

2020

## Child Welfare Workers Perceptions of Their Competencies at Detecting and Reporting Abuse of Foster Children

Shameka Angela Manigault  
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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Walden University  
2020

Abstract

Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of Their Competencies at Detecting and Reporting  
Abuse of Foster Children

by

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MSW, University of Southern Mississippi, 2011

BA, University of South Alabama, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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## Abstract

Child abuse is a national issue in the United States. Past research has revealed that child welfare workers' competency at detecting and reporting child abuse comes with challenges and barriers. Poor recognition and reporting of suspected maltreatment are problematic because a lack of action on the part of child welfare workers may leave children vulnerable to continued abuse, which could result in increased morbidity and mortality for the children. This generic qualitative study examined child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placements. Bandura's principles of self-efficacy as presented in social learning theory served as the theoretical framework that guided this study. Fifteen child welfare workers who were assigned cases in which children were abused while in foster care placements, were recruited using a purposive sampling strategy. Semi structured interviews were conducted, and data obtained from the interviews were thematically interpreted to analyze the information. Results revealed that the lack of training in identifying and reporting child abuse and challenges (court process issues, uncooperative caregivers, feelings of being overwhelmed, and uncooperative children) made child welfare workers feel less competent in reporting and investigating cases of child abuse. The results of this study revealed that child welfare workers may need additional training to develop competencies at effectively identifying and reporting child abuse.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Child welfare workers are mandatory reporters who are responsible for identifying and assessing reports of child maltreatment (Pecora, Chahine, & Graham, 2013). However, Pietrantonio et al. (2013) indicated that many child welfare workers lack the ability to detect and manage cases of child abuse. The high incidents of child abuse in foster care placements have revealed a need to determine whether child welfare workers perceive that they possess the skills and competencies needed to detect child abuse (Font, 2015).

To address the issue of child abuse occurring while children are in foster care placements, it was necessary to look at the perceptions of child welfare workers regarding their competencies in investigating child abuse. Studying individuals' perceptions of their professional competencies can provide insight as to whether individuals perceive they can effectively identify, investigate, and report child abuse. Determining child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies could contribute to social change by revealing whether social workers may need additional training to develop skills needed for detecting and reporting cases of suspected child abuse.

This chapter presents the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research question. The chapter also presents the theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions of key terms, assumptions, the scope and delimitations, limitations, and significance of the study. The chapter will close with a summary of the content illustrated in the chapter and include a transition to Chapter 2.

## **Background**

Findings from prior research has revealed that some professionals, including child welfare workers, were not familiar with the guidelines for mandatory reporting (Pietrantonio et al., 2013). Previous research indicated that some professions, including child welfare workers, were reluctant to report cases as they believed that reporting the abuse may have caused more harm than good for the victims (Pietrantonio et al., 2013). Pietrantonio et al. (2013) obtained data from various professionals such as law enforcement, hospital personnel, school personnel, and social workers. The researchers assessed the participants' experiences with mandatory reporting. Pietrantonio et al. concluded that there was a need for further training and education of child welfare workers and other professionals in identifying and reporting suspected cases of child abuse and child maltreatment.

Magure-Jack and Beyers (2013) conducted a study to gain insight into how child protection workers used their knowledge to decide whether to screen cases, open cases for ongoing services, and substantiate cases of maltreatment. Results from the study showed that many child workers used child abuse prevention programs, which had a direct impact on the child protection workers' ability to screen, open, investigate, and close cases related to child abuse. Child abuse prevention programs were described as a variety of community-based services to help individuals to prevent initial or recurrent child maltreatment behaviors (Magure-Jack & Beyers, 2013). Community-based services provided children and families assistance with poverty, mental health, substance abuse, domestic violence, and other concerns (Magure-Jack & Beyers, 2013). Magure-Jack and

Beyers concluded that child welfare workers may benefit from learning multiple techniques for assessing cases of child maltreatment and that decisions made regarding the assessment of child abuse cases should not be limited to one technique.

Raman, Maiese, Hurley, and Greenfield (2014) also interviewed child welfare workers regarding their practices in pertaining to maltreatment assessments. The researchers found that child welfare workers should improve practices related to identifying and reporting child maltreatment. Raman et al. (2014) identified the gaps in the child welfare worker practices which included (a) inadequate awareness, recognition, and follow-up of child maltreatment and (b) lack of trained and qualified staff.

Biehal (2014) conducted a study to examine factors that contributed to maltreatment of children in foster care placement. Results from the study showed that poor assessment and poor supervision of foster caregivers, as well as child welfare workers' failure to notice signs of abuse and neglect, were factors that contributed to the failure to detect child abuse; which resulted in failure to remove children from abusive situations. Biehal suggested that poor quality of investigations may be a result of the heavy workloads of the staff members who are responsible for protecting the children. Findings from this study revealed that there may be a need for improving the quality of training for child welfare workers in detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse.

Cherry, Dalton, and Dugan (2014) suggested that child welfare workers' ability to perform their jobs were affected by their self-efficacy. Cherry et al. found that work experiences, direct and indirect practice skill domains, length of time on the job, undergraduate degree, and training were factors that affected child welfare workers'

abilities to perform their jobs effectively. The researchers also concluded the following: (a) that many child welfare workers lacked self-efficacy regarding their abilities to perform their roles, (b) that self-efficacy was related to perceived competence as well as retention, and (c) competent workers were critical for the well-being of children involved in the child welfare system (Cherry et al., 2014).

Badarau (2015) conducted a study to review the methods that child welfare workers used to assess and make ethical decisions pertaining to cases of suspected maltreatment. Findings revealed that child welfare workers were at risk of making the wrong decisions when assessing child abuse for the following reasons: (a) they failed to make predictions about how likely it was for maltreatment to occur, (b) they were not confident in their skills at predicting maltreatment, and (c) they experienced difficulty associating factors related to assessing maltreatment.

Morton (2015) conducted a study to assess cases of child abuse while in foster care placements. Morton interviewed 11 children who had been abused while in the foster care system. The goal of the study was to learn how the abuse impacted the victims. Results from interviews with the victims revealed that the victims experienced disempowerment, anger, poor academics, and high mobility as result of the abuse (Morton, 2015). The victims indicated that the foster care system failed to protect them. Results from the interviews also revealed that the abuse may have been prevented if the child welfare workers had recognized and reported the suspected abuse (Morton, 2015). The researcher concluded that child welfare workers should receive training and

education on how to detect child abuse, and how to ask probing questions to determine if children have been abused or if children are at risk of child abuse (Morton, 2015).

During my review of the literature, I did not locate any research on child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting and reporting abuse of children in foster care. Studying child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies was necessary. Reviewing child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies may provide insight, as to what child welfare workers' may need to effectively investigate child abuse. Information on this topic is essential as it may be used to provide awareness of the potential need for additional training for child welfare workers to develop the competencies and skills they need for detecting and reporting child abuse.

### **Problem Statement**

Child abuse is a national issue in the United States. The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect reported that approximately 1,670 children in the United States died from abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2015 (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Child maltreatment negatively impacts the economy as it leads to an increase in utilization rates of health and mental health utilization services (Ho et al., 2017). There were 3.6 million reported cases of child neglect or abuse in 2013 and 60% of those reports were investigated by child protection service workers (Critchton et. al, 2016). Font (2015) indicated that a maltreatment investigation occurs in approximately 8% of out of home foster placements. Child welfare workers are professionals who are responsible for advocating and protecting the welfare of children. Child welfare workers'



competency at intervening on behalf of children comes with challenges and barriers to addressing suspected or confirmed abuse and neglect (Pietrantonio, et al., 2013).

Pietrantonio et al. (2013) indicated that many child welfare workers lack the training needed for identifying and managing cases of suspected child abuse. Poor recognition and reporting of suspected maltreatment are problematic because a lack of action on the part of child welfare workers may leave children vulnerable to continued abuse, which could result in increased morbidity and mortality for the children (Pietrantonio, et al., 2013).

Child welfare workers are responsible for protecting children from further maltreatment while under their supervision (Biehal, 2014; Font, 2015). Child abuse can lead poor mental and physical health problems (Ho, Gross, & Bettencourt, 2017). Several researchers have identified instances in which child welfare workers have failed to properly identify, report, and assess child abuse (Badarau 2015; Cherry et al., 2014; Morton, 2015; Pietrantonio, 2013; Raman et. al 2014). However, I did not locate any literature which addressed child welfare workers' perceptions of their competency in detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse. Therefore, additional research was needed to assess the degree to which child welfare workers believe that they can address cases involving child abuse. This study differed from previous research as it gathered information regarding competencies of child welfare workers who were assigned cases where children were abused in foster care placements.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies, or self-efficacy, at detecting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placement. Bellamy, Ostini, Martini, and Kairuz (2016) indicated that a generic qualitative study is used to investigate a phenomenon, a process, or the perspective of participants. Participants were recruited from Southern Alabama and Southern Mississippi. Child welfare workers have a key role in protecting children from maltreatment while under their supervision (Biehal, 2014; Font, 2015). Their competence at detecting child abuse has a direct impact on their ability to assess and report child abuse when it occurs. Information obtained from this study may provide information which outlines the need for additional for training child welfare workers in detecting, assessing, and reporting cases of abuse of children in the foster care system.

### **Research Question**

What are child welfare workers' perceptions of their competency in detecting and reporting abuse among children in foster care placements?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical base for this study is social learning theory. Social learning theory was introduced by Bandura in 1977. A major construct in Bandura's (1977a) social learning theory is the concept of self-efficacy, which refers to a person's belief that he or she can successfully perform a task. Bandura related that the stronger the perceived self-efficacy for performing a given task, the more active the efforts will be to perform a task. Bandura's (1977a, 1977b, 1986) social theory posited that individuals who have high

expectations of their ability to perform a given task tend to produce high performance on that task. On the other hand, an individual's low or unrealistic expectations of their abilities for a task may contrarily influence their performance on that task. Self-efficacy is essential in the context of the performance and is therefore highly relevant for the work environment (Paggi & Jopp, 2015). Applying principles of social learning theory allowed me to examine child welfare workers' perceived competencies or self-efficacy in detecting and reporting child abuse in foster care placements. Detailed information referencing Bandura's (1977a) social learning theory and its major constructs will be discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

The high rate of child abuse among children in foster care due to the lack of detection and intervention from child welfare workers is the problem that was the focus of this study. This qualitative study was predicated on the principles of the generic qualitative approach. Delost and Nader (2014) indicated that "Qualitative research allows researchers to "gain insight into human experience, thoughts, or behavior through the subjects' perspective allows the researcher to provide explanations for previously unexplained issues or to develop policy or practice guidelines" ( p. 240). A qualitative research design was selected over quantitative research because I was interested in the subjective perceptions of each participant. The qualitative research allows more in-depth insight from participants, which can shed more light on the participants' perspectives; thus, the qualitative research design was most appropriate for guiding this research.

A generic qualitative study was selected to explore child welfare workers' perceptions of their abilities to effectively detect abuse in children who are in foster care placements. Generic qualitative research allows researchers to study participants' ideas or perspectives about an issue, rather than just focusing on participants' feelings (Bellamy et al., 2016). Emphasis is placed on the participants' perspectives and feelings when a generic qualitative approach is applied to a study; as the aim of a generic study is to draw out participants' beliefs about things to gain an understanding (Bellamy et al., 2016). Therefore, the generic qualitative approach was an appropriate methodology for conducting this research. Reviewing child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies may identify the need for enhancing child welfare workers' training regarding detecting and investigating child abuse.

Data were collected through semi structured interviews with of 15 current child welfare workers from Southern Alabama and Southern Mississippi who have been employed in those states during the past 2 years. The number of participants selected for this study was sufficient to address the research question and large enough to illustrate the matter being addressed in the study. Data saturation is obtained when the selected participants provide enough information to sufficiently describe the research question and subject matter being studied. Data collected from the child welfare workers regarding their competencies at investigating child abuse in foster care placement, was enough to achieve the purpose of the research. Boddy (2016) indicated that selecting a sample size is contextual and to some extent is dependent upon the scientific paradigm under which the study is taking place.

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling is used to recruit individuals who are uniquely suited to address the phenomenon related to the research question based on their knowledge of or experience with the topic or problem being investigated. (Delost & Nadder, 2014, p. 238). A purposive sampling strategy provided this researcher the opportunity to recruit participants who provided information about the research. Detailed information regarding the research design and rationale will be provided in Chapter 3.

### **Definitions**

The following terms were used throughout this research. Therefore, it was essential to provide define each term as it relates to this study.

*Child abuse:* An event which a parent, caretaker, or an adult acts or fails to, which results in the death, physical, sexual, or emotional harm to child (Patil, Hegde & Yaji, 2017).

*Child maltreatment:* A broad range of behaviors which includes physical abuse, sexual abuse, and various forms of neglect of a child (Schnitzer, Gulino, & Yuan, 2013).

*Child welfare worker:* Individuals who are responsible for protecting and advocating for the welfare of children and adolescents (Dijkstra et al., 2018).

*Foster children:* Children who are removed from the homes of their biological parents and placed in out of home placement, as result of substantiation of abuse or endangering the safety of a child (sexual, physical, or neglect; Patil et al., 2017).

*Out of home placement:* Placement in a variety of settings such as foster care, group homes, relative homes, or restrictive residential care that provides stability for vulnerable children that are victims of child abuse (Geiger, Piel, & Julien-Chinn, 2017).

*Perpetrator:* An individual who is deemed responsible for causing maltreatment of a child (Pirdehghan & Rajabzadeh, 2018).

*Professional competence:* The capability and demonstrated capacity to complete certain tasks successfully expected of a qualified professional (Kuittinen, Merilainen, & Ray 2014).

*Self-efficacy:* An individual's belief that he or she can exercise some influence over what they do (Bandura, 1977).

### **Assumptions**

The aim of this study was to use a generic qualitative approach to conduct semistructured interviews with participants to determine their perceptions of their professional competencies at investigating abuse of children in foster care placement. It was assumed that to understand the phenomena, I needed to conduct in-depth interviews with participants who could provide insight pertaining to a specific research question. As the researcher of this study, it was assumed that I had access to participants who would share their perspectives. It was assumed that the participants selected for this study were truthful and refrained from deception when sharing information, regarding their perceptions of the professional competencies related to the phenomena.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

The goal of this study was to determine child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies at detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse. This study only included child welfare workers employed in southern Alabama and Mississippi. Delimitations of the study were that there may be other aspects of child welfares' personal and professional lives that could affect their professional competencies. However, this study only assessed the participants' perceptions of their professional competencies. Policies and procedures pertaining to child protection services vary among states, therefore it was necessary to select participants from child welfare agencies from both states.

### **Limitations**

There are a few limitations for this study. One limitation is that policies and procedures pertaining to child protection services vary among states. Therefore, it was necessary to select participants from child welfare agencies from both states (Alabama and Mississippi). Selecting participants from only two states could limit the transferability of the results.

Another limitation of the study was the sample size. This study was designed to examine a minimum of 15 child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placements. The small sample from just two states restricted the breadth of the information obtained, which may in turn limit the transferability of the results.

Transferability is the ability to apply the findings from participants of a study and apply it to other populations in similar contexts (Rolfe, Ramsden, Banner, & Graham, 2018).

