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Social Work Practice with Older Adults

Carley Yvonne Vailu'u
Walden University

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Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

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Carley Vailuu

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
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Review Committee

Dr. Sean Hogan, Committee Chairperson, Social Work and Human Services Faculty
Dr. Takeisha George, Committee Member, Social Work and Human Services Faculty
Dr. Alice Yick, University Reviewer, Social Work and Human Services Faculty

Chief Academic Officer
Eric Riedel, Ph.D.

Walden University
2018

Abstract

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by

Carley Yvonne Vailu'u

MSW, California State University, Fullerton, 2013

BS, California State University, Fullerton, 2006

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

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Abstract

Social workers working for adult protective services (APS) face many clinical challenges to ensure the safety and well-being of older adult clients. APS social workers often interact with older adults who engage in self-neglecting behaviors that compromise their ability to function in a healthy and independent manner. The purpose of this research study was to explore challenges in direct social work practice to identify how APS services can be improved when working with the older adult population, particularly individuals who engage in hoarding behaviors. Using action research methodology, 2 focus groups were conducted to explore the experiences and knowledge of social workers who are trained in APS and in-home supportive services programs and work directly with the older adult hoarding population when investigating cases of self-neglect. The theoretical framework of cognitive behavioral theory guided the analysis of focus group data to provide insights into understanding the core manifestations of hoarding and how social workers working with this population can provide appropriate services. The overall findings of the study resulted in identifying improvements to APS service interventions. Study findings inform recommendations that allow APS social workers to effectively work with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors, while also advancing professional development in the field of social work. Understanding practice challenges to appropriately serve older adults that exhibit hoarding behaviors is essential in effecting positive social change in the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged older adults, APS agencies, and communities.

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Dedication

This action research study is dedicated, with love, to my family.

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Throughout my journey in graduate school I have received an incredible amount of support and encouragement from many individuals. While my support system as a whole has continuously given me strength and motivation, I would like to thank several people individually for their contribution to my personal and academic development.

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In closing, it is with great anticipation that I move forward from this journey with my family and friends to support them as they experience the next chapters of their lives and achieve their greatest dreams, but for this chapter of my life, I am forever grateful for the support of everyone to achieve mine.

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Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Adult protective service (APS) social workers are faced with various challenging situations involving older adults, many of which include cases of self-neglect due to hoarding behaviors (Sommerfeld, Henderson, Snider, & Aarons, 2014). APS agencies are often charged to investigate and mitigate cases of self-neglect; however, factors such as limited research, funding, and wide definitional service variations have contributed to a lack of targeted and effective intervention methods available to APS workers (Ernst et al., 2014). Research has indicated that hoarding behaviors are more prevalent among the older adult population and can result in dangerous consequences to individual safety and well-being (Kim, Steketee, & Frost, 2001). In efforts to improve social work practice knowledge and assist APS social workers to better serve the older adult hoarding population, this study used an action research methodology to identify practice challenges among social workers when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors.

This section includes, (a) the problem statement; purpose statement, including variables and key terms; (b) nature of the project; significance of the study, including practice advancement, significance to social work, and implications for social change, (c) a theoretical framework review; and (d) the relationship of this study to social work values and ethics.

Problem Statement

APS agencies are designed to investigate various forms of elder and dependent adult abuse, including abuse from perpetrators and individual cases of self-neglect (Roepke-Buehler & Dong, 2015). In response to reports of alleged abuse received from

family and community members, social workers are tasked to investigate and, if necessary, intervene and attempt to resolve these cases (Roepke-Buehler & Dong, 2015). According to Teaster and Otto (2006), the majority of reported APS elder abuse cases are allegations of elder self-neglect, characterized as the unwillingness or inability of an adult aged 65 or older to ensure adequate resources are in place to maintain independence and safety (Dyer, Pickens, & Burnett, 2007).

Hoarding situations present significantly challenging cases of elder self-neglect faced by social work professionals (Kutame, 2008). Hoarding behavior can impact individuals of all ages; however, in a sample of 742 community-based participants, it was found that hoarding was 4% more prominent among older age groups in comparison to younger counterparts, suggesting that hoarding behavior occurs more frequently among the older adult population (Samuels et al., 2008). The characterization of hoarding is identified as the process of acquiring and failing to discard possessions that cover areas of a home, resulting in impairment or significant distress (Frost & Hristova, 2011).

Hoarding behaviors can lead to substantial negative impacts on the individual that is hoarding and the broader community. For example, the accumulation of objects and clutter in the homes of individuals that hoard may create various problems such as mold, infestation, increased falls, lack of sanitation, fire hazards, and structural dangers (Steketee, Schmalisch, Dierberger, DeNobel, & Frost, 2012). As a result, individuals that hoard, as well as members of the community, are potentially exposed to serious health problems and threats to personal safety (Steketee et al., 2012).

Tolin, Frost, Steketee, Gray and Fitch (2008) conducted a study in which 864 individuals who hoard and 665 family members of individuals who hoard were surveyed to determine the impacts of hoarding on economic and social outcomes. Results indicated that chronic hoarding was associated with increased work impairments and serious medical concerns (Tolin et al., 2008). Furthermore, 12% of participants indicated that, as a result of their hoarding behavior, they were evicted or threatened with an eviction and approximately 3% experienced a child or older adult being removed from the home due to hoarding (Tolin et al., 2008). This reflects the significant public health burden caused by hoarding behavior in terms of poor physical health, increased social service involvement, housing challenges, and occupational impairments (Tolin et al., 2008).

Although self-neglect among elder adults is a widespread concern, it remains a problem that is poorly understood (Pavlou & Lachs, 2008). Self-neglect cases reported to social service agencies are rising and will continue to do so as the older adult population grows (Mardan, Hamid, Redzuan, & Ibrahim, 2014; Teaster, 2002). When focusing on hoarding as a form of self-neglect, Brown and Pain (2014) identified that, in the field of social work, there continues to be limited clarity regarding how to adequately address cases of hoarding and its subsequent and resultant problems. Although social workers are frequently in contact with individuals in the community that hoard, there is limited evidence regarding the effect of social work practice interventions (Brown & Pain, 2014).

As the aging population continues to increase dramatically, many APS social workers will encounter hoarding situations involving older adults; however, there is not a clear consensus among clinical social work practitioners as to most efficacious treatment

for this client population (Braye, Orr, & Preston-Shoot, 2013). As a result, to improve social work services, it is critical to identify practice challenges that will assist APS social workers when addressing cases of older adult self-neglect due to hoarding behavior (Burnett et al., 2014).

Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Older adults receiving APS provision are a diverse client population based on such characteristics as age, gender, ethnicity and culture, and physical and psychological capacity. Self-neglecting behaviors displayed by individuals with cognitive impairments that limit an individual's ability to care for themselves adequately may be considered a differentially-affected group (Naik, Lai, Kunik, & Dyer, 2008). Practice interventions for such individuals may differ as they may require an extensive assessment of capacity, resulting in alternative interventions, such as guardianship, to ensure their well-being (Pavlou & Lachs, 2008).

APS social workers who investigate cases of older adult self-neglect conduct in-depth investigations for allegations of suspected abuse involving professional functions considered to be extensive and complex (Bourassa, 2009). However, due to diverse knowledge and experiences, APS social workers may present with differing perspectives regarding practice challenges when working with older adult hoarders. Some examples of diversity include varying training experiences with the older adult population, differences in education as not all APS social workers are degreed social workers, and length of work tenure in the field of APS resulting varying practice experiences (Bergeron, 2002; Daly, Jogerst, Haigh, Leeney, & Dawson, 2005).

As there continues to be a lack of research efforts regarding self-neglecting behaviors among older adults, the issue of self-neglect remains a poorly understood problem (Lachs, Williams, O'Brien, & Pillemer, 2002). The purpose of this study was to apply action research methodology to explore social work practice challenges when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. This study is important to the field of social work as it identifies social work practice challenges and improvements to enhance professional knowledge that will better serve older adults who hoard and the communities in which they reside. The practice focused research questions are, (a) What are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders; and (b) How can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors?

Key Terms

Adult protective services. Adult protective services is defined as preventative activities performed on behalf of elder adults who are lacking adequate basic needs, deprived of entitlement, exploited, unable to protect their personal interests, or are harmed, threatened, caused physical or mental injury as a result of the action or inaction of another individual or their on action due to ignorance, incompetence, mental limitations, substance use, poor health, or illiteracy. (State of California Health and Human Services Agency [CAHHS], 2013, p. 14).

Case. A case is defined as what is created if a report falls within APS service jurisdiction and is assigned to an APS social worker and supervisor for a follow-up investigation (CAHHS, 2013).

Confirmed. Confirmed refers to a decision made after completion of an investigation accompanied with credible information indicating abuse occurred or likely occurred (CAHHS, 2013).

Hoarding. Hoarding disorder is defined as a perceived need to save items and difficulty discarding or parting with saved belongings (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). As a result, excessive accumulation of possessions, regardless of value, occurs (APA, 2013).

In-home supportive services. In-home supportive services are defined as a social service assistance program that provides personal and/or domestic caregiving services to those eligible aged, blind, or disabled and are unable to remain safely in their own home without assistance (State of California Department of Social Services, 2016).

Investigation. Investigation refers to an activity that takes place to determine the validity of an elder or dependent abuse report (CAHHS, 2013).

Older adult. An elder or older adult is defined as an individual 65 years of age or older (CAHHS, 2013).

Self-neglect. Self-neglect is defined as the failure of an elder adult to satisfy basic needs such as water, food, personal care, shelter, and/or medical care or a failure to protect themselves from health and safety hazards due to impaired cognitive functioning, mental limitations, substance abuse, or chronic poor health (CAHHS, 2013).

