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The Lived Experience and Perceived Challenges of Child Protective Investigators Who Place Children in Foster Care

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Approval Page

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Abstract

The Lived Experiences and Perceived Challenges of Child Protective Investigators Who Place Children in Foster Care. Elizabeth Presume, 2023: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice. Keywords: foster care, child care occupations, child welfare, occupational health, stress.

This applied dissertation examined the difficulties and coping mechanisms associated with child welfare professionals' interactions with vulnerable children who provide vulnerable populations with emotional, physical, mental, and psychological support. This responsibility impacts their personal life and professional performance since their regular involvement with the children and the following aspects, such as case resolution, in-depth discussions about trauma, and home visits, are emotionally and mentally taxing.

The researcher conducted a phenomenological study with nine child protective investigators via an asynchronous online focus group on the Google Groups platform. The participants were all employed in the United States child welfare department, held a bachelor's degree in sociology, and had at least 2 years of experience with home removal and placement in foster care.

Findings indicated that child protective investigators who work to remove children from homes and arrange foster care placement experience emotional and mental drain. These child welfare cases profoundly affect their personal lives and networks attributable to secondhand traumatic stress and occupational trauma. Some workers develop mental health illnesses, such as anxiety, and physical disorders, such as burnout, which impair their work quality due to staff shortages. The study uncovered strategies and practices that can help minimize the challenges, including cognitive-behavioral therapy, mindfulness, and art.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Despite the intended purpose of foster care as a protective environment for children, placement failures unfortunately arise. Researchers have presented compelling evidence suggesting that removing a child from their home can have detrimental effects and is seldom warranted (Leathers et al., 2021; Sköld & Markkola, 2020; Solerdelcoll et al., 2022). The subsequent statement does not purport to be indicative of many children who are placed in foster care. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019), many children in foster care do not experience abuse or neglect. Additionally, they tend to have fewer than two placements and are often either permanently adopted, put with relatives, or successfully reunited with their parents. Nevertheless, it is essential to acknowledge that system failures do indeed transpire, rather than solely attributing them to anomalies, as evidenced by several class action lawsuits against state foster care systems (Font & Gershoff, 2020). The foster care systems nationwide have significant challenges in ensuring minimum safety standards for children (Fowler et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2020). Children who experience frequent relocations to temporary homes may also suffer from enduring negative consequences (Fowler et al., 2017; Henry et al., 2020).

Children encounter several challenges that vary from child to child. According to Méndez-Fernández et al. (2022), it is anticipated that Child Protective Investigators (CPIs) will address these challenges gradually, but they will encounter many obstacles in the process. Professionals experience second-hand depression due to variations in their reactions to these challenges (Li et al., 2022). Psychologists are tasked with resolving the psychological concerns of individuals, a responsibility that may potentially subject them

to comparable difficulties. The presence of elevated caseloads is a prevalent contributor to job dissatisfaction and burnout among social workers across many nations (Chung & Choo, 2019; García et al., 2018; Marmo et al., 2021). The considerable quantity of children within their caseloads, along with the diverse range of challenges they present, is likely to induce psychological discomfort in the worker (Méndez-Fernández et al., 2022). The correlation between the number of children and the impact on CPIs mental well-being exhibits an upward trend. Many child protection professionals are anticipated to be engaged in addressing the psychological consequences of this phenomenon. Anokye (2018) posits that individuals with psychological disturbances cannot provide care or facilitate the rehabilitation of individuals suffering from psychological afflictions. Consequently, in the absence of an appropriate strategy for addressing the issue, the efficacy of foster care may diminish, thereby perpetuating psychological distress and trauma among a more significant number of children. Therefore, studies must address this issue and mitigate stress among child welfare workers, particularly CPIs, as previous studies have primarily focused on children (Bergström et al., 2020).

The utilization of CPIs sourced from child welfare organizations in the United States was deemed suitable for the present research investigation due to their regular engagement with children who have undergone traumatic experiences and abuse. The significance of their involvement in child welfare services is of utmost importance as they serve as the primary safeguard in concerns pertaining to the protection of children (Akesson et al., 2021; Vang et al., 2020). Furthermore, a primary duty assigned to them entails the evaluation and authorization of all child welfare endeavors. Determining whether the experiences of CPIs were characterized by one or more occupational traumas, such as traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, or vicarious trauma, was deemed

crucial (Vang et al., 2020). Moreover, burnout, an unexplained occurrence resulting from occupational trauma, has a detrimental impact on the performance of child welfare professionals. This is primarily because professionals working in child welfare have reported a deficiency in trust, mutual respect, peer support, supervision, resources, and collaboration with other professionals, as well as an excessive workload and involvement in complex cases (García et al., 2018; Hermon & Chahla, 2019). In this context, a comprehensive search was conducted using web channels to identify numerous CPIs datasets from multiple institutions. The data was collected through online surveys, interviews, and telephone conversations and subsequently transcribed for analysis. CPIs have a similar level of responsiveness to the workplace environment, which might lead to occupational stress among healthcare practitioners involved in child protection, akin to their counterparts in other healthcare fields. The current study investigated the challenges these CPIs face and how they implement effective techniques to improve foster care without adding to the stress and trauma these workers are already tackling.

Phenomenon of Interest

Practitioners within the field of child welfare are commonly seen as indispensable professionals who provide aid and support to youngsters facing distinct difficulties and are unable to remain within their familial environments (Barck-Holst et al., 2021; Dimba-Ndaleni et al., 2022; Otterlei & Studsrød, 2022). These children have already had psychological and mental impacts. The transition to foster care does not instantaneously eliminate individuals' internal experiences and thoughts. The Child Protection Institution will be obligated to ensure the provision of a secure environment for these youngsters, thereby fostering a sense of safety. Caring for such youngsters might present difficulties, and the workers involved are susceptible to experiencing secondary trauma. At present,

diverse families have a range of challenges stemming from disagreements. Instances of homicide within intimate relationships resulting from conflict are unpredictable, yet children can be exposed to such occurrences (Ponnert, 2022).

When children are exposed to such instances, this encounter will probably persist in their memories for an extended duration. When CPIs assume the responsibility of caring for and providing guidance to these youngsters, they inevitably experience secondary effects stemming from the trauma experienced by the children. Child welfare professionals may encounter several psychological challenges, such as stress, despair, and the emotional burden associated with experiencing sympathy and empathy for the child. Numerous scholarly investigations, exemplified by the research conducted by Baldschun et al. (2019), have established a correlation between engagement in foster care employment and the experience of distress and occupational trauma. Child welfare experts are responsible for proactively engaging with children who are experiencing emergency and enduring pain, aiming to resolve their challenges, alleviate their stress, and provide them with suitable guidance for maintaining stability in their lives. Numerous studies have delineated the impact of trauma on children within and beyond the confines of their domestic environment. Bahari et al. (2022) and Lagos et al. (2022) posit that there exists an indirect relationship between work-related or occupational trauma and the occurrence of traumatic workplace events. Based on this theoretical perspective, addressing the trauma experienced by children may result in the immersion of a worker or adviser in the same cognitive framework, enabling them to engage with the situation at hand empathetically.

Occupational trauma encompasses the psychological stress and trauma that CPIs encounter due to the challenges or situations exhibited by the children they work with.

Occupational trauma engenders mental or physical fatigue because of indirect or second-hand exposure to traumatic experiences (Cook, 2020). According to Cook (2020), frequent visits to sites where individuals have been subjected to assault or where children have been removed by child protection personnel might potentially result in psychological distress for a CPI, mainly if the investigation involves a child welfare worker who directly observed the abusive incidents. According to Beer et al. (2021), the CPI may experience fatigue or cognitive challenges because of resource constraints and increased workloads.

Traumatic stress, empathy fatigue, psychological anguish, and emotional depletion are all manifestations of work-related depression (Beer et al., 2021). Numerous studies have examined the perspectives of CPIs regarding children's behavior and prior experiences. However, little attention has been given to the viewpoint of the CPI themselves. The findings of this study indicate that the behavior of caseworkers in the provision of childcare services is influenced by workplace trauma (Beer et al., 2021). The concept of an individual's lived experience pertains to the various encounters and interactions with events or environments. This study has the potential to address the existing research vacuum by examining the present state of foster care and the challenges faced by the child welfare system, as observed through the lens of CPIs.

The contemporary era presents significant challenges within the foster care system (Ball et al., 2021). Numerous noteworthy societal concerns, including the quantity of offspring and the concerning pervasiveness of familial destitution, disparities, homelessness, substance dependency, HIV/AIDS, substandard education, family and societal conflicts, as well as discriminatory practices, detrimentally impact children and have a substantial influence on their overall welfare and well-being. The U.S. Department

of Health and Human Services (2022) asserts that societal difficulties have given rise to significant domestic workloads characterized by intricate and ever-changing obstacles.

Healthcare professionals and child welfare practitioners frequently provide care and support to numerous children who have experienced trauma due to neglect and abuse (Arkow, 2020). The presence of a substantial number of children with diverse traumatic experiences can potentially result in psychological trauma for CPIs. However, there is a scarcity of research in the existing body of literature that examines the lived experiences of CPIs that provide evidence-based recommendations for effectively addressing their psychological issues associated with their professional responsibilities in working with children within the foster care system. CPIs experienced a surge in demand during the COVID-19 epidemic owing to a significant rise in incidents of child maltreatment. The likelihood of children being exposed to neglect, exploitation, impaired development, domestic violence, psychological anguish, and mistreatment was increased (Adams, 2020; Alliance for Child Protection in Humanitarian Action, 2019; Fallon et al., 2020). Over the course of time, engagements with CPIs might lead to emotional and psychological exhaustion (Beer et al., 2021). Child care workers have reported that the difficulties they face could negatively impact their professional performance and personal lives (Beer et al., 2021; Bunting et al., 2019).

Hospital professionals, police enforcement officers, and educators have encountered many issues associated with trauma and stress. According to John et al. (2019), foster care providers experience psychological stress and secondary trauma as they endeavor to address the challenges associated with traumatic incidents. The resolution of cases involving children has a psychological impact on the professionals or individuals responsible for managing these matters. Workers address the challenges faced

by these children either before or after their placement in foster care. According to Cook (2020), it has been argued that the mental well-being of children can be impacted by psychological trauma, therefore emphasizing the importance of persons tasked with addressing these issues to possess psychological fitness. According to Cook (2020), it is imperative that child protection staff maintain sound psychological well-being and deliver appropriate guidance under specific circumstances.

It is imperative that child welfare employees have comprehensive training in providing professional care to children, both within and outside of the foster care system. This training should encompass a thorough understanding of racial discrimination and the social justice problems specifically affecting Black families. The United States exhibits a notable disparity in the representation of Black children inside the foster care system. According to data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019), a notable disparity exists between the proportion of Black children placed in foster care in 2018 and their representation in the overall population. Specifically, while Black individuals accounted for only 13.4% of the people, they constituted 23% of the children in foster care during that year. In the year 2018, a total of 141 children residing in Brownsville, a predominantly Black area, were subjected to the process of removal from their households and then relocated to foster care. The New York City Administration for Children's Services (2019) reported that a total of eight children were relocated from their residences in Park Slope and Carrol Gardens, which are primarily inhabited by individuals of White ethnicity, and were subsequently placed under foster care.

Child protective services could benefit from the discoveries presented in this research by utilizing the knowledge to develop strategies for implementing self-care educational initiatives and support programs. The collected data and information are

anticipated to contribute to the reduction of recurring occupational trauma, turnover rates among staff, job attrition, and health issues associated with the field of social work. This research endeavor will contribute to the existing corpus of information pertaining to child welfare, encompassing many dimensions of child welfare and occupational stress. The objective of this qualitative conceptual study was to identify CPIs as a significant subset of the social welfare profession that is susceptible to experiencing occupational trauma.

The importance of implementing progressive reforms in child welfare organizations cannot be overstated for CPIs, as it is crucial for addressing the needs and expectations of the community, which in turn has significant implications for public health, safety, and general welfare (Tehrani, 2018). Occupational trauma, encompassing secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, trauma, and burnout, exerts a significant influence on decision-making mechanisms, job performance, and overall welfare. In the given scenario, it is possible that child protection interventions may not effectively serve socioeconomically disadvantaged children, as suggested by Molnar et al. (2020). Boswell and Cudmore (2017) asserted that children placed in child protection institutions are susceptible to comparable, and in certain instances, heightened levels of trauma when compared to children in foster care. Cook (2020) reported a higher prevalence of stress and trauma among female workers working with children in foster care. Due to the relatively higher propensity of women to experience emotional distress, the corresponding percentage is elevated.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant influence on health and human services, as noted by Milner (2020). Radel et al. (2018) reported that many child welfare workers involved in foster care encounter heightened stress levels because of their professional responsibilities. Amidst the COVID-19 epidemic, a notable proportion of

child welfare employees, precisely 46.4%, had distress levels beyond the typical range. In their study, Miller et al. (2020) asserted that the available evidence indicates that child welfare workers are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, they argue for the importance of developing, implementing, and assessing interventions that try to alleviate the distress experienced by these employees.

There is a need for several enhancements to safeguard the welfare of individuals in foster care placement, with a focus on addressing difficulties related to the CPIs (Hobbs & Evans, 2017). To mitigate workplace trauma, activists must construct a comprehensive framework consisting of curriculum, infrastructure, and policy enforcement. These components should be meticulously crafted through considerable research and development. Research in the field of child welfare has played a pivotal role in advocating for the implementation of self-care practices and improved employment policies. As a direct consequence of these efforts, valuable tools for policy reform have been developed. Promoting the integration of self-care practices within social work education programs is considered an ethical obligation, as it has the potential to enhance student retention rates. According to Curry and Epley (2022), engaging in self-care contributes to the overall well-being of professionals, while including reflective practices aids social workers in effectively managing their responsibilities.

Moreover, implementing healthcare and foster care policy reforms will incentivize child welfare services to provide efficient and trustworthy treatment and practice models for a cooperative network of professionals catering to marginalized and underprivileged communities. These reforms aim to address detrimental circumstances, such as those found in child welfare services, and mitigate their impact (Berrick et al., 2022; Jones, Simons, et al., 2020). The implementation of these reforms should be

grounded in the utilization of expert knowledge and the most reliable empirical facts. Additionally, it is crucial to incorporate the viewpoints of many stakeholders, including individuals who have experienced the unjust removal of their children, such as Native Americans (Berrick et al., 2022). Through the implementation of the proposed measures, these changes can enhance the efficacy of child protection groups in their collaboration with the community and their support of poor children. Different studies have varying perspectives on the proposed resolution. The issue of psychological safety among CPIs in the context of foster care has emerged as a prominent concern. Child welfare professionals and their supervisors in the United States have encountered a multitude of cases involving children who have experienced trauma due to abuse, war, or neglect (Oates, 2022).

Deb and Ray (2022) highlighted the scarcity of studies about children residing in impoverished nations who undergo traumatic experiences, abuse, and neglect. Child abuse and neglect are recognized as significant challenges encountered by industrialized nations. Within the urban setting of Los Angeles in the United States, there is a notable prevalence of child abuse incidents. According to a study by Disney et al. (2019), child welfare workers in the region typically document 31 cases involving different families. CPIs typically document approximately 155 incidents monthly as part of their responsibilities in safeguarding children. The substantial monthly incidence of reported cases and the sizeable workforce in the foster care system contribute to notable levels of pressure and stress experienced by CPIs. Foster care personnel have a multitude of obstacles stemming from the escalating monthly increase in reported instances. The experience of CPIs in the foster care system has been found to present significant psychological and emotional challenges (Hendricks & Tanga, 2019). Roygardner et al.

(2020) showed an illustrative case demonstrating the wide-ranging impact of child abuse on the entirety of a community. When considering this perspective, it may be argued that the effects of child abuse on society has substantial implications for the CPI responsible for addressing such cases and ensuring the provision of essential care. For example, if CPIs are allocated a workload exceeding 20 cases of child abuse, their cognitive processes may probably undergo alterations, resulting in heightened levels of stress and increased burden.

Several studies have commonly categorized the phenomenon as a regular occurrence, wherein the psychological stress that influences CPIs also has implications for the foster care and childcare sector (Anokye, 2018; Cook, 2020). It is imperative to address this matter to enhance the social standards and psychological well-being of the CPI. When examining these tactics, it is evident that most of the research, such as Gypen et al. (2017) and Fowler et al. (2017), exhibit a tendency towards generality and prejudice about the effectiveness of foster care management strategies. Hence, the present study delineated an appropriate methodology for the management of foster care and the enhancement of workers' welfare.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

Children placed in foster care experience various mental health challenges from child to child (Humphreys et al., 2020). Consequently, it is anticipated that child welfare professionals will work towards addressing these issues over time. Additionally, these mental health difficulties pose significant obstacles in the lives of child welfare professionals. Numerous investigations on foster care services have primarily focused on the psychological challenges encountered by children, as stated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022). The oversight of the issues pertaining to

traumatization and mental stress experienced by CPIs has been observed. Most of the prior study has focused on examining the difficulties faced by children residing in foster care facilities, with limited consideration given to the experiences of CPIs (Genç & Buz, 2020). Hence, there is a lacuna in the study pertaining to the difficulties CPIs encounter in placing children in foster care. To fill the current research void, this study focused on the lived encounters and perceived obstacles encountered by CPIs involved in placing children in foster care.