Another limitation of the study was the use of a generic qualitative approach. Generic qualitative research allows researchers to study participants' ideas or perspectives about an issue, rather than just focusing on participants' inner feelings (Bellamy et al., 2016). Selected participants may have had difficulty articulating their thoughts and feelings about their professional competencies, which could make it difficult for me to interpret their perceptions, which could limit the results of the study. Interviews depend on a participant's ability to recall and provide information (Johnson et al., 2017), and a participant's inability to remember things may result in a lack of meaningful data being shared.

Researcher bias is another factor that may limit the findings from a study. As the researcher, I addressed my biases by bracketing my thoughts and reactions to the interviews and data analysis. I did not allow my own personal experiences and preconceived assumptions about research topic to influence the results of the research. In effort to address additional bias, I conducted member checks by following up with participants after interviews were conducted to ensure that the information obtained during interviews were accurate and valid. Member checking provided participants the opportunity to review transcripts of interviews and emergent themes to determine whether the data accurately reflects their comments (see Lou, 2013). I provided additional information pertaining to the research design, data collection, and data analysis in Chapter 3.



### **Significance**

Child maltreatment is a prevalent issue in the United States (Ho et al., 2017). Child maltreatment can lead to various physical and mental health problems including death and can also negatively impact the economy as result of increased use of child welfare, mental, and health services. (Ho et al., & Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Many child welfare workers lack skills and training to detect, assess, and report child maltreatment (Font, 2015).

A generic qualitative approach was used for this study. Generic qualitative research allows researchers to study participants' ideas or perspectives about an issue, rather than just focusing on participants' feelings (Bellamy et al., 2016). Emphasis is placed on the participants' perspectives and feelings when a generic qualitative approach is applied to a study; as the aim of a generic study is to draw out participants' beliefs about things to gain an understanding (Bellamy et al., 2016).

Information obtained from this study may provide empirical support of the need for training regarding detecting, assessing, and reporting child maltreatment. The results of this study could contribute to social change by identifying the need for additional training for equipping child welfare workers with tools for effectively identifying and reporting child abuse. The early identification and reporting of instances of child abuse can contribute to social change by preventing further child maltreatment and reducing the potential for future maltreatment among children in the foster care.

## Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at identifying, assessing, and reporting child abuse. A generic qualitative approach was used to collect data from participants to answer the following research question: *What are child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies in identifying abuse among children in foster care placements?*

The theoretical basis for this study was Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Self-efficacy (and its four major sources), which is a major construct in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, was incorporated in the study. Data were collected through semistructured interviews with 15 current child welfare workers (employed within the last 2 years), from Southern Alabama and Southern Mississippi, who were assigned cases in which children were abused in foster care placements. Limitations of the study are the small sample size and potential issues with credibility, as the target population may have had difficulty expressing their thoughts and feelings referencing their professional competencies in relation to the phenomena.

The significance of the study was that the results may identify the need for additional training and policies for child welfare workers, which could subsequently lead to a reducing the number of missed cases of child abuse or neglect. Reviewing child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placements, may identify the need for social change. Chapter 2 provides a review of literature pertaining to previous studies referencing child welfare workers' ability to manage reports of

suspected abuse and also illustrates a gap in literature regarding child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies regarding detecting and reporting child abuse.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

Child maltreatment is a problem that effects approximately 6 million children in the United States each year (Crichton et al., 2016). Child protection services (CPS) only investigated 60% of the 3.6 million reported cases of child neglect or abuse in 2013 (Crichton et al., 2016). According to Wildeman and Emanuel (2014), children are placed in foster care after a state investigation has revealed that the child was a victim of maltreatment or the child was at a high risk of experiencing abuse or neglect. Font (2015) indicated that approximately 8% of children experience maltreatment while in foster care placements. Child welfare workers are responsible for investigating or assessing reports of maltreatment to protect children from further maltreatment (Pecora et al., 2013). The prevalence of child abuse in foster care placements illustrates a need for reviewing child welfare workers competencies. Studying child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies for investigating cases of suspected child maltreatment, may provide insight as to whether additional training is needed within child welfare agencies.

Badarau (2015) noted that child welfare workers were at risk of making inaccurate decisions when investigating abuse as many did not have the proper training to identify, assess, and report maltreatment. During my review of the literature, I did not locate any research on child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting abuse of children in foster care. Information on this topic may provide awareness of the potential need for additional training for child welfare workers

regarding detecting child abuse. The purpose of this study was to examine child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy at detecting and reporting abuse of children in foster care.

This chapter is comprised of a review of literature pertaining to this study and the theoretical orientation. Information presented in this chapter includes, the prevalence of child maltreatment, consequences of child maltreatment, and the need for adequate training for child protection workers. The chapter also entails the use of social learning theory which guided the research process.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

The literature research for this study entailed several sources of information. The key terms and phrases I used to conduct this search included; child welfare workers, foster care placements, abuse in foster care, detecting child abuse, evaluating child welfare worker's job performances, results of undetected child abuse, and professional competencies of child welfare workers. I searched databases such as AcademicSearchComplete, ProQuest, PsychINFO, PsychArticles, and SocINDEX to obtain articles pertaining to this research. I focused on pulling articles published during the years 2012 to 2019. The information obtained from the review of literature included quantitative and qualitative studies. Background and historical information pertaining to the terms and phrases relevant to the child abuse and professional competencies of child welfare workers in regarding to investigating child abuse was also reviewed. The results of this literature review revealed the prevalence and effect of child maltreatment. The review of literature identified incidences in which child welfare workers failed to report,

identify, and assess abuse (Bettencourt, 2017; Davies, 2014; Department of Health and Human Services, 2017; Font, 2015; Raman et al, 2014). The importance of adequate training for child welfare workers, the construct of social learning theory, and illustration of how self-efficacy relates to job performance were also included in the literature review.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Social learning theory was the theoretical base used for this study. Social learning theory was originated by Bandura in 1977 (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy is a major aspect of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Self-efficacy relates to an individual's belief that he or she can exert some control over what he or she does (Bandura, 1986; 1997; 2008). Bandura indicated that the more confident the individual is about their ability to complete a task, the more efforts will be made by the individual to carry out the task.

Bandura (1977) indicated that psychological change influences the level of strength of self-efficacy. Bandura suggested that self-efficacy beliefs are constructed from four major sources of information: performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional arousal. The four major sources of information are influential in determining human behavior. Bandura posited that the major sources of self-efficacy can enhance or impair a person's motivation to perform a task. A strong sense of self-efficacy will enhance human confidence and well-being in performing tasks. Individuals that doubt their ability in performing tasks will have low ambition and less likely to commit to completing a tasks.

## **Performance Accomplishments**

Bandura (1977) indicated that when a person has successfully performed a task previously, the person is more likely to feel competent in his or her ability to perform the task, or a similar associated task. Performance accomplishment results when a positive experience influences an individual's perceptions of his or her ability to perform a certain task (Bandura, 1977). The concept of performance accomplishment is highly influential as it is based on personal mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977). Bandura indicated that a previous performance accomplishment raises an individual's belief that they can successfully complete the task in the future. Conversely, repeated failure at performing a task lowers an individual's belief that they can successfully complete a task (Bandura, 1977). Strong efficacy expectations develop as a result of repeated success, and repeated success may reduce the negative impact of occasional failures (Bandura, 1977). The most effective way in developing a strong self-efficacy through performance accomplishments. Successes enhance an individual's personal efficacy. Contrarily failures undermine an individual's self-efficacy.

Bandura (1977) related that self-efficacy is about gaining mastery experience with a specific task. If a person encounters a new task, the person will have to gain experience to master the new task which. Bandura indicated that performance accomplishments enhances a person's self-beliefs of capability and failures create self-doubt. Performance accomplishments was identified as the most reliable source of information that influences self-efficacy judgments (Bandura, 1977). Performance accomplishments are supported by actual mastery experiences (Bandura, 1977). Successfully completing a task builds an

individual's level of confidence in completing that task or a similar task in the future.

Once a person has successfully completed a task, they are convinced that they have what is necessary to succeed.

Several researchers have conducted research related to performance accomplishments and self-efficacy (e.g. Oetker-Black & Kreye, 2015; Tompkins, 2013). Tompkins (2013) conducted a qualitative study to review how service providers used sources of self-efficacy to aid in achieving competence. Participants were asked to rate their degree of efficiency at completing each task related to interventions with clients on a 100-point scale. Results from the study revealed that when therapists had a successful intervention with a client, they saw themselves as being competent, which increased their self-efficacy expectations (Tompkins, 2013). After having successful interventions with their clients, the participants felt competent in performing their role as a therapist. The results of the study revealed that performance accomplishments builds self-efficacy.

Oetker-Black and Kreye (2015) conducted a quantitative study involving nursing students to determine the impact of performance accomplishments on self-efficacy. The nursing students completed 12 items on a confidence scale that was developed to measure their self-efficacy in performing various clinical skills. The results revealed that nursing students who previously performed a given clinical skill in a clinical setting were more confident in their ability to perform the task than those who had no prior skills training. The results of this study illustrated that performance accomplishments could improve self-efficacy. This study relates to my study as it confirms that successfully completing task builds confidence. A strong sense of self-efficacy enhances accomplishment.



## **Vicarious Experiences**

Vicarious experiences refer to indirect experiences that individuals obtain by observing others around them engage in certain tasks or behaviors (Bandura, 1977). Observing a person engaging in a task increases the observer's belief that can also complete the task (or similar task; Bandura, 1977). Seeing a person succeeding a task raises the observer's belief that they have the ability to complete the task or similar task as well. According to Bandura (1977), vicarious experiences have more of an impact on individual performance when the individual has limited experiences in observing the task being completed or when the individual has not had any evaluation about his or her ability to complete the task. Bandura indicated that with this source of self-efficacy individuals convince themselves that if others can achieve something, they should be able achieve the same act or action. In contrast, if an individual observe others fail at accomplishing a task, the observer's self-efficacy decreases. Ultimately vicarious experiences enhance or decrease the self-efficacy of the individual observing the modeled behavior. Modeled influences provide a social standard in which an individual can judge their own capabilities.

Findings from current studies have supported the relationship between vicarious experience and self-efficacy. Chan's (2015) quantitative study assessed the impact that vicarious experiences have on self-efficacy. The study compared the effects of instruction on nursing student's self-efficacy in urinary catheterization, using positive and negative. Positive examples were identified as an appropriate and correct application of the rule or procedure, and a negative example was identified is an inappropriate application of the rule or procedure (Chan, 2015). The sample consisted of 126 undergraduate nursing

students who were placed in a control group or one of two experimental groups (instruction with positive examples [PE] and instruction with negative examples [NE]; Chan, 2015). The results of the study showed that participants in the instruction with PE and instruction with NE groups had a significant increase in their self-efficacy. After the participants read about the errors of the nurse who administered the urinary catheterization in the scenario, and after reading the instructions on how to avoid errors which gave participants insight and awareness to errors that were previously made (Chan, 2015). Results from the study illustrated how the self-efficacy of individuals could be enhanced by observing errors of a model (Chan, 2015).

Thakore and McGee (2016) conducted a qualitative study to determine whether academic career coaches provided effective learning experiences that promoted individual career development. Participants were 24 underrepresented racial and ethnic minorities. Participants were asked to explain how their academic career coaches impacted their goals of being a future biomedical science faculty. Participants reported that being able to observe and learn about their academic coaches' career paths increased their self-efficacy regarding their career pursuits in the biomedical science field. Findings from Thakore and McGee's (2016) study illustrated how vicarious learning experiences could influence self-efficacy.

### **Verbal Persuasion**

Social or verbal persuasion refers to persuasive messages from peers, teachers, or parents that can improve or weaken a learner's beliefs of self-efficacy in their ability to perform a task (Bandura 1986). Bandura (1977) indicated that social or verbal

persuasions provides encouragement and is likely to stimulate greater execution of a task. Bandura stated that to be effective and cogent it is necessary to provide evaluative feedback. Evaluative feedback should be given by an individual that is knowledgeable and credible. The verbal persuasion needs to be authentic and appropriate for the learner to influence a learner's self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Warren and Hale (2016) conducted a qualitative study to determine how verbal feedback from school principals influenced teacher efficacy. The researchers concluded that teachers with a strong sense of efficacy indicated that good principals provide precise feedback, promote autonomy, and encourage original, creative, and innovative thought. Warren and Hale concluded that verbal persuasion can either positively or negatively influence individuals' perceived ability to complete tasks. Verbal persuasion can provide encouragement or discouragement for others. Encouragement increases self-efficacy, while discouragement decreases self-efficacy.

### **Emotional Arousal**

Bandura (1977) indicated that emotional arousal can also affect a person's perceived self-efficacy for performing a task. Bandura (1986) stated that the level and quality of physiological arousal affects an individual's behavior through the cognitive appraisals (efficacy expectations) of the information delivered by the arousal (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1977) indicated that stressful and taxing circumstances evokes emotional arousal, which may produce informative value pertaining to personal competency.

Pasupathy and Bogenschutz (2013) conducted a study to which investigated the relationship between emotional arousal and self-efficacy. The researchers investigated graduate speech-language pathology students' self-efficacy beliefs in their ability to successfully perform clinical skills assessments. The research indicated that when a participant was less confident about performing a task successfully, stress responses are heightened by anticipatory self-arousal. Results from the study showed that when the participants were able to channel their emotional arousal into positive energy, the students' self-efficacy and task performance increased significantly. Positive mood enhances an individual's perceived self-efficacy, and a despairing mood decreases self-efficacy.

### **Impact of Self-Efficacy on Performance**

The four components of self-efficacy can impact performance. Research has shown how the components of self-efficacy can impact an individual's ability to complete a specific task. The components of self-efficacy can have a positive or negative influence on an individual's performance at completing tasks.

Jordan and Church (2013) conducted a quantitative study to assess the impact that various sources of self-efficacy have on an individual's self-efficacy. The purpose of the study was to evaluate how a clinical learning activity affected the self-efficacy of 39 baccalaureate nursing students. The learning activity occurred in nursing home. The students were responsible for implementing a 45-minute psychosocial activity with their classmates and nursing home residents. Prior to the experience, the student's instructor developed timeframes with the recreational therapist at the nursing home, and the

students were given an activity which was a reading assignment that focused on holistic methods for caring for clients with dementia (Jordan & Church, 2013). As a result of performing the psychosocial activity the students gained mastery experience, the reading material provided the students with a vicarious experience, and the meeting with the instructor provided the students with verbal persuasion and emotional arousal (Jordan & Church, 2013). The students completed 10-item survey (a modification of the General-Self-Efficacy instrument) to measure students' self-efficacy in the meeting of psychosocial needs of the clients with dementia, before and after the activity. The results of showed that the students' self-efficacy with working with clients with dementia, was enhanced as result of performing the activity (Jordan & Church, 2013). The researchers indicated that the four components of sources of self-efficacy contributed to the increase in self-efficacy with working with patients with dementia. The study illustrates that the sources of self-efficacy can enhance an individual's self-efficacy.

### **Literature Related to Self-Efficacy and Performance**

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgement of his or her ability to compose and administer a course of action that is essential to consummate designated types of performance (Pedrazza, Trifiletti, Berlanda, & Bernardo, 2013). Pedrazza et al. (2013) indicated that perceived self-efficacy influences human behavior through cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes. Several researchers have used principles of self-efficacy to examine the relationship between worker's perceived competency and their work performance.