Rationale for Study

Although many individuals are able to maintain a high quality of life throughout their older adult years, some face serious and consequential challenges in later life that place them at risk for self-neglect, resulting in APS involvement (Vincent & Velkoff, 2010). In contrast to child welfare agencies, the federal government has not played a strong role in funding or structuring APS agencies, resulting in agency service variations, perceptions of an underdeveloped knowledge base, and a lack of evidence-based intervention tools (Sommerfeld et al., 2014). As a result, this lack of support has limited APS staff members and agencies to ensure the provision of current and future high-quality practice interventions (United States Government Accountability Office, 2011).

In the field of APS services, issues of hoarding and unsanitary environments are some of the most prevalent forms of self-neglect in APS cases (Sommerfeld et al., 2014). When addressing these cases, APS social workers face various challenges to providing effective practice interventions among older adults who hoard (Brown & Pain, 2014). In response, this doctoral study identified practice challenges and barriers to improvement faced by social workers when addressing cases of self-neglect in the form of hoarding, and, as a result, determined how social work practices can be improved in APS service provision among older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors.

Nature of the Project

Action research is a methodology that allows for collaboration and participation between a researcher and community constituents to address one or more problems (Berg, 2009). This form of research is applied in efforts to improve practices using

action, analysis, and evaluation of collected data (Berg, 2009). Action research methodology was used to explore and understand challenges faced by clinical social work practitioners working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. The focus of the study was to identify how APS social work practice can be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. To explore areas of practice improvement, the study examined the experiences and perspectives of social workers trained to work interchangeably in APS and in-home supportive services (IHSS) programs, which both provide direct services to older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors in Riverside County, California. Action research was an appropriate research method for this project given its focus on eliciting information and solutions to community and agency-based problems directly from study participants.

Data were collected from two focus groups. The panels were made up of four to seven social workers who work in either APS or IHSS programs and are exposed to older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Information gathered from focus group participants involved topics such as professional experiences working with older adults with hoarding behaviors, case management methods, current service interventions, and associated barriers to service provision. Data was gathered through digital recording. Interview findings were transcribed verbatim. Collected data were evaluated to determine the strengths, weaknesses, and perceived effectiveness of current intervention practices used by social work practitioners working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors.

Significance of the Study

Practice Advancement

According to Susman, Lees, and Fulmer (2015), existing research that explored the problem of elder abuse and neglect suggests the need for improved intervention methods. Furthermore, Dauenhauer, Mayer, and Mason (2007) indicated there is limited research regarding the evaluation of APS social worker efforts such as investigation, triage, intervention, and service planning. To advance social work practice knowledge, I explored the experiences and perceptions of social workers providing direct practice services to self-neglecting older adults in the form of hoarding and, as a result, identified how APS social work practices can be improved when working with this unique client population.

Significance to Social Work

According to Susman et al. (2015), the global magnitude of elder abuse is increasing, making the urgency to conduct intervention and prevention studies in the areas of elder abuse an important issue. However, due to the allocation of funding and resources towards more recognized public health concerns, effective interventions to prevent elder abuse are limited and the issue of elder abuse and neglect remains an under addressed public health problem (Bonnie & Wallace, 2003). Henderson (2011) indicated that without standardized risk assessment approaches and intervention methods with measurable outcomes, it is foreseeable that APS agencies will maintain a disadvantage in stable funding and opportunities for growth. As the current study identified challenges in direct social work practice when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding

behaviors, research outcomes may serve as a vital component in the enhancement of APS agency service practices, as well as inform policymakers about the value and effectiveness of APS programs.

Implications for Social Change

Daly et al. (2005) suggested social work professionals agree that APS agencies face challenges in meeting service demands due to the lack of available resources to address the complex needs of older adults. Additionally, there have been limited research efforts to advance the knowledge of professionals regarding the collaborative efforts between social and public service agencies to mitigate APS cases (Daly et al., 2005). In a study conducted by Balaswamy (2002), APS agencies and community agencies were asked to rate their level of satisfaction regarding working in a collaborative partnership to address APS cases. Results indicated that the more efforts workers from community agencies allocated toward APS cases, their levels of satisfaction with the APS system decreased, whereas APS worker's levels of satisfaction were dependent on the accessibility and cooperation of agencies (Balaswamy, 2002). This suggests the need for improved interagency collaboration among APS agencies and community partners.

Neglect or avoidance of excessive hoarding poses significant risks to the community and threatens the individual quality of life among older adults (due to deterioration in areas of physical and mental health and safety) so increased attention from researchers and APS social workers is required (Kim et al., 2001). The focus of this study on identifying practice challenges to appropriately serve older adults who exhibit

hoarding behaviors is essential in effecting positive social change within the lives of vulnerable and disadvantaged older adults, APS agencies, and communities.

Theoretical Framework

To better understand challenges and limitations to current social work practice and how social work practitioners can better serve older adults who self-neglect in the form of hoarding behavior, I used cognitive behavioral theory as a theoretical foundation. Key concepts of cognitive behavioral theory were applied to provide insights into understanding the core manifestations of hoarding and how social workers working with this population can provide appropriate services.

From a historical viewpoint, Freud (1908) theorized that hoarding was considered a part of an *anal triad* composed of orderliness, obstinacy, and parsimony. Fromm (1947) later indicated that hoarding was the behavior of individuals acquiring possessions to relate to the world that surrounds them. More recently, concepts from a cognitive behavioral theoretical viewpoint regarding compulsive hoarding behavior indicate that manifestations of hoarding behavior develop due to conditioned emotional responses that are related to thoughts and beliefs about possessions (Grisham & Barlow, 2005).

Prominent key theorists Frost and Steketee (1998) formulated a multidimensional perspective to hoarding by suggesting that various deficits contribute to hoarding behavior, including

- Information processing deficits such as problems maintaining focus and difficulty categorizing belongings.

- Maladaptive beliefs about and attachment to belongings such as emotional attachments, poor memory, responsibility to belongings and need for control over belongings.
- Emotional distress and or avoidance, including psychological responses such as anxiety or grief about misplacing belongings, resulting in avoidance in the form of acquiring and saving belongings.

Although many theories provide a presumed understanding of behavior, details regarding psychological processes remain absent. Cognitive behavioral theory commonly incorporates psychological aspects associated with dysfunctional behavior, therefore, providing improved insight regarding additional precipitating factors associated with hoarding (Grisham & Barlow, 2005).

Beck is recognized as the founder of cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), an intervention method developed to assist individuals in recognizing dysfunctional thoughts to promote rational thinking (Neziroglu, Bubrick, & Yaryura-Tobias, 2004). CBT is identified as a promising treatment for hoarding and is widely used by practitioners to treat various psychiatric disorders associated with hoarding behaviors such as anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and depression (Tolin, Frost, Steketee, & Muroff, 2015).

Cognitive behavioral theory was applied as the theoretical foundation of the study to address the research questions. Since CBT is the dominant practice paradigm among professional social workers working with older adult hoarders (Steketee, Frost, Tolin, Rasmussen, & Brown, 2010), cognitive behavioral theory was informative towards my understanding of practice challenges, as well as how APS social work practice can be

improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Using cognitive behavioral theory to understand the practical underpinnings to working with hoarding behavior will benefit social work practitioners in identifying, and possibly reconciling, clinical practice challenges in working with older adult hoarders.

Values and Ethics

According to the National Association of Social Workers' code of ethics, the social work profession maintains the mission of ensuring that basic human needs of all people are met and to enhance the overall well-being of individuals and society (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). As I addressed practice challenges for APS social workers when investigating cases of confirmed self-neglect involving older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors, it was essential to uphold the standards of the NASW code of ethics by applying ethical principles and core values of the profession used to drive social work practice (NASW, 2008). The NASW (2008) code of ethics indicates that ethical behavior is not guaranteed by an ethical code, nor can all ethical issues be resolved by the code of ethics. However, the code can serve as a standard of practice that professionals aspire to and follow (NASW, 2008). As this study involved social workers who are frequently in contact with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors as focus group participants, it encourages social workers to maintain an ethical standard of volunteering their professional abilities in efforts to advance social work practice research.

The NASW (2008) identifies competence as an ethical principle that requires social workers to continually increase their professional knowledge. This study aimed to

improve competence among social workers when working with older adults with hoarding behaviors by utilizing information gathered from the study to contribute to the knowledge base of APS social work professionals. Improved competence among clinical social work practitioners also enhances and supports the integrity of the profession, ensuring that practices are evidence based and delivered in the most efficacious manner possible.

Through this study I also aimed to uphold the social work value of social justice by creating positive social change through exploring current practice challenges in addressing the significant social problem of hoarding among older adults that exists in the community and by representing the underserved and vulnerable population of older adults who hoard, including those diagnosed with hoarding disorder and other related disorders. As a result, I identified improvements to service interventions among APS social workers in efforts to evoke positive change in the lives of individuals and the community.

A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature

The process and steps involved in completing the literature review included identifying published articles relevant to the social work problem that strongly focused on older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors and social work interventions with this population. Databases used to conduct the literature review included PsycINFO, SocINDEX, PsycARTICLES, MEDLINE, and PsycTHERAPY. Inclusive key terms were *treatment, older adult, social work, hoarding, intervention, cognitive behavioral therapy, adult protective services, theory, and psychosocial*. Additional reference lists from

published studies and reviews were examined. Publication dates for all information gathered varied from 1990 to 2017.

APS and Older Adults with Hoarding Behaviors

In response to incidences of hoarding in communities, social service agencies and other organizations frequently deliver considerable efforts to address safety issues and public health concerns related to hoarding behavior (Koeing, Leiste, Spano, & Chapin, 2013). Diefenbach, DiMauro, Frost, Steketee, and Tolin (2013) indicated that the issue of hoarding behavior in late life is of substantial clinical practice importance; however, there is very little knowledge about the personal and home environments of community dwelling older adults who hoard. Although hoarding has received increased recognition due to the advancements of hoarding studies and the recent inception of hoarding as a disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) (APA, 2013). Despite greater negative consequences associated with hoarding behaviors among older adults, there continues to be few studies that include interventions with geriatric samples (Grisham & Norberg, 2010). As a result, questions related to the etiology, phenomenology, and management of hoarding in the older adult population continue to go unanswered (Grisham & Barlow, 2005; Koenig, Chapin, & Spano, 2010).