Kinman and Grant (2020) employed a multifaceted research methodology to investigate the roles and responsibilities of CPIs within the context of foster care. The researchers discovered that investigators are faced with many cases pertaining to children who have experienced trauma because of abuse and neglect within the context of children's social safety net programs. The number of these cases continues to rise, resulting in a significant strain and an excessive workload. The mental and emotional exhaustion experienced by investigators has been attributed to the substantial caseloads and complex difficulties they encounter. Nevertheless, the researchers failed to acknowledge and examine the difficulties faced by these investigators adequately. Consequently, there exists a research void that necessitates an investigation into the perceived hurdles encountered by these CPIs in the execution of their responsibilities.

According to Kinman and Grant (2020), the CPI interacts with a wide range of children, families, and law enforcement officials. During these encounters, the investigators elicit information from the children, perhaps leading to the development of depressive symptoms and increased stress levels. This knowledge tends to remain salient in the thoughts of investigators, hence contributing to psychological distress and anxiety. Nevertheless, Sprang et al. (2019) have highlighted the need for comprehensive

investigations of interventions designed for service providers who engage with individuals affected by trauma, thereby identifying a research need. Moreover, a few scholarly studies have established a correlation between the experiences of traumatized children in foster care and the experiences of children under the supervision of the CPIs (Kim et al., 2022; Molnar et al., 2020).

Several research has endeavored to examine the challenges encountered by CPIs through the implementation of diverse techniques; nonetheless, their efficacy remains undetermined (Kim et al., 2022). It is recommended that these CPIs receive psychological guidance, engage in sufficient physical activity, and undergo periodic medical examinations. However, thus far, no effective measures have been implemented to adequately mitigate the trauma and psychological stress experienced by these workers. Furthermore, the literature review yielded limited findings regarding investigating techniques and views related to CPIs. The topic of workers' experiences in child protection research is often overlooked, as these studies typically operate under the assumption that workers in foster care are content with their roles and have experienced improvements in their overall well-being and safety. The existing body of literature primarily focuses on elucidating the expertise possessed by these CPIs but needs to offer practical tactics and effective solutions to address the aforementioned difficulties.

The literature review component of this research examined the experiences of CPIs. However, there needs to be more literature regarding solutions for CPIs to manage job-related stress in foster care units effectively. The historical focus of professionals engaged in practical work within child protection and child welfare programs has been limited, mainly on the complications of child exploitation (Kinman & Grant, 2020). The scarcity of data and information is the primary reason why only a limited number of

studies have been conducted to develop solutions to manage the challenges encountered by CPI practitioners. To enhance the quality of information, news, and interventions pertaining to children's experiences in foster care, this study aims to address existing gaps in the area by introducing tactics and practices that can enhance the experiences of CPIs when dealing with diverse cases. In summary, this study presents recommendations for addressing social, psychological, health, and mental well-being concerns to enhance the quality of foster care.

Professionals experience second-hand depression due to variations in their reactions to these challenges (Beer et al., 2021). According to Singer et al. (2020) and Vang et al. (2020), mental health professionals are tasked with addressing the psychological concerns of individuals, a responsibility that may potentially subject them to comparable challenges. The augmentation in the number of clients served by social workers can amplify the psychological burden experienced by these professionals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a significant increase in the workload of social workers in Spain due to the widespread transmission of the virus among the population, which correlated with heightened levels of stress and higher job demands (Ben-Ezra & Hamama-Raz, 2020). During instances characterized by high levels of stress, individuals may experience compromised decision-making abilities and the emergence of emotional numbness, anxiety, and depression (Beer et al., 2021). Social professionals may face cognitive impacts in the form of feelings of ineffectiveness and depersonalization.

Beer et al. (2021) documented a correlation between work-related stress and adverse outcomes such as diminished well-being and emotional weariness. The topic of work-related stress has been constantly addressed in the literature by professionals in the

field of social work for over 20 years (Gomez-Garcia et al., 2019). Consequently, in the absence of an appropriate strategy for addressing the issue, the efficacy of foster care placement may diminish, leading to a persistent experience of psychological distress and trauma among more children. Therefore, it is imperative that this study addresses the concern by devising a proficient approach to address this matter and mitigate the stress experienced by child welfare professionals, particularly CPIs.

The primary objective of this study was to furnish relevant information to various stakeholders, including CPIs, healthcare professionals such as doctors, students, families, child protection agencies, foster parents, parents contemplating adoption, and the wider community. The objective of this research study was to identify the obstacles faced by CPIs in their work with placing children in foster care. Additionally, the study attempted to propose techniques that can be employed to effectively carry out foster care placement practices while minimizing the risk of trauma and extreme psychological stress for the investigators. The target demographic encompasses healthcare professionals, including nurses, prone to encountering such challenges. Medical professionals, including doctors and nurses, are responsible for providing care and support to children who have sustained injuries, exhibited psychological disturbances, or been neglected. Consequently, healthcare professionals will derive advantages from developing competencies that enable them to administer treatment effectively and efficiently to these pediatric patients in a manner that minimizes stress.

In a similar vein, most of the prior research on workplace trauma has focused on CPIs within the context of child welfare. Nevertheless, the focus on CPIs' experiences and their trauma on the job is not explicitly emphasized. This dissertation offers valuable insights for child welfare workers seeking to enhance their ability to provide optimal care

for traumatized children and deliver high-quality services to this vulnerable population. Hence, it is imperative to foster understanding regarding efficacious strategies for individuals engaged in educational pursuits, as well as families and professionals confronted with comparable situations. Moreover, given that these professionals play a crucial role in addressing child welfare concerns and facilitating the removal of children from their families into foster care, government agencies, and law enforcement entities might potentially derive valuable insights from this research study. Such insights would equip them with the necessary information to effectively support and guide children who have experienced trauma. Interventions and laws on child welfare are subject to evaluation by the state and other governmental entities. Furthermore, the significant challenges faced by CPIs are accompanied by recent endeavors to incorporate the experiences of CPIs into the formulation of policies and the decision-making procedures concerning the children under their supervision. These efforts have the potential to establish novel benchmarks. Government agencies should be seen as a crucial audience for this study, as it aims to provide a significant and context-specific understanding of the involvement of government agencies in the foster care system.

Definition of Terms

For this applied dissertation, the following terms are defined.

Burnout

This term refers to the psychological fatigue and cynicism of workers in human services who interact with individuals (Bride, 2019).

Case Managers

This term refers to the people who help assess, plan, monitor, and evaluate the services children need in the child welfare system or agency (Bunting et al., 2019).

Child Protective Investigators (CPI)

This term refers to individuals concerned with protecting children from harm and investigating claims of child abuse and neglect (Fong, 2020).

Child Welfare Workers

This term refers to the employees in child welfare agencies concerned with protecting children from abuse and other forms of maltreatment and providing necessary services (King et al., 2018; Pryce et al., 2007).

Compassion Fatigue

This term refers to building physical and emotional fatigue for support workers who affect others' kindness and empathy (Mathieu, 2014).

Foster Care

This term refers to 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Occupational Trauma

This term refers to the impact of psychological or physical fatigue from workers exposed to implicit trauma can trigger a shift in a person's viewpoints, such as frustration about workplace problems (Mathieu, 2014).

Perceived Issues

This term refers to social workers' issues that are significant in their experiences (Bride, 2019).

Seasoned or Experienced Child Protection Social Workers

This term refers to child protection social workers with several years of experience with a child protection department that examines child neglect and

abuse complaints (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020).

Secondary Traumatic Stress

This term refers to the experience from a family, personal, or work relationship of a horrific situation (Bride, 2019).

Social Workers

This term refers to individuals who support people in their everyday experiences of overcoming and coping with issues (U.S. Department of Labor, 2020).

Vicarious Trauma

This term refers to dealing with traumatized people, a detrimental stress transition to a social work specialist (Pearlman, 2017).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the core issues faced by CPIs in the child welfare field to determine possible strategies for implementation to address the challenges they face. The existing body of research primarily focuses on the difficulties faced by children in foster care while neglecting to address the experiences and interests of CPIs. It is anticipated that the overall work experience and level of engagement among CPIs can be enhanced. According to Ofreneo et al. (2020), children who have experienced trauma resulting from neglect, familial conflicts, or life-threatening incidents consistently exhibit heightened sensitivity to their treatment. Due to the delicate nature of the task, CPIs responsible for placing children in foster care must possess sound mental and psychological capacities to effectively impart suitable guidance and exercise sound judgment on behalf of these children. The fulfillment of children's needs is contingent upon child welfare personnel making appropriate decisions and delivering accurate education. The primary aim of this

dissertation was to contribute to existing research by proposing a foster care placement approach that prioritizes the well-being and circumstances of children in out-of-home care. The study conducted an examination and evaluation of the obstacles encountered in the removal of children from their homes by CPIs and their subsequent placement in foster care. Furthermore, these issues can serve as a means to develop efficacious strategies that CPIs might employ to address the management of their well-being and psychological safety effectively.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Numerous research studies explore the challenges CPIs face in reducing child abuse and neglect in multiple societies. Some obstacles have solutions considered for its success, making these pieces of literature essential for this study's purpose. This chapter relates various theories and practices concerning lived experiences, the challenges child protective investigators face in child welfare, and how some have been developed to solve multiple issues. This chapter reviews the literature organized into sections beginning with the introduction, followed by a section on the theoretical framework. Several theories are presented. The nature of the issue on which this dissertation focused involves a presentation of the children in foster care and their social welfare. The mental health of child welfare workers follows the purpose of foster care. Occupational trauma is the next section, as it is a common problem among child welfare workers.

Secondary or secondhand traumatic stress is explained as the most common type of traumatic stress experienced by child welfare workers. Ways to overcome social workers' stressors is the next section. There are several different types of child welfare programs presented. CPIs served as the focus of this dissertation, and they must remove children from their homes sometimes, which can create a dangerous situation. When children are removed from the house, there are many options for foster care that they can be transferred to for their safety. The chapter is then summarized, followed by the research questions.

Theoretical Framework

Various theoretical frameworks elucidate the core characteristics of workplace trauma, including the idea of traumatic stress as proposed by Hammonds (2019). The

theories encompass various perspectives, namely learning theory, systems theory, transpersonal theory, psychosocial development theory, cognitive-behavioral theory, shattered belief theory, emotional processing theory, and the idea of learned helplessness. Constructivist self-development is the theoretical framework employed to elucidate how child protective investigators approach their contacts and challenges (Hammonds, 2019). The genesis of the theory emerged to comprehend many traumatic occurrences within the realm of child welfare. According to Miller et al. (2018), the constructivist approach of self-development posits that individuals with complex posttraumatic stress disorder employ cognitive and psychological abilities to effectively manage the impact of others' psychological difficulties. Miller et al. advanced the constructivist self-development theory that elucidates how the provision of community services is influenced by exposure to unfavorable occurrences. The findings of this study indicate that participants expressed their subjective interpretations of their experiences, and that child protection investigators experience psychological consequences because of job trauma. The etiology of work-related trauma varies depending on the specific work setting and the unique circumstances experienced by the individual.

According to Moore's (2020) research, an investigation of the encounters of CPIs within the realm of child welfare revealed that the constructivist theory of self-development emerged as the most favorable theoretical perspective. The constructivist self-development approach encapsulates the lived experiences of social workers. The development of individual expertise occurs as social workers meet challenges within their professional environments. However, Beer et al. (2021) showed that children and young individuals in foster care face an escalation in their caseloads, which subsequently leads to an increase in their exposure to severe stress. Nevertheless, this rise is also positively

correlated with the psychological impacts people experience. The data collected from the participants regarding their experiences with child welfare revealed these events' effects on them. The primary objective of the present study was to provide a comprehensive account of the challenges related to the life experiences of the participants and examine how these experiences influenced their personal lives and professional performance. The psychological strain experienced by CPIs frequently arises due to the inherent conflict between their cognitive processes and the demands of resolving foster care cases, which in turn has a detrimental impact on the academic achievement of foster children under their supervision (Beer et al., 2021).

Systems Theory of Social Work

The systems theory of social workplaces emphasizes examining human behavior and the various issues individuals encounter within the framework of interconnected systems. The strategy considers the requirements and level of expertise of interconnected systems. Adams et al. (2018) stated it is expected that participants should consider all the essential components of the foster care system in theory. The implementation of this approach has the potential to enhance the overall well-being and effectiveness of the system. For example, youngsters burdened by stress find relief from their distress as they receive essential assistance from the professionals operating inside the system. Individuals should receive the necessary service in a supportive setting that minimizes potential distress. Child Protective Services generally assumes the parental duty of providing care for children placed in foster care. Providing essential services that foster children's spiritual and moral development, such as counseling, mentorship, and spiritual growth, is crucial. Hence, the diverse range of experiences had by social workers in all facets of their responsibilities renders them indispensable in the provision of services,

notwithstanding the numerous obstacles they encounter (Adams et al., 2018). The idea provides a framework for understanding how individuals from marginalized groups in the United States are socialized to regulate their emotions within professional and interpersonal settings.

Transpersonal Theory

The transpersonal theory is a psychological framework that explores and examines the spiritual and transcendent aspects of human experience. It goes beyond traditional. The transpersonal paradigm places significant emphasis on the spiritual, socio-emotional, and intellectual development of social workers (Lee, 2019). The present study emphasizes the inclusion of creativity as an integral component within a comprehensive framework while examining the remaining six elements about the duty of treatment. Hence, the imperative of fostering production emerges as a societal obligation for a significant number of youngsters within the foster care system. Based on the theoretical framework, the experience acquired inside the foster care system places substantial emphasis on fostering a comprehensive sense of community. The enhancement of all facets of survival is observed in an individual. To imbue children's lives with significance, it is imperative for individuals to engage in spiritual endeavors. The theory also emphasizes the importance of comprehensive training in various aspects of the lives of foster children and foster care social workers across multiple domains. Numerous studies have demonstrated that the treatment's fundamental essence encompasses knowledge, acceptance, and forgiveness. Hence, the acquired knowledge and skills can serve as a crucial amalgamation with hands-on application, enabling individuals to effectively provide solace and fulfill other significant obligations to their clientele (Lee, 2019). The theoretical framework engenders a state of enhanced

psychological and emotional welfare, catalyzing the motivation underlying the endeavors of the CPI. Children residing in foster care facilities are often characterized as exhibiting exceptional cognitive and imaginative abilities.

Psychosocial Development Theory

Psychosocial development theory originated from Erick Erickson's work on psychosocial development. According to the recent idea analysis, it takes eight key life steps to make a complete life cycle. The notion of psychosocial development has its origins in the pioneering work of Erik Erikson. Based on the findings of the current investigation, it has been determined that a comprehensive life cycle consists of eight essential stages. This implies that the CPIs inside foster units and other key stakeholders undergo a series of eight interconnected processes, one of which involves the cultivation of hope in order to establish trust (Selman et al., 2017). The second aspect pertains to the concept of crisis autonomy. Another essential factor is the underlying objective that drives the advancement of the endeavor. Competency development fosters a sense of self-worth and a commitment to maintaining one's individuality. Another aspect to consider is love, which gives rise to feelings of compassion and the practice of self-care. Finally, wisdom is the ultimate level in this progression. The life cycle is employed by social workers as a framework for comprehending the process of self-development. It serves as a point of reference when clients are situated within the maturation life cycle (Selman et al., 2017). This has facilitated their ability to effectively tackle concerns and issues that are appropriate for the given level.

Cognitive-Behavioral Theory

The cognitive-behavioral theory is a psychological framework that explores the relationship between an individual's thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. The cognitive-

behavioral hypothesis establishes a connection between individuals' subjective experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of events and their subsequent emotional and behavioral responses. Individuals may undergo significant psychological distress because of adverse experiences and preoccupation, leading to the development of bad beliefs and actions. According to DuBois et al. (2017), addressing individuals who have formed skewed cognitive processes poses significant difficulties. Recent studies have demonstrated the applicability of the idea, as it pertains to a highly specialized therapy focused on modifying behavior. Hence, in the role of a therapist, the CPI safeguards individuals subjected to adverse circumstances by discerning the obstacles associated with such detrimental encounters. The individuals affected by the incident are presented with a series of cognitive exercises aimed at enhancing their cognitive abilities. Patients may be compelled to interact with an object that evokes feelings of confidence, despite the negative consequences resulting from the illusions they have encountered. Perceiving a drug without incurring any harm can also be considered a component of the process (DuBois et al., 2017). The patient collaborates with a qualified therapist to affirm and acknowledge the experiential and cognitive understanding of the foster care system. As a result, the idea guarantees that professionals possess essential talents that can be utilized in foster care.

Social workers who specialize in social care, counseling, nursing police departments, and emergency medical response occupational trauma experience psychological distress and trauma because of their involvement in instances connected to child abuse and neglect (MacEachern et al., 2019). All individuals within the human species universally experience emotions. The concepts of sympathy and empathy exhibit variations based on individual emotional experiences. Nevertheless, there is a scarcity of

scholarly research that specifically examines the viewpoints of social workers when it comes to their interactions with individuals who are undergoing challenging circumstances. Previous studies in this domain have commonly employed quantitative methodologies to investigate the occurrence of workplace trauma among social workers in the field of child welfare (MacEachern et al., 2019). The present study employed a qualitative approach to investigate the intricacy of participants' relationships, revealing a prevalent issue of workplace trauma among social workers. Moreover, the results revealed the symptomatology of the experiences reported by the participants.