Several researchers have investigated the relationship between self-efficacy and job performance (see Consiglio, Borgogni, Di Tecco, & Schaufeli, 2016; Meissner, Kowalski, & Gassman, 2013; Smith & Day, 2015; Tims, Bakker, & Derks, 2016). Tims et al. (2013) indicated that there is a relationship between self-efficacy and job performance. A strong sense of self-efficacy may improve job performance because individuals who perceive themselves as competent will execute sufficient task-related effort and will follow through longer on the task despite any potential setbacks (Tims et al., 2013). High self-efficacy increases the likelihood of increased efforts in performance. However, individuals with low self-efficacy are more likely to discontinue their efforts in performance, which may result in poor outcomes (Tims et al., 2013).

For instance, Meissner et al. (2013) related that self-efficacy beliefs were related to an individual's perceived level of competence rather than the individual's actual level of competence. The researchers conducted a quantitative study with youth workers to investigate workers' self-efficacy related to working with youth in private/commercial, public/government, and nonprofit youth development organizations. Youth workers were responsible for providing opportunities for youth to develop (Meissner et Al., 2013). The researchers concluded the following: (a) individuals who had less experience working in youth development were less confident in their abilities to perform their roles, (b) participants with more experience in the youth development setting were inclined to have self-efficacy levels (relationship building, informal education, trust, respect, protection of human rights, ethical decision making, and empowerment), and (c) participants who attended previous training sessions related to youth development differed in their self-

efficacy levels, compared to those who had not attended previous trainings sessions. The researchers concluded that experience and training enhanced the youth workers confidence in working with youth (Meissner et al., 2013). The enhanced confidence increased the worker's self-efficacy regarding their ability to work with youth (Meissner et Al., 2013). Limitations of the study were that most participants were women and participants were from the same demographic area. Findings from the Meissner et al. (2013) study are relevant to my study because the results elucidated how self-efficacy can impact an individual's level of competence and performance as an employee. The findings from the study supported mastery experiences.

Smith and Day (2015) stated that negative self-efficacy beliefs pose a threat to a human service worker's ability to succeed in practice. The researchers used a mixed-method approach to assess the impact of Family Development Credential (FDC) training on social workers' work-related self-efficacy beliefs. The researchers analyzed data from surveys collected during 2002 to 2004 from participants who completed the FDC training and compared results to a group of participants who did not participate in the program. Findings revealed that FDC training enhanced human service worker's self-efficacy about their job performance and produced positive results for job performances. Results also revealed that participants who did not have the FDC training had negative self-efficacy related to their job performance (Smith & Day, 2015). The study relates to my study as the results illustrated how self-efficacy had a direct impact on job performance. The findings from the study supported vicarious experiences.

The impact of self-efficacy on job performance can be beneficial as well as detrimental to an individual's ability to perform a specific task. The principle of self-efficacy is an important element in child welfare workers' perceptions regarding their ability to detect and report situations of child abuse. Self-efficacy influences the motivation which results in individuals working to enhance their skills development, which contributes to success in the activity (Qi, Hu, Zhang, & Li, 2015).

### **Review of Literature Related to Child Maltreatment in the United States**

Child maltreatment is an ongoing issue in the United States. There are various consequences that children may experience as a result effects of child maltreatment. Child maltreatment can be adversely impacts the victims as well as the economy.

### **Prevalence of Maltreatment in the United States**

Child maltreatment is a problem that affects approximately 6 million children in the United States each year (Friedman & Billick, 2014). Child maltreatment includes neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and emotional abuse (Kim, Wildeman, Jonson-Reid, & Drake, 2017). Child maltreatment is an act of abuse or neglect that may result in imminent risk or serious harm caused by a parent, caregiver, or unknown perpetrator (Allareddy, Asad, Lee, Nalliah, Rampa, & Speicher 2014).

In the United States, one in eight children will have been a victim of maltreatment by the time they reach their 18th birthday (Wildeman et al., 2014). According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, there were 5,689,900 state-confirmed cases of child maltreatment reported between 2004 and 2011 in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children & Families,



Administration on Children, Youth & Families, Children's Bureau, 2011). Data from a more recent report revealed that in 2014, there were more than 6.6 million families were reported to child protection service agencies for allegations of child maltreatment (Ho, Gross, & Bettencourt, 2017). Ho et al. (2017) related that out of the 6.6 million reports of child maltreatment in 2014 approximately 3.2 million were screened by child protective service agencies, and 702,000 children were found to have been actual victims of maltreatment. According to Wildeman et al. (2014), the risk of child maltreatment is highest during a child's first few years of life as half of confirmed reports of child maltreatment took place within the abused/neglected child's first 5 years of life.

Child maltreatment negatively impacts the United States' (US) economy as it leads to greater use of child welfare services, as well as increased utilization of health and mental health services (Ho, et al., 2017). Kim, Wildeman, Jonson-Reid, and Drake (2017) estimated that the total lifetime cost for a single year of US children with investigated reports (referencing maltreatment) was approximately \$585 billion, which was approximately 4% of the US gross domestic product in 2010. A more recent report estimated that the average per-victim lifetime cost of child maltreatment in the United States was \$210,012 for instances of nonfatal maltreatment, and \$1,272, 900 for maltreatment that resulted in death, which illustrates an increase in dollars spent (Ho et al., 2017).

### **Effects of Child Maltreatment**

Mathews (2014) identified physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and neglect as the four types of maltreatment. Mathews (2014) indicated that common

adverse effects of maltreatment are: (a) impaired social, emotional, and behavioral development; (b) reduced reading ability and perceptual reason; (c) depression; (d) anxiety; (e) post-traumatic stress disorder, (f) low self-image, (g) physical injuries, (h) alcohol and drug use (i) aggression, (j) delinquency, (k) long-term deficits in educational achievement, and (l) adverse effects on employment and economic status. Mathews (2014) indicated that the adverse physical, mental, behavioral, educational, social, and economic consequences of child maltreatment are enormous. Consequences of child maltreatment also affect a child's dignity and ability to develop fully as a human being (Mathews, 2014).

Exposure to any form of child maltreatment can lead to short and/or long-term effects for the victims. Ho et al. (2017) related that children who were victims of maltreatment have substantially poorer mental and physical health outcomes compared to children who were not victims of abuse. The researchers indicated that the adverse health effects may extend into adulthood. Shields, Hovdestad, and Tommmyr (2015) further indicated that there are long-term health consequences of physical abuse in childhood. Shields et al. (2015) conducted a study to assess the outcomes associated with childhood physical abuse measures. Data were obtained from the National Population Health Survey. The study was conducted with 15,027 participants (18 years or older) who had been victims of physical abuse during childhood. Results showed that respondents who were physically abused during childhood experienced long-term health effects as result of the physical abuse. Prior victims of child abuse had increased odds of depression, fair or poor self-perceived health, disability (long-term physical or mental condition or health

problem), migraines, and higher rates of heart disease compared to respondents who did not report abuse during childhood (Shields, et al., 2015). Limitations of the study were that some participants who were actually victims of childhood physical abuse may have failed to disclose their encounter of abuse (Shields, et al, 2015). The participants' failure to report abuse could possibly affect the credibility of the findings (Shields et al., 2015). Findings from this study are relevant to my study as the results illustrated the negative, long-term impact of child abuse on an individual's overall health.

Nguyen (2014) indicated that child maltreatment placed victims at risk for a number of long-term, adverse health outcomes. The researcher reported that adults who were physically abused as children were 39 % more likely to become obese than those adults who were not physically abused as a child. Nguyen also reported that adults who were physically abused as children were 70% more likely to have heart disease compared to adults who were not victims of child abuse. In addition, past research has revealed that adults who were emotionally abused or neglected as children were 40% more likely to have heart disease than those adults who were not victims of emotional abuse or neglect (Nguyen, 2014).

Cowell, Cicchetti, Rogosch, and Toth (2015) indicated that child maltreatment can have adverse effects on a child's neurocognitive functioning. The researchers conducted a quantitative study to assess the potential performance difference between children who had experienced maltreatment and children who had not experienced maltreatment. All participants were tested on 10 tasks where sessions were videotaped and last approximately 1 1/2hr. The results showed that children who experienced

maltreatment performed more poorly on inhibitory control and working-memory tasks than children that had not experienced maltreatment (Cowell et al., 2015). The researchers suggested that maltreatment during infancy disrupted normal brain structure development and function (Cowell et al., 2015). The researchers concluded that the neurocognitive deficits in the children were associated with prolonged stress of chronic maltreatment during their early years of life (Cowell et al., 2015).

Death is the most tragic outcome of child maltreatment. The National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NCANDS) revealed that 1,560 children died from abuse and neglect in the fiscal year 2010 (DHHS, 2011). According to the NCANDS data, approximately 1,670 children in the US died from abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2015, which was approximately 5.7% more deaths than in 2011 (DHHS, 2017). Chahine and Sanders (2013) reported that more children die from maltreatment than what is actually reported. It was noted that states experience multiple difficulties when it comes to determining whether a child's death is the result of maltreatment (Chahine and Sanders, 2013). The total number of child deaths related to child abuse and neglect are unknown as child abuse and neglect cases are underreported in the US. (Chahine and Sanders, 2013). Therefore, the true prevalence of deaths related to child maltreatment in the US is unknown (Schnitzer, Covington, Wirtz, Verhoek-Oftedahl, & Palusci, 2008; GAO, 2011).

Putnam-Hornstein, Cleves, Licht, and Nell (2013) reported that many fatal injury cases among children have involved children who had been previously reported to child protection services. Past research has revealed that of the 3,534,000 million children who

were the subject of an investigation of child abuse in 2018, 678,000 children were determined to be victims of maltreatment (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2020). Research indicated that 1720 of children who had prior reports of child maltreatment that were investigated by child protective services died from maltreatment (Administration for Children and Families [ACF], 2017). Findings from other research revealed that approximately 1.4% of fatally abused and neglected children were in foster care at the time of incident occurred (ACF, 2011). Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2013) utilized a quantitative study to examine the incidence of fatalities related to maltreatment after an allegation of physical abuse, neglect, or other forms of maltreatment were reported to child protective services. The study involved 514,223 children in California who had been referred to child protective services for an incident of maltreatment from 1999 to 2006 (Putnam-Hornstien et al., 2013). Results revealed that children who were previously referred to child protective services for allegations of physical abuse stained fatal injuries at 1.7 times the rate of children who were referred for neglect. Putnam-Hornstien et al. (2013) also indicated that children who had been previously referred to child protection services due to an allegation of physical abuse died from intentional injuries at rate 5 times higher than children without an allegation of neglect. The results from this study are relevant to my study as the findings showed that there was a need to improve child protection practices and policies for investigating child abuse, due to the number of deaths related to child maltreatment.

### **Training Needed to Detect and Assess Child Maltreatment**

Child welfare workers must effectively assess child abuse, which entails being able to identify and report the incident of child abuse. Poor recognition and reporting of suspected maltreatment is problematic because lack of action on the part of child welfare workers may leave children vulnerable to continued abuse, which may result in increased morbidity and mortality for the children (Pietrantonio, et al., 2013). Effective safety and risk assessment depend on the child protective service professionals' ability to obtain accurate and timely factual information (Pacora, Chahine, & Graham, 2013). Child welfare workers are key decision-makers in making assessments regarding child safety, which are then used to determine which actions should be taken to protect children (Pacora et al., 2013). Child welfare workers must have skills that enable them to achieve the following: (a) think through family strengths and dangers; (b) enable explicit risk assessments; (c) make precise decisions- regarding to the best action to take to minimize risks of abuse to children; and (d) engage with families to promote change (Turnell, Munro, & Murphy, 2013). Effective safety and risk assessment skills enable child welfare workers to process and promote critical analysis of information obtained during the assessment process (Pecora et al., 2013).

Findings from past research has revealed that child protective workers need to improve their effectiveness in making decisions that protect children from maltreatment (Putnam, Wood, Fluke, Yoshioka-Maxwell, & Berger, 2013). According to Putman et al. (2013), child protective workers make that decisions related to protecting children in the following areas: (a) deciding whether the circumstances of constitutes maltreatment and

warrants an investigation or assessment, (b) deciding whether child protection services are needed or required, (c) and determining the type intervention needed in cases of confirmed maltreatment. Putman et al. (2013) indicated that the essential role for child protective services is decision-making and that decision-making sometimes leads to uncertainty, which may place a child at risk of further or potential harm. Putman et al. (2013) concluded that there was a need for improving the training for child protection workers in the area of assessing reports of maltreatment.

Davies (2014) indicated that some child welfare workers displayed poor practices relating to the assessment of child maltreatment when working with other agencies such as law enforcement officers and professionals in the health sector. Davies noted that child welfare workers (a) had issues with sharing information, (b) they had issues with the various ways in which different agencies interpreted problems, and (c) the child welfare workers' professional identities sometimes interfered with effective inter-professional affiliations. Davies (2014) further indicated that child welfare workers' failure to work with other agencies placed a child at greater risk of serious harm and maltreatment.

According to Camasson and Jagannathan (2014), abuse of children while under protective service supervision has been an issue that has caused debate among politicians, child welfare advocacy groups, media, and the general public. There have been concerns that many child welfare workers were making decisions that were detrimental to children and families (Camasson & Jagannathan, 2014). The United States Public Child Welfare System's officials have suggested that child protective service workers need to implement strategies to improve proper identification of maltreatment cases in order to

reduce the potential danger to children (Camasson & Jagannathan, 2014). Camasson and Jagannathan (2014) related that incorporating strategies to improve correct and reliable identification and assessment of maltreatment cases could also reduce the probability of as a result of the delivery of inappropriate decision making among child protection workers.

Davies (2014) suggested that training for child welfare workers should include some sort of information regarding interagency collaboration, such as safeguarding training. Davies (2014) indicated that safeguarding training promotes the safety and well-being of children because the training gives information that helps workers become more “alert to the needs of children and any risks of harm that individual abusers, or potential abusers, may pose” (p.39). Safeguarding promotes interagency collaboration because it requires that all professionals who are responsible for the protection of children share information regarding cases of child maltreatment in a timely manner. Safeguarding requires that high quality professionals use their best judgement when making decisions regarding a child’s safety and well-being (Davies, 2014). This study is relevant to my research because it provided information on the training that child welfare workers need to enable them become more proficient at interagency collaboration on cases of child maltreatment.

Douglas et al. (2015) conducted a quantitative study to review evidence-based information related to child maltreatment. Data for the study was obtained from child welfare agencies from 20 states. The data included training materials (PowerPoints, guides, case scenarios, etc.) that the agencies provided to the child protection workers.



Results from the study revealed that only 10 states made reference to risk factors for child maltreatment fatalities as a component of their training for child welfare workers. Child welfare agencies' failures to provide child protection workers with training pertaining to risk factors of maltreatment and fatalities related to maltreatment, implies that child welfare workers may not be competent in identifying risk factors for maltreatment.

Limitations of the study were that data was not obtained from all 50 states, data received from participants did not obtain the entire training curricula from participants, and that data was only assessed training received from child welfare workers at the beginning of their employment (Douglas et al., 2015). Findings from this study are relevant to my study because the results revealed the need for training for child welfare workers in identifying risk factors associated with child maltreatment and signs of child maltreatment.