When exploring the provision of direct practice services among older adults with hoarding behaviors, APS social workers regularly interact with older adult hoarders in their home environments Whitfield, Daniels, Flesaker, and Simmons (2012). APS social workers assume a professional role in the specialized area of social service practice that focuses on the mitigation of elder and dependent abuse and neglect to ensure the

provision of coordinated care that safeguards the protection, safety, and well-being of older and dependent adults (National Adult Protective Services Association, 2013). Older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors are categorized under the APS abuse type *self-neglect* due to exposure to hazards that impact the older adult's health, safety, and ability to maintain independence (Dong, Simon, Mosqueda, & Evans, 2012).

In research and practice, self-neglect among older adults is commonly viewed as a separate entity in elder abuse as all other forms of elder abuse are perpetrated by other individuals (Dong, 2017). Although there is an increased amount of research examining self-neglect, there continues to be a lack of information related to professional intervention and estimates of its prevalence (Dong, 2017). In the United States, self-neglect has been identified as the most reported form of elder abuse to APS agencies (Dong, 2017). Self-neglecting older adults do not necessarily always demonstrate hoarding behavior; however, it is important to include the self-neglecting population when discussing this topic, as APS involvement with this population reveals insight into the lives of hoarders, which is otherwise very limited (Murdock, 2006).

Identifying Clinical Characteristics

In efforts to better understand clinical factors associated with older adults who exhibit hoarding behavior, researchers have focused on identifying specific clinical characteristics of older adult hoarders that may serve as areas of focus in social work service delivery (Diefenbach et al., 2013). In a study conducted by Diefenbach et al. (2013), a sample of 55 older adults diagnosed with hoarding disorder (HD) and 32 older adults without a diagnosis of HD completed assessments associated with participants'

functional, cognitive, psychiatric, and health related measures. Results indicated that older adults with HD reported more functional impairments, psychiatric symptoms, medical comorbidities, and attention problems in comparison to the older adults without HD (Diefenbach et al., 2013). Furthermore, older adults with HD were more likely to experience risks to their health and safety including, increased falling, fire hazards, poor nutrition and hygiene, insect infestations, and medical issues (Diefenbach et al., 2013). This suggests that characteristics associated with hoarding behavior among older adults with HD can be significantly complex, resulting in the need for multifaceted practice interventions.

The results of this study provided valuable insight regarding clinical issues faced by older adults with hoarding behaviors. However, the results did not identify how clinical characteristics directly impact hoarding behavior; rather, researchers solely indicated that older adults diagnosed with HD present with certain clinical characteristics. To address this, researchers suggest that longitudinal studies are needed to explore the progression of symptoms of HD (Diefenbach et al., 2013).

The clinical feature of capacity among older adults and its impact on the ability to identify and resolve harmful circumstances in hoarding situations is also a common challenge faced by APS social workers (Naik et al., 2008). This is a result of the necessary ethical and clinical decision-making abilities required when determining if an older adult is able to make appropriate decisions related to their needs, health, and safety (Naik et al., 2008.).

In a study conducted by McDermott (2010), 18 professionals were interviewed regarding their decision-making process when working with self-neglecting older adults. When making professional judgments regarding individuals' capacity, respondents indicated their primary influences were organizational background and the level of risk associated with the self-neglect (McDermott, 2010). Respondents also recognized that self-neglect can result from various factors such as psychosis, dehydration, substance abuse or physical illness and that a formal health assessment is necessary for individuals they believe may lack capacity before taking any further action.

APS social workers are commonly at the forefront of determining the capacity of clients that are unable to manage self-care or reside in unsafe environments, and if necessary, refer the individual to an appropriate clinician for further evaluation (Naik et al., 2008). In the event it is determined the client does not have capacity to make decisions for themselves, the appointment of a guardian, or other legal decision maker is necessary to ensure the client's safety and well-being, which is commonly mitigated by APS social workers in collaboration with legal systems (Naik et al., 2008).

Although individual clinical characteristics can provide insight regarding why older adults participate in hoarding behaviors and on social work service delivery methods, it is necessary to also examine characteristics and diversity of among social workers who may influence service provision to this population. Research suggests that service delivery by APS social workers may vary and can be influenced by factors that are unrelated to the condition of the client (Wilson, 2002). Results from a qualitative study focusing on methods of service provision among 24 social work practitioners and

managers found that perceived limitations to resources and negative views of residential care led to differences in providing services (Wilson, 2002). Furthermore, research has found that social workers may differ when judging the client's capacity to make decisions even when presented with the same evidence, such as the same reoccurring client (Braun et al., 2009; Kitamura & Kitamura, 2000). Killick and Taylor (2009) indicated that decisions made by APS social workers are further complicated by various aspects including resource availability, high caseloads, difficulty assessing the decision-making capacity of the client, individual case circumstances, agency operations, and individual practitioner factors. As a result, it is necessary to recognize that practice interventions can be influenced by both the social worker and client.

APS social workers are tasked to determine the validity of abuse or neglect cases with minimal guidelines (Mosqueda et al., 2016); however, it is unclear if APS social workers make the same determination of findings when given cases with similar circumstances, resulting in inconsistencies in service delivery. Mosqueda et al. (2016) explored variations in case findings and reasons behind them. Researchers reviewed data from various reports of APS cases investigated by social workers in California across 58 counties, conducted telephone interviews with APS staff in 54 counties, completed site visits to 17 counties, and compared APS agency data from 2004-2005 with data from 2013 (Mosqueda et al., 2016). Findings of the study indicated that variability in case outcomes were strongly correlated with various factors associated with APS social workers themselves, such as work experience, education, varying skill, and training (Mosqueda et al., 2016). Telephone interview participants stated differences in individual

APS social workers skill level, training, and experience influenced decisions related to case outcomes (Mosqueda et al., 2016). Researchers suggested that the inconsistencies in elder abuse and neglect cases raise the need to develop policy, standardized training, and improvement in the accuracy of case outcomes (Mosqueda et al., 2016).

According to Braun, Gurrera, Karel, Armesto, and Moye (2009), existing research supports that structured frameworks create more reliable and accurate decisions, opposed to solely relying on clinical judgment. As APS social workers face complex decisions in the field of social services due to challenges of decision-making capacity and ethical dilemmas related to self-determination, APS agencies are recognizing the need for structured tools to promote valid and reliable decision making, resulting in improved application of necessary service interventions (Killick & Taylor, 2009.)

Ineffective Interventions

When exploring older adult hoarding behaviors and interventions, researchers and social scientists have relied on informants from third parties to gain information (McGuire, Kaercher, Park, & Storch, 2013). Kim et al. (2001) conducted a study that included interviews with 36 professionals with experience working with older adults in the community that exhibited hoarding behaviors. Using a semi structured interview, researchers asked study participants about various topics related to hoarding including, client demographics, intervention methods and outcomes, mental health statuses, effects of hoarding, and the nature of clients hoarding problems (Kim et al., 2001). Professionals provided feedback on 62 older adult clients who exhibited hoarding behaviors.

Results of the study indicated that, when examining intervention methods, partial and complete removal of clutter from the homes of clients was not effective (Kim et al., 2001). The majority of clients who received either a partial or a full-home clean-out either maintained or worsened their hoarding behavior (Kim et al., 2001); Steketee et al.'s (2001) study suggested that simply cleaning the home may not be a practical solution to the issue of hoarding. However, the majority of clients' providers encountered in this study were white, unmarried females that lived alone (Steketee et al., 2001). Many clients also presented with various mental and physical health conditions that may have also affected the study's outcome. This led researchers to suggest that future research should focus on characteristics of older adults with hoarding behaviors, such as marital status, mental and physical health, and cognitive functioning to determine how they may influence hoarding behaviors and methods of social work intervention with the older adult hoarding population (Steketee et al., 2001). A limitation to this study was the absence of clients' perspectives on their own hoarding problems. The results of the study also did not address when the clients began their hoarding behavior, therefore, providing little insight into the etiology of hoarding behavior (Steketee et al., 2001).

An additional exploratory study conducted by Franks, Lund, Poulton, and Caserta (2004) examined the most effective methods of service delivery when assisting older adult individuals that hoard. The researchers studied four cases involving older adults with hoarding behaviors to examine identification of hoarding behaviors, and how community agencies process and resolve these cases (Franks et al., 2004). Researchers specifically studied APS involvement in one of the four cases reviewed (Franks et al.,

2004). A review of the case involved a self-neglecting elderly woman who presented with hoarding behaviors, anxiety, paranoia, and was displaced due to her unsuitable living environment (Franks et al., 2004). Initially, APS professionals completed an assessment and a service plan in accordance with the client's level of consent to services (Franks et al., 2004). The client agreed to a service plan that assisted her in locating suitable housing and completion of a medical examination (Franks et al., 2004). APS assisted the client with multiple housing relocations and a home clean out; however, the client continued hoarding behaviors despite APS involvement (Franks et al., 2004). The overall outcome of the case resulted in the client decreasing her hoarding behavior due to a decline in health and the lack of physical ability to collect hoarding items (Franks et al., 2004). A definitive closure of the case was not indicated, rather, researchers disclosed that APS continued to monitor the client in attempts to mitigate any ongoing issues of self-neglecting behavior (Franks et al., 2004). Overall, this study brought insight to APS professional involvement when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors; however, the case example does not explore more specific aspects of APS service delivery, such as informed practice interventions, methods of case maintenance, service provision timelines, measurement outcomes to identify effectiveness of service interventions, or ways to improve service interventions that better serve older adults who hoard.