The present study employs the constructivist self-development philosophy to elucidate the approach adopted by social workers in addressing the consequences of individuals' traumatic experiences (Hammonds, 2019). Several post-event resolutions encompass engaging in physical activity and ensuring sufficient rest. Several ideas, including the theory of learning, the concept of shattered assumptions, the theory of emotion regulation, and learned helplessness, have been associated with workplace trauma akin to traumatic stress (Pearlman, 2017). These theories have the potential to be applied in diverse contexts pertaining to the trauma experienced by social workers. Healthcare professionals can effectively employ the concept of learning to acquire various strategies for managing stress and trauma, drawing upon evidence-based approaches. Social professionals have the capacity to utilize the concepts of shattered assumption and emotion regulation theory to approach the experiences of these children with a sense of detachment in routine circumstances, thereby resolving them without internalizing the emotional burden associated with these concerns. Nevertheless, the primary focus lies on the traumatic stress experienced by the primary victims and the social workers who aid these victims (Miller et al., 2018). The experience is commonly

shared, particularly when Child Protective Services initiates efforts to address prevailing concerns to safeguard the well-being of children.

The viewpoints of child welfare social workers undergo a transformation when they encounter persons who face various disadvantages, such as children who have experienced trauma (Selman et al., 2017). Caseworkers can also find the same thing to be appropriate. Occupational stress among social workers is strongly influenced by their mental, psychological, and emotional challenges, as highlighted by MacEachern et al. (2019). The paper provided an overview of child welfare organizations in South Florida, highlighting their substantial workload management and ability to serve larger populations compared to commercial social care agencies in the region. There exist notable differences in financial planning, staff management, and service quality between public and private child protection groups. The potential challenges encountered during the replication of this research effort are expected to be comparable. Smaller organizations focused on child welfare and child protection may gather comprehensive data for their entire organization due to a relatively lower number of social workers than other child welfare organizations discussed in this study.

The concept of compassion fatigue was introduced by Figley (2010) as a means of characterizing the emotional experiences faced by social workers and counselors who interact with individuals who have experienced trauma. In a study conducted by Bourassa (2016), the phenomenon of compassion fatigue in child protection was examined within the context of social work. The findings revealed that social workers who acquire knowledge about their clients' traumatic experiences are susceptible to acquiring compassion fatigue. The form of occupational trauma discussed here pertains to the stressors social workers encounter in their interactions with, responses to, and personal

experiences of patients who have had traumatic events. Bourassa's research demonstrates that compassion fatigue bears a resemblance to psychological suffering. Furthermore, according to Figley (2016), it has been asserted that compassion weariness and secondary traumatic stress might be considered interchangeable terms. The creation of compassion fatigue was found to be associated with a single occurrence of sensitivity towards the trauma experienced by another individual (Bourassa (2016).

Nature of the Issue

Background

The historical origins of child protection programs may be traced back to the early 1870s when the professionalization of social work gained significant momentum in 1898 (Nelson, 2020). The establishment of the initial organization dedicated to child welfare services occurred in 1875 (Nelson, 2020). The campaign was initially undertaken by The New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 2017. The Child Welfare League of America (2014) was established in 1920. CWLA is a collaborative effort between corporate and state child protection groups aimed at ensuring the safety of children and promoting the overall welfare of all children (Rymph, 2018). Child abuse has persisted as a persistent issue despite variations in legislation, societal beliefs, and changes aimed at protecting human rights (Child Welfare League of America, 2014). The field of research on child safety and children's services has expanded significantly, surpassing the boundaries of victimization and prevention strategies (Rymph, 2018). Recent scholarly investigations have commenced to examine the experiences of those employed in child protection organizations and regularly engage with catastrophe victims and individuals affected by trauma (Rymph, 2018).

According to Mathieu (2014), support workers may experience indirect traumatic

discomfort following very distressing and traumatic situations. Various forms of workplace stress, such as overwhelming caseloads, unsupportive managerial practices, and inadequate financial resources, frequently lead to a postponement of necessary actions (Antonopoulou et al., 2017). According to the study conducted by Armes et al. (2020), social workers experience high levels of stress because of their professional practices. Sprang et al. (2019) have provided empirical evidence to support the notion that emotionally painful experiences have wide-ranging effects beyond the individuals immediately impacted. This is particularly evident in trauma care, where trauma can significantly damage the psychological well-being of the caregivers and professionals involved in aiding trauma patients. Residual psychological discomfort is experienced by social workers in many disciplines because of their direct encounters with trauma patients (Bride, 2019). Secondary psychological distress is characterized by cognitive-behavioral, mental, and bodily components (Oates, 2022). The research conducted by Molnar et al. (2020) and Sprang et al. (2019) revealed that the presence of intricate secondary trauma has a detrimental impact on social workers' work ethic, morality, and performance.

Children in Foster Care and Their Social Welfare

According to Bell (2022), the President and Chief Executive Officer of the Casey Family Program, about 424,000 children in the United States awaken in foster care daily. Children are placed in foster families due to experiencing maltreatment, engaging in misconduct, and exhibiting delinquent conduct. Daily, over 700 children undergo the process of being separated from their family residences and then relocated to foster care. Daily, a total of 1,800 children experience instances of neglect and diverse forms of abuse during a 24-hour period. A population of over five million children reside in households characterized by a significant lack of money (Bell, 2022). This insufficiency

is a situation where a family of four subsists on a daily amount of $36, equivalent to a mere $9 per individual inside the family unit.

The Tennessee Commission on Children and Youth (2019) placed over 2,000 adopted adolescents in protective custody due to instances of abuse and unruly behavior in 2019. Additionally, around 1,500 children were placed in protective custody for engaging in delinquent activities during the same year. In the context of children entering foster care, it is common for states to prioritize the eventual reunification of these children with their families. Projections made in 2019, approximately 51% of children entering the foster care system across the country will ultimately return to the custody of their biological family or primary caregivers. Nevertheless, it has been seen that certain young children are granted emancipation through the means of protective custody, as stated by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022). Emancipation refers to terminating one's service prematurely or remaining under the guardianship and oversight of the government until reaching the age of 18 or 21, as determined by the specific rules of each state (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2022), federal statistics indicate that around 44,000 children were emancipated by child protection in 2019. These children faced the challenge of transitioning into independence with limited assistance.

Purpose of Foster Care

The purpose of foster care is to provide temporary, safe, and nurturing homes for children who are unable to live with their biological parents due to various reasons, such as abuse, neglect, or parental incapacity. The major objective of foster care is to safeguard the welfare and well-being of underprivileged children (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

The proposed revisions of the Adoption and Healthy Families Act aimed to reduce the duration of permanent adoption placement. This phenomenon results in increased adoption rates, enhancing the government's ability to accomplish its goals. Additionally, the implementation of metrics to assess performance serves to improve transparency within the process. The foster care system is mandated to achieve these objectives. Concurrently, the implementation of foster care has resulted in a decrease in the prevalence of unsuitable foster homes, an elongation of waiting periods for drug abuse treatment, a scarcity of housing and easily accessible childcare, a rise in socioeconomic inequality and unemployment rates, a relaxation of time limitations on social welfare assistance, and an escalation in public scrutiny (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

Mental Health of Child Welfare Workers

The child welfare system in the United States encompasses various professional roles, each of which entails distinct stressors that may not be commonly faced in other fields. Whitt-Woosley et al. (2022) reported several traumatic situations, including child fatalities, the death of co-workers, serious child mistreatment, and demanding professional tasks. The factors mentioned above often result in burnout, attrition from the profession, and health-related issues among social work practitioners (Bridger et al., 2020; Phillips et al., 2020). In contrast to the challenges faced by police officers, social workers responsible for assessing cases of child abuse are confronted with arduous decisions such as the removal of children from their homes, all while managing significant levels of pressure and stress (MacEachern et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it is recommended that police officers partake in psychological counseling services following their exposure to traumatic incidents, such as seeing a shooting, encountering distressing accident scenes, or being involved in stress-inducing events like internal or administrative

investigations. This does not impose any legal obligations on social workers or child safety and protection managers (Miller, 2018).

This present phenomenological study examined the actual experiences of social workers. The theoretical framework of constructivist self-development provided the basis for elucidating how individuals with chronic pain managed their relationships and challenges qualitatively. This resulted in the categorization and representation of lexical units and linguistic expressions. The coding manual authored by Saldana was utilized in the present investigation. Social workers, like front-line professionals, are susceptible to experiencing occupational trauma, including vicarious trauma, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. According to Van-Dam et al. (2021) and Vang et al. (2020), the experiences of the CPIs necessitated the establishment of boundaries, the avoidance of personalizing work-related difficulties, and the promotion of mutual support within the workplace. Enhancing caseworkers' lives and improving job longevity and performance can be achieved through the implementation of enhanced self-care learning requirements, as well as the provision of organizational and social support. The retention of experienced supervisors can contribute to the promotion of real social change by enhancing the support provided by supervisors to front-line employees. This, in turn, indirectly benefits the well-being of the children, communities, and families under their care.

Professionals working in the field of child welfare are presented with several career trajectories and are commonly recognized as members of the helpful professions. Professionals in the helping field are tasked with effectively engaging individuals across different contexts, including those facing catastrophic events and undergoing psychological suffering. Several studies have documented the impact of disasters and the

experiences of those in distress on workers in the caring professions. A traumatic

experience during one's service can have significant consequences, including the

development of trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout (Wolotira (2022).

    Taylor et al. (2019) explained that occupational trauma encompasses mental and

physical strain resulting from a heightened sensitivity to implicit trauma, leading to

potential shifts in an individual's views and beliefs. Occupational trauma refers to

secondary traumatic stress when an individual is exposed to the trauma experienced by

another person through direct observation or auditory reception of their experiences

(Dewey & Allwood, 2022; Taylor et al., 2019). One potential indicator of occupational

trauma among social work practitioners is the consistent exposure to domestic violence

victims and the subsequent observation of anxiety or desensitization towards the victims'

conditions. The presence of fatigue or cognitive impairments among helping

professionals may serve as indicators of workplace distress, which can be attributed to

insufficient resources and excessive workloads (Gurm, 2020; Taylor et al., 2019).

CPIs perform extraordinarily stressful and upsetting activities in challenging

moments, providing a setting for the development of secondary traumatic stress (Benuto

et al., 2022). Secondary traumatic stress symptoms occur when CPIs indirectly become

vulnerable by caring for traumatized clients (Benuto et al., 2022). Bride (2019) showed

that traumatic psychological experiences, such as the social workers sent to support

trauma victims, have extended outside of those explicitly impacted and are emotionally

scarred. One of the participants in the Middleton et al. (2021) study explained secondary

trauma as follows:

> I guess I call it your soul gets a little, um, jaded in a way, I guess. You know, it
>
> becomes a little harder to see good things that happen in life and the world. Um,

and, and, and so, yeah, you, your soul feels a little bruised, I guess, would be a

way of describing it. (p. 75)

Ben-Ezra and Hamama-Raz (2020) and Kim et al. (2022) identified secondary

traumatic stress and psychological discomfort as two distinct forms of occupational

traumas. To clarify further, the study conducted by Miller et al. (2020) aimed to examine

the levels of distress experienced by a sample of 1,996 child welfare investigators during

the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers utilized the COVID-19 Peritraumatic Distress

Index, as developed by Qiu et al. (2020), to assess the extent of suffering among the

participants. According to the National Conference on State Legislatures (2020), the

pandemic had a discernible effect on the child welfare process, as the imposition of court

restrictions resulted in a deceleration of proceedings and hindered the ability of workers

to effectively carry out their responsibilities. Consequently, these limitations gave rise to

challenges in the management of child welfare cases (Kelly, 2020). The scenario was

accompanied by the expeditious shift towards the implementation of online service

delivery (Merritt & Simmel, 2020). CPIs continued to conduct house visits, hence raising

concerns over the availability of personal protective equipment (Fadel, 2020).

The issues were further intensified by the pandemic (Miller et al., 2020). Hence,

the primary objective of the study conducted by Miller et al. (2020) was to mitigate the

distress experienced by individuals. The study results indicated that child protection

employees experienced a higher-than-average level of anguish. Nevertheless, the severity

of these symptoms was found to be rather low, suggesting that individuals might be

employing self-care strategies and relying on support networks to manage their condition.

Other potential factors contribute to their discomfort, including personal adversities and

the experience of homeschooling, among others. However, the outcomes align with the

findings reported by other healthcare practitioners (Shechter et al., 2020). It was emphasized that the presence of distress at any level is considered problematic, and it was found that 53% of the sample fell within the usual range. However, it is imperative to cultivate self-care practices to alleviate anxiety, as emphasized by the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018). Given that the study by Miller et al. (2020) was the inaugural investigation specifically targeting child welfare personnel, it became evident that further research in this area was warranted (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018).

Considering the existing significant demands faced by social workers, current endeavors have emerged to incorporate their perspectives into the processes of training and decision-making for the children under their supervision, resulting in the establishment of novel benchmarks (Mersky et al., 2019). Social workers, individuals seeking to become pre-adoptive family members, and potential caregivers have yet to engage as active participants within these institutions fully. Agencies began to place increasing reliance on the ephemeral nature of foster care, often neglecting to recognize the crucial roles that social workers and families can assume as dedicated group members in safeguarding the well-being, welfare, and long-term stability of children. In the present system setting, caregivers are commonly observed doing diverse roles. In the realm of child welfare, professionals must undertake several responsibilities, including the provision of care for newborns, the promotion of birth families' well-being, the dissemination of vital information pertaining to the welfare and permanency of children to team members, the cultivation of a nurturing environment for children, and the facilitation of their safe development and growth. The provisions of the Adoption and Healthy Families Act emphasize the increased level of responsibility that social workers

are required to assume in the provision of care for foster children. Mersky et al. (2019) highlighted that it is imperative to ensure that social workers, pre-adopted parents, and relatives responsible for the care of children under the jurisdiction of public Child Protection Services receive timely notification of permanent hearings and annual six-month assessments. Furthermore, it is crucial to allow them to respond to these notifications.

Occupational Trauma

Various vocations have distinct obstacles; however, certain challenges are prevalent across a wide range of workplaces (Salazar & Schelbe, 2021). Occupational issues pertaining to stress and psychological disturbances commonly arise when individuals are exposed to hazardous working environments characterized by demanding, unsupportive, or time-sensitive duties, resulting in excessive workloads. CPIs face numerous problems in foster care, with many of these difficulties associated with psychological stress (Geirdal et al., 2022). Miller et al. (2020) suggested that the experience of trauma after a range of distressing incidents, including accidents, acts of violence, sexual assault, and natural calamities, is influenced by emotional reactions. While the primary victims undoubtedly undergo traumatic experiences, it is essential to acknowledge that secondary victims also encounter distress, particularly while aiding the major victims. Secondary victims have a heightened stress level due to their frequent exposure to several traumatic incidents as an inherent aspect of their professional responsibilities.

In recent decades, numerous studies have been conducted to offer practical approaches for effectively managing stress among primary victims, while comparatively less attention has been given to addressing stress experienced by secondary victims

(Nagy et al., 2022). Secondary traumatic stress, burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue have been identified as significant sources of trauma experienced within the foster care system (Chan et al., 2021; Shechter et al., 2020). Secondary victims have exhibited difficulties in effectively regulating their stress, hence leading to substandard foster care (Nagy et al., 2022). The substandard quality of foster care has resulted in a significant number of children in foster care enduring insufficient care, leading to prolonged recovery periods from the traumatic experiences commonly encountered in their previous living arrangements. The substandard quality in the foster care system typically arises when CPIs endure psychological distress, impeding their ability to make sound decisions and exercise rational judgment in matters necessitating such deliberation. Individuals in caring professions are susceptible to experiencing psychological distress, namely secondary traumatic stress (Taylor et al., 2019). This condition has been associated with detrimental effects on employees, including erasing empathy.

Furthermore, Pyles (2020) posited that countertransference is a form of occupational trauma that is commonly encountered by social workers. Countertransference refers to the phenomenon in which a mental health professional, such as a counselor or therapist, unconsciously reacts to a client in a manner that is influenced by their own unresolved emotional issues or personal needs (Sam, 2013). Hence, it can be inferred that Clinical Psychologists lack awareness regarding their limited understanding of the client's conduct (Sam, 2013). Countertransference is a phenomenon that occurs within the foster care job setting, hence exacerbating stress levels among social investigators. The employees in foster care are tasked with providing guidance and resolving the trauma experienced by many primary victims, as discussed by

John et al. (2019). Moreover, individuals also encounter routine stressors such as excessive work demands and heightened pressure levels.

CPIs employed in the foster care sector exhibit a higher susceptibility to mental health disorders compared to individuals in other professions (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). Nevertheless, this assertion remains unaddressed by experts in the field. Keeshin et al. (2020) posited that the emotional challenges associated with caring for children surpass those encountered while providing care for people who have experienced trauma or have mental health issues. There is a necessity to address this research gap. Many academics typically focus their investigations on different organizations, such as those in the chemical production sector, while neglecting to examine the field of foster care. Hence, the objective of the present study is to conduct a comprehensive investigation into this matter utilizing the existing resources.

