate that the theory is not correct. Falsifiability stands in contrast to the goal of conducting research in order to confirm theory, an approach that is subject to what is known as confirmatory bias. The trial-and-error approach proposed ultimately results in the acceptance of a few theories that remain unfalsified and represent the best knowledge available at any given point. Currently accepted theories are viewed as always open to correction or replacement in the future.

A second criticism of positivism is that it fails to acknowledge that knowledge and reality are socially constructed and, therefore, do not exist as separate entities to be discovered by the researcher. From this idea came the school of thought known as social constructivism. Adherents of social constructivism believe that reality is constructed through human activity and that members of a society together invent the properties of the social world (Kukla 2000). For the social constructivist, social reality cannot be discovered per se, as it does not exist prior to its social invention (Ernest 1999; Gredler 1997; Prawat and Floden 1994). Individuals create meaning through their interactions with one another and with the environment in which they live. Intersubjectivity is the term used to describe the shared understanding among individuals whose interactions are based on common interests and assumptions that form the basis for their communication (Rogoff 1990). Within social constructivism there are a range of positions regarding social science methods. For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985, 75) advocate multiple socially constructed realities that, "when known more fully, tend to produce diverging inquiry." They argue that reality cannot be studied "in pieces" (for example, as variables) but only holistically and in a larger context. In addition, they reject the traditional relationship between knower (the scientist) and known (the object of a research study) and endorse instead the belief that scientists and their "subjects" develop a joint understanding through a process of dialogue and negotiation. There are no external objective truths that can be generalized from one setting to another, because all human behavior is bound by its specific context. This approach is also known as interpretivism. Interpretive researchers start out with the assumption that access to reality (given or socially constructed) is possible only through social constructions such as language, consciousness, and shared meanings. Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them.

Positivism has also come under fire for not being sufficiently critical of social realities such as class, race, and gender bias. Some have argued that social reality is historically constituted and, although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, their ability to do so

is constrained by various social, cultural, and political barriers. The main task of research, according to this perspective, is to provide a critique of existing social realities. As such, studies are conducted in order to identify and bring attention to the limitations and constraints that prevent certain classes or groups of individuals from rising above their circumstances. This approach draws on the works of Karl Marx and is most closely associated with the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research.

The epistemological perspective of this book is squarely within the postpositivistic framework. That is, we recognize that there are limits in the human endeavor to uncover scientific truths. This process is viewed as a flawed and imperfect enterprise due to the fallibility in a human's ability to perceive and measure reality. It is also recognized that often what is most of interest is not an objective reality (should that exist) but rather the *experience* of reality from the perspective of specific "others," such as clients and consumers and staff in the field of child welfare. At the same time, the book does not endorse a purely relativistic approach either. That is, we believe that some measures are better than others and that some truths can be converged upon. Thus, a humble approach is taken, in which the scientific method is used as the best approximation to capturing a version of truth and reality at any given time.

A Brief History of Child Welfare Policy and Research

Although there may be other definitions of child welfare in use, the one used for the purpose of this review and for the book as a whole is the set of services put into place (abuse investigations, prevention services to maintain families, out-of-home placement when children are deemed unsafe at home, and all efforts to achieve safe and permanent homes for these children) that are activated when government and voluntary agencies become involved in the concern about the safety of children in a home.

Initially, the work of child welfare was supported through charitable organizations offering informal assistance to vulnerable children and families, such as the Ursuline Convent in New Orleans. Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, poor and indigent children were routinely placed in almshouses alongside adults, with no recognition of their distinct needs. Eventually, there was a public demand to remove children from almshouses and place them in institutions in order to protect and care for them apart from adults. The first private agency to care for children in family settings or placing-out services was the New York Children's Aid Society (NYCAS), led by Charles Loring

Brace. This organization was created in the 1880s in order to address the increasing problem of juvenile delinquency and the "moral degradation of society" that might result from poor youth who were abandoned. Brace and NYCAS began the now infamous transportation of inner-city children out west via the "orphan trains." The children were placed with farming families as a means of removing them from the dangers of the city and improving their morale and work ethic. It was also a way of providing free labor to families pioneering the American West. Other agencies joined this placing-out effort, including the New York Foundling Hospital.

Eventually, several seminal events converged to highlight the need for society to address the problem of abandoned children, the numbers of which had increased dramatically by the end of the Civil War. In 1889, the American Pediatric Society was formed to address the medical needs of children, and in 1904, Robert Hunter published his groundbreaking work, *Poverty*, in which he argued that poverty not only degrades adults but also hinders child development and thus has a long-term detrimental impact on society. In the same year, G. Stanley Hall (1904) published his influential book on youth development, *Adolescence: Its Psychology and Its Relation to Physiology, Anthropology, Sociology, Sex, Crime, Religion, and Education*. President Theodore Roosevelt, in response to pressure from child advocates, most notably James E. West, Jane Addams, and Lillian Wald, convened the White House Conference on Dependent Children in 1909. One eventual outcome of this conference was the formation of the Children's Bureau in 1912 by President Taft. The oldest government agency devoted to the needs of children, the Children's Bureau has the primary responsibility for administering federal child welfare programs. Its original mission was to investigate and report on infant mortality, birth rates, orphanages, juvenile courts, and other social issues of the time. Currently, its mission is to "provide for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children through leadership, support for necessary services, and productive partnerships with States, Tribes, and communities."