Perspectives of Older Adult Hoarders

In efforts to better inform social service delivery, few studies have incorporated interviews with older adult hoarders; however, eliciting information directly from older

adults with hoarding behaviors has proven to provide valuable insight to the reasons why older adults hoard. Eckfield and Wallhagen (2013) conducted a qualitative research study using in-person interviews with 22 older adults over the age of 65 that exhibited hoarding behaviors. Interviews consisted of gathering information regarding the participant's history of hoarding and factors that influenced hoarding behavior throughout their lifespan (Eckfield & Wallhagen, 2013).

Results of the study found that all 22 interview participants indicated having long-standing issues with hoarding for several decades. Participants disclosed their personal experiences regarding their hoarding behavior and ability to manage their living environments as they age. Participants indicated that issues including, declining health, mobility, and stamina were challenges that impaired their ability to discard objects and manage their home environments. Additionally, participants disclosed that living in the same residence for years resulted in the accumulation of objects, which contributed to hoarding behavior, whereas moving to new homes as younger adults typically forced the participants to sort and discard unnecessary items. Lastly, changes in participant's social lives, such as retirement, the death of loved ones, and social isolation affected their ability to manage hoarding behavior and daily life (Eckfield & Wallhagen, 2013).

Findings of the study suggested that challenges related to health status, changes in the home environment, and changes in social context are related to hoarding behavior and explain why hoarding problems can increase with age. Additionally, researchers found that, based on participants' responses, hoarding behaviors appeared to be chronic and not an onset of behavior in late life (Eckfield & Wallhagen, 2013). However, researchers

indicated that participants involved in the study presented with insight regarding their hoarding, whereas research suggests a majority of hoarders deny, rationalize, or minimize hoarding behavior, which can impede on the efficacy of service delivery with this population. This suggests that further research is needed to explore the reasons associated with lack of insight among older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors (Damecour & Charron, 1998; Thomas, 1997).

Overall, the findings of the study provide important clinical practice knowledge by identifying challenges faced by older adults and how they influence hoarding behavior. This information can help to guide social workers as to how they will assess situations involving older adults who hoard and utilize practical interventions and new strategies to ensure the safety and well-being of clients (Eckfield & Wallhagen, 2013).

Effective Interventions

Harm reduction. Tompkins (2011) indicates that a harm reduction approach to hoarding involves a “comprehensive, effective and humane health approach” (p. 498). Although harm reduction was initially created as an intervention for intravenous drug users to minimize harm and consequences, this evidence-based practice is an alternative intervention when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors (Tompkins, 2011). The harm reduction approach suggests that it is common for individuals who hoard to refuse assistance, therefore, in many situations, issues of health and safety and high rates of relapse will occur. In response, harm reduction serves as an essential core principle to assist individuals that hoard by providing a minimally invasive intervention

that focuses on maintaining the safety, health, and the comfort of the individual (Tompkins & Hartl, 2009).

Whitfield et al., (2012), conducted a qualitative study interviewing two sets of participants, including older adults with hoarding behavior that used a method of community support, and a focus group interview with individuals that provided direct community supports for older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. As hoarding behavior can cause significant safety risks for the individual and the community, harm reduction emerged as an important topic of the study (Rodriguez, Panero, & Tannen, 2010). Individuals providing community support indicated that focusing on harm reduction was essential to ensure that safety was rooted among all service provision actions, and supports provided to individual clients. One focus group member stated,

we subsequently learned the value of focusing on a harm reduction approach wherein we address issues of harm first so that the person [with hoarding behavior], at least, will be safe. Even though they may be living with a significant amount of stuff every day of their lives, but at least they are safe. (Whitfield et al., 2012, p. 4)

In hoarding situations involving older adult study participants with hoarding behaviors, one participant described their harm reduction experience involving setting goals and generating a plan. The individual disclosed their involvement with a social worker that completed subsequent home visits to identify and meet the individual's goals to remain safely in the home (Whitfield et al., 2012). An overall philosophy of harm reduction considers that changes in the individual's behavior are incremental, with the

assumption that behavior change will be maintained when the individual decides to put their goals into action (Rogers & Ruefli, 2004). Harm reduction interventions can vary; however, always maintain an individual's safety in their residence as a primary focus. Interventions may involve tasks such as creating pathways, eliminating fire hazards, organization, minimizing household items, or ensuring access to emergency exits (Whitfield et al., 2012).

Using harm reduction as a service delivery method, social workers are able to maintain a primary focus on creating a safe space for the client to live by reducing the potential harm caused by hoarding behaviors. This method of intervention also assists in ensuring the older adult is able to remain in their home as long as possible rather than using invasive methods such as removing the individual from their environment (Tompkins, 2011).

Multidisciplinary teams. It has been recognized among professionals that there is an increased need to use a multifaceted approach in situations involving older adults with hoarding behaviors. This allows professionals to address the complexities of hoarding behavior by utilizing diverse agencies in a multidisciplinary approach (Koeing et al., 2013). Multidisciplinary teams can be used as an intervention that involves various professionals in the circumstance that a hoarding situation becomes overly challenging for one agency (Koeing, Chapin, & Spano, 2010). Professionals involved may include, law enforcement, health department, fire department code enforcement, mental health, protective agencies, aging services, and animal control (Koeing et al., 2013).

Multidisciplinary teams can establish common goals to ensure the health and safety of older adults with hoarding behaviors by coordinating resource allocation, sharing expertise, and assisting with the division of service provision (Whitfield et al., 2012). A qualitative study conducted by Koeing et al. (2013) examined the perspectives of 15 multidisciplinary team members representing multiple agencies (e.g., animal control, APS, mental health) about their involvement in older adult hoarding cases. The team members were asked to describe what did and did not work when attempting to resolve hoarding cases.

Overall, the team members came to a consensus on several aspects that led to successful multidisciplinary teamwork. Foremost, team members identified the importance of working collaboratively to provide comprehensive service provision to the older adult that is hoarding. This collaboration is primarily established upon each team member's knowledge about each other's roles and extent of each team members' involvement (Koeing et al. 2013). As a result, team members can avoid duplication of services, conflict over responsibilities, and incomplete responses to hoarding cases. Additionally, an external support, such as state and local agencies for multidisciplinary teams serving older adults with hoarding behaviors, was valued as being beneficial as it can enhance a team's ability to establish and improve services. Lastly, the team members agreed that a team's development of trust with the individual they are serving is also a critical aspect of successful work together (Koeing et al., 2013).

Although multidisciplinary teams present with many strengths in service delivery with older adults who hoard, when exploring the operations of specialized teams

inclusive of medical groups and APS agencies used in cases involving self-neglecting older adults, there continues to be a lack outcome studies that evaluate the effectiveness of these teams (Mosqueda et al., 2008). However, the involvement of social workers in multidisciplinary teaming when working with older adults who hoard allows for contribution and collaboration using the social work practice discipline. Furthermore, as multidisciplinary teams are inclusive of various professionals that provide a broad scope of practice, social workers are able to gain perspectives and resources from other experts to establish a comprehensive approach to mitigating issues associated with hoarding (Koeing, et al., 2013).

Psychotherapy. Prior to the induction of hoarding disorder into the DSM-V, hoarding was identified as a feature of obsessive compulsive personality disorder (APA, 2013). As research has supported cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) as an effective treatment approach for individuals diagnosed with an obsessive-compulsive disorder, clinicians have developed a CBT treatment approach targeting hoarding behavior. This method of CBT typically involves improving insight and motivation, cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, exposure to discarding and decision making (Frost & Hartl, 1996; Steketee & Frost, 2007). However, there are very few randomized or open trials examining CBT for hoarding behavior specifically for older adults (Ayers, Wethrell, Golshan, & Saxena, 2011). Ayers et al. (2011) indicate that although many older adults with hoarding behavior have sought out psychiatric treatment at some point in their lives, few have received treatment catered to hoarding.

In efforts to examine the effects of standard manualized CBT in a sample of older adults with hoarding behavior, Ayers et al. (2011) conducted a quantitative study using a sample of 12 participants over age 65. Participants involved were not receiving any other form of psychotherapy, were cognitively intact, and hoarding was a primary issue of concern. Each participant received 26 individual sessions using CBT as a method of treatment over a period of 17 weeks (Ayers et al., 2011).

Results found that participant compliance with assigned homework during CBT treatment correlated with a decrease in hoarding severity. Also, significant changes in severity and depression were indicated; however, at post treatment, only three of the 12 participants responded to treatment and further gains were not present at 6 months post treatment. Researchers also did not find significant changes in areas of clutter, disability, or anxiety. Researchers suggested these results indicate that older adults with hoarding behavior may benefit from an enhanced form of treatment in addition to CBT. Furthermore, researchers determined that older adult hoarders can present with neurocognitive deficits; therefore, it is suspected that CBT may be less effective in treating older adults who hoard due to subtle neurocognitive deficits, impairing their ability to engage in treatment (Ayers et al., 2011).

In efforts to enhance treatment response, a follow up qualitative study conducted by Ayers et al. (2014) paired CBT with cognitive rehabilitation interventions in the treatment of older adults who hoard. The researchers used 11 older adult participants diagnosed with hoarding disorder that received treatment in the form of 24 individual CBT psychotherapy sessions, also inclusive of cognitive rehabilitation targeting

executive functioning and exposure to discarding items. Results found statistically and clinically significant changes in the hoarding severity among participants at post treatment. Eight participants responded to treatment, and three as partially responded to treatment. Researchers confirmed that study results presented a favorable approach to the treatment of older adults who hoard. Researchers also indicated that by targeting neurocognitive deficits with behavior therapy, response rates doubled among participants in comparison to the study mentioned above that solely used CBT (Ayers et al., 2014).