Secondary or Secondhand Traumatic Stress

The experience of stress varies among individuals, with some encountering it directly and others experiencing it indirectly. Armes et al. (2020) elucidated that children in foster care undergo stress, while protective investigators indirectly encounter trauma. For instance, the experience of working with abused or traumatized children might engender a sense of parental responsibility among social workers in the foster care system. The findings of Gypen et al. (2017) showed that individuals employed in the field of foster care assume the role of parents or guardians within their own families, displaying a tendency to treat children in foster care as if they were their biological offspring. The emotional and psychological strain experienced by social workers is heightened when they confront a greater number of victims, intensifying their emotions and stress levels. Consequently, the pressure faced by social workers also escalates.

Social workers in the foster care system provide services in challenging circumstances that are characterized by high levels of stress and emotional sensitivity (Adams et al., 2018). Secondary trauma is a phenomenon that arises from indirect exposure to the distressing experiences of those who have been directly affected by a traumatic event. This type of trauma is commonly observed among workers who meet the primary victims. Ashley-Binge and Cousins (2020) conducted an empirical investigation pertaining to the Australian juvenile population. The study results indicated that vicarious trauma is predominantly regarded as a secondary phenomenon, as it arises in the context of secondary trauma. The study conducted by the researchers also revealed that employees commonly encounter posttraumatic stress, which is found to have a notable association with secondary focus. The participants' encounters with juveniles resulted in vicarious trauma, as it elicited emotional responses from the staff owing to the children's experiences (Ashley-Binge & Cousins, 2020).

Ways to Overcome Social Workers' Stressors

One of the problems of social workers' stressors is that CPIs need more financial resources and assistance in forming support services (Cho & Song, 2017). CPIs feel undervalued and highlight the importance of honoring child welfare and valuing the workers in this sector. Lack of confidence between the CPI and adoptive care can stem from a low continuum of care, lack of communication of services, and access to adoptive care to support social workers. Foster parents find staff is frequently inaccessible while addressing children's needs is stringent. Foster parents emphasize the need for staff to answer their calls and messages, keep them updated, better express what is required and become more easily accessible to address the stresses of competing priorities (Cho & Song, 2017).

Furthermore, additional steps are required to ensure that the CPI's feedback is actively sought and respected in the decision-making framework. For instance, given federal law requirements, Florida focus groups suggested that one-third of caregivers still needed to receive formal notifications of legal proceedings concerning children in their care in the preceding years (Stewart & Thorrington, 2018). Generally, caregivers participated in all legal proceedings for the children in their care when informed. However, focus group discussions of social workers, prosecutors, and judges revealed that they would be indifferent or resistant to social workers' presence in legal proceedings and judgment about their custody of children. The surveyed foster parents did not want social workers engaged in case preparation, nor were they excited about the possibility of making social workers attend legal proceedings (Donnelly et al., 2019). The option of social workers joining court hearings was available to children's advocates.

Child Welfare Programs

Child welfare programs must be planned with the child's developmental concerns at the top. For instance, infant and child development is the most vulnerable development phase, yet more children are progressively put into foster care in these age brackets (Rebbe et al., 2017). Some may contend that the rise in out-of-home residencies for children in all these age brackets is justified. It is a vulnerable stage of life, and the levels of child violence are comparatively high for this age bracket. However, putting children out of the home can severely damage their growth during this time. When protection can be ensured, every attempt must be made to hold children with proper care in their families or position them in a group kinship environment. The psychological literature says that positioning with a family member to understand their biological origins and

social identity is particularly suitable for a child. If necessary, improving and using kinship care will provide very young children with added safety and support (Rebbe et al., 2017).

Child welfare professionals can cooperate to ensure children's positive developmental well-being by adhering to the guidelines established by the American Pediatric Association in 1994 (Schor & Erickson, 1994). The guidelines were reissued in 2002 (Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, 2002). A month after placement, developmentally responsive child protection procedures include performing a thorough clinical evaluation, establishing and organizing consolidated health records, defining each child's medical environment and health care plan, and creating structured behavioral and emotional evaluation interventions. Foster parents and childcare workers require guidance on the links and gaps in growth, culture, and environmental factors and how to recognize potential challenges proactively. Also, greater cooperation between clinicians and implementing holistic tools for developmental evaluation, including psychosocial links, are essential to facilitate policies promoting children's safe growth in foster care.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act also calls for increasing cooperation concerning the developmental, health, and mental health needs of children in foster care; however, the reality is that many states restrict the funding for these types of services as they decrease funding for both education and health services (Care, 2022). Finally, child protection initiatives that are cognitively sensitive must draw on foster children and their parents' current abilities. These qualities must be acknowledged as work begins with the child and the birth family (Thompson, 2021). Children's safe growth and well-being need to be identified. Their strengths must also be pinpointed to

build executive actions and policy decisions via effective recourse-taking.

Child Protective Investigators

CPIs are responsible for investigating cases or reports of children whose rights are being violated (Anderst et al., 2020). They are also responsible for collecting the court evidence of the problems by interviewing witnesses and analyzing the coinciding cases recorded earlier (Anderst et al., 2020). CPIs focus entirely on the subject and note the points of concern that must be emphasized in the investigation. The investigators also collect all the hospital records and report any signs of injuries and trauma. They can also represent the child in a court of law, provide evidence of child abuse, and press charges against the child's abuser (Anderst et al., 2020).

Anderst et al. (2020) noted that some of the responsibilities of a CPI include assessing the appropriateness of the services provided to the children and assessing the worthiness of the clients taking care of the children. Secondly, they are tasked with finding the eligibility of someone being an abuser and adding to the register of child abusers. Thirdly, they should serve the clients with subpoenas and prepare or examine court documents on demand (Copeland, 2021). They also respond to emergency reports of child abuse, conduct any necessary investigations on the safety of the children, and determine the child's risk if they stay in the same environment. Moreover, CPIs sort the reports by examining abuse reports, neglecting the ones with fewer concerns or cases in which the children are not at risk, and reporting the issues that need attention to the state abuse hotline (Copeland, 2021). Finally, there are other responsibilities like reviewing cases and ensuring the safety of children.

Therefore, CPIs should define and document the primary aggressor status (Victor et al., 2021). First, it is essential to determine the proper criteria that should be applied in

a case. To select the appropriate standards, investigators must differentiate between the victim and the aggressor (Victor et al., 2021). Failure to verify could lead to incorrect conclusions because some criteria may not be utilized or applied. Second, CPIs must define and document the level of exposure to the risk and the harm. This helps them determine the level of domestic violence and the repetitiveness of the incidences, hence selecting the proper criteria (Chopik & Kitayama, 2018). Lastly, CPIs must define and document appropriate and prudent behaviors in their research. According to most books used to determine the care provider's behavior concerning maltreatment, the investigator should determine if it was correct and acceptable when conducted (Hanson et al., 2019). This is because some of the caregivers could mistreat a child. After all, that can be listened to in a court of law, while others lack enough reason for their actions. This helps the investigators determine if there was an option for the caregiver to behave or treat the situation differently.

Child Removal From Home by Child Protective Services

Under the provisions set forth in the Child Care Act of 1991, legal counsel must be sought prior to the removal of a child from their familial environment. To initiate the process, child protective services must endorse the petition. Depending on the jurisdiction, the petition may be referred to as a Suit Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship. The affidavit encompasses all the accusations that justify the requirement for the child's removal. The court thereafter determines if there is a necessity for the child's removal (Hanson et al., 2019). The data obtained during the process of conducting investigative services are utilized to prepare the affidavit, and it is the same data that is gathered during the investigation service. Following the formal request and execution of the testimony, the child protective service agency requests the parent's consent to avail

themselves of the service to secure temporary custody of the child. In situations where

the removal of a child is discretionary, either the parent or the custodian can reach a

mutual agreement (Care, 2018). In such cases, it is permissible for either party to seek the

assistance of legal counsel to facilitate the decision-making process. Removing a kid can

be categorized as either an emergency or a non-emergency situation.

As per the provisions outlined in the Child Care Act of 1991, the act of

emergency removal may be executed with or without the presence of a court order. There

are two primary factors to be considered when examining the emergency removal of a

child by protective services: removal without a court order and removal with a court

order. When the child protective process removes a child from their legal guardian or

parent without obtaining a court order, it is required by law for them to initiate legal

proceedings known as a Suit Affecting the Parent-Child Relationship (Berger & Slack,

2020). It is recommended that CPIs begin the process of requesting a hearing on the

subsequent business day, irrespective of the parent's attendance during the investigation.

In situations where a parent is not available, the legal proceeding is commonly referred to

as an ex-parte hearing.

Conversely, the removal of a child through a court order occurs when the child's

protective service arranges for an ex-parte hearing to appear before the court. Following

the conclusion of the hearing, individuals involved are assigned a hierarchical position,

granting them the authority to separate the child from their respective parent or guardian.

A non-emergency removal occurs when child protective services determine that the kid is

not facing imminent harm (Font & Gershoff, 2020). This event occurs after the petition

submission and the provision of a notification on the scheduled hearing to the parents.

The attendance of the parents is optional. The individual can perceive the auditory stimuli

during the hearing process, respond to the petitions filed by child protective services, and make a formal request to remove the kid. In this manner, individuals allocate a certain amount of time and formally petition to establish a Temporary Managing Conservatorship (Care, 2018).

The third category pertains to the act of challenging or disputing the process of removal (Care, 2018). If a parent expresses disagreement with a court order mandating the removal of their kid or with a request made by child protective services, they can request that the service substantiate or challenge the necessity of the emergency removal (Cross et al., 2016). The service possesses pre-existing proof that has been conducted and documented, for instance, in the scenario where the service fails to satisfy the legal requirements for removing the child from the custody of the parent or guardian under the Temporary Management Conservatorship. In such circumstances, the child remains in the custody of the guardian or parent. The court has determined that it is not advisable to return the child to the care of the parent or guardian, given that emergency measures were taken and implemented before the hearing.

In accordance with legal provisions, there are two potential avenues for opposing parental rights. The initial point of consideration pertains to the circumstances under which a child or children are removed, whether in response to an emergency or a non-emergency situation, as stipulated by the Child Care Act of 1991. Furthermore, the contestation by the parent or guardian must occur within a time frame of no more than 14 days after the court's decision to carry out an emergency removal of the kid. Subsequently, the court determines the permissibility of the service's continuation within the purview of the Temporary Managing Conservator of the Child or children. If the court cannot reach a resolution during the designated hearing period of 14 days, the

parent or guardian is entitled to compile comprehensive evidence. In this scenario, the parent can generate substantiating evidence in opposition to the removal of child protective services. For the service to be deemed appropriate for the removal of the kid, a burden of proof and supporting evidence must be established. The burden of proof is assumed by child protective services. Initially, it is essential to ascertain if there exists substantiation indicating the presence of a tangible or health-related peril to the minor, which may be attributed to the actions or negligence of the caregiver or custodian. It is imperative for the service to provide a prompt and expedited mechanism for facilitating the transfer of the child (Copeland, 2021).

Moreover, there exists an elevated likelihood of relinquishing custody of the child in the earliest stages. Additionally, the service needs to furnish substantiating evidence sourced from the legal representative affiliated with said service. Both the parent and the child should present substantiating evidence, with the assistance of their respective legal representatives, to demonstrate that child protective services should refrain from removing the child. The presence of the parent must be ensured to provide testimony at the hearing.

In accordance with the stipulations delineated in the Child Care Act of 1991, it is imperative to provide verified evidence and assume the onus of proof while contesting a non-urgent circumstance. If it is determined that it is necessary to remove the child from the care of the parent, a hearing will be held within the first 30 days after the agency submits the legal petition. In accordance with circumstances of pressing importance, it is incumbent upon the party to present substantiating evidence that corresponds to the probability of harm that may have befallen the child had they continued to be under the care of the same caregiver (Baughman et al., 2021). Henry et al. (2020) found that CPIs

are responsible for assessing the level of accountability of mothers in instances of claimed failure to ensure the safety of their children in situations involving sexual abuse. The spectrum of health problems encompasses physical and mental well-being domains. In other circumstances, the youngster may be under the supervision of an alternate individual who has assumed the role of caretaker for them. The available facts may also indicate that the child's therapy is incongruous with their overall well. In circumstances that do not involve emergencies, it is crucial to provide supporting documentation, which may include live recordings, videos, and relevant papers. Moreover, in the case of emergency removal, the introduction of evidence in a legal setting is commonly facilitated by many individuals, such as the attorney, the service provider, the parent, or the guardian of the child (Henry et al., 2020).

Options for Foster Care

There exist several types of foster care programs that provide support to children who have experienced adverse circumstances. The National Foster Youth Institute (2017) reported that on a yearly basis, over 23,000 adolescents inside the foster care system attain the age of 18. Research has demonstrated that a significant proportion, specifically 20%, of these persons face the immediate challenge of homelessness upon reaching the age at which they are no longer eligible for support from the system. Foster care organizations emphasize fostering the growth and development of individuals who can conform to society's standards and values often imparted within a conventional family framework. There is a proposition on the presence of other options for foster care such as kinship foster care, which is a well-recognized and widely utilized modality of foster care (Jones, Schulte, et al., 2020). Kinship care is a prevalent phenomenon, affecting around 9% of children before they reach the age of 18. However, it is important to highlight that

over 20% of children of African American descent are placed in the care of their

extended family. Kinship care is a familial arrangement wherein a child is placed under

the care and protection of their closest relatives or next of kin within their own family.

The present model of foster care enables a continuous sense of closeness between the

children and their known individuals, as opposed to the process of being moved to

unfamiliar households, which can lead to feelings of isolation and necessitate a more

extended period of adaptation (Jones, Schulte, et al., 2020). Nations that possess

institutions committed to safeguarding the well-being of children facing precarious

circumstances commonly solicit feedback and direction from immediate family members

and relatives. Through this approach, family members can deliver caregiving services to a

member inside their own familial network, including situations involving a cousin, aunt,

or uncle. In essence, it is crucial for foster parents to possess a comprehensive

understanding of the child through community resources or by examining their familial

heritage. The classification of relative foster care has three discrete categories: informal,

voluntary, and official kinship.

When the child welfare system is not involved or when there is a lack of a local

legal framework, the situation is commonly known as informal foster care (Jones,

Schulte, et al., 2020). When parents encounter illness and must travel internationally,

they may delegate the responsibility of caring for their children to a relative who is either

a direct family member or a trusted associate. This tendency may also manifest when the

primary caregiver is afflicted by disease, rendering them incapable of fulfilling their

parenting duties or when they encounter financial difficulties (Jones, Schulte, et al.,

2020). As a result, the parent maintains legal custody of the child.

In the realm of child protective services, the term "involuntary kinship care"

pertains to circumstances when the well-being of a child or children is jeopardized owing to a parent's incapacity to effectively meet their needs because of harmful behaviors. In instances of this nature, the court, with due regard for the child's welfare, finds it imperative to separate them from the custody of their parent. Nevertheless, the court acknowledges a suitable individual who is both accessible and competent to undertake the task of caring for the child. During the transitional phase, the parent of the child engages in training sessions aimed at acquiring valuable skills to support their capacity to nurture the child effectively. Jones, Schulte, et al. (2020) conducted an observation of the phenomenon where, in cases of formal kinship, the legal custody of children is transferred to the child welfare system by a judge when a mother is incapable of providing sufficient care owing to either cruelty or financial instability. Child welfare refers to placing a child or children in the care and custody of a family member. However, in situations when an individual faces difficulty in deciding, they may opt to engage in a collaborative process with other family members to jointly establish the most suitable course of action for the kid or children concerned.

Hanson et al. (2019) explained that the inclusion of a familiar figure in the lineage of a child or teenager, who can guarantee their safety and fulfill their fundamental needs, has a positive impact on the child's holistic welfare. It is crucial to acknowledge that there are situations in which this arrangement might also result in the child experiencing stress and trauma. The classification of these foster care arrangements is widely recognized as non-related kinship care. The primary factor contributing to stress and trauma is the separation between parents and children. According to a report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2019), the placement of a child with a family member has been associated with a reduction in stress and tension levels. Non-related kin refer to

those who do not possess a biological or legal relationship with a child but willingly

undertake the duty of providing care for the child in the absence of the parents or during

the child's recuperation. These persons may encompass a range of individuals, such as

family members, coaches, instructors, or other individuals who actively assume the

responsibility of providing care. In some instances, establishing an alternate permanency

arrangement may be warranted when a child exhibits a lack of willingness to be reunited

with their biological family. In specific circumstances, it may be imperative for parents to

obtain provisional certifications that authorize them to offer immediate assistance to

children in need, regardless of the complex prerequisites associated with obtaining a

foster license (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2019).

The term *conventional foster care* refers to the arrangement of care for a child or

a cohort of children placed under the legal custody of a family or an individual for a

designated period (Steenbakkers et al., 2018). The principal obligation of parents or

families is to create a stable and enduring residential setting for their children within a

specific period. The parental role should adopt characteristics like that of a service

provider, encompassing parental guidance, facilitating familial healing, and dispensing

essential aid. According to Wu and Snydey (2018), medical foster care is categorized as

the second variant of family foster care.