Thus three important benchmarks related to the needs of children were established in the early part of the twentieth century: (1) the debate regarding dependent children was raised to a national level; (2) a federal agency was established, acknowledging that the government had a responsibility to care for children in need; and (3) the government also acknowledged the utility and need for research-based knowledge about dependent children. To this day, much of the funding available to conduct child welfare research and efforts to compile data regarding the problem of child abuse and neglect is provided by the federal government.

Over the years, research, legislation, and public opinion about the needs of children and families have intertwined to move the field forward and shape specific areas of concern and emphasis. In 1959, Maas and Engler published their account of the lack of stability of out-of-home placements, coining the term "foster care drift" to describe children who stay too long in the foster care system without any plan for a permanent home. These findings were echoed and expanded upon in other seminal works (e.g., Fanshel 1971; Fontana 1968), which, along with public support, led to the enactment by the United States government of the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) in 1974. CAPTA provided additional federal dollars for increased child abuse prevention and created a legal mandate for states to track and report the number of suspected and confirmed cases of abuse and neglect. A primary goal was to prevent as many children from entering the system as possible and, ideally, avoid the problem of foster care drift.

In 1980, the United States government enacted the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (AACWA), which established the need for preventive services as a means of avoiding placement. In addition, AACWA legislated that children who were in the child welfare system were to be placed in the least restrictive setting possible and were to receive casework, documented with a detailed case plan, aimed at achieving permanency. Reporting requirements were expanded to include a statewide information system to account for children in foster care. AACWA also allowed for subsidized adoptions in order to increase the number of children with special needs (i.e., medical and/or mental health needs) adopted by families, by providing financial assistance and support.

The concerns of the public and federal policymakers about length of stay in the system and lack of permanency have been echoed in the efforts of researchers in the field of child welfare. In response to this legislation, research in child welfare turned to uncovering why children remain in foster care for a longer period of time than necessary. Gibson, Tracy, and DeBord (1984), for example, studied the effects of various types of contacts between the family, child, and agency providing foster care services. They found that intensive and frequent contact, especially in the initial month of foster care placement, could potentially reduce the amount of time a child was in care. Testa (2001) examined whether kinship placements (with relatives) were more likely to achieve permanency than nonkinship foster care. He found that kinship placements were more stable than nonkinship placements but that these differences diminished over time. Also as a result of the 1980 legislation requiring the collection of administrative data, large-scale data sets were created and became available to researchers for multistate studies of

the dynamics of foster care (Vogel 1999). For example, Wulczyn (1996) applied newly developed statistical techniques such as survival analysis and the use of entry cohorts to a multistate study of the length of stay in foster care. By using survival analysis and an entry cohort, all data can be used—even if some of the children in the sample had not yet exited care—to document length of stay in care and to link reductions in stays to program or policy changes. Building on this work, Baker, Wulczyn, and Dale (2005) used survival analysis to examine factors associated with rate of discharge from a residential treatment center. For youth who were transferred or reunified, mental health issues were the strongest factor that slowed down the rate of discharge.

Beyond questions related to length of stay, researchers have also focused on placement stability and its relationship to permanency, in response to evidence that multiple placements while in foster care negatively impact the likelihood of a child being reunified (Landsverk, Davis, Ganger, Newton, and Johnson 1996). For example, Wulczyn, Kogan, and Harden (2003) found that the initial six months in care were crucial for a child in foster care to make a connection with his or her foster family.

Level of care was also examined as a factor affecting length of stay and stability of placements. Using data from the state of California, Berrick, Barth, Needell, and Reid (1998) found that younger children in group care settings had less stability, lower rates of adoption, and longer stays in care.

Other researchers have focused on the impact of reunification and the potential for recidivism back into foster care. Festinger (1996) studied 210 children in New York City who exited foster care (either foster boarding home or group care). For those children who returned within twelve months (12.9 percent of the sample), the strongest predictors of reentry were four characteristics/experiences of the biological parents: lower parenting skills (as rated by caseworkers), less social support, more unmet needs (as rated by caseworkers), and less organizational participation in community groups.

Legislation and research has also been concerned with preventing out-of-home placement of children. The 1980 Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act required states to make "reasonable efforts" to prevent children from entering foster care and to reunify children who were placed out of the home. As part of the legislation, the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) was authorized to set aside funds to evaluate a range of family preservation and family support programs.