Overall, social workers play a key role in the referral and/or direct the involvement of older adults in receiving mental health services. Psychotherapy is described as an approach that can successfully address hoarding behavior, which if not addressed, will likely reoccur (Koeing et al., 2013). However, the ability to link mental health providers and older adults who hoard remains a challenge. Although professionals are aware that individuals who hoard will benefit from mental health services, these services lack availability due to limitations in funding. Furthermore, few mental health providers are trained to address hoarding issues (Koeing et al., 2013). This suggests the need for social workers to advocate for social change allowing for older adults with hoarding behaviors to have adequate access to services and resources that will safeguard their well-being.

Justification of Current Study

Upon the initial establishment of APS agencies throughout the United States, very little provision of federal oversight resulted in differing APS systems regarding client eligibility, available resources, and allocated funding (Dong, 2017; Mosqueda et al.,

2016). In efforts to achieve continuity among APS systems in California, the CAHHS Department of Social Services established state mandated APS policies and procedures providing direction to California counties regarding APS standards of service (CAHHS, 2001). As a result, APS social workers in California are responsible for delivering service provision within California's established state guidelines and as directed by their individual county social services departments.

In addition to state established guidelines, county APS agencies maintain autonomy when incorporating intervention tools used by APS social workers into practice. The National Council on Crime and Delinquency (NCCD) completed a study that explored evidence-based practices used by APS agencies. Researchers conducted a nationwide survey, of which 22 states responded (National Adult Protective Services Resource Center and National Council on Crime and Delinquency [NAPSRC], 2014). The survey targeted social workers, managers, and administrators of APS agencies as respondents to identify evidence-based practices used by their agency. A subsequent follow-up survey was also distributed to inquire about the research associated with the evidence-based practices being used.

Survey results of this study were limited as respondents from less than half of the states surveyed replied; however, many respondents reported that their agencies used standardized assessment tools, yet the majority of instruments identified were specific to each state, and not adopted from another source (NAPSRC, 2014). The majority of respondents also did not know if the assessment tools being used by their agencies were

evidence-based; many believed they were not. Most respondents also did not identify that their agency used evidence-based intervention methods for clients. (NAPSRC, 2014).

Professionals have indicated that APS social work practices are in need of improvement through necessary research and evaluation. APS agencies lack systematically designed studies to measure intervention outcomes and prevention methods that appropriately influence mandated guidelines for APS social workers to follow (Quinn & Klawnsnik, 2014). Furthermore, as APS elder abuse and neglect cases are extremely diverse, research focusing on specific dyads, such as self-neglect among older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors, is necessary to assist APS social workers in providing informed service delivery methods dependent on the types of abuse or neglect being addressed (Dong, 2014).

Overall, it does not appear there is adequate assurance that APS social workers are using best practices or even safe practices when working with this population. As a result, APS social workers are being left to use their clinical judgment and otherwise already acquired knowledge to ensure the safety and well-being of clients (Quinn & Klawnsnik, 2014). In response, this study aimed to improve the field of social work by determining how APS social work practices can be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors.

Gaps in Research

The gaps in research include a lack of studies that explore APS involvement with older adults who hoard and a lack of longitudinal studies that examine subtypes of elder abuse and neglect in various settings (Dong, 2012). Literature provides general social

work involvement with older adults with hoarding behaviors; however, research targeting specific APS service delivery methods to this population are absent. Ploeg, Fear, Hutchison, MacMillan, and Bolan (2009) indicate that systematic reviews of literature suggest there are significant deficits in knowledge regarding evidence-based prevention and intervention strategies when assisting clients involved in elder abuse and neglect. Furthermore, rigorous intervention studies, prevention strategies, and outcome measures related to elder abuse and neglect are needed (Dong, 2012).

When examining elder abuse subtypes, analyzing elder abuse and neglect as a unitary concept does not allow for the assessment of risk factors associated with each subtype (Garre-Olmo et al., 2009). The subtype of self-neglect among older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors requires further exploration as research in this area will assist in explaining changes in factors such as cognition, physical and mental health, and social status, and how they influence the prevalence of self-neglect (Dong, 2012).

Although it is evident that research in various areas of elder abuse is desired, the concern of ethical issues associated with abuse research remains a challenge and requires further examination; as the collection of information from an individual associated with a case of elder abuse or neglect may result in various negative consequences, as well as raise issues associated with confidentiality (Bonnie & Wallace, 2003; Cooper & Livingston, 2016).

Summary

Overall, social workers and professionals alike face various practice challenges when working with individuals that hoard (Tolin, 2011). When incorporating the added

dynamic of the geriatric population in hoarding cases, APS social workers are in the position to identify and address precipitating factors associated with hoarding to better ensure the safety and well-being of older adults who are self-neglecting due to hoarding behaviors. Experts in APS practice agree there is a considerable need for better informed practice interventions when determining and implementing service provision among APS clients (Dong, 2012). Furthermore, research that focuses on analyzing elder abuse subtypes, such as self-neglect due to hoarding behaviors, is necessary to identify related factors that compromise the health and safety of older adults in hoarding situations (Dong, 2012).

Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

The overall social work practice problem included practice challenges among APS and IHSS social workers when addressing cases of self-neglect involving older adults who hoard. This section includes, (a) the research design, including practice problem, nature of the study, study rationale, and operational definitions; (b) methodology, including participants, sampling strategy and instrumentation; and lastly, (c) data collection and analysis.

Research Design

Practice Problem

The identified social work practice problem included practice challenges among APS and IHSS social workers when addressing cases of self-neglect involving older adults who hoard. Social workers working with older adult hoarders experience challenges with successful case management of this client population (Brown & Pain, 2014). Research indicates that practical challenges, such as a lack of consensus on best practices (Braye et al., 2013) and clear identification of barriers to success (Burnett et al., 2014), have compromised the effectiveness and integrity of social work practice with older adult hoarders. By further exploring challenges faced by social workers, and how they affect service provision, this study addressed the practice-focused research questions:

1. What are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders?

2. How can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors?

Nature of the Study

This is an action research project. Two focus groups were used to gather data regarding the experiences and perspectives of social workers that directly interact with and provide services to older adults who hoard. Grounded theory, which is commonly used in action research to identify consensus among study participants and create theories about social phenomena (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), was applied to support efforts in establishing common relationships between collected data and the application of theoretical concepts. Theoretical sampling, coding, and comparative analysis was used to analyze data and refine information into categories to enhance understanding of the study problem (Charmaz, 2006).

Study Rationale

Qualitative inquiry, in the context of this action research project, allowed for the exploration of the social work practice problem by using contextualized and detailed descriptions of social worker experiences when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. This enabled study participants who identify with the experience of direct practice within this population to share their perspectives and provide possible recommendations and solutions toward the improvement of APS social work practice with older adult hoarders. Data collected from APS and IHSS social work practitioners revealed the strengths and limitations of current practices to inform practice improvements when working with older adults who hoard.

In the field of social work research, the Council on Social Work Education identified the need for social workers to engage in the core competency, “research-informed practice and practice-informed research” (Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009, p. 2). This suggested the importance of applying practice experience to inform scientific inquiry. As I used a qualitative design for this study exploring current APS social work practices, true social work practice experiences and perspectives were acquired as data to identify practice challenges and areas for improvement when working with the population under study.

Operational Definitions

Study focus group participants were comprised of social workers that are employed in the County of Riverside, California. Focus group participants work in the community and directly interact with, and provide services to, older adults who hoard. Hoarding is recognized as a disorder in the DSM-V and characterized by the urge to acquire, yet not discard, objects resulting in restricted functioning due to excessive clutter (Kress, Stargell, Zoldan, & Pavlo, 2016). When providing direct practice services to older adults who hoard, APS and IHSS social workers use various practice interventions in efforts to ensure that older adult clients are able to remain safely in their own homes (Benjamin & Matthias, 2001; Bourassa, 2009). APS social workers mitigate self-neglecting behavior among older adults to ensure safety and well-being, whereas IHSS social workers assess and approve caregiving services to assist in meeting domestic and personal care needs of older adults in their home (Benjamin & Matthias, 2001; Bourassa, 2009). This level of interaction with older adult hoarders qualified study participants to

provide valuable insights based on their experiences with and perspectives on determining how social work practice can be improved when working with this unique client population.

Methodology

Prospective Data

An action research methodology was employed to identify aspects of social work practice necessary to improve knowledge and service provision when working directly with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. The action research process consisted of recruiting and purposively selecting study participants with knowledge and experience working with older adult hoarders, conducting focus groups to gather data, analyzing the content of the focus group interviews, interpreting the results, and sharing findings with study participants and other stakeholders. Using focus groups allowed for social workers to participate in a less threatening environment when discussing their ideas, opinions, perceptions, and experiences regarding the study population (Krueger, 1994; Krueger & Casey, 2000). Allowing study participants to express solutions for, and recommendations regarding, their own problem was a critical component of the action research process (Stringer, 2007).

The data was collected from two focus groups comprised of four and seven APS and IHSS social workers, respectively. Data was recorded via audio tape; researcher notes of focus group observations were also recorded. Following the collection of data, I transcribed and prepared all audio-recorded information for content analysis as recommended by Krueger and Casey (2000). Using the focus group as the unit of

analysis, emergent themes were extrapolated from the collected data. Furthermore, I explored degrees of consensus and dissent among focus group participants to delineate the extent to which the data produced themes, and any negative or outlier events, such as argumentative interactions (see Krueger & Casey, 2000). As a result, this methodology yielded an improved understanding of the phenomenon, and how social work practice can be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. This methodology also ensured the descriptive, theoretical, and interpretive validity of the action research process (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

Participants

Social workers that work with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors served as study participants. The participants were recruited from the southern regional service area of Riverside, California. A total of 11 professional social workers with specialized knowledge and experiences through the APS and IHSS programs, and who maintain a caseload of older adult clients that include those receiving direct social service assistance for hoarding, participated in two focus groups. There were four participants in one group and seven participants in the other group. Each focus group was inclusive of social workers trained in both APS and IHSS programs.