The young individuals or the youngsters being considered necessitate medical

care. Due to their medical issues, it is crucial that the children receive specialized care to

adequately address their fundamental requirements. In certain cases, a caregiver can

assume the role of a medical foster care parent, aiding one or more children in need.

Furthermore, individuals who serve as medical foster care parents receive comprehensive

training in various areas, including community welfare. This training equips them with

the necessary information and skills to effectively address the safety and healthcare concerns of the children under their care (Wu & Snydey, 2018).

Another category of foster care is referred to as elevated need (Kääriälä et al., 2022). In this context, a financially stable family, among other factors, extends their support to children who have experienced trauma or need care. The potential sources of trauma experienced by children can be attributed to various factors, including the socio-environmental context in which they are raised, with particular emphasis on familial disruptions such as parental separations or divorces. Consequently, individuals may face the risk of homelessness and endure the adverse effects of trauma and long-term psychological distress. A family capable of meeting the extensive requirements of children experiencing psychological distress is essential. Parents possess the necessary skills to assist their children in overcoming trauma and returning to their regular daily routines. As highlighted by Navarro-Soria et al. (2020) and Seltzer et al. (2020), reestablishing normalcy in the lives of the child or children may present difficulties and require a considerable amount of time. Foster families acquire enhanced abilities in managing the developmental stages of the child, hence facilitating harmonious cohabitation between foster parents and children (Navarro-Soria et al., 2020; Seltzer et al., 2020).

On the other hand, foster care refers to a form of intervention when children at risk of homelessness or experiencing trauma due to being displaced from their homes seek assistance from empathetic caregivers or service providers (Nunes et al., 2022). The foster treatment modality of care is widely regarded as one of the most highly esteemed forms of foster care. This is due to the necessity for foster parents or foster families to possess resilience and perseverance to support children experiencing severe trauma

during their healing process.

The final category of care discussed in the study conducted by Gresham et al. (2018) pertains to respite or temporary care. In this form of care, the adopted children receive temporary care only from foster parents or guardians. The duration of this phenomenon can vary, spanning from a single day to many days (Gresham et al., 2018). The primary rationale for implementing this form of foster care is rooted in the notion that the brief intervals during which children are placed under the care of foster parents allow their caregivers to recuperate. Extensive research has consistently demonstrated the critical role of relaxation in mitigating burnout and fatigue among foster care providers (Jones, Simons, et al., 2020).

Summary

This chapter presented factors connected with social workers' work stress and trauma. Child protective services began in the United States in the 1870s, and the first organization devoted entirely to child welfare was founded in 1875 (Nelson, 2020). Nearly 500,000 children in the United States are in foster care alone (Bell, 2022). CPIs use constructivist self-development (Hammonds, 2019). Several other theories can be utilized to explain the basics of workplace trauma, such as traumatic stress (Miller et al., 2020), including systems theory of social work, transpersonal, psychosocial development, cognitive-behavioral, shattered belief, emotional processing, and the concept of learned helplessness (Adams et al., 2018; DuBois et al., 2017; Lee, 2019; Pearlman, 2017; Selman et al., 2017).

There are different professional positions in the child welfare system, and all have stressors encountered with the work that often results in burnout, compassion fatigue, people leaving the profession, and health concerns (Bourassa, 2016; Figley, 2016). Child

removal is incredibly stressful, but social workers are not encouraged to seek counseling after witnessing a traumatic event like police offers are. Trauma that is faced while performing work duties is referred to as occupation trauma. A worker can also experience secondary trauma by hearing or witnessing another person's trauma. Other factors of occupational trauma are when the workplace is unfriendly, unsafe or when tasks must be executed quickly, causing work overload, which is typical for social welfare workers (Antonopoulou et al., 2017; Armes et al., 2020; Dewey & Allwood, 2022; Taylor et al., 2019). Social workers and CPIs could relieve stress by having more financial resources, reducing workloads, providing better supervision support, and forming support services for themselves (Care, 2022; Cho & Song, 2017).

Children can be placed in foster care, such as kinship care with relatives, if they can provide a safe environment (Jones, Schulte, et al., 2020). Otherwise, they are placed with strangers. CPIs have many duties, including investigating reports of child abuse and neglect, collecting evidence for a court of the problems with their parents or guardians, interviewing witnesses, and analyzing earlier reports if they were obtained in the past (Anderst et al., 2020; Chopik & Kitayama, 2018; Victor et al., 2021). A series of steps and requirements are mandated for removing a child from this home (Baughman et al., 2021; Berger & Slack, 2020; Care, 2018; Hanson et al., 2019). Overall, the goal is to provide a safe environment for the child, and there are mandated requirements for which that process is to take place (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

Research Questions

The following research questions were established to guide this applied dissertation:

1. What are the lived experiences of CPIs working to arrange foster care for child

welfare?

2. How do the lived experiences of CPIs affect their personal lives and networks?

3. How do CPIs' lived experiences and challenges affect the quality of foster care placements?

4. What practices and strategies can be implemented to minimize challenges and lived experiences CPIs face during their protective roles in child welfare?

Chapter 3: Methodology

Aim of the Study

The aim of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the core issues CPIs face in the child welfare field to determine possible strategies for implementation to address the challenges they face. Research has shown that CPIs in foster care have failed to provide quality care because of their work challenges. The study will help ensure quality care placement (Fantus et al., 2022; Geirdal et al., 2022; Lee, 2019; Schiller, 2017). Children who have encountered trauma due to neglect, a family feud, or a potentially fatal event are always sensitive to how they are treated (Ofreneo et al., 2020). Because of this sensitivity, CPIs who place children in foster care must be mentally and psychologically fit to provide appropriate teaching and make tough decisions for these children. A child's needs will be met when child welfare workers make the proper decisions and provide the correct instruction. In short, the objective of this dissertation was to bridge the research gap by providing effective foster care placement by first considering the welfare and conditions of CPIs. The research helped to identify and analyze CPIs' challenges while conducting removal and foster care placement. In addition, these challenges can be used to draft effective ways CPIs can ensure that their well-being and psychological safety are managed.

Qualitative Research Approach

Qualitative research is considered suitable for this study because the design explores and examines the lived experiences of CPI working in the child welfare field and their related perceived concerns about placing children in foster care. Creswell and Creswell (2022) asserted that qualitative research is interested in understanding the cultural and social contexts under different behavioral trends. The depth and quality of

information are emphasized since qualitative studies explore a study's *why* questions. The

qualitative research approach is deemed suitable and relevant for this study since it

explores CPIs' lived experiences and related problems while removing children from

their homes and placing them in foster care.

The approach ensures that the study is done under a naturalistic context with the

key players involved in foster care, CPIs, and other child welfare workers, not

manipulating any variables or situations. Creswell and Creswell (2022) further advanced

that qualitative research has the strength to understand diversity, context, process, and

nuance in the contemporary world. Therefore, the researchers utilize tools and techniques

of qualitative research to quickly establish a good rapport with the study participants to

capture as much information as possible from them. This approach is valuable as it

allows the subjective and sensitive topic understudy to seek meaning while cultivating

comprehension, especially for the foster care units and stakeholders. Moreover,

qualitative research utilizes knowledge and expertise in counseling, purported to be

administered by CPI in foster care placement.

The phenomenological design was used in this study. A phenomenological

approach is a qualitative research approach that focuses on the commonality of the lived

experiences within a particular group (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This approach was

developed as a philosophy that does not separate the mind from matter but instead points

to conscious experience as a central feature of life. Phenomenological research involves a

return to experience to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a

reflective structural analysis, which portrays the essence of the incident (Smith & Osborn,

2015). CPIs face challenges in their line of duty, putting children in need of protection

and care in foster care. As a result, there is a pressing need to address this issue in

practice.

The current study utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework to examine individual data and assess the research findings. The validity of a phenomenological study is applicable when the researcher aims to reveal the fundamental nature of certain phenomena and assess the subjective experiences of the individuals involved. At a deeper level, the use of this methodology serves to authenticate individuals' accounts of their own experiences, the importance ascribed to these narratives, and the possibility for personal growth that emerges from the act of storytelling for the persons engaged in the process (Smith & Osborn, 2015). This implies that the individuals involved in the interviewing process took on the roles of co-designers and co-researchers through their interactions with the researcher. The IPA standard was utilized in a methodical manner to organize patterns, themes, and coded descriptions. The application of this specific methodology or strategy is widely employed in the field of education and social science to investigate contextual topics that hold substantial social or cultural significance (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The paradigm of IPA examines the cognitive mechanisms through which humans generate significance within the framework of their social and personal environments (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The phenomenological method entails conducting a thorough investigation of the lived experiences of individuals and the contextual factors surrounding them. The objective of this study was to generate meticulous and all-encompassing documentation of the incident, while also exploring the subjective experience associated with the event. The recognition of the IPA holds great significance, emphasizing a dynamic research process that encompasses the involvement of the researcher (Smith & Osborn, 2015). The discipline of IPA is frequently associated with

interpretation and hermeneutic frameworks. The main objective of IPA is to thoroughly comprehend individuals' subjective experiences and interpret the phenomenon being studied by adopting their perspective. This process entails demonstrating empathy towards the participants and conducting a thorough analysis of the texts from their perspective by employing probing inquiries. IPA possesses a broader scope of utility beyond its primary role as a research instrument, due to its inclusive methodology and commitment to augmenting one's reservoir of knowledge. Instead of only defining and measuring a particular research subject, this instrument functions as a method to evaluate and improve its viability by including many philosophical principles in a thorough and thoughtful manner (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

Participants

One of the core principles of qualitative research is that participants bring various viewpoints to the table, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of a subject. By contributing a more diversified perspective, the study population extends the lens through which a subject is seen or experienced. Creswell and Creswell (2022) defined the study population as individuals with specific features relevant to the research. The population for this study was CPIs from the child welfare system in the United States dealing with removing children from homes due to domestic abuse or negligence and placing children in foster care.

Sampling is the technique used to pick a subset of a population to research. In qualitative research, non-probability sampling is used (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). Using the Facebook group for Child Welfare Professionals, this study employed purposive sampling to choose specific people from the child welfare system. The idea behind this group is to bring industry experts together in a platform so they may benefit

from one another's experience. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), purposive sampling suggests that the study population is selected because they have identifying characteristics that make them the sources of the knowledge and data needed for the study. The sample participants for the analysis needed to meet the following requirements: (a) at least 2 years of experience working in the child welfare system, including removal and placement in foster care; (b) proficiency with technology; (c) proficiency in spoken and written English; (d) employment in the child welfare field in the United States; (e) availability and willingness to participate in the research; and (f) possession of a social science degree.

The identified participants gave contact information for the recruiting process, which was used to contact them by phone or email. The researcher did not consider the gender, age, or ethnicity of the sampled CPIs to be necessary, which had no impact on the validity or reliability of the study. However, it was important to include people with direct experience with the phenomenon to understand the motives and underlying reasons (Colton et al., 2017). Employees in child welfare were prescreened via emails and phone calls (see Appendix A). They returned an informed consent form through email after deciding to participate in the study signing it to indicate they wanted to volunteer. The entire operation lasted about 2 weeks. After receiving their informed consent, participants were contacted by phone and email with details regarding the procedures of the study. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the study process before creating their account on the Google Groups platform. Their basic knowledge of taking children out of their homes and placing them in foster care was the basis for the focus group talks.

Data Collection and Instruments

The Google Groups tool, which worked well and was reasonably priced, was used

to manage the online focus group. Utilizing the forum was essential for the study project because it created a setting where participants could actively participate in the discussion. The World Health Organization mandates the use of the Google Groups platform to supplement social exclusion and isolation, including, in extreme cases, lockdown protocols, during the global coronavirus outbreak in 2020. Governments of the affected nations banned in-person gatherings and decided to shut down service businesses as a means of reducing the spread of the highly contagious COVID-19 virus. Interviewing and focus groups are common ways to collect data in qualitative studies and are conducted with people deemed to have the knowledge desired by the researcher (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

The objective of the online focus group (see Appendix B) was to elicit participants' thoughts, ideas, sentiments, and emotions using open-ended questions that would allow them to express themselves using their preferred vocabulary. The main goal of the group discussion technique was to urge participants to relate their own accounts of the procedure for pulling children out of their families and taking on placement obligations in foster care. Researchers should have a thorough understanding of various strategies and principles, including but not limited to probing, attentiveness, active listening, clarification, and reflection, when participating in the interview process, according to many academics in the fields of communication and interview methodologies (Creswell & Creswell, 2022). An online focus group was also the best method for gathering data for this study because language is one of the most effective ways for people to express their life experiences. A series of questions that were politely provided and arranged in a way that highlighted individual perspectives served to facilitate the online discussion. It was determined that this format was suitable for

carrying out interpretive phenomenological analysis. The research questions were derived

from the body of scholarly literature when formulating the questions. They were created

with the goal of enabling thorough examination and analysis of a variety of phenomena.

Using an online focus group platform allowed for more freedom in each participant's

ability to voice their thoughts and opinions. This platform was created with the express

purpose of ensuring the creation of pertinent and morally sound inquiries.

Procedures

Once the Institutional Review Board gave permission, the recruitment process for

selecting CPIs within the child welfare system was done through phone calls, emails, and

social media platforms using the Facebook group of Child Welfare Professionals.

Possible participants received an email with details of the proposed study. All interested

persons completed a questionnaire to determine if they qualified. Nine participants were

sought to participate in the study based on the feedback provided. The participants

provided their informed consent by signing documents that outlined the objectives,

methodologies, and, notably, the measures taken to ensure the confidentiality of the

study. These measures included the protection of participants' identities by name

anonymization and other relevant facts outlined in the study report. The chosen number

of participants proved to be appropriate for optimal research objectives and for the

acquisition of an adequate amount of data within the designated timeframe.

The online focus group was administered utilizing the Google Groups platform,

known for its user-friendly interface and cost-effectiveness. The method of recruiting

participants for the study spanned 2 weeks to obtain a sample. The focus group was

conducted by posting numerous discussion threads published on this platform, expecting

all participants to actively contribute to these inquiries. The participants were given three

days within which they were permitted to provide their responses to the discussion threads. Every participant was invited to actively participate and express their perspectives, thoughts, and personal experiences with the topic. If it was deemed necessary, further follow-up questions were posed in accordance with the responses received. Furthermore, an extension of two additional days was granted to allow participants to make further comments. After the focus group, the researcher expressed gratitude toward the participants and verified the accuracy of their contact details. This step was undertaken to ensure that the researcher could subsequently reach out to the participants for the purpose of clarifying the information obtained during the session. Later, meticulous preparations were made to ensure the precision of the conversations, resulting in the creation of a transcript for the focus group. Subsequently, all the dialogues were transcribed and subjected to a rigorous verification process to ensure accuracy. The researcher employed the method of member-checking by providing the participants with the transcribed data to evaluate its accuracy. The verification of member checking has been found to validate the accuracy of the acquired data, enhancing its reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Data Analysis

The study findings were analyzed and interpreted using the IPA approach. The aforementioned methodology was utilized to facilitate the organization of encoded explanations and the amalgamation of said patterns. Moreover, the process of data analysis adhered to a sequential methodology, as proposed by Smith and Osborn (2015). The items above consisted of the following:

1. The data analysis procedure was initiated by implementing bracketing techniques and addressing potential biases that may have influenced the investigation.

2. The data collected from the participants was transcribed and afterward analyzed to uncover its inherent importance. This action was implemented to ensure that the inquiries were congruent with the subject matter under examination. In addition, the repetitive perspectives and viewpoints were systematically arranged and classified.

3. The elements exhibiting commonalities were systematically categorized into overarching themes, which were subsequently further separated into subthemes. The examination of the articles facilitated the establishment of a relationship between the existing knowledge and the incident under investigation. The themes were systematically classified and afterward rearranged in a logical manner. Various coding techniques, such as using colors and numbers, were employed to allocate data themes.

4. The researchers examined the themes arising from the discussion to ensure that no redundancy of similar information was present in the themes.

5. Reporting of study findings followed.

Ethical Considerations

The following ethical consideration was addressed. Participants were offered informed consent to participate by signing the consent form. This study relied on written permission distributed to the participants before commencing the study to maintain a good ethical standard. The subjects also gave verbal consent via telephone communication. The participants were informed of the voluntary nature of their involvement and were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any negative repercussions. The researcher ensured the confidentiality and privacy of all participants' information and data to safeguard the identities of the participants; the results of the survey were provided in an anonymous manner. The participants were provided with information regarding the study's objective, and it was

emphasized that their data would be exclusively accessible to the research team.

Participants in the study were provided with a guarantee of safeguarding their privacy

(Smith & Osborn, 2015). The participants were provided with explicit confidentiality

provisions of the research, as well as its limitations. These limitations encompassed the

potential utilization of third-party transcription services and the thorough removal of any

identifiable information from both the transcripts and the final report. Ultimately, the

entirety of the records and data obtained throughout the course of the study were securely

stored on a computer equipped with encryption technology, with a retention period of 2

years. After 3 years, it was anticipated that all research documents would be destroyed.