Several related but distinct models of prevention have emerged as the focus of research, policy, and practice (Nelson and Landsman 1990). One particularly well-known model is crisis intervention, of which the Homebuilders

Program is the most prominent example. The program calls for short-term, time-limited services provided in the home to families with children at imminent risk of foster care placement. Key program characteristics include contact with the family within twenty-four hours of the crisis, caseload sizes of one or two families per worker, service duration of four to six weeks, and provision of both concrete services and counseling, up to twenty hours per family per week. Several evaluations of the Homebuilders Program model have been conducted, most but not all of which have produced generally positive results, that is, low rates of placement of the children served (e.g., Fraser, Pecora, and Haapala 1991). Summaries of other research on Homebuilders can be found at http://www.institutefamily.org/programs_research.asp. The principles of Homebuilders are largely incorporated into what is now referred to as Intensive Family Preservation Services. Other models of family preservation provide longer-term and more family systems–focused services or services with a specific emphasis on substance abuse or delinquency in the children. In reality, many states and agencies offer an eclectic mix of program elements in their prevention efforts.

In sum, child welfare research has both spurred and been guided by various public concerns and federal legislation. A review of the current body of policy- and practice-related research reveals seven major tenets. The first is concern for children's safety. The child welfare system was developed primarily to ensure that when a child is at risk for maltreatment, services can be brought to bear to determine whether the family and child can remain together safely (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, Barth, and Plotnick 1993). This is accomplished by a child protective services (CPS) investigation of a family based on a call made to a state central registry from an anonymous person or a mandated reporter who suspects child abuse. It is important to understand that these reports of child abuse are made based on suspicion, as opposed to evidence. This policy ensures that the largest possible safety net is created to protect children.

The second tenet is to keep families together whenever possible. Thus, if the CPS investigation substantiates the abuse, attempts are made to maintain the child safely and appropriately in the child's home so that familial and community bonds can be maintained and strengthened and out-of-home placement avoided. This is done by offering preventive service to the child and family in the community in which they live. (In addition, a family may request prevention services on their own based on their perception of need or as advised by professionals, friends, or neighbors). In all cases, maintaining the child in the home and in the community is the preferred option for families and children that come into contact with the child welfare system.

If the CPS investigation determines that the child cannot be maintained in the home, the child is placed into out-of-home care. The third tenet of child welfare practice is that children should be placed in the least restrictive level of care necessary to maintain the child's safety. The least restrictive setting is family foster care and kinship care, in which children live in families and attend schools and receive services in the community in which they live. Therapeutic and specialized foster homes are somewhat more restrictive, because children are provided with a structured behavioral management program and may attend specialized schools. Nonetheless, they are still living with a family and are cared for by parent figures. Group homes are more restrictive, in that children live in a group setting, are cared for by rotating shifts of professional staff, and are typically subject to a series of "house rules" and restrictions regarding their activities and movement in the community. Even more restrictive are diagnostic reception centers (DRCs) and residential treatment centers (RTCs), in which children receive a regimen of treatment and often participate in behavioral management reward and punishment systems to control and shape their emotions and behaviors. It is important to bear in mind that even at the highest level of restrictiveness, DRC and RTC facilities are not secured (i.e., locked), and children are able to leave the premises at any time (although it is likely that there will be consequences for leaving without permission).

The fourth tenet of the child welfare system is that once a child is placed in care, the length of time a child remains in foster care should be as short as possible in order to maintain family-child bonds. As noted above, considerable research has focused on identifying factors associated with length of stay, and several legislative initiatives have spurred efforts to shorten stays for children in care.

A fifth tenet is that children in foster care should achieve permanency, either by reunifying them with their family of origin or through adoption into an alternative permanent family. The early research on foster care drift highlighted the problem of children spending too many years in the system, moving from one foster home to another with no efforts made toward achieving a permanent home. In response, concurrent planning, which involves the simultaneous pursuit of reunification and adoption options, is now mandated casework practice.

The sixth tenet is the emphasis on placing children with relatives whenever possible. This is known as kinship care. Although figures vary by agency, nationwide approximately 30 percent of all children in family-level foster care are currently being cared for by relatives (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2000). Kinship care represents the

fastest growing category of foster care (Wulczyn and Goerge 1992). The push for utilization of kinship care was shaped largely by a 1979 Supreme Court ruling that encouraged greater use of kinship care by allowing government payments to be allocated for the support of children cared for by relatives.

And finally, the seventh tenet is that children should be prepared for life after foster care, regardless of their permanency plan. A spate of studies conducted with foster care alumni documented their difficulty in achieving self-sufficiency following emancipation from the foster care system (Courtney, Piliavin, Grogan-Kaylor, and Nesmith 2001; Festinger 1983). Currently, states must provide training in independent living skills to all youth in the system who are fourteen years of age or older in order to help prepare them for adulthood.

All of these major principles of child welfare practice are dynamic, meaning that they occur at the same time and interact with one another. This necessarily complicates research efforts aimed at isolating the effects of one principle on outcomes for children and families. The complexity of child welfare research will be considered throughout the remainder of the book.