Study participants were cross trained to work in both APS and IHSS programs. The APS program maintains a focus on mitigating reports of elder abuse using risk assessment, service planning, crisis intervention, and case management services, whereas the IHSS program aims to keep older adults in their own homes by assessing individual physical and mental limitations of the individual client and authorizing in-home support

caregiver services and case management services to meet the individual's needs (Benjamin & Matthias, 2001; Bourassa, 2009). Overall, both programs aim to ensure the safety and well-being of older and dependent adults who live in the community.

I initiated the recruitment of participants by scheduling a meeting with the district regional manager of a large APS agency in Riverside County, California to schedule an information session with potential social work participants. I provided the regional manager with an email to send to potential participants containing information including, the description of the study, and date and time of the information session. The meeting was used to provide information regarding the study and elicit the interest and commitment of focus group participation among social workers. All meeting participants interested in participating in the study were asked to submit their contact information. Following the meeting, I electronically sent an informed consent form (approval number 03-02-18-0593528) to all interested study participants. Interested study participants were also provided with an opportunity to sign up for the study at the end of the information session, if they chose. I remained at the location for individual debriefing and to collect informed consent forms from individuals who wished to enroll in the study.

Sampling Strategy

As the focus of the study aimed to explore the social work practice problem of practice challenges among social workers when addressing cases of self-neglect involving older adults who hoard, study participants included social workers from both the APS and IHSS programs. Retaining social workers that work directly with this population enabled me to gather data examining real life practice involvement that

incorporated multi-faceted case scenarios that social workers experienced. As a result, the participants played a well-suited role in providing insight to the social work practice problem of practice challenges among social workers when addressing cases of self-neglect involving older adults who hoard.

Using a purposive sampling strategy (Palinkas, Green, Horwitz, & Hoagwood, 2013; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015), focus group participants were inclusive of APS and IHSS social workers with specialized knowledge and experiences working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. There were no exclusion criteria (e.g., years of experience, years of employment at the agency, professional ranking or status) among this group. Using an initial sample size of 31 participants, 13 study participants who agreed to voluntarily participate in the study were selected. Applying this judgmental sampling strategy enabled me to maintain an equitable focus group sample of social workers that regularly provide service provision to the elderly hoarding population (Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest, & Namey, 2005). In order to allow participants time to share in-depth insights, and gather a sufficient amount of discussion and feedback for data collection, I intended to hold two focus groups consisting of five to six participants; however, due to participant attrition and accommodation to participant schedules, one focus group included seven participants, and the other focus group included four participants. According to Drayton (2007), five to six study participants per focus group has been identified as the optimal number to maintain a well-managed discussion and allow for all participants to contribute.

Instrumentation

I conducted two focus groups in efforts to ensure that an adequate amount of data was collected. Focus group sessions followed a structured format that maintained attention on the research topic, allowing for a more comprehensive analysis. I also encouraged active interaction among participants as added value to the focus groups to highlight observations beyond verbal information, such as participant reactions, shared experiences and perceptions, and oppositions and agreements (Gaižauskaitė, 2012).

Focus group questions were designed to answer the study's research question. I used an original 6-item semi-structured qualitative interview schedule during the focus group process. Interview questions were open-ended questions that were qualitative in nature and strategically sequenced to allow for a natural process flow (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). The initial one or two questions addressed focus group participants' thoughts related to the study population, followed by questions that addressed specific experiences and practices, and lastly closing questions used for summarization and to conclude the group (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). During the interview process, I encouraged interaction among participants by inviting focus group members to comment on each other's responses. Each focus group session was held for the duration of one hour to allow adequate time for transitional periods and the formal session (Rice & Ezzy, 1999) (see Appendix A for focus group information session and discussion guideline).

Data Collection and Analysis

The overall objective of the focus-group interviews was to ensure a clear process for data collection and analysis. This procedure incorporated data collection, identifying

themes, indexing, charting, and interpretation (Raibee, 2004). Qualitative research, particularly when working with focus-group interviews, can create a substantial amount of data; therefore, it was essential for the researcher to establish a consistent number of stages of data analysis to manage data appropriately, make sense of information collected, and exclude irrelevant material (Raibee, 2004). Two focus group interviews were held to ensure the data collected was sufficient to address the social work practice problem being examined (Onwuegbuzie, Dickenson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009). I used an audio recording device to collect content in the form of spoken language, which was later transcribed. Additionally, at the end of the focus group interviews, I used my individual notes to capture non-verbal communication among participants and any additional observations.

Once all data was collected, I processed the information by listening to audio tapes, reviewing and transcribing information, and reviewing additional individual notes that were not captured by audio recording. This step allowed me to identify common themes, as well as become fully immersed in the data. I then began to create a thematic framework by notating concepts and developing categories in the text margins of the transcribed data (Uprety, 2008). Following this, I completed an indexing and charting process by conducting a constant comparison between the data allocated into established categories to allow for data sorting and reduction. Lastly, I completed the interpretation process by conducting an inductive analysis of the data to inform theory (Dilshad & Latif, 2013).

Using a constant comparative analysis technique, I categorized collected data into smaller units and attached a descriptor to each unit. Descriptors were then grouped into categories, resulting in the development of themes that reflect the content gathered in the focus groups. Additionally, as two focus group discussions were held, I assessed whether themes that emerged from one group also emerged with the other group, which assisted in reaching data saturation (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

The study was designed to minimize bias or subjectivity by holding validity and reliability standards that ensure the rigor of the work. As an action research study, the rigor of the work was based on examinations made by myself, as a researcher, to ensure trustworthy research outcomes (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011). To ensure overall trustworthiness of the study, the assessment of study attributes including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability were reviewed (Stringer, 2007).

The credibility of the study was established by explicitly using language and terminology of study participants (i.e., referential adequacy). This ensured that the data reflected the thoughts and perspectives of the study participants (Stringer, 2007). Study participants were also given an opportunity to debrief following completion of the group interviews. This allowed study participants to process any feelings or emotions that may have arisen during the interview process (Stringer, 2007).

With regard to transferability, the study maintained a specialized focus on APS social work practice improvements when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors; however, as hoarding behavior among older adults is a situation that various professionals in the social services profession may face, information gathered from this

study allowed for transferability to other professionals that work with the older adult community (Stringer, 2007). Lastly, dependability and conformability of the study were met through documentation and authentication of the measures that are necessary in the research process. This included a detailed description of the procedures that are followed to confirm the veracity of the study (Stringer, 2007).

Ethical Procedures

This study upheld the ethical social work practice principles of ensuring that each prospective participant was protected by providing adequate information and practices of the study and that they maintained their fundamental right to self-determination throughout the study process. A principal tool used was the informed consent procedure to apprise prospective participants of the overall purpose, aims, and procedures of the study (Stringer, 2007). I provided an information session prior to data collection for prospective participants that included a general overview of the study, question and answer session, and informed consent form to be reviewed and signed by those who chose to participate in the study. The informed consent form was inclusive of information about the study, why the participant was chosen, the participant's right to withdraw, data storage, and confidentiality standards. Furthermore, the informed consent form was clear and simple to improve participants' understanding and did not include highly detailed information that may cause confusion (Dunn & Jeste, 2001).

The use of focus groups in qualitative research presented various unique ethical considerations. As focus groups involved multiple participants in one setting, a particular ethical issue that was considered was reiterating the importance of confidentiality among

participants and ensuring sensitive information was appropriately managed. Furthermore, by participating in a focus group, participants' contributions were shared with other members, therefore, keeping participants informed about the expectations of the group was necessary to aid in ensuring participants do not feel pressured or intimidated when contributing to the discussion (Gibbs, 1997). Data collected were anonymous and confidential in order to protect study participants. I used alternative names as pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality (Kaiser, 2009). I ensured that data, including hard copy documents and audio recording devices, were transported and stored in a locked document box located in my home office. Computer files were password protected. Audio recordings were destroyed upon completion of transcription. Hard copies of signed informed consent forms and data will be stored for a period of 3 years after completion of the study (United States Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Research Integrity, 2006). After 3 years, all study information, including informed consent forms and data, will be destroyed.

Summary

Overall, I facilitated two focus groups of 11 total professional social workers that provide direct practice services to older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors and are considered to have specialized knowledge and experiences through the APS and IHSS programs. I collected data from each focus group using an audio recording device and individual notes. I transcribed, analyzed, and categorized collected focus group data for further interpretation and development. As a result of gathering and analyzing collected data, I identified aspects of social work practice to improve knowledge in the field, and

improve social work practice in older adult services, with a specific focus on older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors.

Section 3: Presentation of the Findings

The purpose of the study was to apply action research methodology to explore social work practice challenges when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. The practice focused research questions were, (a) What are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders; and (b) How can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors? The research questions allowed for the gathering of study participants' ideas, opinions, perceptions, and experiences when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors.

I used action research methodology to conduct two separate focus group discussions to gather data relevant to the study's research questions. Focus group data was collected using a 6-item semi structured qualitative interview schedule with 11 social workers that directly interact with and provide services to older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors in Riverside County, California. Information from each focus group was documented using an audio recording device. Additionally, I took individual notes to document group occurrences not captured by audio recording.

This section includes (a) data analysis techniques, including data collection time frames and recruitment, data analysis and validation procedures, and limitations encountered when conducting the study; and (b) findings including descriptive statistics of the sample, and content analysis results.

Data Analysis Techniques

Using an initial sampling frame of 31 participants identified as APS and IHSS social workers in Riverside, CA, a general email was sent scheduling an information session that I facilitated to provide information regarding the study and elicit the interest and commitment of focus group participation among social workers. Following completion of the information session, a total of 13 participants volunteered to participate in the study by providing me with completed informed consent forms.