Radey and Schelbe (2017) conducted a qualitative study with 38 newly hired child protection "front line" workers to examine the worker's job proficiency in being able to detect and assess child maltreatment after transitioning from training to having their own caseloads. Results from the interviews revealed that workers expressed difficulty applying knowledge from training to real-life crisis situations on the job. Radey and Schelbe (2017) also found that the workers had difficulty to providing a comprehensive safety assessment of alleged cases of child abuse. Subsequently, many workers reported feeling unprepared for the job and that they struggled in their dual responsibilities of keeping children safe and following agency protocols (Radey & Schelbe, 2017). Limitations of the study noted by the researchers were that the study (a)

used a convenience sample in which results may not have been representative of the experiences of all workers and therefore the results may not have been generalizable to other and (b) the use of qualitative data analysis was subjective. This study is relevant to my study as the results provide empirical evidence of the need to improve policies and practices for child protection workers. The study also illustrated that there may be a need to improve training for child welfare workers. The study also demonstrated how child protection workers' self-efficacies can influence their practice.

Cabiati (2017) conducted a quantitative study to gain knowledge about child welfare workers' opinions about their educational needs, daily work-related activities, and workloads. The participants consisted of 300 child protection social workers who were involved in field work. Results showed that many child protection workers reported the need for improving their job competencies, improving their assessment skills, and increasing their knowledge of innovative strategies for working with children. Cabiati (2017) concluded that social workers needed adequate assessment skills to be able to determine whether a child was in a difficult situation and whether the situation may adversely impact the health and welfare of the child. A limitation of the study was that the data were subject to interpretation as a qualitative study was used. This study is relevant to my study as it illustrated the importance of understanding child protection service workers' perceptions of their job competencies related to assessing the safety of children. Understanding the child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies of detecting and reporting child maltreatment could provide insight in the areas of practice where training needs to be enhanced.

## Summary

Findings from the review of literature thus far revealed that there is need for improving child welfare workers' abilities to detect and assess child abuse (Davies, 2014; Raman et al, 2014; Font, 2015; Bettencourt, 2017; Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Davies (2014) indicated that child welfare worker's display poor practices when investigating reports of child maltreatment. Raman et al. (2014) stated that child protection workers need additional training to aid in recognizing child abuse and neglect, and training to improve reporting procedures for child maltreatment cases. Enhancing child welfare workers' abilities to properly identify and assess child abuse is essential. The extent of child maltreatment that has occurred while children were placed under the care of child protection services and the overall prevalence of child maltreatment in the US, illustrates need to modify training for child welfare workers. Font (2015) indicated that 8% of children experience maltreatment while in foster care placements.

The effects of child maltreatment are substantial. Ho et al. (2017) estimated that there are millions of reports annually pertaining to child maltreatment which can led to short and long-term health conditions. Death is most tragic effect of maltreatment. Most recent data showed that 1,670 children in the United States died from abuse or neglect in fiscal year 2015 (Department of Health and Human Services, 2017).

This literature review revealed that child welfare workers lack skills needed to detect and assess child abuse. Substantial evidence of illustrated that child welfare's works failure to identify child abuse and consequential effects of maltreatment after child

maltreatment goes unnoticed (Pietrantonio et al., 2013; Putnam-Hornstien et al., 2013; Badarau, 2015). Badarau (2015) stated that many child welfare workers do not have the proper training to identify, assess, and report maltreatment. Pietrantonio et al. (2013) indicated that many child welfare workers have poor recognition and reporting skills are related to child abuse, as they lack essential skills needed to detect and assess child maltreatment. Putnam-Hornstien et al. (2013) indicated that in some cases children who had previous reports of child maltreatment, investigated by child welfare agencies, and had multiple reports of maltreatment after their initial contact with child protection services.

According to Raman, Maiese, Hurley, and Greenfield (2014), child protective workers and other health workers identified several gaps in practice pertaining to the assessment of child maltreatment. The researchers interviewed child protection professionals to obtain information pertaining to their practices and procedures for detecting and assessing child abuse. The researchers found that child welfare practices related to detecting and reporting child maltreatment need to be improved in the following areas: (a) knowledge and recognition of physical abuse/neglect, and (b) procedures and protocols for detecting and reporting child abuse (Raman et al., 2014)

Premises of social learning theory was used to guide this research. Specifically, principles of self-efficacy theory was used to guide the research. Self-efficacy refers to a person's perceptions of his or her ability to successfully complete a task (Bandura, 1977). The chapter presented a summary of literature which addressed how the principles of self-efficacy (verbal persuasion, performance accomplishment, emotional arousal, and

vicarious experiences) impacts individual performance on a task (e. g.Chan, 2015; Oetker-Black & Kreye, 2015; Pasupathy and Bogschutz (2013) Tompkins, 2013; Warren & Hale, 2015; Williams et al. (2016). Other researchers reported that a strong sense of self-efficacy may improve job performance because individuals who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to execute task-related effort and will follow thorough longer on the task (e. g. Consiglio et al., 2016; Meissner et al., 2013; Smith & Day, 2015; Tims et al., 2016). Principles of self-efficacy theory is suited for determining child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting and reporting child abuse may aid in identifying factors that led to the prevalence of child maltreatment.

There is a gap in literature regarding child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy in detecting and reporting child abuse among children in foster care placements. Human service professionals can potentially use the information from this study to advocate for additional training for child welfare workers. Chapter 3 summarizes the research design and methodology that was used to collect data to address the research question: What are child welfare workers' self-perceptions of their competencies at detecting child abuse among children in foster care placements?

## Chapter 3: Research Method

### **Introduction**

This generic qualitative study examined child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during foster care placement. Research has shown that many child welfare workers fail to implement practices that are effective for managing cases of child maltreatment (Pietrantonio et al., 2013). The lack of child welfare worker's skills at managing cases of suspected child abuse diminishes the child welfare worker's ability to prevent and report child abuse.

The chapter outlines a description of the research design and the reasoning for the selected the design. I describe the role of the researcher and the methodological procedures that were used to systemically inquire about the child welfare workers perceptions of their professional competencies in detecting and reporting child abuse. The chapter also describes demographic data of the participants and provides a rationale for the selection of participants. There is also a discussion of the data collection and data analysis procedures. The chapter will end with the ethical procedures that were used to conduct the study.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to address the following research question: *What are child welfare workers perceptions of their competencies in detecting and reporting child abuse of foster children in out-of-home foster care placements?* The goal of qualitative research is to understand the perspectives of research

participants and to understand the meanings of their perspectives as they are associated to life events, experiences or objects (Haahr et al., 2014). A qualitative research design was most suitable for this study because it allowed me to obtain in-depth information regarding the thoughts and perceptions of the participants. Qualitative research was selected over quantitative research because the focus of the research was the subjective perceptions of each participant. Qualitative research allows researchers to collect more in-depth information from participants on a process, event, or phenomenon. (Birchall, 2014). Qualitative methods allow the researcher to explore meaning, interpretation, and individual experiences (Birchall, 2014). Quantitative study was considered but would not be appropriate for this study. Quantitative research frequently involves systematic and empirical investigation of phenomena by using statistics, mathematics, and processing numerical data (Baisias & Pollalis, 2018); which are not methods that will be incorporated in this study.

A generic qualitative approach was selected for this study. A generic qualitative approach allows a researcher to use strengths from one or more qualitative approaches in situations where neither of the traditional qualitative paradigms are suited for the study (Bellamy et al., 2016). A generic qualitative study places emphasis on participants' perceptions and feelings (Bellamy et al., 2016). A generic qualitative study is somewhat different than most qualitative methods as it does not claim adherence to a single established methodology (Kahlke, 2014). A generic qualitative approach was selected for this study as more focused qualitative research approaches such as grounded theory and phenomenology were not deemed suitable for such this research topic. For example,

grounded theory obtains data from individuals to establish an explanation of a theory (Khalke, 2014). Grounded theory was not appropriate for this study because the focus of the study was not on developing a theory. Phenomenology is used to examine participants' lived experiences of a given event or phenomena (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015). A phenomenological approach was not the best fit for this study as the lived experiences of the participants were not being assessed. The focus of this study was child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies in detecting and reporting abuse of children in foster care placement. Therefore, the generic qualitative approach was the best suited methodology for this research because generic qualitative research emphasizes participants' perceptions and feelings (see Bellamy et al., 2016; Percy et al., 2015). Using a generic qualitative approach allowed me to gain in depth information of child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy in identifying, assessing, and reporting child abuse and neglect.

### **Role of the Researcher**

Prior to beginning this study, I obtained permission to conduct this research from the Walden Institutional Review Board (IRB). I was the sole researcher in this study and I interviewed participants to obtain data related to child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at handling cases of child abuse and neglect. Mikene, Gaizauskaite, and Valaviciene (2013) related that the researcher becomes an active tool for gathering data in the qualitative research. Haahr, Norlyk, and Hall (2014) indicated that researchers must select how to position themselves during interviews, either as being listeners or cocreators of data. For this study, I positioned myself as the interviewer and



listener. As an interviewer, I asked questions pertaining to the research, and as a listener I used active listening techniques to give participants my undivided attention during interviews. During the interview, I was also kind to participants and I avoided distractions.

### **Managing Researcher Bias**

I have 9 years of professional experience as a social service caseworker, in which I was assigned to investigate reports of child maltreatment for a local child welfare agency. Working in this profession brought insight to the prevalence of child maltreatment. As a former child protection employee, I am aware that it is essential to understand the workers' perceptions of their competencies in investigating cases of child maltreatment. My professional experience may influence my beliefs regarding the child welfare workers perceptions of their competencies in handling cases of child abuse and neglect. However, I controlled any biases that I encountered during the study. Details regarding how I managed my personal biases is presented in the paragraphs that follow.

Haahr (2014) stated that exchanges between the researcher and the participant during a qualitative interview can affect the outcome of study. Haahr implied that every interview is unique. Kruth (2015) stated that researchers must be aware of how their personality could influence the perceptions of others. To control for researcher bias. I avoided personal biases by not including my beliefs or values during the research process, by maintaining a neutral stance throughout the study. I did not allow my personality or cultural to influence the perceptions of the participants. I used self-

reflection, reflexivity, and bracketing to reduce the impact of researcher bias on the outcomes of the study.

In effort to avoid personal biases during the study, I performed a self-evaluation before and during the study by defining my position in the study. When I encountered bias during the research, I documented it in a journal which allowed me to set the issue aside so that I was able to focus on the responses of the participants. A copy of the self-evaluation tool can be found in Appendix D. Orange (2016) indicated that self-evaluation allows for researchers to consider the influence that their own personality plays in research. Orange implied that a researcher's personality can influence participants, the data collection, and how data is interpreted. I completed self-evaluations throughout the study to ensure that my experience and opinions did not influence the research or findings from the research. Self-evaluations were completed by documenting my thoughts in journal so that my perceptions did not influence any aspect of the study.

I also implemented reflexivity throughout the study by repeatedly evaluating my position during the research process (interviews with participants and interpretations of data). I completed reflexivity during the research by maintaining a dialogue of my own opinions about the data to ensure that my opinion did not influence data. Reflexivity is a process in which the researcher engages in continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of their positioning during the research process (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity is defined as the act of the researcher being aware of their own responses to the data as the data is being collected (Orange, 2016). Reflexivity can aid in identifying biases as it helps researchers to ascertain if and how their biases may affect the way the results are

presented (Orange, 2016). I implemented reflexivity throughout the research process by reflecting on how I interpreted information obtained from participants during interviews. I allowed sufficient time between participant interviews so that I was able to reflect on the information obtained from the interviews. I reviewed the information obtained during the interviews on multiple occasions so that I understood the content. I also reviewed data from different angles to ensure that all data was considered in detail. I also remained transparent during the research process by creating a trusting rapport with participants and remaining open with participants with data analysis and reporting the results. Orange (2016) suggested that researchers could also use reflexivity to minimize the impact of their experiences, personality, and positionality on the outcomes of a study. Reflexivity allows researchers to review the data. Reflexivity is when researchers review participants' by considering how results are presented, and by identifying and clarifying any possible ramifications of their beliefs, values, or biases (Orange, 2016).

Personality and positionality were utilized during this study to minimize researcher bias. I did not allow personal experiences or my position as a researcher to influence my interpretation of the data. To minimize the influence of personality and positionality during research, I used reflexive journals. Reflexive journals allow the researcher the opportunity to document methodological decisions that were made during the research, track the analysis process, consider their own emotions and roles they play during research process (Orange, 2016). The reflexive journal allowed me to review the data obtained by notating my ideas and concepts that emerged while analyzing the data.

I also used bracketing during the data analysis process to further minimize researcher bias. Bracketing is a process in which researchers alleviate potential harmful effects of preconceived ideas related to the study in effort to enhance the rigor of the research (Tufford & Newman, 2010). Bracketing is the process of not allowing the researcher's experiences to influence the participant's reported perspective of the phenomenon (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). I set aside my own perceptions about social workers' competencies in detecting child maltreatment to provide a valid account of the data obtained during the study. I set aside my own perceptions by documenting my perceptions on a separate sheet of paper so that I was able to focus only on the participants' perceptions. I implemented bracketing throughout the entire research process. Bracketing consisted of the following: (a) reviewing and writing down any biases, experiences, and past knowledge that I may have had regarding the research topic prior to conducting the study; (b) taking notes of any preconceived notions that may arise so that I was able to reflect on the content to reduce any biases; and (c) I reviewed everything that was bracketed during the course of my research to discuss in my final report of study. Bracketing allowed me to reflect on my own opinions that I had regarding some of the participants' responses. By incorporating bracketing, I was able to remain open-minded, which allowed me to minimize the interference of bias with every aspect of the research process. The process of bracketing allowed me opportunities for reflecting, evaluating, and exploring my thoughts and opinions about all aspects of the research process which identified biases that I had being a social worker, that has worked employed as a child welfare worker previously. Chan et al. (2013) indicated that

foreknowledge and assumptions about a research topic could constrict a researcher's understanding of the participant's perspective, which could lead to biases.

## **Methodology**

### **Sampling Strategy**

A purposive sample strategy was used to recruit participants for this study. Setia (2016) indicated that purposive sampling is used in qualitative studies when a researcher wants to intentionally recruit participants who have the requisite knowledge to answer a specific research question. Therefore, participants were recruited from a homogenous sample of participants in order to obtain valid information pertaining to the phenomena (see Alase, 2017). Conducting a study with homogenous participants may provide more of a defined scope and understanding of the overall perceptions among the participants (Alase, 2017). A homogenous sample is one where participants have similar characteristics or have a shared experience. The main shared characteristic among the participants is that they were child welfare workers. The eligibility criteria also outlined the factors in which the participants had to have in common. The criteria for eligibility to participate in the interviews was that a participant had to (a) be a current child welfare workers was currently at child protection agency who is responsible for investigating reports of child maltreatment, (b) have been employed as a child welfare worker for at least 2 years, (c) have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social service related field, (d) be willing to participate in the study, and (e) give consent to being audio recorded during face-to-face interviews. Participants were recruited via social media sites (Facebook and LinkedIn) where an announcement was posted which described the study.

## **Sample Size**

I recruited 15 participants who were currently employed as child welfare workers from Southern Alabama and Southern Mississippi. All participants were assigned cases where they were responsible for investigation reports of abuse among children that were foster care placements. This sample size was adequate for providing sufficient data to reference the phenomenon. Gentles, Charles, Ploeg, and McKibbon (2015) suggested that smaller samples are used in qualitative research, as the general goal of the research is to obtain data that is used to understand the complexity, depth, variation, or context of the phenomenon. Sample size for qualitative studies are usually much smaller than sample sizes in quantitative studies (Mason, 2010).