Trustworthiness

The data collected and coded were stored safely on the I-cloud platform to remain

intact and safe while waiting for analysis and transcription. In addition, the researcher

used member checking to foster the study's trustworthiness. Member checking entails

participants being actively involved in the credibility of the discussion; hence, utilizing it

in asynchronous online focus groups enhanced the credibility and validity of this study

(Smith & Osborn, 2015). Handwritten notes regarding potential practices in participants'

responses, including repeated words, phrases, and ideas, were recorded.

Potential Research Bias

The researcher's personal bias could have affected the reliability and validity of

this study, considering that she was involved in gathering information through the focus

group. Consequently, the researcher took part in a personal inventory to support

impartiality. This allowed the researcher to focus keenly on participants' answers and

feedback and clarify their statements and contributions. This study sought to use these

protocols to ensure that the researcher played an impartial role while gathering,

collecting, and evaluating data. Furthermore, to uphold the validity of this study, the

researcher ought to suspend all predispositions, prejudices, and assumptions throughout

the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the core issues CPIs face in the child welfare field to determine possible strategies for implementation to address the challenges they face. This chapter presents the findings from a focus group conducted with nine CPIs. First, this chapter includes a description of the participants, followed by a description of the interpretative phenomenological analysis procedure applied to the data. This chapter then proceeds with a detailed presentation of the findings, organized under the research questions used to address them, and concludes with a summary of the results. The participants in the focus group were a purposive sample of nine CPIs from the child welfare system in the United States dealing with removing children from homes due to domestic abuse or negligence to place children in foster care. Table 1 indicates the participants' years of experience as CPIs and their work location during the study.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant	No. years as CPI	State
1	7	Florida
2	5	Florida
3	3	Florida
4	5	Florida
5	3	Florida
6	7	Florida
7	3	Florida
8	2	New York
9	8	Florida

Note. CPI = Child protective investigator.

Data Analysis

The focus group was conducted using Google Group, and the responses were converted into a Microsoft Word document. The transcript was imported into NVivo 12

computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software as a source file. The analysis

procedure applied to the data involved the five-step thematic IPA procedure

recommended by Smith and Osborn (2015): (a) bracketing, (b) reviewing the data, (c)

theming the data, (d) reviewing the themes, and (e) presenting the findings.

Step 1: Bracketing

Bracketing was conducted through a researcher's reflection on past experiences

and the study topic to identify potential biases and preconceptions. The researcher

documented handwritten notes pertaining to probable biases or prejudices that might

potentially impact the process of data processing. The researcher demonstrated awareness

of potential biases and prejudices and made a conscious effort to set them aside during

the data analysis process. The primary objective of employing bracketing techniques was

to ascertain the extent to which the outcomes of the study accurately represented the

viewpoints and perspectives of the persons involved.

Step 2: Reviewing the Data

The transcript of the focus group was thoroughly reviewed many times to

establish a comprehensive understanding of the facts. The purpose of this stage was to

comprehensively comprehend the data to allow the detection of patterns during the third

step of the analysis. During this step, handwritten notes regarding potential practices in

participants' responses, including repeated words, phrases, and ideas, were recorded.

Step 3: Theming the Data

The theming of the data was conducted in two stages. The first step was the

identification of inductive codes in the data. The data were reread in full again.

Participants' responses were broken down into phrases or groups whereby each conveyed

one meaning relevant to a participant's experiences of working as a CPI. Each word or

group of terms gave a single, relevant meaning and was defined as a meaning unit. Each

meaning unit was assigned to an NVivo node. The nodes represented codes. When

multiple-meaning units had similar meanings, they were assigned the same code to

simplify inductive theming based on finding patterns in the data instead of sorting the

data into pre-existing deductive themes. To briefly describe the significance of the data

provided to each code, descriptive phrases were used as labels, and 203 meaning units

were grouped into 27 initial codes in the first stage of data theming (see Table 2).

Table 2

Initial Codes

Initial code	No. participants contributing data	No. meaning units included
Adjust time limits	4	4
Background-check issues can make placement challenging	9	13
Being a CPI caused significant stress	8	19
Better screening of calls	6	7
Colleagues are supportive	8	11
CPI work is rewarding	8	13
Culture is considered	5	5
Culture not considered	1	1
Ensure CPI safety	3	3
Feeling bonded with colleagues	5	5
Guidelines are effective	8	8
Learning to disconnect from CPI role	3	5
Limit CPI caseload	6	6
Limited placements available	5	6
Negative parent reactions to removal	5	7
Parent resistance to child's removal	8	10
Placement in foster care involves risk.	7	8
Poor work-life balance	7	10
Raise CPI salary	5	6
Reduce redundancy in workload	3	4
Removal is stressful	7	9
Setting limits on background check ranges	2	3
Trying to block negative effects on family and friends	2	3
Trying to find placement with people the child knows	6	6
Waiting for placement is stressful	8	12
Work strained relationships	8	13
Working with other jurisdictions is challenging	6	6

Note. CPI = Child protective investigator.

The first coding process aimed to identify preliminary patterns of meaning in participants' responses. The second coding was conducted to cluster the initial codes into a smaller number of broader themes that captured the overarching patterns in the data and incorporated all participants' experiences. To find significant themes in the data, similar initial codes were clustered. In NVivo, nodes representing similar initial codes were grouped as child nodes under the same parent node or a theme. Overall, the 27 initial codes were grouped into four themes. The first theme was formed from the five initial codes that indicated participants' experiences in removing and placing children as CPIs.

The second theme was developed by grouping the eight initial codes that demonstrated the effects of CPI work on the participants' personal lives and relationships. Five initial codes indicating factors determining the quality of foster care placement were grouped to form the third theme. The eight initial codes that showed participants' policy and strategy recommendations were grouped to begin the fourth theme. The themes were then compared to the four research questions and named with propositional phrases indicating their significance as answers to the research questions. Table 3 shows how the initial codes were grouped to form the finalized themes.

Step 4: Reviewing the Themes

The themes were compared to ensure they were not redundant and did not overlap. Each theme in the study was carefully evaluated singly to ensure that it represented a sufficiently cohesive idea to justify its presentation as a single theme rather than two or more separate themes. The themes were also cross-checked against the original data to ensure they accurately reflected patterns of meaning in the participants' responses.

Table 3

Grouping of Initial Codes Into Finalized Themes

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Initial code grouped to form theme	No. participants contributing data	No. meaning units included
Theme 1: Removal and placement are among CPIs' most stressful experiences.	9	42
Limited placements available		
Negative parent reactions to removal		
Placement in foster care involves risk		
Removal is stressful		
Waiting for placement is stressful		
Theme 2: CPI work is associated with significant stress, straining of personal relationships, and strengthening of professional bonds.	9	79
Being a CPI caused significant stress		
Colleagues are supportive		
CPI work is rewarding		
Feeling bonded with colleagues		
Learning to disconnect from CPI role		
Poor work-life balance		
Trying to block negative effects on family and friends		
Work-strained relationships		
Theme 3: The quality of foster care placements depends on background checks, parental resistance, and cultural considerations.	9	35
Background-check issues can make placement challenging		
Culture is considered		
Discrepant data / culture not considered		
Parent resistance to child's removal		
Trying to find placement with people the child knows		
Theme 4: Improvements to CPIs' working conditions are recommended.	9	47
Adjust time limits		
Better screening of calls		
Ensure CPI safety		
Guidelines are effective		
Limit CPI caseload		
Raise CPI salary		
Reduce redundancy in workload		
Setting limits on background check ranges		
Working with other jurisdictions is challenging		

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Note. CPI = Child protective investigator.

Step 5: Presenting the Findings

The findings were presented by writing Chapter 4. This chapter describes the data

analysis procedure and a high-level overview of the findings. The following section is a

more detailed presentation of the conclusions, of which direct quotes from the data are

provided as evidence. Research questions organize this presentation of the findings.

Under the heading for each research question, the theme used to address the question is

presented. Table 4 overviews the themes used to address the research questions.

Table 4

Research Questions and the Themes Used to Address Them

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Research question	Theme used to address question
1. What are the lived experiences of CPIs working to arrange foster care for child welfare?	Removal and placement are among CPIs' most stressful experiences.
2. How do the lived experiences of CPI affect their personal lives and networks?	CPI work is associated with significant stress, straining of personal relationships, and strengthening of professional bonds.
3. How do CPIs' lived experiences and challenges affect the quality of foster care placements?	Quality of foster care placements depends on background checks, parental resistance, and cultural considerations.
4 What practices and strategies can be implemented to minimize challenges and lived experiences CPIs face during their protective roles in child welfare?	Improvement to CPIs' working conditions are recommended.

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Note. CPI = Child protective investigator.

Research Question 1. The first research question was focused on the lived

experiences of CPI working to arrange foster care for child welfare. The following theme

addressed this question: Removal and placement are among CPIs' most stressful

experiences. All nine participants attested to the finding in this theme. The participants

indicated that removing children from abusive or neglectful parents was one of the most

stressful parts of their job as CPIs. Adverse parent reactions to the removal of the child

caused the participants significant stress, and the challenges of placing children after

removal constituted another set of stressors. The participants reported that there were not

enough foster homes available to accommodate the number of children being removed from homes and that they, as CPIs, had to stay with the removed child or children until a placement at a foster home or group home could be found. The delays in waiting for placement for a child or children who had been removed from their homes caused significant stress, participants reported. They added that placing children in foster homes also caused participants stress because they perceived many foster homes as providing less-than-optimal care for children.

Seven of the participants reported that they experienced removing children from unfit homes as the most stressful task they, as CPIs, engaged in. P2 described removals as the most challenging part of being a CPI, saying, "In child welfare, I feel that removals were the hardest part of the job. It's not easy telling a parent that you are about to take their child away from them." P3 corroborated P2's response: "Removals were the hardest part of the job. Removals can be overwhelming, emotional, and stressful." P7 also said, "The removal process is the most stressful when you are a CPI." P5 explained:

> Removing a child is a challenging, stressful, and heartbreaking experience. I never started my day with the intention of going into someone's home and ripping their child or children away from them, but there are times when nothing [else] that can be done to keep this child safe from what is going on in their home.

Removals were stressful for CPIs in part because of the adverse reactions of parents to having their children removed. P2 indicated that parents could become violent: "The removal process can be overwhelming and tedious. While doing it, you must ensure the child is safe as well as yourself because sometimes parents can become violent." P4 reported experiences of verbal and physical aggression from parents whose children were being removed: "The legal guardians can become verbally and physically aggressive

toward the CPIs or create a hostile environment where law enforcement's involvement might be needed." P5 said, "Some parents become combative and aggressive, and there are those who attempt to run off with the children," P5 added that parents' aggression toward CPIs was sometimes persistent: "Some CPIs have dealt with being harassed by parents. I have received harassing phone calls and text messages from parents or other family members." Years after the fact, P8 could still recall the first removal they oversaw:

My first [removal] experience was to remove three children from their mother's care.... This mother had had many encounters with ACS and knew I was a "rookie." She threatened to hurt me and do "voodoo" on me physically. It was a horrible experience.

After a CPI removed a child from home, the participants reported that the CPI had to wait with the child until the placement team could find an appropriate foster home or group home placement for the child. P1 said, "The children can be with you for hours while you try to work on the removal packet for court or look for alternative options for placements. This can be stressful because our office isn't child friendly." P6 explained:

Foster care placement can take a couple of hours to 24 hours to find the proper placement for the child. During this time, as the CPI, you are expected to have the child with you, while as an investigator, you are still trying to complete the other tasks asked of you.

P9 corroborated P6's response that placement could take hours after removal:

I had one experience where the child was removed at 8:00 PM, and placement call was made by 8:45 PM. I was with this child in my office until 7:00 AM the next morning. The placement was never found for this child.

Even when the parents from whom the child was being removed were able to recommend a family member or friend who would take the child in, P2 indicated the necessary home and background checks to ensure that the placement was safe often took hours: "If you do have placement for that child, a home assessment has to be completed on the person's home, and background checks have to be run before you can place that child in that home." P2 said of this process of checks, "It can take many hours."

Finding a foster home for a child could be prolonged or unsuccessful; five participants indicated that there needed to be an adequate number of appropriate foster homes available. P5 said of the shortage of foster parents, "My experience with placement in foster homes is that there are not enough foster parents to accommodate the large number of children being taken into care." P7 affirmed, "We have a shortage of foster parents," and P2 said, "I do feel that there aren't enough foster parents for the number of children that go into the foster care system." P2 added that available foster parents could be selective about which children they took, further limiting placement options for some children: "Some foster parents pick and choose what type of children they are willing to allow in their home." P4 corroborated P2's response about the selectiveness of some foster parents. Also, it referred to some of the factors for which foster parents selected: "Foster parents tend to have preferences—for gender, age, or disability—of which children they are willing to care for." P6 said of some foster parents' selectiveness regarding which children they were willing to take in, "That creates an issue due to it possibly taking hours and even days to find temporary placement for a child." Thus, the insufficient number of available foster homes was further limited by the constraints some foster parents placed on the children they would accept. The placement process was often prolonged. At the same time, the CPI supervised the removed child.

Seven participants added that placement in a foster home was a last resort, used only if no family or friends were available to care for the child or if such persons had been disqualified through the home- and background-check process. P2 noted, "As a CPI, you have no control over the placement part." P4 indicated that foster care placement was a last resort, saying, "After removal, it's usually my last option to place a child in the foster care system. I believe relative placement is more suitable." P6 expressed a perception like P4's, saying the following:

Foster care is the last thing that the department wants to do. As an investigator, we try our best to place the child in an environment where they feel safe and comfortable. This means that we attempted to place ourselves with family and friends.

P7 provided further corroboration that foster care was perceived as a last resort, saying, "You always want to place [a removed child] with family, if possible, but when that cannot happen, foster care is the last choice." P1 said of the uncertainty and risk involved in placing a child in a foster home, "Placement in foster care is always the unknown, as we don't know where the children are going to be placed…. You just pray that these children go into a decent place." P8 explained why foster care was the last resort: "Not every foster parent has the child's best interest at heart. Most are just a paycheck, and even though they [children] are not being abused or neglected, they are not given the love or attention a child needs." P5 said foster care was the last resort because "Foster parents are not adequately trained to deal with children with behavioral, emotional, and mental issues."

Research Question 2. The second research question was focused on how the lived experiences of CPIs affect their personal lives and networks. The theme used to

address this question was as follows: CPI work is associated with significant stress, straining personal relationships, and strengthening professional bonds. All nine participants contributed data to this theme. The participants indicated that their work as CPIs affected them as individuals primarily in two ways. First, they reported that they found CPI work rewarding because they perceived it as enabling them to help children and families. Second, the participants reported that their work as CPIs caused them significant stress. One of the reasons CPI works was stressful, the participants said, was because the long, unpredictable hours made a satisfactory work-life balance almost impossible to achieve. Most participants added that their work hours strained their relationships with family and friends. However, all participants associated their work as CPIs with solid and supportive relationships with their colleagues, who understood the unique challenges CPIs faced and were available to provide backup and support in work tasks.

Nine participants described CPI work as rewarding, and the remaining participant did not indicate a discrepant view. P2 said, "The job can be gratifying. What makes the job rewarding is working with child families and helping those in need." P3 expressed, "Working as a CPI is rewarding, primarily helping keep children safe and providing resources for families. The best part is knowing you're helping families." P4 indicated that the rewards of the work adequately balanced the stress associated with it: "I had a great experience working in the child welfare field. It's always worth the time, the energy, and the ongoing stress in working and providing a better living situation to these families, especially these children." P5 said, "Working as a Child Protective Investigator was fulfilling and rewarding. Working with children and their families and being able to meet their needs and link them to services they didn't even know they needed was a great

feeling."

However, all participants reported that working as a CPI caused significant stress. P3 described the long, unpredictable hours as stressful: "Child welfare is not for the weak. The workload is usually 12 hours or more a day. Planning your day is helpful. However, it never goes as planned. The most difficult part is not knowing when you're leaving work." P1 associated the stress with the workload and the high stakes in protecting children: "The caseload is extremely stressful…. You want to ensure the children's safety, [so] you're constantly thinking about your work, even when you're off. Sometimes it will affect your mental health." Like P1, P9 spoke of being affected by CPI work after hours: "There were nights I couldn't sleep because I was thinking about a case if the correct outcome was made. My eating habits were not normal; my sleep schedule was off, and I was working over 80 hours a week." P4 described a similar experience of lingering concern for the families encountered during the workday, causing stress: "I was too emotionally involved in these families' lives or living conditions. After my initial visit from these families, I tended to be worried about these children's safety and overall well-being." P8 perceived the heavy workload and threats to CPIs' safety as sources of significant stress: "I think the workload is too hefty for one CPI. The demands are unrealistic, and there is not enough protection for the worker, not only in the streets but also within the agency." A successful strategy for coping with the stress, three participants said, was to detach from the job when the workday was over. P1 said in a representative response to this effect:

Initially, the role of a CPI had a bad effect on me, as I needed help finding a balance between being a CPI and being myself. I had to learn to disconnect from work once I was off and teach myself ways to de-stress. My biggest lesson was to

continuously remind myself that being a CPI is my job but not my life…. I had to learn to detach myself from work once I was home and how to balance my time so that work could no longer take over my life.

Seven participants said the stress and long hours of working as a CPI made a satisfactory work-life balance almost impossible. No participants expressed disagreement with this perception. P5 explained as follows:

It was difficult to leave my role as a CPI at the workplace because there were tasks that had to be completed promptly, which resulted in me working even while I was home, which took away from my personal life. I realized there was no work-life balance if you were a CPI.