A total of 11 social workers participated in two independent focus group discussions. The additional two social workers were unable to participate in the scheduled focus groups due to work affiliated scheduling conflicts. All participants were social workers in Riverside County, California and cross trained to work in both APS and IHSS programs, both of which aim to ensure the safety and well-being of older and dependent adults who live in the community. Focus groups were constructed based on participant's number of years of professional experience and department affiliation by intermingling participants with less than 6 years of experience with those that had 7 or more years of experience. Study participants were given the option to participate in one of two focus groups held on two different days and times. Study participants were identified in the group by their participant numbers, which were later assigned to pseudonyms to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality.

Data analysis was conducted by listening to audio recordings of the two focus-group interviews and transcribing verbatim the information gathered. Furthermore, I reviewed my additional observational notes that were not captured by audio recording.

Once completing the transcription process and reviewing the additional notes, I created a thematic framework by notating concepts and developing categories based on each individual participant's data. As a result, a series of themes were developed to reflect the content gathered in each of the focus groups. Following this, an indexing and charting process was completed by conducting a constant comparison between the data allocated into established categories to allow for data sorting and reduction (see Dilshad & Latif, 2013).

Validation Procedures

Credibility

To ensure the integrity and credibility of the study, I explicitly used the language and terminology expressed by the study participants during the focus group process. As a result, the data collected accurately captured the thoughts and perspectives of the study participants. Additionally, study participants were provided the opportunity to debrief with me upon completion of each focus group discussion to allow for study participants to process any feelings or emotions that may have arisen during the group. After completing the focus group discussions, I conducted a member checking procedure by completing follow-up telephone calls during the data analysis stage. This procedure was used to check for accuracy and resonance regarding the participants' experiences and insights discussed during the focus group discussion.

Transferability

Using a focus group discussion that included APS and IHSS social workers that work directly with older adult hoarders, I was able to gather a significant amount of in-

depth information including participants' detailed testimonies, demographics, and interpersonal bonds, as well as my personal observations. Participants' audio-recorded responses provided a clear picture into the reality of challenges in direct social work practice as participants provided case examples and conflicts they faced when working directly with clients as well as other agencies. Furthermore, I was able to personally document my observations that were not captured by audio recording, such as participants displaying hand gestures and facial expressions, suggesting a high level of conviction in their statements, as well as frequent nodding in agreement when reacting to others expressing their personal insights during the group. Because of exploring social work practice challenges and improvements using detailed and intimate methods of gathering data, allows a high degree of trust that the findings can be applied to other social work professionals and settings (i.e., transferability) (Stringer, 2007).

Dependability and Confirmability

In efforts to establish dependability and confirmability, the research process was overseen by my capstone research chair to ensure that a detailed description of the research procedures was followed, including participant selection, observation, data collection and analysis, and findings. Furthermore, to confirm the veracity of the study, I maintained an audit trail to detail the process of collecting and analyzing data as well as interpreting data. This included recording topics that I later established into themes, my personal observations during the coding process, and rationale regarding the reasoning for merging codes to explain the meaning of each theme (Stringer, 2007).

Limitations

Upon conducting the series of two focus group discussions, there was a disproportionate number of participants in each focus group both in numbers and department affiliation. Focus Group 1 included seven participants with six APS social workers and one IHSS social worker, whereas Focus Group 2 included four APS participants. The unequal number of participants presented an inconsistency in the planned sizes of the focus groups; however, it is uncertain if this limitation negatively impacted the findings of the study.

Findings

The findings of the study provided insight regarding social work practice challenges and improvements when working with older adults who participate in hoarding behaviors. Common themes were identified based on participant responses, including (a) barriers to mental health services, (b) funding and client financial constraints, (c) changes to current practice interventions, (d) practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and (e) community education and support.

Demographics

Using a purposive sampling strategy, focus group participants were inclusive of APS and IHSS social workers from the same agency with specialized knowledge and experiences working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. All APS and IHSS social workers with experience working with older adult hoarders were accepted for inclusion in the study. A total of 11 social workers participated in two focus group

sessions; each participant was assigned a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and confidentiality (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Pseudonyms

Group	Participant Number	Pseudonym
1	1	Sarah
1	2	Tanya
1	3	Sonya
1	4	Stella
1	5	Allison
1	6	Alex
1	7	Jessica
2	8	Morgan
2	9	Ashley
2	10	Alice
2	11	Jordan

The overall participant sample was inclusive of 1 IHSS social worker and 10 APS social workers. Participants' ages varied from 27 years old to 65 and older, and the genders of study participants included nine females and two males. The participants' identified levels of education ranged from some college to doctoral degree. The participants' years of employment as social workers were categorized as 0 to 3 years, 4 to 6 years, 7 to 10 years, and 10 or more years.

Common Themes Identified

A total of 11 social workers participated in two separate focus groups to discuss their experiences when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Using a 6-item semi structured qualitative interview schedule to elicit participant responses, the discussion revealed common themes across each group, including (a) barriers to mental health services, (b) funding and client financial constraints, (c) changes to current practice interventions, (d) practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and (e) community education and support.

Theme 1: Barriers to Mental Health Services

Mental health was a topic consistently addressed by participants in each focus group. All 11 participants identified that when working with older adults who participate in hoarding behaviors, many clients present with unaddressed mental health concerns. However, barriers to the provision of mental health services, including direct practice services provided by APS social workers, interagency collaboration and access to mental health agencies, and client participation were identified as significant social work practice challenges. This theme supports the research questions in identifying what the practical

challenges to social workers are when working with older adult hoarders and, how can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Alex discussed time limitations as an APS social worker when addressing client mental health concerns in the following:

Trying to help them [clients] by doing any therapeutic interventions with so little time is hard . . . it's just hard to even say what we can do because we are so fast paced . . . I mean, we can plant seeds, but that's in an hour visit compared to 10, 20, 30 years of this [hoarding behavior] happening, so that's where it's hard, and hopefully we can plant seeds, and get them mental health services, if they accept it, and other services.

Stella then weighed in regarding her thoughts about time limitations as an APS social worker in the following

Because we are so time limited sometimes it is a matter of referring them to mental health, if they [clients] are even willing . . . I think going into a case understanding that they will come back [APS will receive additional referrals for the same client to conduct future investigations of elder abuse] we can at least put in some interventions right now to keep them safe . . . and as we go back out again and again, hopefully being able to build rapport . . . that's kinda my, I feel like, that's the approach we have to take because we don't have a lot of time and we are not able to follow up with case management. It's just to let them know so that the next time somebody [APS social worker] goes out there, they will be more willing to open the door and let us in . . . hopefully building that rapport we

can then work those seeds like Alex said in there, like, you know, maybe this isn't a rational thought and where is this coming from, uhm, and then over time hopefully we can build that to where they can understand. I think mental health is an incredibly important part of it, if they are willing to accept it, but the challenge is a lot of times they don't want to.

Ashley, Morgan, and Jessica discussed their experiences regarding practice challenges related to interagency collaboration and accessing mental health agency services for older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Ashley discussed the need for improved interagency collaboration with APS and access to mental health services when stating "It's a catch 22 because we need help and their [mental health] parameters [inclusion requirements to receive services] are so slim that there is no way that you can get the help that they [clients] need." Morgan also weighed in to the discussion when she suggested "Maybe if they [mental health agencies] had services going into the client's home to work on those issues of letting go . . . they [clients] need someone to go into the home to help them." Jessica supported Morgan's statement by explaining

I'm not sure how much actually taking them [clients] out of the home to a mental health facility actually really helps with the, it's almost like, like, the best way to work with somebody is in their location, in their home . . . to actually get them out of their home into regular treatment is extremely difficult, and if maybe it happens, it doesn't happen often. So, it's almost like there, I wish there was some kind approach where mental health will come to the home and will provide regular counseling in the home.

This discussion amongst participants identified the need for improved collaboration and client accessibility to mental health service provision. As a result, APS social workers may be better able address potential mental health conditions that influence hoarding behaviors among older adults in efforts to mitigate cases of self-neglect.

Several participants also discussed barriers to client participation in mental health services. Alice and Stella both discussed challenges to client participation in mental health services due to lack of insight among clients regarding mental health concerns. Alice reported the following based on her experiences when directly addressing mental health concerns with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors in the following:

Even when you suggest mental health they [clients] will refuse saying . . . “why are you going to send me to mental health?” “I am not crazy.” They understand they have an issue in the home, but they don’t see that it is related to a mental health issue.

Stella also indicated the following about the insight of older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors:

They [clients] don’t often view it as a mental health issue, so when you approach it like there is a need for mental health, they can sometimes put those barriers back up, because for them these are their belongings and they don’t view it [hoarding] as a problem.

Overall, participants identified lack of client insight regarding mental health conditions as a practice challenge when working with this population. This suggests the need for more

intensive mental health service interventions to assist APS social workers in ensuring the provision of effective practice interventions.

Theme 2: Funding and Client Financial Constraints

A second common theme that emerged from social worker responses were challenges related to funding and client financial constraints on both micro and macro levels. This theme addresses the research question, what are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders. Participants discussed challenges they have faced regarding accessing and utilizing resources to support older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Jordan discussed his experiences with financial constraints when attempting to access resources in the following:

I have made phone calls to agencies for those who are hoarders, but they charge from 2,100 to 2,500 dollars and there is just no way that our clients can afford that . . . there needs to be more agencies that do not overcharge that go based on the client's monthly income in order to help people get help.

Allison brought up a case example related to financial constraints in the following:

I think finance plays a big part . . . we have this client, uh, she didn't have the money to hire someone to help, so code enforcement said "well, talk to people in your church or see if you have some friends or neighbors in your mobile home park that could maybe help with lifting." Uhm, she was unable to find anybody on her budget . . . we in APS could provide the dumpster, but she needed to find physical labor to help load the dumpster, so uh, I think it really comes down to finances. Again, there is no real agency that will provide affordable help to clean.