The goal of the data analysis was to achieve saturation of themes that emerge from analysis of the transcribed interview. The term data saturation is defined as the point in the research at which no further information or themes are observed in the information obtained after completing additional interviews or cases (Bellamy et al., 2016; Boddy, 2016). Charmaz (2006) suggested that the sample size drives the research, and that a small sample size may achieve saturation quicker than a study that is striving to explain a process that covers disciplines. The sample size was within the range of sample sizes needed for saturation as revealed in scholarly research. The number of participants selected for this study was adequate to address the research question, and large enough provide sufficient information pertaining to the matter being addressed in the study.

## **Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited via social media sites (Facebook and LinkedIn) where an announcement was posted which described the study. After I received approval from Walden University's IRB to conduct the study, I posted the announcement. The announcement included my email address and phone number so that participants knew how to contact me regarding the research. The announcement included the IRB approval number, a description of the research, information about the study, participant criteria, benefits of study, and who to contact if problems with the study exist for participants.

## **Participation**

Individuals who were interested in participating in the study contacted me by using the contact information documented on the recruit announcement. When I was contacted by potential candidates, they were screened via phone to ensure that they met the criteria for participating in the study. A copy of the screening tool I used to determine eligibility can be found in Appendix B.

## **Instrumentation**

The main instrument that I used to collect data for this study was a researcher-developed interview protocol. The interviews were semi structured. Interviews were conducted to obtain regarding participants' perceptions about their professional competencies at identifying child abuse. Kruth (2015) noted that qualitative researchers use interviews to give participants the opportunity to produce information that reveals the nature of their experiences and allows for expression of the participants' subjective experience. A list of the interview questions is presented in Appendix C. A digital voice

recorder was used to record interviews to take notes during and after interviews if needed.

The interview questions were based on the research question and general information obtained from the literature review. Interview questions addressed participants' perceptions about their professional competencies in identifying child abuse. The content of the interview questions was reviewed by committee members to ensure content validity. Content validity is ensuring that assessment instruments are pertinent to and representative of the construct for the purpose of the research (Pandey & Chawla, 2016).

### **Data Collection**

Brace et al. (2015) indicated that data collection is a crucial component to the research process. Proper implementation of data collection can increase the quality of the research (Brace et al., 2015). Data collection is vital as it influences the outcome of the research. Data that is collected heighten the quality of a study when results are plentiful and aid in answering the research question. However, if data collection is not accurate it can lead to invalid results. Data for this study were collected using semi structured interviews. Semi structured interviews allow researchers more flexibility in addressing each question based on the needs of each individual interview (Dikko, 2016). Semi structured interviews are traditionally a combination of both structured and unstructured content in one interview (Dikko, 2016). Qualitative interviews are used to collect in-depth responses from research participants about their feelings, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences as related to a given issue (Mikeneet al., 2013). Participants were advised



that all interviews would be audio recorded (with the consent of the participant) and transcribed. Participants were advised of potential risks and benefits and contact information for me if they had any questions regarding the study. Participants were provided with sufficient information about the study to ensure that they were able to make an informed decision of whether to be a participant in the research.

**Informed consent.** I arranged the time and place for interviews with participants by phone. After individuals were screened and it was determined that they met all criteria to participant in the study, participants received informed consent forms. All individuals who agreed to participate in the study received an informed consent form via email or mail. Informed consent forms were signed in the presence of myself prior to the beginning of the interview. The consent forms included information about that study so that participants were able to make an informed decision about whether to participate including. The consent forms outlined the following information: (a) participation criteria, (b) Walden University IRB approval number, (c) indication that participant responses will remain confidential, (d) participants were allowed to review transcriptions of information they shared the interview, (e) participants were contacted after the initial interview if there was more clarification needed for participant responses, (f) indication that participation in the research was voluntary, and (g) information that participants were free to withdraw from the study at any time and that any data collected from participants who wish to withdraw from the study will be securely disposed. I obtained contact information from the participants interested in participating in the research so that I could

send consent forms be sent via mail or email, based on the preference of the participant. Before interviews were conducted, I reviewed the consent form with all participants.

**Interviews.** At the beginning of each interview I reviewed the informed consent to explain the research and to advise participants of what was required of them. I conducted face-to-face interviews with participants, and each interview was conducted in a private room at a local public library or either at a private area at local restaurant. All interviews were conducted at a time that was convenient for myself as well as for the participants.

Participants were advised that all interviews would be audio recorded (with the consent of the participant) and transcribed. Participants were advised of potential risks and benefits and contact information for me if they had any questions regarding the study. Participants were provided with sufficient information about the study to ensure that they were able to make an informed decision of whether to be a participant in the research.

The interviews took approximately one hour to an hour and a half. Two follow-up interviews were conducted for clarification of participants' responses. I contacted the participants via telephone to schedule a follow-up interview. Follow-up interviews were semi-structured as well and did not last longer than 45 minutes. I obtained all necessary information from participants in no more than two interviews.

All interviews were audio recorded. Audio recorded interviews were essential during data collection as it allowed me to refer back to the interview during the data analysis stage to review or obtain clarification of information if needed. I also took notes

during the interviews to document information that I needed to have clarified by the participant prior to the closing of the interview. Participants were also be debriefed at the end of the interview.

Debriefing occurred at the end of each interview. McShane, Davey, Rouse, Usher, and Sullivan (2015) indicated that researchers have an ethical and educational obligation to debrief their research participants. Debriefing allows the researchers to discuss the elements of the study with the participants, which can also be beneficial for the participants (McShane et al., 2015). During the debriefing process participants were: (a) thanked for participating in the study, (b) given the opportunity to withdraw the use of the audio recording of their interview, (c) a chance to withdraw from the study all together, (d) an opportunity to request the results of the study, (e) and were asked to contact me if they would like a follow-up conversation regarding the study. A copy of the debriefing notes can be located in Appendix F. After the research was completed, participants were mailed a thank you card and a \$15 Wal-Mart gift card for their cooperation during the study. I provided the money for the give cards. Participants were informed that they could contact me if they had additional questions regarding the interview or the research.

Participants were advised at the end of the interview that they may be contacted after the initial interview was completed to obtain clarification or expand on the information they provided during the interview. Participants had an option to decline a follow-up interview. After I completed data processing, data analyzing, and concluded the study, participants were notified via mail that the study has been completed.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

Data was systematically organized and analyzed. Due to the number of anticipated participants for this study, I did not utilize systematic software to store data. I transcribed data by hand. I determined that transcribed data were accurate based on the content of data received. I reviewed by reviewing notes and audio recordings of interviews for significant statements and patterns of ideas. I compared audio recording of interviews, and notes taken during interviews to ensure that both elements were consistent. Prior to engaging in data analysis, I grouped responses to each interview question into separate documents. Responses from the interview questions were labeled by a participant number, which I assigned to each participant prior to the interview process.

The data analysis process used for this study was thematic content analysis. Thematic content analysis is a process used in qualitative research to identify themes with a given data set Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Thematic content analysis is the process of reviewing data from interviews to formulate an organized and concise summary of the findings. I also took an inductive approach to analyzing the data. In the inductive approach, codes, categories, or themes are directly extracted from the data (Cho & Lee, 2014).

I used open coding, axial coding, and selective through the data analysis process. Open coding refers to the process of extracting simple categories and concepts from a dataset for later comparison and understanding (Almarzooqi, Jones, & Howley 2016). Axial coding occurs when data is narrowed down and examined for relationships among

the data (Almarzooqi, Jones, & Howley 2016). Selective coding refers to the process of integrating and refining the relationships of categories of data after completing open and axial coding (Almarzooqi, Jones, & Howley 2016). Selective coding is the final process of data analysis.

I determined the recurring words and phrases. I used open coding to assign codes to the recurring words and phrases. Then I analyzed the underlying meaning of the recurring words and phrases. Next, I analyzed the underlying meaning of the recurring words and phrases to identify the themes among the recurring words and phrases. Axial coding conducted to assign codes to the themes. I subsequently determined meta-themes that emerged across the interview questions. I used axial coding and selective coding to code the meta-themes across the interviews. Meta-theme is defined as an overarching dimension of meaning that cuts across themes. Meta-themes are developed by actively searching and comparing the threads for any identified themes, and grouping themes based on similarity of concept (Heslehurst, Dinsdale, Sedgewick, Simpson, Sen, Summerbell, & Rankin 2015).

Data were analyzed coded by referencing and coding the manifest and latent meaning of information obtained during interviews. Manifest content of communication refers to the coding of visible and surface context, and latent coding refers to coding the underlining meaning of the text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas (2013) related that coding should be formulated to give a description of the research topic through categories and subcategories. Data were analyzed by incorporating

Colaizzi's (1978) seven step analysis process. Details regarding the actions that were accomplished in each of the seven steps presented below:

Step 1. For the first step of the data analysis I engaged in familiarization with the data by conducting a line by line review of each transcribed interview. I reviewed printed copies of the interviews. I printed a copy of each interview (that I documented in Microsoft Word) and systematically read through each printed transcript several times. I read each line of each transcribed interview to identify similar words, phrases, and ideas in the participant's responses to each of the interview questions. I highlighted key words, phrases, recurring statements (responses from participants), and ideas that were identified during my review. I highlighted this information on printed copies of participants' responses of the interview questions.

Step 2 During the second step of the data analysis I extracted significant statements and recurring patterns of ideas from the interviews. I documented the significant statements and recurring patterns of ideas on a separate sheet of paper. Recurrent statements were grouped together and assigned codes, which were documented in Microsoft Excel. Those statements and ideas served as emergent themes. After I extracted the emergent themes, I assigned codes to those themes. I also developed a code sheet, which included a list of the emergent themes and the codes I assigned to those themes.

Step 3 of the data analysis plan consisted of creating and formulating themes. This step was accomplished by reviewing the coded themes to look for patterns among the themes so that a general description could be formulated across the themes. I determined

common meanings amongst the themes and assigned codes to the common meaning. I documented the codes and themes in Microsoft Excel. At this point I went through each of the interviews and coded each comment that pertained to each theme identified for each interview question. I also counted the number of occurrences of each theme in each interview question.

Step 4 of the data analysis process involved data reduction through axial coding. This step consisted of aggregating formulated themes into clusters, developing codes, and recoding transcripts. This step was accomplished by grouping themes together in clusters based on similarities in meanings and content. Clusters were coded and assigned numbers to group data so that data can be easily accessible. The themes that emerged from this second level of analysis constituted meta-themes. Each meta-theme was defined by a cluster of themes. Transcripts (individual responses from interviews) were recoded to document the meta-themes across the interview responses.

Step 5 of the data analysis process consisted of developing an exhaustive description of findings from the data analysis. The goal of this step was to provide an encompassing description of the meta-themes. This step involved providing an explanation of the findings in relation to the phenomenon, by summarizing the themes and codes to formulate the main idea of the data. An explanation of the findings was documented in Microsoft Word.

Step 6 of the data analysis process consisted of identifying the fundamental structure of the phenomenon. This step was accomplished by combining the exhaustive

descriptions (developed in Step 5) from the findings to develop a short explanation that grasps just the aspects that were essential to the structure of the phenomenon.

Step 7 of the data analysis process was to validate the findings. Validation of the findings was completed by presenting a participants with a transcription of their interview. This step is also known as member checking. Member checking was conducted by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed interview to review. Transcriptions were emailed, mailed, or provided in person based on the participant's preference indicated at the time of the interview. Participants were asked how they would like to receive their transcriptions during the initial interview. Participants had the opportunity to give feedback if they want to elaborate, confirm, disagree, or make changes on a matter in the transcriptions. Feedback was provided by mail, email, or in person. Participants were given 14 days to provide feedback on their transcripts. I paid the cost of mailed transcripts. Three participants provided feedback, in which they confirmed that transcripts of their interviews were accurate.

### **Discrepancies**

Discrepancies may be encountered when reviewing and analyzing data collected during interviews. I compared audio recordings of the interviews to the notes that I took during and after the interview to ensure that I the data was consistent. No discrepancies were identified for this study.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential for research. Trustworthiness refers to the validity and reliability of research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) related that credibility,



dependability, confirmability, and transferability needs to be established in order to effectively evaluate qualitative research. Trustworthiness is defined as the degree of accuracy in a qualitative study (Mandal, 2018). Trustworthiness is a requirement for qualitative research, as researchers do not use instruments to measure reliability or validity.

### **Credibility**

Credibility relates to the accuracy of the data, interpretation of the data, and how the data it is represented by the researcher (Cope, 2015). To establish credibility for this study, I conducted member checks and triangulation. Member checking allows participants to clarify or expand on information in the printed transcripts as they are the ones that actually experienced the phenomena (Loh, 2013). Member checking was conducted by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed interview to review. Details of how the member checking process were presented previously in the description of Step 7 of the data analysis procedure. Two follow-up interviews were conducted to clarify if responses of participants. Following-up with participants allowed me to review the data obtained from the interview, to ensure that the information was valid and accurate.

Triangulation was also be implemented during the study to enhance the credibility. Triangulation is the process of utilizing multiple sources or data in qualitative research to gain complete understanding of phenomena (Cope, 2014). Triangulation was utilized to increase credibility of the data obtained during the research. To execute triangulation during the research process I reviewed and considered all audio recordings,

notes, and transcription of interviews. All data were used to understand the perceptions of the participants.

### **Dependability**

Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions, in which the study findings can be reproduced with similar participants in similar conditions (Cope, 2014). Triangulation can also be implemented to establish dependability of data obtained during this study. Triangulation is the process of using multiple sources to draw conclusions (Cope, 2014). Member checking was also implemented during the data analysis process by following up with participants by phone. Follow-up with participants were conducted to verify and clarify accuracy of data. Member checking assisted with ensuring that the findings and interpretations accurately represent the participants' perceptions. Member checking is the process in which you review an interview or analyzed data with a participant to check and confirm results (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, & Walter, 2016).

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the ability to illustrate that data presented by the researcher, reflects the participants' responses (Cope, 2014). Cope (2014) indicated that researcher's viewpoints should not be concluded in research. In order to establish confirmability, I refrained from including personal biases during the data collection, analyzing process, and throughout the entire research. I also implemented the act of reflexivity throughout the research process by remaining transparent throughout all aspects of the research

process. I was explicit and open with participants about the methods and procedures used to conduct the research.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to the degree to which findings from a study may be relevant to other groups or settings (Cope, 2014). According to Cope (2014), indicates that researchers should provide sufficient information about the study so that the reader can deem the findings as being “fit” or transferable. I provided ample information on the sources of the data and ensure that the results of the research is sufficient so that the audience can apply the proposed study to other research. Purposive sampling also implemented, in which participants that are selected were child welfare workers who could share their perceptions referencing the phenomena. Selected participants shared their perceptions related to the research question to provide information pertaining to the research question. Anney (2014) indicated that using purposive sampling allows the researcher to focus key informants that can provide knowledge information for the research, and this method of sampling provides a more in-depth findings than other sampling methods.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Participants in a study have rights and must be treated fairly. Participants of my proposed study were protected under the process held by the Institutional Review Board of Walden University. Babb, Birk, and Carfagna (2017) asserted that a researcher is responsible for proving to the IRB decision-makers that the participation in a study is voluntary, that participants have a precise understanding of the study, and that the

benefits of the study must outweigh potential risks. Approval for this research was obtained from Walden University's IRB.

I was responsible for collecting all data during the research. Data obtained during the research was kept private and confidential. Participants' responses were kept confidential. Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a private room in a public library or either a private location in a local restaurant. Audio recordings and notes were placed in a locked secured storage bin in a private location in my home. I used codes on documents used to gathering data from participants, rather than record identifying information. I kept an additional document that linked codes to participants' identifying information, locked in a separate secured location where I only had access to the information. The computer utilized to document the data analysis process, was locked and secured with a password in which I only have access to.