P7 said working as a CPI, "It has been rewarding at times, but other days you are overworked, get home late and have little time for your family." P9 said that while working as a CPI, "I was neglecting my own family. My work-personal life balance was terrible." P8 indicated that CPIs were warned that the hours were open-ended: "We were told that when working as a CPI, you have a time to start but no end time." P8 added, "I worked during my days off to ensure my notes were in the record…. It affected my home life with my own children."

Nine participants said a poor work-life balance strained relationships with family and friends. P1 described changes in mood associated with work stress as an alienating family: "My first year of being a CPI was horrible. My family would not include me in things and separated themselves from me due to the change of attitude because I was always on edge and snappy." P3 said relationships were strained by the unpredictability of the hours: "CPI work is unpredictable…. If I already had prior plans and received a removal, I would have to cancel any plans scheduled for that day, which would always

upset my family and friends." P4 said personal relationships were strained because, "Many days, I had to cancel date nights, game nights, church events and workout sessions due to having a removal, working on an investigation for closure, or having a court hearing on the weekend." P5 stated, "My role as a CPI affected my relationship with my family and friends tremendously because I would have prior engagements, but due to never knowing what the day would look like, I was left canceling my plans." P7 described the CPI hours as straining relationships with family and friends: "Working late and coming home different hours of the night has affected my family because of the unknown. Being a CPI has also strained some friendships, as I cannot have a social life." P8 said that while working as a CPI, "There was no time for friends [or] for my family. I only saw my children asleep when I arrived home and on weekends."

In contrast with the strain on family and friendships that participants associated with their CPI work, all nine participants reported that the work strengthened their bonds with their CPI colleagues. In a representative response, P6 described supportive relationships with colleagues as necessary for continuing in the CPI role:

My relationship with my colleagues has been excellent and one of my most extensive support systems because they know what you are going through. They are living day in and day out the experiences of sheltering, working late nights, and not getting enough sleep. They understand what you mean when you tell them that you're mentally exhausted and are the only ones that can help you by completing referrals or even accompanying you to a case. I think that if it were not for my coworkers and the teamwork and the work-family environment we have all developed, I would have left my position a long time ago.

P9 corroborated P6's response: "One thing that kept me in my position had a

structured unit where everyone had each other's back and assisted each other no matter the time of day. A team effort goes a long way." P1 spoke of bonding with colleagues as an effect of their support: "The job helps us [CPIs] bond, as we are constantly helping each other, whether it's in the field or the office." P8 expressed a perception like P1's and added, "Strong bonds are built with colleagues as you spend so much time with these people. Maintaining a good relationship with them was important since, at times, you needed them to help cover a case."

Research Question 3. The third research question was focused on how the participants' lived experiences and challenges affected the quality of foster care placements. The following theme was used to address this question: The quality of foster care placements depends on background checks, parental resistance, and cultural considerations. All nine participants contributed to this theme. The participants described three challenges influencing the placement quality for the children they removed. The first challenge was parental resistance to the removal. The participants said parental resistance was often intense and could escalate to violence, resulting in the child not being removed until law enforcement arrived to oversee the transfer. Parental opposition affected placement quality because CPIs relied on parents to recommend relatives or friends who could care for the child to avoid placement in the foster system. Resistant parents sometimes refused to name potential alternative caregivers, contrary to their children's best interests. Background checks were another challenge that influenced the placement quality for removed children. The participants said that when parents named potential caregivers, those individuals were often disqualified by the presence of felony charges or child welfare cases on their records. When a child could not be placed with relatives or friends of the family, the child might have to be placed with a family that did

not share the child's culture, ethnicity, or language, despite CPIs' efforts to advocate for a placement in which the child would be comfortable. Thus, cultural considerations were an additional challenge that influenced placement quality.

Parental resistance to a child's removal was a challenge that all nine participants experienced in their work as CPIs, and it caused them significant stress. In a representative response, P3 stated the following:

The main issue I've encountered when removing is parents' refusing to give up the child. They become aggressive during the process, making the removal more intense, especially in the presence of the children. The process can be so intensified that law enforcement is usually called to the scene.

P2 provided evidence that corroborated P3's response: "Dealing with parents during a removal can be the hardest part of the job. Sometimes law enforcement needs to be called to help get the children." P9 described parental resistance as sometimes severe: "The parents would hate you. I've had several parents pull guns on me, try to follow me home, take pictures of my vehicle tag, et cetera." P5 said of parental resistance, "When I realized it was a common thing with parents, I would contact law enforcement before going out to the home. That way, there is no issue when removing the child from the home." The participants said that resistant parents sometimes refuse to recommend alternative caregivers, making parental resistance a challenge that affected the placement quality. P1 said, "The parents can be very resistant with cooperating with the Department. The issue is providing with possible placements because they're mad their children are being removed when we're just trying to ensure the children are placed with relatives." P6 described parental noncooperation with placement procedures as standard:

Most parents are so upset over the situation [they] close off and will refuse to provide you

any friends or family with which you can place the child. They want to make the situation as hard as possible for you but not understating that they are making the removal experience harder on themselves and the children.

When parents were willing to provide the names of potential alternative caregivers with whom the child was familiar, all nine participants said background checks often disqualified those individuals. Disqualifying ordinary individuals through felony charges or child welfare cases on their records, no matter how old, could result in children being placed through the foster system, making this challenge a significant determinant of placement quality. P3 stated the following:

> A major issue when determining a child's placement is background checks. Placing a child with relatives is usually the first option regarding ordering. Usually, the relative has a criminal history or verified prior reports with the Department that would disqualify the placement.

P4 reported experiences like P3's, saying, "Many times, the Department of Children and Families has to deny placement to close family members—grandparents, uncles, adult siblings—because that family member or someone in the home has a criminal history 10-15 years ago." P6 described background disqualifications for close families of removed children as the rule rather than the exception: "When it comes to family placement, we always run into family members that have department history or criminal history disqualifiers, causing the placement to take longer and [be] more stressful on everyone involved." P8 confirmed, "If there is a relative who cares and wants to take the child in, but they have a prior case, even if the case was closed and it was years ago, the child cannot be placed in that home."

Nine participants reported that cultural affinity between the child and the potential

temporary home was a consideration in assigning placement. Still, this consideration was most frequently addressed by trying to place the child with relatives or friends of the family, with the result that background-check disqualifications were likely to occur. In a representative response, P1 said, "When looking for placement, I inquire about relatives so that it won't be a hard adjustment for the child. It's best for the child to be with someone familiar, who understands the child's culture, and religion and can bond easily." However, P1 added, "The major issue with finding a placement is finding a family willing to care for the child long-term, with a clean background, and willing to allow case management into their home" for the required home check before placement. When family and friends of the family were disqualified, placement teams tried to take cultural considerations into account when finding foster care, nine participants said. P5 expressed the perception that cultural affinity with foster parents could help ease the adjustment for the child:

> When children [ages] 1 [year] and up, that child's ethnic background, culture, and religion should be considered when placement options are being sought. These children are already being uprooted from their homes, their schools [and] friends, and the least that we can do for them is place them in a home that accommodates their religious beliefs, their ethnic background, and culture to give them some peace of mind and sense of normalcy.

P2 stated, "It's good to have a child placed with someone who speaks the same language as them, as well as someone who has the same culture and religion as them." P6 indicated that placement teams considered culture, saying, "Culture, religion, and ethnicity are some of the things we take into consideration when placing a child," and adding, "The main reason for this is because not only do we want the child to go into a

placement where they feel comfortable, but we also want to make the transition as smooth as possible." P9 provided discrepant data indicating that placement teams did not consider cultural considerations, saying, "Culture, religion, ethnicity, and compatibility are big factors overlooked by the placement team." P9 added why cultural considerations affected the placement quality: "How can you place a child who speaks no English in a home where no one speaks their native language? The same goes for culture, religion, and ethnicity…to help a child feel comfortable and not be retraumatized."

Research Question 4. The fourth research question was focused on recommended practices and strategies to minimize challenges that CPIs face during their protective roles in child welfare. The following theme was used to address this question: Improvements to CPI working conditions are recommended. All nine participants contributed data to this theme. The improvements to CPI working conditions the participants most frequently recommended were better screening of calls reporting abuse or neglect to avoid adding cases based on false reports to CPIs' workloads and limiting CPIs' caseloads, reducing workloads. Some participants also recommended raising CPIs' salaries and adjusting the time a case needed to remain open to reduce CPIs' caseloads. Some participants further recommended reducing redundancy in CPIs' workloads (e.g., redundant reporting requirements), taking additional measures to ensure CPIs' safety in the field, and setting limits on the number of years certain nonviolent crimes remained to disqualify in alternative caregivers' background checks to make placement of removed children with relatives more feasible.

Six participants recommended better screening of calls from citizens reporting neglect or abuse to screen out more baseless accusations instead of adding them to CPIs' caseloads. P1 suggested, "The abuse hotline should be able to screen the calls better by

reviewing priors, as most of the time it's the same reporter calling in reports just to be malicious." P1 added, "We spend too much time dealing with drama when there's real situations that need to be investigated…. The majority of the cases being called in are out of spite and fictitious." P5 stated, "I recommend that the screen-in process for cases be revamped because a lot of the cases received are issues between parents that should be addressed in family court and not by the department." P7 expressed a similar view about spurious cases' tending to be initiated by one parent against the other, saying, "Most of the cases we get [are] baby mama and baby daddy drama. There should be a different screening process when a parent wants to call in a case on another parent."

Six participants recommended limiting CPIs' caseload. P2 made this recommendation: "When CPIs' caseloads start to get high, it starts to burn out the workers, and they start to not give quality work." P4 said, "The Department of Children and Families has to limit the investigators' caseload because getting a new case every day, on average, has brought too much stress on the investigator." P6 added, "Retention has always been a significant issue…. You get overworked, stressed, and feel like there is no end to your caseload because [every] day you are guaranteed one [new] case or even two."

Five participants suggested raising CPIs' salaries to make them commensurate with the workload. P9 provided figures: "CPIs today are still being paid entry-level $35K to $39K, which does not correlate with the workload a CPI deals with. CPIs, at a minimum, should be paid at least $53K and up." P5 agreed, saying, "One of the first things that the department needs to consider is raising the salary of a CPI…because the amount of work and sacrifices being made by investigators does not amount to the measly pay that they receive." P3 said, "The pay does not correlate with the amount of

work CPIs have to deal with on a daily basis."

Four participants recommended reducing CPIs' caseloads by decreasing the time for a case to remain open. P8 suggested "Removing the 30-day mandatory timeframe on a case. If the case is clearly a false allegation, the CPI worker should be able to close it within a week or 14 days. This will reduce the cases on a workload." P2 recommended reducing "the timeframe we have to keep a case open." Three participants suggested additional measures to ensure the safety of CPIs in the field. P3 recommended involving law enforcement from the outset rather than placing the investigators at risk by sending them into the field unprotected: "DCF needs to implement law enforcement to commence cases that can potentially put the CPI in danger." P6 explained why the presence of law enforcement was perceived as necessary despite its often being delayed:

Many CPIs, including myself, have been placed in many situations where they feel unsafe. The department always says you can call law enforcement to go out with you on a case, but odds are, you will be waiting hours for law enforcement to pick up your call and assist you. I have stayed four hours before in a parking lot half a mile away from a client's home for law enforcement.

P8 offered a different recommendation for helping to ensure CPIs' safety as an alternative to law enforcement involvement: "Put in place a buddy system for the CPI to always have someone attend a home visit with them. The CPIs need more security." Three participants recommended reducing the redundancy in CPIs' workloads. P3 cited a specific task that might be removed: "The family functioning assessment is redundant and pointless; it's basically everything the CPI documented during the investigation in a paragraph." P5 agreed with P3:

CPIs spend too much time repeating themselves. A present danger assessment

[PDA] is required to explain why you did not find present danger. You have to

document your interviews in chronological notes. You have to staff the case with

a subject matter expert. Finally, you must complete a family functioning

assessment containing the information you have already documented in your PDA

and notes.

P4 suggested that home studies for potential alternative caregivers should not be

conducted until a judge approves a child's removal to avoid conducting unnecessary

home studies for removal that would not be upheld. Instead, P4 said, "I believe the

removed children should stay in foster care until the case is heard by the judge." If the

judge approves the removal, the Department can conduct the home study."

Two participants suggested limiting the time for some offenses to remain

disqualifying on potential alternative caregivers' background checks. P3 said, "The

Department needs to implement limitations on how many years the charges and verified

reports can go back before automatically disqualifying someone for potential placement,"

However, the limitations should depend on the specific charge. P3 elaborated, "If the

person was convicted of sexual battery, it should remain as a disqualification," and

added, "But if the prospective caregiver was charged with possession of marijuana with

no conviction, and it is the only charge on their criminal history, that should be a

determination within management." P5 agreed with P3, stating, "I think some verified

priors should have a timeframe where they no longer count against you."

Summary

Four research questions were used to guide this study. Research Question 1 asked

the following: What are the lived experiences of CPI working to arrange foster care for

child welfare? The theme used to address this question was that removal and placement

are among CPIs' most stressful experiences. All nine participants attested to the finding

in this theme. The participants indicated that removing children from abusive or

neglectful parents was one of the most stressful parts of their job as CPIs. Adverse parent

reactions to the removal of the child caused the participants significant stress, and the

challenges of placing children after removal constituted another set of stressors. The

participants reported that there were not enough foster homes available to accommodate

the number of children being removed from homes and that they, as CPIs, had to stay

with the removed child or children until a placement at a foster home or group home

could be found. The delays in waiting for placement for a child or children who had been

removed from their homes caused significant stress... They added that placing children in

foster homes also caused participants to stress because they perceived many foster homes

as providing less than the optimal standard of care for children.

Research Question 2 asked the following: How do the lived experiences of CPIs

affect their personal lives and networks? The theme to address this question was that

CPIs' work is associated with significant stress, straining personal relationships, and

strengthening professional bonds. All nine participants contributed data to this theme.

The participants indicated that their work as CPIs affected them as individuals primarily

in two ways. First, they reported that they found CPI work rewarding because they

perceived it as enabling them to help children and families. Second, the participants

reported that their work as CPIs caused them significant stress. One of the reasons CPI

work was stressful, the participants said, was because the long, unpredictable hours made

a satisfactory work-life balance almost impossible to achieve. Most participants added

that their work hours strained their relationships with family and friends. However, all

participants associated their work as CPIs with solid and supportive relationships with

their colleagues. They understood the unique challenges CPIs faced and were available to provide backup and support in work tasks.

Research Question 3 asked the following: How do CPI's lived experiences and challenges affect the quality of foster care placements? The theme that addressed this question was that foster care placements' quality depends on background checks, parental resistance, and cultural considerations. All nine participants contributed to this theme. The participants described three challenges influencing the placement quality for the children they removed. The first challenge was parental resistance to the removal. The participants said parental opposition was often intense and could escalate to violence, resulting in the child not being removed until law enforcement arrived to oversee the transfer. Parental resistance affected placement quality because CPIs relied on parents to recommend relatives or friends who could care for the child to avoid placement in the foster system. Resistant parents sometimes refused to name potential alternative caregivers, contrary to their children's best interests. Background checks were another challenge that influenced the quality of placement for removed children; the participants said that when parents named potential caregivers, those individuals were often disqualified by the presence of felony charges or child welfare cases on their records. When a child could not be placed with relatives or friends of the family, the child might have to be placed with a family that did not share the child's culture, ethnicity, or language, despite CPIs' efforts to advocate for a placement in which the child would be comfortable. Thus, cultural considerations were an additional challenge that influenced placement quality.

Research Question 4 asked the following: What practices and strategies can be implemented to minimize challenges and lived experiences CPIs face during their

protective roles in child welfare? The theme that addressed this question involved

recommended improvements to CPIs' working conditions. All nine participants

contributed data to this theme. The upgrades to CPIs' working conditions the participants

most frequently recommended were better screening of calls reporting abuse or neglect to

avoid adding cases based on false reports to CPIs' workloads and limiting CPIs'

caseloads, again reducing workloads. Some participants also recommended raising CPIs'

salaries and adjusting the time a case needed to remain open to reduce CPIs' caseloads.

Some participants further recommended reducing redundancy in CPIs' workloads (e.g.,

redundant reporting requirements), taking additional measures to ensure CPIs' safety in

the field, and setting limits on the number of years certain nonviolent crimes remained

disqualifying in potential, alternative caregivers' background checks to make placement

of removed children with relatives more feasible. Chapter 5 presents the conclusions,

implications, limitations, and recommendations drawn from these findings.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Overview of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges that CPIs face and implement effective techniques that can improve foster care without adding to the stress and trauma that these workers are already tackling. The researcher aimed to understand what challenges CPIs face and how best to provide quality foster care with minimum or no stress and traumatic experiences for CPI. The study used a qualitative study design. Using the Facebook group of Child Welfare Professionals, purposeful sampling was used to select designated participants from the child welfare system. The IPA approach was employed, with its protocols utilized as a guide for arranging coded descriptions and consolidating thematic patterns. The emergent themes during data analysis included the following: (a) removal and placement are among CPIs' most stressful experiences; (b) CPIs' work is associated with significant stress, straining of personal relationships, and strengthening of professional bonds; (c) quality of foster care placements depend on background checks, parental resistance, and cultural considerations; and (d) improvements to CPIs' working conditions are recommended. The chapter discussion consists of the discussion and implications. The chapter concludes with limitations, considerations for future research, and conclusions.