Data will also remain confidential. After the entire research process was completed, data will be kept for a period of 5 years or longer, depending on the current standard of Walden University Research Protocol. Other ethical issues such as conflict of interest and power differentials were not encountered during this study,

### **Summary**

This chapter addressed the methodology used in this study. A description of the research design and rationale was presented in this chapter. A description of researcher's role, participants, data collection, data analysis, and procedures for recruitment was also identified.

The purpose of this study was to determine child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy in detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse of foster children. A generic qualitative approach was used to conduct the study. I conducted the research and was responsible for obtaining all data for the study. Current child welfare workers from southern Alabama and Mississippi who have experienced the phenomena will be interviewed (semi structured) to obtain data. The data analysis plan, qualitative content analysis were discussed. Participants were recruited via an announcement on social media sites.

Issues pertaining to trustworthiness were addressed in this chapter. Credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability strategies were explained. Ethical procedures were also discussed in this chapter. IRB approval, participant and data privacy and confidentiality, conflict of interest, and power differential were discussed. Chapter 4 will address the research setting, demographic, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and the research findings.

## Chapter 4: Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to determine child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during foster care placement. The research question which guided this study was: *What are child welfare workers' perceptions of their competency in identifying and reporting abuse among children in foster care placements?*

This chapter presents results from the findings from 15 participants. The chapter begins with a review of the organizational setting and demographics of the participants. The data collection and analysis procedures and evidence of trustworthiness are discussed next. The results are then presented in the form of themes that emerged referencing the research question. The chapter will conclude with a summary of the answers to the research question.

### Setting

Child welfare workers were identified as individuals who were responsible for investigating reports of child abuse of children in foster care placements. At the time of the study three participants verbalized that their agency was understaffed, and one participant disclosed that their agency experienced budget cuts, which limited the agency's resources. Organizational changes may have affected the participants' perceptions of their competencies at detecting and reporting child abuse. The organizational conditions may have influenced participants' perceptions at the time of the study. Organizational changes may have negatively impacted participants' perceptions of

their competencies, for those participants who reported that their agency was understaffed and participants who reported budget cuts. It is possible that a participants' perspective would be different if that did not experience organizational changes. As a researcher, I did not allow outside influences to interpret the results of the study.

### **Demographics**

A total of 15 individuals participated in semi structured interviews for this study. Participants were from southern counties located in Alabama and Mississippi. Table 1 presents a summary of the demographic data for the participants. All participants were assigned to assess reports of child abuse of children in foster care placements. Thirteen participants were females and two were males. The ages of the participants ranged from 27 to 46 years. Nine participants had a master's degree in a social service-related field and six participants held a bachelor's degree in a social service-related field. Ten of the participants were licensed social workers. Participants' years of work experiences as child welfare worker ranged from 2 to 9 years.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Participant	Age	Years of Experience	Degree/Certification
P1	44	4	Associate of Human Services
P2	46	3.5	Bachelor of Social Work
P3	32	7	Master of Social Work Licensed Clinical Social Worker
P4	27	2	Master of Social Work Licensed Social Worker
P5	31	3	Bachelor of Sociology
P6	26	2	Master of Social Work Licensed Social Worker
P7	28	2	Master of Social Work
P8	32	4	Bachelor of Sociology
P9	45	6	Master of Criminal Justice
P10	33	5	Bachelor of Social Work, Licensed Social Worker
P11	34	5	Bachelor of Psychology
P12	43	9	Master of Social Work Licensed Social Worker
P13	38	2	Master of Social Work Licensed Social Worker
P14	24	3	Bachelor of Social Work, Licensed Social Worker
P15	35	8	Master of Social Work Licensed Clinical Social Worker



### **Data Collection**

Data for this study was collected from 15 child welfare workers who were responsible for investigations of child abuse in out-of-home placements. Participants were interviewed in face-to-face semi structured interviews, which lasted from between 35 minutes to 90 minutes. Data were collected over a duration of 3 months. I drove to conduct interviews in Alabama and Mississippi in private at mutually agreed upon locations, such as public libraries, coffee shops, and delis. Participants were asked 10 guided open-ended interview questions so that I could gain insight in regards to the perceptions of their competencies in investigating child abuse of child in out-of-home placements.

Interview dates and times were scheduled via phone for those participants who were interested in the study and met criteria requirements for participating in the study. I audio recorded all interviews. I also took notes during each interview. I also transcribed data obtained from the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was systemically organized and analyzed by using Colaizzi's (1978) seven step process for data analysis process. Participant responses to interview questions were transcribed by hand. To determine if transcriptions were accurate based on the content of the data received, I reviewed notes and audio recording of interviews for significant statements and patterns of idea. I verified that transcriptions were accurate by listening to the transcriptions to compare the words spoken by the participants, to words documented in the transcripts. Prior to engaging in the data analysis, I separated and grouped the

transcribed interview questions by number. Data obtained during each participant interview was labeled by a participant number. I assigned each participant a number prior to the data collection process, to maintain confidentiality of the participants.

I coded data by applying open coding, axial coding, and selective coding throughout the data analysis process. I determined emerging themes for each interview question and used open coding to code the emergent themes for each interview question. Open coding was implemented by placing the data in categories for comparison and understanding. Recurring statements (responses from participants) of each interview question were grouped together and assigned codes which I documented in Microsoft Excel.

I used axial coding and selective coding to code the meta-themes across the interviews. Axial coding was applied in which the data was assessed to provide a description for relationships identified. Selective coding was incorporated to refine the relationships among the categories that were developed. I used Microsoft Excel to formulate meta themes, by reviewing and comparing the themes and grouping the themes based on the similarity of content.

I followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven step process for data analysis process. First, I reviewed printed copies of the interviews, which I saved had in Microsoft word, to identify similar words, ideas, and phrases from the participant's responses. Then, I extracted significant statements and recurring patterns of ideas from the interviews. Next, I documented the significant statements and recurring patterns of ideas in Excel and assigned codes (separate code sheet developed) to those themes. Then, I reviewed the

codes common meanings, and then assigned a theme that captured the shared meanings among the codes. Themes were created for the common meanings; and I documented in the themes in Microsoft Excel. Themes were grouped into clusters (formulating meta themes) based on similarities in meaning and content. Then, I coded the clusters and assigned numbers to group data so that the data was easily accessible. Data was protected with passwords, on my personal computer which I have sole access to. The following five major themes were identified. Five major themes identified were (a) minimal employee training and education, (b) challenges at detecting and reporting abuse, (c) utilizing processes for complications when investigation reports of child abuse, (d) competencies and job performance, and (e) change needed to better equip child welfare workers.

I also developed an exhaustive description of the findings from the data analysis. I summarized the themes and codes to form the main idea of the data, to provide an explanation of the findings in relation the phenomenon. Fundamental structures of the phenomenon were identified. Lastly, member checking was implemented to validate the findings. Discrepancies with data were addressed by comparing audio recordings of the interviews, to the notes that I took during and after interviews for clarification. I also conducted follow-up interviews via phone with participants. I contacted two participants via phone to obtain clarification for information they reported during their interviews. Clarification was needed to confirm that the information I received provided an accurate account the participants' perceptions of their competencies at identifying child abuse.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is imperative for qualitative research. Credibility, dependability, conformability, and transferability are elements of trustworthiness that are used to measure the accuracy of the research (Mandal, 2018). In this study, I established credibility through member checking. I conducted member checking by making a transcribed copy of the participants' interviews available for their review via email. Participants were given the opportunity to give feedback if they wanted to elaborate, confirm, disagree, or make changes on a matter in the transcriptions. Three participants provided feedback via email, confirming that the transcription of their interviews was correct. Follow-up interviews were conducted with two participants to clarify that I interpreted the information they provided correctly. Triangulation was used to increase credibility of the data obtained during the research. Triangulation is the process of using different sources or data in qualitative research to gain complete understanding of phenomena (Cope, 2014). To execute triangulation during the research process I reviewed and considered all audio recordings, notes, and transcription of interviews. All data were used to understand the perceptions of the participants.

Dependability was also used during the study to enhance the elements of trustworthiness. Member checking was conducted during the data collection and analyzing process. Member checking was completed after I reviewed transcripts and after themes were developed. Member checking was performed in some instances, in which follow-ups were made with participants via phone, to verify and clarify accuracy of data. Two follow-up interviews were conducted by phone and both participants confirmed that

the data obtained from their interviews were gave an accurate account of their perceptions.

Confirmability was used during this study to strengthen the elements of trustworthiness. I maintained a journal throughout the research process, to reflect on what was happening in the research process regarding my values and interests. Reflexivity was also used throughout the research process in which I repeatedly evaluated my position during the research process (interviews with participants and interpretations of data). I also implemented reflexivity throughout the research process by reflecting on how I interpreted information obtained from participants during interviews. I allowed sufficient time between participant interviews, so that I was able to reflect on the information obtained from the interviews. I also reviewed data from different angles to ensure that all data was considered in detail.

To address transferability, I used triangulation to increase of the data obtained during the research. I provided ample information on the sources of the data. I ensured that the substance of the research was detailed so that the audience could apply the study to other research. Purposive sampling was also implemented, in which participants that were selected were child welfare workers who could share their perceptions referencing the phenomena. Setia (2016) indicated that purposive sampling allows researchers to intentionally recruit participants who have the requisite knowledge to answer a specific research question. Child welfare workers were selected as participants as they could share their perspectives, which provided understanding to the phenomena.

## Results

In this study, I explored child welfare workers' perceptions of their perceptions of their competence detecting abuse in children in foster care placements. Findings from the study revealed that child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies at detecting and reporting child abuse impacted their ability to perform their duties as a child welfare worker. Five major themes identified were (a) minimal employee training and education, (b) challenges at detecting and reporting abuse, (c) utilizing processes for complications when investigating reports of child abuse, (d) competencies and job performance, and (e) change needed to better equip child welfare workers. A description of each theme is identified below.

### **Minimal Employee Training and Education**

Themes emerged related to employee training and education. Participants revealed that aspects of employee training and education impacted their perceptions of their perceptions of their competencies. Subthemes that emerged regarding the training and education they received for detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse of children in foster care were limited training and generalized training. Several participants indicated that they did not have adequate training related to investigating and reporting cases of child abuse.

**Limited training.** Five participants reported having received limited training in investigating cases of child abuse and neglect. According to the participants, the training ranged from no training at all, to one to two weeks of classroom training, and to 1 to 4 weeks of shadowing an employee only, with no classroom training. Comments from (P6)

reflected the lack of formal training she received in how to detect child abuse. According to P6: “I did not have any training. I watched a PowerPoint presentation about child protective services and followed a worker for 1 week and then I was on my own.” P14 further commented: “I only completed one week of training, which was an overview of the agencies’ policies and procedures. I also shadowed an experienced worker for 1 week, and after that I was on my own.” The length and depth of the training in detecting child abuse was reflected in comments given by

P2, who indicated the following:

I had two weeks of classroom training. The first training was 3 months after I started and the second training session was 4 months after that. I also shadowed another worker my first week and started receiving cases of my own after my second week on the job.

P4 reported having received minimal training in detecting child abuse. P4 responded with the following: “I did not have any extensive training. I had 4 weeks of classroom training and 4 weeks of shadowing an experienced worker.” P12 reported having taken only one course in detecting child abuse. The lack of training impacted their perceptions of their competencies at detecting and reporting child abuse. The lack of training made participants believe that they were not capable of effectively investigating cases of child abuse.

**Generalized training.** Two participants indicated that they received generalized at the training related to detecting child abuse, at the child welfare where they were employed. The generalized training was described as an overview of child abuse and

investigating child abuse. According to P3: “We had basic generalized training about child abuse and neglect for a few days.” P10 further indicated:

I had a weeklong training to learn how to navigate the system” [referencing the computer system to store caseload documentation], at the time of hire. Then a couple of months after I started, I had 1 week of the Alabama Child Welfare Training (ACT training). ACT training was a generalized training of child protective services.

The lack of training affected the participants’ perceptions of their competencies in detecting and reporting child abuse. Participants related that the training they received was not sufficient for adequately preparing them to investigate cases of child abuse. The lack of training resulted in participants perceiving they were not competent in performing their detecting and reporting child abuse.

### **Challenges of Detecting and Reporting Child Abuse**

All participants indicated that they experienced challenges in investigating and reporting child abuse, which affected their perceptions of their competencies at detecting and reporting cases of child abuse. Four meta-themes were identified regarding the challenges the child welfare workers experienced by. Those meta-themes were: (a) court process issues, (b) uncooperative caregivers, (c) feelings of being overwhelmed, and (d) uncooperative children.

**Court process issues.** Participants indicated that a major challenge that they frequently experienced when investigating cases of child abuse was related to delays in court processes. The participants indicated that when their assessments of cases of child



abuse revealed that children needed to be removed from their placements, delays in court orders prevented them from having the children removed to a safe environment.

Comments from P2 revealed how the court delays affected her effort in reporting a case of child abuse in the following comments:

I investigated a case where it was determined that a foster parent abused a child that was placed in their foster home, by whipping the child repeatedly with a belt. There were several marks left on the child. I attempted to get the child removed from the foster home, because I believed that the child was unsafe, but the court would not give me consent to remove the child.

P13 reported that court hearings do not happen immediately. P4 indicated having difficulties testifying and justifying why the children should be removed from their placements. P1 stated the following: “It took me 3 months to get a court order to have two children removed from a group home foster care placement where the children were being neglected and emotionally abused by one of the group home’s employees.”

Participants indicated that there were some instances when they detected child abuse, however, they had difficulty obtaining court orders to remove the children from situations of danger. Participants related that they were not successful with advocating the need for urgency of court proceedings to justify the need for removing children from an unsafe environment. Participants perceived that they lacked the ability to effectively advocate for the removing of children from an unsafe environment.

**Uncooperative caregivers.** Three participants disclosed that encountering uncooperative caregivers adversely impacted their competence to complete their

investigations of child abuse or neglect. Participants indicated that in some cases, caregivers who were responsible for alleged child abuse, refused to cooperate with child welfare workers when they were being investigated for the allegations of child abuse.

According to P1:

Caregivers suspected of child abuse, refuse to be interviewed regarding the alleged incident, or they denied abusing a child, even after there is sufficient evidence to support that there were responsible for the abuse.

P13 Indicated: “There are times that caregivers do not cooperate during the investigation, they will not speak with worker about the report.” P14 further stated: “The caregivers do not make themselves available to be interviewed, and in some cases the case may have to be closed as their not sufficient evidence to complete the investigation.”

The lack of cooperation from caregivers affected the outcomes of child welfare workers’ investigations of child abuse. Caregivers’ failure to cooperate resulted in child welfare workers not having sufficient information to complete an investigation. Not having sufficient information to complete an investigation made it difficult for child welfare workers to determine child abuse. Not being able to thoroughly complete an investigation, negatively impacted their perception of their competencies at detecting and reporting cases of child abuse.

**Feeling overwhelmed.** Five participants indicated that their jobs were overwhelming, which lowered their perceptions of competence. The participants disclosed that they were overwhelmed because of high caseloads, the agency being understaffed, and agency time restraints for completing investigations. These individuals

related that being understaffed and agency time restraints negatively impacted their ability to work effectively. Comments from P1 reflected the high caseloads. According to P1: “We have too many cases at one time, and usually have to work beyond our scheduled work hours.” Comments from P12 further evidenced the impact of high caseloads. According to P12: “We have high caseloads, and we can’t do everything we need to do to thoroughly investigate reports. The agency gives you timeframes to complete cases, which causes burnout among staff within the agency.”

Several participants discussed how the high turnover of personnel affected their ability to manage their caseloads. Comments from P2 indicated that there are high turnover rates. According to P2: “There is always a high turnover rate at my job.” P9 further referenced feeling overwhelmed. P9 indicated: “My job is overwhelming, we are at least 10 employees short, which makes it hard to manage all my cases in a timely manner.” P14 further mentioned the impact of high caseloads. According to P14: This job is very overwhelming, there are times that I have so many cases, that I cannot keep up.”

Feeling overwhelmed affected the participants’ perceptions of their competence in detecting and reporting child abuse. Participants related that they felt that they were not able to complete the jobs effectively and in a timely manner. High caseloads, understaffed agencies, and agency time restraints for completing investigations resulted in perceptions of not being able to effectively detect and report child abuse.

**Uncooperative children.** Some participants mentioned the challenges they experienced with interviewing children while investigating reports of child abuse. Some

participants reported encountering instances where children refused to talk during the investigation. Other participants reported occasions where there were inconsistencies in children's statements during investigations. According to P1: "In some cases I believe that some of the children lie about being abused, even though signs of abuse are visible." P3 further added: "Some children will shut down and not say anything."

Uncooperative children affected the participants' perceptions of their competence in detecting and reporting child abuse. The lack of cooperation from children resulted in participants perceiving that they were not able to effectively engage children in conversations where they can obtain information to complete their investigations.

### **Utilizing Processes for Complications when Investigating Reports of Child Abuse**

Findings from the study revealed that many child welfare workers experienced issues when working with clients. Many child welfare workers reported that they experienced complications when investigating reports of child abuse. Participants identified processes they used to assist them with completing investigations.

### **Using Skills and Competencies**

Participants identified competencies as they used specific skills when they experienced challenges while investigating child abuse or maltreatment. Participants reported using skills obtained through on-the-job training and techniques acquired through reviewing agency policies and manuals, to investigate reports of child abuse. Participants described using skills such as: (a) being able to identify children who have been abused, (b) being able to conduct interviews with individuals while being respectful of their culture, (c) ability to work with other community agencies and resources to

ensure the safety and well-being of children, and (d) ability to determine present and future risk of abuse to children. Only five participants identified that they used competencies when assessing and reporting child abuse. Participants reported that some of the competencies they used to detect and report child abuse were acquired from being an experienced child welfare worker. Participants described competencies such as (a) being aware of the indicators of child abuse, (b) understanding strategies to observe, assess, and interview children who have been abused, (c) knowing how to gathering pertinent information to complete an investigation of child abuse, and (d) understanding how to establish a rapport with children who have been identified as victims of child abuse. Direct quotes from participants are listed below:

P2: "I look for signs that may indicate that I child abused. I really focus the behavior of the children during the interview.

P4: "I get on the children's level to try to gain their trust. I try to make them feel comfortable with talking to me."

P7: "I look for signs and use my professional perspective when investigating cases."

P9: "I used on-the-job training that taught me how to interview children." I became better with interviewing children after being on the job for several years."

P13:" I listen very carefully and observe children during interviews to looks for signs of abuse."

### **Observation and Listening**

The participants described that they used techniques when they had a difficult time investigating a suspected case of child abuse. Participants indicated that they used techniques such as observation and listening skills to assist them with investigating child abuse investigations.

P1: "I look for visible signs of abuse. I look for visual and verbal cues, this is something that I learned during training."

P3: "I think outside the box, when I observe and interview children to determine if they are victims of abuse."

P15: "I look for signs of abuse or neglect, according to the agency policies."

Child welfare workers must possess skills that are effective for investigating child abuse. Observation and listening skills impacted the participants' competencies in detecting and reporting cases of child abuse. The use of observation and listening skills increased participants' competencies in detecting and reporting child abuse. Participants' utilized various techniques to assist with determining whether child were abused occurred.

### **Referrals Forensic Interviewing**

Some participants indicated that they investigated several complex cases in which they felt that they were not competent in determining whether child abuse occurred. Four participants indicated that they referred alleged victims to have a forensic evaluation when they were not able to determine whether a child had been abused during their initial assessment. The forensic interviews were completed by mental health professionals.

Participants indicated that such evaluations provided them a more thorough assessment of child abuse by a qualified professional. A few of the direct quotes from participants regarding referrals to forensic evaluation are presented below:

P2: “I schedule children to have a forensic evaluation by a mental health professional when I had a hard time determining whether a child has been abused.”

P5: “I did extensive questioning and also referred children for a forensic interview.”

P12: “If there is not a disclosure of abuse from the child, nor visible signs, I referred children to have a forensic evaluation completed.”

P14: “I referred children to our local child advocacy center for a forensic evaluation.”

Participants reported experiencing incidents in which they believed that they were not competent in detecting and reporting child abuse as a result of the complexity of the cases. Participants indicated that they had to collaborate with other professionals for assistance with complex cases. The inability to detect child abuse during initial assessments with children, negatively impacted the participants’ perceptions of their competencies in detecting child abuse.

### **Additional Training**

All participants reported that they could benefit from additional training to develop and improve their competencies at investigating and reporting child abuse. The participants related that they could benefit from generalized training (training related to

aspects of investigating child abuse) or specialized training. Two participants indicated that they felt that they could benefit from specialized training specifically related to investigating sexual abuse. Four participants felt the need for ongoing training, while employed as a child welfare worker.

### **Competencies and Job Performance**

#### **Positive Impact on Job Performance**

Nine participants reported that their perceptions of their competencies impacts their role as child protection workers. In particular, participants related that their perceptions of competencies had a positive effect on their job performance to investigate child abuse. Themes that emerged that were a positive impact on competencies in job performance were: (a) having experience on the job, and (b) consulting regularly with others that are knowledgeable of the job. Participants 1, 2, 7, and 15 directly spoke of feeling competent with investigating reports of child abuse. Each of the three participants reflected on how they gained competence through their work experiences. Excerpts from the three participants' interviews are presented below:

#### **Job Experience**

P1: I believe that I am very competent when it comes to investigating reports of child abuse. Having the experience with working several cases and consulting regularly with seasoned child protection workers about various aspects of the job has prepared me to work effectively.



P2: I feel confident about my knowledge and ability to investigate child abuse to a certain extent. However, I feel that I am still learning the job, even after having worked in this field for approximately 3 ½ years.

P7: The more experience I had on the job, the more confident I felt about assessing the safety and well-being of children. My confidence in my job performance developed overtime

P15: I was nervous, because I did not know what to anticipate; however, I am a hands on learner, a visual learner, and with interpersonal skills and assessments skills I became more confident after that first call.

### **Consulting with Others**

The theme of consulting others emerged in the responses of several participants. These individuals discussed how limited training and experience sometimes affected their perceptions of their competencies of detecting and reporting child abuse. The participants also discussed that when they doubted their competence, they consulted with more knowledgeable or more experienced individuals. Comments from Participants 6, 14, and 15 below reflect the theme related to consulting with others:

P5: I believe that having a degree in sociology has prepared me to work in this profession and has made me more confident when I make decisions about cases.

P6: I was only employed a child welfare foster care worker for only 10 months. I felt like I had adequate skills and competencies when investigating and reporting child abuse, but I felt I needed more training. I sought consultation from my supervisor when I am unsure of what to do.

P14: When I started the job, I was insecure about my work, I would often take my work home “mentally”, wondering if I made the right decision. After at least 2 years of experience on the job I believed that I was more equipped to investigate cases of child abuse. Being able to consult with my coworkers about cases also helps as well.

### **Poor Perceptions of Competence**

Some participants related that their perceptions of competencies at detecting and reporting abuse negatively impacted their job performance. Participant 10 Indicated: “I do not feel that I was thoroughly trained to perform my job duties as a child welfare worker. I often have to seek advice from others when I am uncertain about things pertaining to cases that I investigate.” Participant 13 replied: I don’t feel like I am really the person to do the job, but I do it. I like to be 100 percent prepared when I do something, and I don’t feel like I completely prepared for this position.

### **Change Needed to Better Equip Child Welfare Workers**

All participants related that there needs to be changes made within child welfare agencies. Participants related that such changes are needed to better equip child welfare workers to detect and report child abuse. Eleven participants (P1, P2, P3,P5, P6, P7, P9, P10, P11, P13, P15) indicated that changes in policies, procedures, or techniques are needed in order to be better equip child welfare workers in the tasks of assessing, detecting, and reporting child abuse or child maltreatment.

### **Increased Supervisor Involvement**

Five participants reported that supervisors of child welfare agencies and other authoritative personnel should accompany child welfare workers when they go out in the field to investigate reports of suspected child abuse. Child welfare workers stated that they are the frontline workers for child abuse investigations, however many thought authoritative personnel should be more engaged in child abuse investigations.

Participants related that supervisors should work with child welfare workers in the field on complex cases, to offer guidance and support when assessing cases of child abuse.

Participant indicated that should notify their supervisors of complex cases that warrant assistance. A few direct quotes are listed below:

P1: “Supervisors should go out with the worker to help with investigations of child abuse.”

P5: “Supervisors need to accompany workers in field on severe cases.”

P14: “Our supervisors need to out with us in the field to help with the complex cases.”

### **Ongoing Training Needed**

Participants reported that child welfare workers needed on-going training related to detecting and reporting child abuse. Four participants related that there needs to continuous training that focuses specifically on the aspects of investigating child abuse. Participants indicated that training needs to include various scenarios that they may

encounter when investigation cases of child abuse. A few quotes from the participants are listed below:

P9: “There needs to be on-going training. You can never stop learning in this job. Each investigation is different.”

P10: “More practical day-to-day training is needed. Training needs to focus more on what you will actually be doing.

P14: “Overall I feel that there is a need for on-going training. Training should be intensive, case specific to the different types of child abuse that child may experience.”

Other comments from participants revealed the need for on-going training for child welfare workers to involve all departments within the child welfare agency, so that workers can be familiar with the entire process (intake thru the completing the investigation) for investigation child abuse. A few of the participant’s direct quotes are listed below:

P13: “It would be helpful to be trained in all of the departments within a child welfare agency. It would for workers to know how the reports were generated during the intake process through the end of the investigation.”

P15: “I think every new employee needs to shadow an employee in all departments, such as intake, child protective services, in-home services, and foster care. This will help employees understand the entire process for investigating child abuse.”

### **Discrepant Cases**

Discrepant data was identified related to what is needed to better equip child welfare workers for investigating and reporting child abuse. There was one discrepancy identified during this study. Participant 13 stated, “Nothing could prepare me for this job”, which was contrary to other participants. This discrepancy in the data was noted and considered as insights regarding this participants perceptive of her professional competencies.

### **Summary**

This chapter presented the major findings of this study. The main themes that emerged from participant interviews were discussed and presented with support from analysis and participants’ quotations. The main themes that were identified were: (a) minimal employee training and education, (b) challenges at detecting and reporting abuse, (c) utilizing processes for complications when investigation reports of child abuse, (d) competencies and job performance, ,and (e) change needed to better quip child welfare workers. The themes identified were all related to the participants’ perceptions of their competence at reporting and investigating cases of child abuse. Participants felt less competent when assessing and reporting cases of child abuse as a result of minimal training and education. The challenges of detecting and reporting child abuse resulted in: (a) participants feeling that they were not successful with advocating for children, (b) participants believing that they were not capable of receiving expected outcomes, (c) feelings of lack of accomplishment and (d) participants feeling that they were not able to complete their job assignments effectively, and in a timely manner.

More than half of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P5, P6, P7, P12, and P15) indicated that they either utilized skills or competencies when they had difficulty determining whether a report of child abuse was valid or invalid. All participants perceived that there is a need for either additional training, on-going training, or amendments to policies and procedures to enhance child welfare workers ability to assess and report child abuse. In addition, some participants expressed the need for supervisors to accompany child welfare worker in the field to offer guidance and support on complex cases. The majority of the participants felt that their perceptions about the lack of competency, impacted their job performance. The findings revealed that as participants gained more experience and guidance in investigating and reporting cases of child abuse, they became more confident about performing their roles as child welfare workers.

The following chapter provides an explanation of these findings as it compares to peer-reviewed literature related to this study. An analysis and interpretation of the findings in the context of theoretical framework will be provided in this following chapter. Limitations, and recommendations for further research will also be discussed. In addition, the chapter will provide implications of social change.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### **Introduction**

In this study I examined child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies at detecting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placements. The following research question was addressed: *What are child welfare workers perceptions of their competencies in identifying and assessing child abuse of foster children in out-of-home foster care placements?* Participants identified how their perceptions of their competencies impacted their role as a child welfare worker, and they provided insight on what they believe is needed to better equip child welfare workers to perform their roles.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

Most of the findings of this study were consistent with findings from the studies that I identified in the literature review in Chapter 2. The following five major themes emerged from this study: (a) minimal employee training and education, (b) challenges at detecting and reporting abuse, (c) utilizing processes for complications when investigation reports of child abuse, (d) competencies and job performance, and (e) change needed to better equip child welfare workers.

### **Minimal Employee Training and Education**

Several participants indicated that they had minimal training on how to investigate reports of child abuse. The lack of training resulted in participants feeling less competent in being able to detect and report child abuse. The theme regarding minimal aligns with results from a study conducted by Raman et al. (2014). Data from Raman et al.'s study revealed that child protective workers and other health workers revealed the

following gaps in practice pertaining to the assessment of child maltreatment: (a) knowledge and recognition of physical abuse/neglect as well as (b) procedures and protocols for detecting and reporting child abuse. The gaps in practice were related to the lack of training. Results from this study regarding minimal training also aligns with results findings from a Douglas et al. (2015) study which revealed that child welfare agencies' failed to provide child protection workers with training pertaining to identifying risk factors of maltreatment and fatalities related to maltreatment. Minimal training resulted in participants perceiving that they were not capable of effectively detecting and reporting child abuse.

### **Experiencing Challenges of Detecting and Reporting Child Abuse**

Some study participants reported encountering challenges on the job when investigating reports of child abuse. Several participants discussed challenges such as being overwhelmed with job responsibilities due to agencies being understaffed and agency time restraints. Participants reported that the challenges they experienced impacted their ability to effectively investigate reports of child abuse. Participants perceived that they were not capable accurately of detect and report child abuse. The themes of feeling overwhelmed and agency time restraints coincides with results from a study by Radey and Schelbe's (2017), which revealed that workers felt rushed for time to complete child abuse investigations, due to agency time restraints. Radey and Schelbe indicated that agency time restraints affected child welfare workers' ability to provide comprehensive safety assessments of alleged cases of child abuse.



Additional challenges discussed by participants in this particular study, that was not noted in literature reviewed were (a) uncooperative caregivers, (b) uncooperative children, and (c) frequent delays in court process when advocating for the removal of children deemed to be unsafe placements. These challenges resulted in participants feeling a lack of accomplishment with successfully completing their job assignments, and less competent in being able to advocate for children that were victims of abuse. The study's results relate to findings from literature reviewed pertaining to perceptions of competencies in identifying and reporting child abuse. Previous literature indicated that performance accomplishment has a direct impact on individual's self-efficacy (e.g. Chan, 2015; Oetker-Black & Kreye, 2015; Pasupathy & Bogschutz, 2013; Tompkins, 2013; Warren & Hale, 2015; Williams et al., 2016). The lack of accomplishments the participants experienced resulted in the lowered perceptions of competencies.