Implications of the Findings

This chapter compares the results from quantitative analysis with previous studies reviewed in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Theme 1: Removal and Placement Are Among CPIs' Most Stressful Experiences

The findings indicated that removing children from abusive or neglectful parents was one of the most stressful parts of their job as CPIs. Adverse parent reactions to the

removal of the child result in significant stress. The challenges of placing children after

removal constitute another stressor among the CPIs. The results revealed that CPIs had to

stay with children until they were placed in foster care because they lacked enough

respect after a child was removed from the home. The findings imply that limited foster

care homes and substandard care in foster care led to more stress among CPIs.

The findings align with the existing empirical research on foster care and the

placement of children in foster homes within the context of CPIs. In their study, Beer et

al. (2021) discovered that individuals in CPIs engage in highly demanding and distressing

tasks during difficult situations, which creates an environment conducive to the

development of secondary traumatic stress. Figley (2010) highlighted that secondary

traumatic stress symptoms manifest in CPIs because of their exposure to traumatized

clients and involvement in removing children from their families and placement into

foster care. According to Dettlaff and Boyd (2020), CPIs employed in the foster care

sector exhibit a higher susceptibility to mental health disorders compared to individuals

in other professions. This phenomenon is most observed when an individual encounters a

hazardous working environment characterized by demanding work conditions, an

unpleasant atmosphere, and a high volume of activities that result in excessive workloads.

CPIs face numerous obstacles in their work within the foster care system, primarily

centered around the experience of psychological stress (Antonopoulou et al., 2017).

According to the study conducted by Miller et al. (2020), it was shown that emotional

reactions have a significant role in the development of trauma after distressing

occurrences, including accidents, homicides, sexual assaults, and calamities.

While the original victims undoubtedly undergo trauma, it is essential to

acknowledge that secondary victims, particularly individuals involved in helping the

primary victims, also experience trauma. This is particularly evident in the case of children placed in foster care, as highlighted by Kanno and Giddings (2017). According to the findings of Kanno and Giddings (2017), initial victims tend to undergo a higher degree of trauma in comparison to secondary victims. According to Miller et al. (2020), the level of stress experienced by secondary victims is elevated due to their ongoing exposure to multiple traumatic incidents involving individuals who have experienced critical incidents. This conclusion aligns with the current study's results, which suggest that when parents respond negatively to removing their kids, it leads to a notable increase in stress levels. The placement of children following their removal presents an additional source of stress for CPIs. The insufficiency of quality in foster care has resulted in a notable deficiency in providing sufficient care for children, thereby prolonging their recovery after traumatic experiences. When CPIs experience psychological distress, their ability to make effective decisions and engage in the proper reasoning is compromised, leading to a decline in the quality of treatment provided. Häggman-Laitila et al. (2018) identified secondary traumatic stress, burnout, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue as prevalent forms of trauma experienced within foster care.

CPIs must sometimes stay with children until they are placed in foster care because they lack enough placements upon the child's removal from the home. Such delays result in the stress of CPIs resulting in substandard care for children. This is in line with the findings of Bolić (2019), indicating that foster care has different primary victims' stress shared with the workers trying to advise and solve the issues of these children's trauma. CPIs have not always managed their stress, thus contributing to low-quality foster care (Häggman-Laitila et al., 2018). Pyles (2020) established that countertransference is experienced in the foster care work environment, thus contributing

to stress among CPIs. In addition, they also experience everyday stress like work overload and pressure. When these two types of stress are combined, the social workers working in foster care have a great deal to handle (John et al., 2019). The findings contribute to the current empirical literature by establishing that limited foster care homes and substandard care in foster care led to more stress among CPIs.

Theme 2: CPIs' Work is Associated With Significant Stress, Straining of Personal Relationships, and Strengthening of Professional Bonds

The results indicated that CPIs' work was rewarding because it enabled the CPIs to help needy children. However, the job comes with various challenges, such as stress and depression, because of the investigators' long hours of service, strained family and friend relationships, and limited foster care homes for placing children. Despite such challenges, CPIs' work is associated with solid and supportive relationships with their colleagues, who understand the unique challenges CPIs face and are available to provide backup and support in work tasks. The findings imply that CPIs faced various challenges and intense moments in their work yet had supportive relationships and the feeling of a reward for providing help to needy children.

The results of this study align with prior empirical research on the difficulties and advantages CPIs in providing foster care services for vulnerable children. The findings of this study are consistent with those of Cieslak et al. (2013), which suggested that the field of child welfare in the United States encompasses several professional roles. Critical obstacles CPIs face in the foster care system include traumatic incidents such as child fatalities, the loss of co-workers, severe child mistreatment, and demanding professional responsibilities. These challenges have been extensively documented in the academic literature. According to Cieslak et al. (2013), the occurrence of burnout, job attrition, and

health issues is a common consequence experienced by social work professionals. Social professionals assessing child abuse cases face comparable challenges to police officers. These challenges include making arduous decisions such as child removal, as well as managing significant levels of pressure and stress (MacEachern et al., 2019). Nevertheless, it is recommended that police officers partake in psychological counseling services following their exposure to traumatic incidents, such as witnessing a shooting, encountering a distressing accident scene, or being involved in stress-inducing events like internal or administrative investigations. It is generally not recommended for social workers or supervisors in child safety to engage in such practices due to the potential adverse effects on their psychological well-being (Miller, 2018).

Despite these challenges, the work of CPIs is characterized by robust and nurturing interactions with their coworkers. The individuals understand the distinct obstacles CPIs encounter and are accessible to offer assistance and reinforcement in job-related responsibilities. The findings provide further evidence in line with existing research on the level of support received by CPIs. Van-Dam et al. (2021) and Vang et al. (2020) found that social workers experience similar levels of vicarious occupational trauma, burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue as front-line employees. CPIs were required to establish boundaries, refrain from taking work-related matters home, and foster mutual support within the professional environment (Van-Dam et al., 2021; Vang et al., 2020). The implementation of enhanced self-care learning standards, along with increased organizational and social support, has been shown to have a substantial positive impact on the lives of CPIs, as well as their job longevity and performance (Van-Dam et al., 2021; Vang et al., 2020). Retaining experienced supervisors can promote meaningful social change by enhancing the supervision provided

to front-line employees. This, in turn, indirectly benefits the well-being of the children, communities, and families that these workers serve (Van-Dam et al., 2021; Vang et al., 2020). The implication of the finding is that providing social support to CPIs within the context of child protection services would be beneficial to mitigate the psychological distress commonly associated with their role.

Moreover, the findings of this study make a valuable contribution to existing theoretical frameworks by highlighting the imperative of providing enough support to CPIs in their endeavors to secure foster care placements for underprivileged children. Children who endure high stress find relief when they receive the required support and validation from professionals inside the established system. Individuals should be provided with the necessary assistance and a favorable setting to maintain a state of well-being and be free from discomfort (Adams et al. (2018). Child Protective Services typically assumes the parental duty for the care and well-being of children in foster care. Adams et al. (2018) reported that the children needed essential services such as counseling, mentoring, and spiritual development that fostered their moral and spiritual growth. Hence, the diverse range of experiences had by social workers renders them indispensable in the provision of services, despite encountering mental health difficulties (Adams et al., 2018). Ideally, the theory contextualizes how individuals from marginalized groups in the United States are socialized to regulate their emotions within professional and interpersonal interactions (Adams et al., 2018).

Theme 3: Quality of Foster Care Placements Depends on Background Checks, Parental Resistance, and Cultural Considerations

CPIs faced various challenges in their foster care services that influenced the placement quality of the children they removed. Parental resistance to the removal was a

key challenge facing CPIs. The finding indicates that some parents resisted the removal of their children from home. Parental resistance affected placement quality because CPIs relied on parents to recommend relatives or friends who could care for the child to avoid placement in the foster system. Resistant parents sometimes refuse to name potential alternative caregivers, contrary to their children's best interests. The findings support previous literature. Cross et al. (2016) indicated that if the parent disagrees with the court order to remove the child or the request from the child protective service, they may request the service to prove or contest the emergency removal (Cross et al., 2016). The service then has evidence that has been conducted and filed already. For example, suppose the service does not meet the legal criteria to remove the child under the parent's custody or guardian under the Temporary Management Conservatorship. In that case, the child is left under the guardian's/parent's possession. Such cases posed significant challenges to CPI.

The findings also imply that parents need to understand the reason for transferring a child to foster care to lessen the burden on the CPIs. Background checks are another challenge that influences the placement quality for removed children. When parents name potential caregivers, they are often disqualified by felony charges or child welfare cases on their records. When a child cannot be placed with relatives or friends of the family, the child might have to be placed with a family that does not share the child's culture, ethnicity, or language, despite CPIs' efforts to advocate for a placement in which the child would be comfortable. Thus, cultural considerations are an additional challenge that influences placement quality. The findings imply that challenges CPIs face likely impact the quality of foster care services offered to needy children. The results are consistent with the current empirical literature.

According to the Child Care Act of 1991, before a child is removed from a family, there needs to be legal advice is of paramount importance. After the request and signing of the testimony, the child protective service requests the parent to accept the service to obtain the child's custody temporarily. Since it is optional for the parent or the custodian to agree on the child's removal, they may request an attorney to help with decision-making activities (Care, 2018). Removing a child in the custody of the care provider's parent could be classified as either an emergency or a non-emergency (Care, 2018). A parent refuses the child's removal from them despite living in an abusive environment (Care, 2018). The CPI must perform background checks to access the child. In hearing child removal cases in court, the parents may be present or not, which poses a significant challenge to the CPI. They can listen to the hearing, answer the Child protective service petitions, and request to remove the child. They take time and request Temporary Managing Conservatorship (Vang et al., 2020).

The parent is allowed to create evidence against removing the child protective service. For the service to be considered suitable for removing the child, there must be a burden of proof and evidence. Child protective services provide the burden of proof. Verification needs to show that there was a danger to the child, either physically or health-wise, caused by the parent or the guardian. The service should also offer an urgent need for the transfer of the child (Anderst et al., 2020). CPIs decide to substantiate mothers' failure to protect themselves in sexual abuse cases. In other instances, the child could be under the care of another person who took them. The proof could also show that the child is contrary to welfare. The evidence that needs to be provided in non-emergency includes live recordings, videos, and documents. Additionally, evidence is provided in court by an attorney, the service, the parent, or the child's guardian in emergency

removal.

The findings provide an implication for the parents to understand the need for child protection against unfavorable conditions and provide support to CPIs. The latter seek for removal of their children from foster care. The results contributed to the theory and empirical literature by indicating that CPIs face numerous challenges, such as parental resistance, background checks, and cultural consideration challenges against removing children from their parent's homes to foster care homes.

Theme 4: Improvements to CPI Working Conditions Are Recommended

The improvements to CPI working conditions, such as better screening of calls reporting abuse or neglect, avoiding adding cases based on false reports to CPIs workloads, and limiting CPIs caseloads to reduce workloads, could reduce stress among CPIs. Further, raising CPIs salaries and adjusting the amount of time for which a case needs to remain open to reduce CPIs' caseloads as well as reduce redundancy in CPIs workloads, taking additional measures to ensure CPIs' safety in the field, and setting limits on the number of years certain nonviolent crimes remained to disqualify in potential enhances CPIs service provision. Alternative caregivers' background checks to make placement of removed children with relatives more feasible could also be a way to improve working conditions among CPIs. The significance of the above findings is that they provide an understanding of the need for improved working conditions among CPIs. The relevance of the study results is the provision of strategies to reduce psychological distress among CPIs working in foster care homes.

The findings align with existing scholarly research that supports enhancing the working circumstances of Certified Professional Interpreters (CPIs). According to Cho and Song (2017), it is argued that child protective service organizations require additional

financial resources to address these problems effectively, as well as aid in establishing

support services. CPIs perceive themselves as undervalued and emphasize the

significance of recognizing the welfare of children and the professionals working in this

field (Cho & Song, 2017). The absence of confidence between CPIs and adoptive care

may arise due to insufficient continuity of care, inadequate communication regarding

services, and limited access to adoptive care resources for supporting social workers.

Foster parents place significant importance on staff responsiveness, communication,

clarity of expectations, and increased accessibility to effectively manage the challenges

associated with conflicting demands. The findings contribute to the existing body of

literature by demonstrating that implementing enhancements to the working conditions of

CPIs, such as implementing more rigorous call screening procedures to prevent the

inclusion of false reports in their workload and implementing caseload limitations, can

effectively alleviate stress levels among CPIs.

Limitations

The study focused on the perceptions of nine CPIs, thus forming a small sample

size. This limits the overall understanding and identification of variances in the

phenomenon's experiences and the transferability of findings to other populations.

Another limitation was that the focus groups were conducted remotely, restricting reliable

data collection. Collecting data remotely could result in the collection of unreliable

information, thereby interfering with the reliability of the study. Another limitation could

be that the online focus groups only allow a little control or structure. Therefore, the

study findings may not be reliable because of a lack of data collection control.

Additionally, this study was limited by geographical location. The study was conducted

in one geographical setting, which may not permit transferability of the study findings.

While conducting online focus groups has little control or structure that may lend itself to convenience and ensures safety due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the potential of participants to influence each other's responses to agree to the prevailing direction of the discussion may hinder the reliability of the data. In addition, some information may have been sensitive to the participants, and sharing can only occur if they feel safe enough to do so. To mitigate confidentiality breaches, the researcher reminded the participants that it was an intimate group and that sharing information outside of the group was prohibited.

Recommendations for Future Research

CPIs may use the findings to enhance their professionalism in providing foster care services to needy children, understand the challenges encountered and how to counteract them in delivering them and implement mechanisms to manage such challenges. Implementing an effective strategy to address this issue and avoid stress for child welfare workers, specifically CPIs, could improve their service provision (Leve et al., 2012). These findings are recommended for foster care organizations that may create policies and implement strategies for strengthening CPIs working conditions through various healthcare or foster care reforms. Such reforms could encourage CPIs to deliver effective and reliable treatment and practice frameworks for a collaborative community of practitioners serving vulnerable and disadvantaged communities. This will encourage more child protective practitioners to investigate child abuse cases. The relevance of this study is that it enhances the understanding of the factors affecting the provision of quality foster care among the CPIs by establishing various challenges and strategies for improving foster care services.

This research focused only on CPIs, forming a small sample size and limiting transferability. In this regard, future research should focus on all foster care workers, both

investigative and non-investigative workers, to understand their experiences and stress levels for the transferability of study findings. Consideration should be given to researching strategies for reducing stress among CPIs and foster care workers to understand the factors influencing the high level of psychological distress among foster care workers or social workers in the United States. The study was conducted in one geographical setting, which could not permit the transferability of the study findings. Consideration should be given to conducting future research in different geographical settings in the United States to enhance the transferability of study findings to other locations. Another recommendation for future research is to investigate the factors contributing to increased challenges among CPIs to provide critical strategic measures to prevent adverse mental health outcomes among CPIs.

Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the challenges these CPI face and implement effective techniques to improve foster care without adding to the stress and trauma these workers are already confronting. The researcher's objective was to comprehend the challenges encountered among CPIs and implement effective strategies to improve foster care with little stress and traumatic experiences. The study used a qualitative phenomenological study design. Using the Facebook group of Child Welfare Professionals, purposive sampling was used to select designated participants from the child welfare system. The IPA approach was employed, with its protocols utilized as a guide for arranging coded descriptions and consolidating thematic patterns. The findings revealed that CPIs faced various challenges in administering their foster care services, such as parental resistance, cultural considerations, and background checks. Further, improving CPI's working conditions could reduce stress levels among CPIs.

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Appendix A

Prescreening Questions

Prescreening Questions

1. Are you technologically skilled?

2. Are you proficient in English, both spoken or handwritten?

3. Have you worked in child welfare as a Child Protective Investigator for two
   years?

4. Do you hold a Social Work degree or a degree in social sciences?

5. Are you currently living in the United States?

Appendix B

Focus-Group Questions

Focus-Group Questions

1) What are the lived experiences of CPI working to arrange foster care for child welfare?

- Please discuss your lived experience in the child welfare field.

- What are the lived experiences with the removal of children?

- What are the lived experiences with placement in foster care?

2) How do the lived experiences of CPI affect your personal lives and network?

- How does your role as a CPI affect you?

- How does your role as a CPI affect your relationship with family and friends?

- How does your role as a CPI affect your relationship with professional colleagues?

3) How do CPI's lived experiences and challenges affect the quality of foster care placements?

- What are the major issues you encounter with removal from a parent?

- What are the major issues in determining proper placement for the child?

- What consideration do you give to the appropriateness of placement based on culture, ethnicity, and compatibility between families and the foster home?

4) What practices and strategies can be implemented to minimize CPIs challenges and lived experiences during their protective roles in child welfare?

- What practices and strategies can be used to address the challenges faced by CPI while working with vulnerable children?

- How effective are the current guidelines required by the state?

- What recommendations would you make to the current guidelines required by the state?