### **Issues when Investigating Reports of Child Abuse**

Participants indicated that they use their competencies when they experience issues with investigating cases of child abuse. The use of competencies when investigating cases of child abuse is related to Pecora et al.'s (2013) study. Pecora et al. indicated that effective safety and risk assessment skills are essential for child abuse investigations. Pecora et al. related that effective safety and risk assessment skills enable child welfare workers to process and promote critical analysis of information obtained during the assessment process (Pecora et al., 2013). Pecora et al. stated that child welfare workers to have competent assessments and decision making, to able to detect child abuse. The participants discussed using observation skills to identify signs and behaviors

related to abuse and listening for indications of abuse during interviews with children. Participants reported that when they often referred children to have forensic evaluations, for further assessment, to determine whether a child has been a victim of child abuse. Although the use of forensic referrals for forensic evaluations reported by the participants was not identified during a review of previous literature, this data provided insight referencing techniques incorporated by child welfare workers, when having difficulty determining whether a report of abuse is valid or invalid.

### **Additional Training**

Findings from this study revealed that nearly all participants indicated that they believed that they could benefit from additional training to improve their competencies in investigating and reporting child abuse. Findings from this study, related to literature reviewed from Davies (2014) and Raman et al. (2014), which indicated that child welfare worker's displayed poor practices pertaining to recognizing, reporting, and investigating child abuse. Davies and Raman et al. related that child welfare workers needed additional training.

Findings from this study also confirmed findings from a study where Cabiati (2017) investigated what strategies child welfare workers needed to improve their competencies in assessing and reporting cases of child abuse. Cabiati concluded that child welfare workers reported the need to (a) improve competencies in assessing and report child abuse, (b) improve assessment skills, and (c) increase their knowledge of innovative strategies for working with children who are identified as victims of child abuse.

## **Competencies and Job Performance**

All participants reported that their perceptions of their professional skills and competencies impacts their role as a child protection worker. Participants reported feeling competent in detecting and reporting child abuse because of (a) having on the job experience and (b) consulting regularly with others that are knowledgeable of the job. Responses reported by the participants regarding their perceptions of competencies confers with the findings from literature reviewed. Participants in this study reported that their job experience and education positively impacted their job performances, which coincides with studies conducted by Chan (2015); Oetker-Black and Kreye (2015), and Tompkins (2013). The researchers indicated that participants' reported that their education and work experience related to their job, made them belief that they were better equipped to perform their role (Chan, 2015; Oetker-Black & Kreye, 2015; Thompson, 2013). This study and studies conducted by Chan, Oetker-Black and Kreye, and Thompson confirmed that higher levels of self-efficacy can produce better outcomes in work performance.

Some participants' responses revealed how their perceptions of their professional competencies negatively their ability to detect and report child abuse. Comments from P10 and P13 revealed that their perceptions of their competencies made them feel as if they were not able to complete their job assignments. Participants reported having a lack of training pertaining to child abuse investigated negatively impacted their performances on the job.

### **Changes Needed to Better Equip Child Welfare Workers**

Participants reported that there are changes needed to better equip them to assess, detect, and report child abuse. Several participants related that it would be beneficial for child welfare workers to be accompanied by their supervisors or other authoritative personnel while in the field. Participants reported that having additional support while in the field could offer support and guidance during child abuse investigations. Findings from this study were related to findings from Putman et al.'s (2013) study which revealed that that child protection workers need improvement in regards to detecting child abuse. In addition, findings from this study relate to the results of Camasson & Jagannathan's (2014) study where the results revealed that child protective service workers need to implement strategies to improve proper identification of maltreatment cases. The findings from this study provide knowledge regarding what child welfare workers believe is needed for better equipping them to perform their roles.

### **Theoretical Framework and Finding Interpretations**

The findings from my study supported the premises of theoretical framework of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory. Self-efficacy, a major aspect of social learning was used to guide the research. Self-efficacy relates to a person's perceptions of his or her ability to successfully complete a task (Bandura, 1977). Bandura's (1977a, 1977b, 1986) social learning theory posits that individuals who have high expectations of their ability to perform a given task tend to produce a high performance on that task. Contrarily, individuals who have low or unrealistic expectations of their ability to accomplish a task may have difficulty accomplishing that task. Overall, participants in

this study revealed that their perceptions of self-efficacy in detecting and reporting child abuse, impacted their ability to investigate cases of child abuse. In this study work experience, and being able to consult with peers, positively affected child welfare workers' perceptions of self-efficacy. Findings from this study support the premises of mastery experience, verbal persuasion, and vicarious learning.

The participants identified components of self-efficacy that confirms Bandura's (1977) aspect of self-efficacy. The participants described experiences of verbal persuasion. Verbal persuasions includes verbal messages from teachers and peers that can enhance or weaken an individual's beliefs of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Studies conducted by Bakker & Derks, 2016; Consiglio et al., 2016; Meissner et al., 2013; Smith & Day, 2015; Tims et al. 2016, which concluded that a strong sense of self-efficacy could enhance job performance, because individuals who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to perform task-related effort and will follow through with the task longer. The participants revealed themes such as: professional experience, and consulting with peers, contributed to high levels of self-efficacy among. Professional experience supports the premises of mastery experience, and consulting with peers supports the premises of verbal persuasion. Competency and confidence made participants believe that they were capable of investigating and reporting cases of child abuse.

Adequate training in investigating child abuse supports the premises of vicarious experiences. Participants in this study discussed how training related to investigating and reporting child abuse, impacted their competencies. The lack of adequate training

negatively impacted many of the participants' perceptions of their competencies, in regards to reporting and investigating cases of child abuse. These findings confirms the results of Meissner et al, (2013) study that concluded that experience and training enhanced social workers' confidence, and the lack of training can decreased social worker's confidence in performing their role.

Studies conducted by Bakker & Derks, 2016; Consiglio et al., 2016; Meissner et al., 2013; Smith & Day, 2015; Tims et al. 2016; concluded that a strong sense of self-efficacy could enhance job performance. Findings from this study relates to studies conducted by Bakker & Derks, 2016; Consiglio et al., 2016; Meissner et al., 2013; Smith & Day, 2015; Tims et al. 2016. Participants reported that the more experience they had with investigating child abuse, the more competent they were with making efforts to effectively investigate child abuse. Individuals who perceive themselves as competent are more likely to perform task-related effort and will follow through with the task longer. Findings from this study aligns with results from Tims et al. (2013) study which showed that an individual with low self-efficacy is more likely to discontinue their efforts in performance, which may result in poor outcomes (Tims et al., 2013). The participants who reported low-self efficacy insinuated that they did not believe that they would remain employed as a child welfare worker much longer, as they did not believe that they were prepared to effectively do their jobs.

### **Limitations of the Study**

There were limitations with the findings of this study. The first limitation is that policies and procedures pertaining to child protection services vary among states. This

study only consisted of participants from child welfare agencies in Alabama and Mississippi. Selecting participants from only two states could limit transferability.

The second limitation is the sample size. Fifteen child welfare workers were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their professional competencies or self-efficacy at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placements. The sample size may have limited the breadth of information obtained from study, which may affect transferability of results to other populations.

A third limitation is the use of a generic qualitative approach. Generic qualitative allows researchers to study participants' ideas or perspectives about an issue (Bellamy et al., 2016). Selected participants may have difficulty articulating their thoughts and feelings about their competencies, which may make it difficult for this researcher to interpret their perceptions. Participants' inability to provide information pertaining to the research question, may result in a lack of pertinent data being shared (Johnson et al., 2017).

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the limitations of this study, future research should be conducted to include participants from various demographic locations and include a larger sample size. Demographic areas may vary in culture. Research on various demographic locations and a larger sample size may provide different perspectives in regards to competencies at investigating child abuse. This research could be a replication of my qualitative study, and cover multiple demographic areas which will create a larger sample size.

In the future, a quantitative research should explore the perceptions of other individuals, including child welfare agency supervisors, which may provide additional perspectives in regards to child welfare workers competencies at investigating and reporting child abuse of children in foster care and out-of-home placements. Data should be collected by conducted semi-structured interviews with child welfare agency supervisors. A phenomenological study could be used to allow participants to share experiences related to the supervision of child welfare workers who are assigned to investigate cases of child abuse.

Future research can be conducted by incorporating the use of a quantitative study. A quantitative study may allow the research to reach a higher sample size, possibly by the use of surveys to obtain data from child welfare workers in regards to their perceptions of their competencies at investigating and reporting cases of child abuse. This qualitative study would differ from my qualitative study in which it would quantify opinions, and attitudes, from a large sample size. A larger sample size may produce variations in data pertaining to competencies of child welfare workers.

## **Implications**

### **Implications for Social Change**

Implications of this study for positive social change. Reviewing the perceptions of child welfare workers, revealed factors that impact their competencies in regards to detecting and investigation cases of suspected child abuse. Findings from this study highlighted what enhances child welfare workers' competencies at investigating reports of child abuse. Child welfare workers reported that consulting with other experienced



professionals, made them feel more competent at investigating child abuse. Consulting with other experienced professional could be a practice that is implemented by all child welfare agencies to. Consulting with other experienced professional could provide additional support to child welfare workers, which could enhance their ability to detect and report child abuse.

This study highlighted areas where changes are needed within child welfare agencies. Participants reported: (a) a need for improving training related to investigating child abuse to better equip workers, (b) a need of on-going training, (c) the need to update policy and procedures regularly to ensure that child welfare workers are working consistency with ongoing societal changes related to child abuse, and (d) the need for increased supervisor involvement. Improving training, on-going training, updating policy and procedures regularly, and can promote social change by advocating for the need to increase awareness for best practices for child welfare workers who investigate child abuse. Results pertaining to the need for increased supervisor involvement can advocate the need for more support for child welfare workers who are investigating reports of child abuse.

### **Methodological Implications**

The methodological implication of this study is that an in-depth illustration of child welfare workers' perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting abuse of children in foster care was accomplished. With proper training, resources, and alleviations of challenges; child welfare workers' competencies could be enhanced. The

methodological implication of this study was achieved from the participants of the study by incorporating Colaizzi's (1978) seven step analysis process to analyze the data.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Participants in this study shared their perspectives of what is needed to better equip child welfare workers with tools for effectively detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse. The insights shared by participants in this study can provide insight on the training needed to better equip child welfare workers to perform their roles.

Recommendations for practice would be to enhance training, and policies, and to better equip child welfare workers. It is recommended that child welfare agencies provide child welfare workers with: (a) on-going training for child welfare workers, (b) training that involves learning all departments within the child welfare agency, (c) training that informs all forms of child abuse. Policies should require more supervisors accompanying child welfare workers in the field when investigating complex cases, for guidance and support. This study's findings can also identify the need for advocating to improve the quality of training for investigating and reporting cases of child abuse. Advocating for enhancing policies and procedures among child welfare agencies is essential for improved outcomes in regards to safety and well-being of children in foster care settings.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to examine child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies at detecting and reporting abuse of foster children during out-of-home placement. Examining child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies and how their perceptions of the professional competencies impacted

their role as a child welfare worker was informative. Child welfare workers reported that the lack of training, and challenges; made them feel less competent in reporting and investigating cases of child abuse. Studying child welfare workers' perceptions of their competencies, has provided findings that furthered the knowledge in this area of practice. The results of this study may provide insight to training that is needed to better equip child welfare workers for investigating and reporting child abuse in foster care placements, or child abuse in general. This knowledge may also advocate for the need to enhance child welfare agencies' policies and procedures pertaining to investigating and reporting child abuse.

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## Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

**VOLUNTEERS WANTED FOR A RESEARCH STUDY****Child Welfare Workers' Perceptions of their Competencies at Reporting Abuse of Foster Children**

- Are you a current or former child welfare worker (employed as a child welfare worker within the last 2 years)?
- Do you have a minimum of a bachelor's degree in social service related field
- Are you current (employed with an agency within the last two years) child welfare worker (Individuals who are responsible for protecting and advocating for the welfare of children and adolescents) from child welfare agency in Southern Alabama or Southern Mississippi?
- Are you or were you responsible for investigating reports of child maltreatment of children placed in foster care?

I am conducting a study regarding child welfare worker's perceptions of their professional competencies at detecting, assessing, and reporting child abuse and I would like your input.

You will be invited to participate in an interview in-person. The interview will entail questions pertaining to your perceptions of your competencies in detecting, assessing, and reporting child maltreatment.

Your participation in the study, may help with identifying the need for additional training that would equip child welfare workers with the tools they need to effectively identify and report child abuse.

You will also receive a \$15 gift card at the conclusion of the interview process.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact:  
Shameka Manigault @xxxxxxx or via email @ xxxxxxxx.

## Appendix B: Demographic Information Form

1. Participant ID: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: \_\_\_\_\_  
E-mail: \_\_\_\_\_
2. Highest level of education completed? \_\_\_\_\_
3. Do you have any degrees or certifications? \_\_\_\_\_ If so, please describe.
4. Have you received training to be a child welfare worker? If so, please describe.
5. Number of years as a child welfare worker: \_\_\_\_\_
6. What region (Southern Alabama or Southern Mississippi) are you employed as a child welfare worker?
7. Gender
8. Age range

## Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. How long have you been working as a child welfare worker?
2. Describe your responsibilities as a child welfare worker.
3. Tell me about the training and education you received in the areas of child abuse detection and reporting.
4. Tell me about challenges that you may have experienced in regards to investigating and reporting child abuse.
5. Tell me about a time that you had difficulty determining whether a report of child abuse or maltreatment was valid or invalid
  - a. What skills or competencies did you use to make the determination?
  - b. Thinking back on the situation, what skills or competencies do you think might have led to a more successful evaluation of the situation?
6. Describe the skills and competencies that you currently use when investigating and reporting child abuse or maltreatment.
7. What additional training would you like to have in order to develop or improve your professional skills and competencies at investigating and reporting child abuse or maltreatment?
8. How do your perceptions of your professional skills and competencies of investigating and reporting child abuse affect you in your role as child welfare worker?
9. Tell me your perspectives on the changes policies, procedures, or techniques that could potentially be implemented to better equip child welfare workers (within local child welfare agencies) in their roles of assessing, detecting, and reporting child abuse and child maltreatment?
10. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me about your perceptions of your competencies at detecting and reporting cases of child abuse or child maltreatment?

#### Appendix D: Self-Evaluation Tool to Reduce Researcher Bias

1. Have I acknowledged that my position in the study is the researcher?
2. Have I considered how my prior experiences and assumptions may influence the research?
3. Am I aware of my own responses to the data that was collected during interviews?
4. Have I considered how my responses to the data collected may influence the results of the research?
5. Have I taken into consideration that there may be differences in my culture and the cultures of the participants?
6. Have I allowed sufficient time between interviews to reflect on the information obtained from the interviews?

I will complete this assessment throughout the research process to reduce bias. In the event that bias is noted during the research, I plan to document bias in a journal which allow me to set the issue aside, so that I am able to focus on the responses of the participants.



## Appendix E: Debriefing Tool

### Debriefing process

- 1) Participants will be thanked for participating in the study.
- 2) Participants will be given the opportunity to withdraw the use of the audio recording of their interview.
- 3) Participants will have the opportunity to withdraw from the study all together.
- 4) Participants will have an opportunity to request the results of the study.
- 5) Participants and will be advised to contact me if they would like a follow-up conversation regarding the study.