Jessica discussed her thoughts regarding the potential barriers to macro level funding in the following:

I look at some of these other things that get funded a little bit more . . . and I am wondering if maybe hoarding, because it is something very internal, it's something that not a lot of people see . . . people have it inside of their homes, and sometimes people don't notice until all of a sudden, you know, somebody decides to come in and sees boxes up to the ceiling. Uhm, and I think maybe that's one of reasons it just isn't funded as much, because it's not such a, such an in-your-face type of thing like what you would see in homelessness . . . which is unfortunate. Which is unfortunate because it is a very true and difficult, uh, problem that we face here you know. But yeah, it's one of those kind of sad realities, you know, what's out of sight is out of mind in that sense, until we get presented with a really, really bad problem. That's one of the reasons why we don't get them [APS reports involving older adults who hoard] until there is such a big risk.

Theme 3: Changes to Current Practice Interventions

Participants identifying the need for enhancement to current APS practice interventions presented a third common theme. This supports the research question, how can APS social work practices be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors?

During both focus group discussions, several participants expressed concern with not having a standardized protocol when working with older adults who participate in hoarding behaviors. Furthermore, participants expressed the need for involvement of a

multidisciplinary team that specifically addresses cases of hoarding. Lastly, seven out of eleven participants identified the need to change APS social work service provision from short-term crisis intervention to long-term case management services when working with this population. Jessica discussed her thoughts on the need for long-term case management in the following:

This [referring to the focus group discussion] just shows how complex hoarding really is and that's what makes it so difficult is because you can't just attack it at one level, you have to attack it on so many different levels. It's something that does take, kind of like a long-term case management . . . and it takes a complex very detailed case plan . . . I would like to see little bit more of a change in the way APS can case manage some of these folks, because I think that would probably help with having someone when there is a setback, rather than waiting for a crisis to happen again.

Sarah addressed the need for a multidisciplinary team approach and a standardized protocol in the following:

I think we really need to have some sort of a multidisciplinary team (MDT) set up to specifically deal with hoarding cases and I think that is just one of our limitations that we don't have structure or a specific set up in place to approach, you know, on a different level at initial contact. Uhm, so, I watch those shows hoarders, and you know you see them it's an ideal situation, they respond with on the spot therapy and that's not reality, but they do have X, Y, and Z in place . . . we don't have that, we don't have a specific protocol to follow for the hoarding

population and if we did I think it would be a completely different option for us to approach it with, and we'd maybe have potentially different outcomes of course than what we are used to.

Theme 4: Right to Self-Determination

Actions that are taken by social workers require a balance between the duty to ensure the safety of a client and the client's right to self-determination. This balance can present practice challenges when attempting to stabilize a crisis situation using the least intrusive methods, while also respecting the client's right to make their own decisions. This theme addresses the research question, what are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders.

When directly asking participants the discussion question, "could you tell me what you think are your biggest challenges when addressing cases of self-neglect involving elderly hoarders?" Participant responses presented a common theme related to practice challenges related to right to self-determination. Tanya responded by addressing the need to respect individual rights to self-determination and also brought up ethical concerns involved in the following:

I think as an APS social worker with addressing issues of self-neglect with the elderly, uhm, in respect that they have capacity and are able to make decisions, it is their norm, so when you have other agencies calling you and, you know, having complaints about the living conditions they are in, you know, we have to respect that the client may not be ready to, uhm, make that change in their lifestyle . . . I think the biggest issue is trying to advocate for their right to self-determination

and then kinda trying to identify that with other agencies or social support systems that may be concerned with their lifestyle. Also, as an APS social worker, knowing when you have to step away. As an individual outside of my job, I know this is not an appropriate living condition, uhm, but that's what they want, that's their choice.

Alex stated:

I think one of the biggest challenges is I guess, uhm, us from being outsiders coming into their home . . . looking at that and thinking dang, this is dirty, this is not sanitary, how can you live like this, you shouldn't live like this, but then that's their choice . . . for them that's normal . . . at the end of the day as much as all of us know this isn't sanitary, they shouldn't be living like this; if they have capacity, how can we help someone who doesn't think they have an issue . . . so that's where it is hard.

Jordan disclosed his challenges related to self-determination by discussing a case situation that he and Alice were involved with in the following:

We had a client who was a hoarder, and it turns out the client had died in the home uhm, because with all that stuff . . . I mean we both were going in and trying to tell the client that this is unsafe, but yet every time that we would go out and tell her, she made some kind of excuse, saying "I will get someone to do it," "I'll have my friend do it," "I'm doing it." [e.g., eliminating health and safety hazards as a result of hoarding]. Eventually she passed away . . . she ended up dying in the home [as a result of infestation and environmental hazards]. Even

though we try to encourage people to do stuff, we can't force them and that's the hardest part. I think that's the hardest thing we have for our job, it's that we can't force individuals to do what is the best.

In response to Jordan's comment, Morgan, Ashley and Alice verbally indicated they were in agreement.

Theme 5: Community Education and Support

A fifth common theme that relates to the research question, what are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders, is community education and support. Participants identified how a lack of community support and community education creates practice challenges when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Participants intermittently discussed these challenges when responding to various discussion questions throughout the duration of the group. Alex and Jessica discussed their concerns regarding lack of community knowledge and the need for education regarding the APS social work scope of practice in following:

(Alex) We go through a lot of different agencies that automatically point the finger at us and say, "what are you guys going to do," "what are you guys going to do," "what are you guys going to do" and in our mind were like, just as much as you can . . . sometimes people confuse us maybe because they have the stigma of child protective services but they [clients] are adults, we have just as much power as anyone else . . . so I think that's a big challenge for us.

(Jessica) I think we find ourselves educating the other agencies about what we're able to do and actually educating them about what, you know, human rights are . .

. as soon as we determine that there is capacity then we're here trying to educate folks that, hey, they have a right to make bad decisions, they have a right to live this way . . . if this person has capacity and this person is understanding what the risks are and understanding what, you know, could possibly happen if they remain in this house . . . they can choose to live that way. We do find ourselves, I don't know I find myself educating police in law enforcement, what did I have . . . I had a policeman say, "don't you have a foster home for old people" and I thought, ahhhh no.

Stella also weighed in regarding lack of community support in the following:

I think that sometimes we are the ones advocating for the client . . . because a lot of times other agencies will want to come in and remove them [clients] right away, red tag it, they can't be here, it is not safe, and then they [agencies] call APS as their safety plan. They don't really think about the long-term effects and the other things this client is dealing with in terms of what is going to happen to them when they lose their things. Things that for us may be junk or trash have meaning to these people, and a lot times they are dealing with loss and a lot of times this is just another loss for them, so we have to come in and really try to mediate that. I think that we have our agenda and everybody else has their agenda and it is a matter finding a road in the middle.

The findings of the study provide community stakeholders a representation of what is occurring in APS and IHSS social work practices by gathering direct practice experiences and insights from social workers that work with the older adult hoarding

population. Based on social worker responses, it is evident that social workers face numerous practice challenges when providing services to older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors, suggesting the need to integrate APS practice improvements when working with this population.

Challenges and Improvements to Social Work Practices

The findings of the study were used to address the following practice focused research questions (a) What are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders; and (b) How can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors? As a result of APS and IHSS social worker discussion group responses, the overall findings were related to barriers to mental health services, including limitations to providing direct practice mental health services provided by APS social workers; lack of interagency collaboration efforts and barriers to accessing to mental health agencies, and clients declining participation in mental health services; funding and client financial constraints on both micro and macro levels due to lack of affordability in accessing and utilizing resources and limited APS funding to assist with resource provision; changes to current practice interventions including the need to improve APS service provision by implementing long-term case management and multidisciplinary team practices when working with older adult hoarders; practice challenges related to right to self-determination, resulting in social workers facing limitations to implementing practice interventions with APS clients; and community education and support, including the lack of knowledge regarding APS scope of practice, and the need for improved interagency collaboration efforts

Unexpected Findings

An unexpected finding in the study included study participants disclosing their perspectives regarding the lack of support and noncooperation from community partner agencies when serving the older adult hoarding population. I found it disconcerting when study participants revealed the lack of responsiveness and collaborative efforts they face when working with partner agencies. Community partner agencies that become involved in situations of hoarding have established themselves as upholding similar principles that are maintained by APS and IHSS social workers, which are to ensure the health and safety of clients. The lack of systematized approach among agencies in efforts to assist APS social workers that encounter older adult hoarding situations appears to be a contributing factor to ineffective service practices when working with this population.

Summary

The practice focused research questions in this action research project identified practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders, and how APS social work practice may be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors in Riverside County, California. Based on participant responses, common themes included, (a) barriers to mental health services, (b) funding and client financial constraints, (c) changes to current practice interventions, (d) practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and (e) community education and support. Overall research findings revealed relevant social work practice challenges, as well as prospective solutions in efforts to address them. As a result, research findings were used to inform

recommended solutions to improve social work practice and identify implications for social change.

Section 4: Application to Professional Practice

The purpose and nature of this study was to apply action research methodology to explore social work practice challenges when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. APS social workers in Riverside County, California commonly encounter hoarding situations involving older adults; however, there continues to be limited clarity in the field of social work regarding how to adequately address cases of hoarding and its subsequent and resultant problems (Brown & Pain, 2014). To better understand social work practice challenges faced by social workers, I used qualitative inquiry to elicit information from APS and IHSS social workers that work directly with older adult hoarders to address the following questions: (a) What are the practical challenges to social workers working with older adult hoarders, and (b) How can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors?

Based on participant responses, several themes were identified: (a) barriers to mental health services, (b) funding and client financial constraints, (c) changes to current practice interventions, (d) practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and (e) community education and support. I applied the findings to address the research study social work practice problem, how can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors? The action research project resulted in exploring potential solutions in efforts to advance APS direct practice service provision and community organizational support that will improve APS social work practice and better serve older adults in the community that exhibit hoarding behaviors.

This section includes. (a) the application for professional ethics, (b) recommendations for social work practice, (c) impact to social work practice, (d) research and policy considerations, and (e) implications for social change.

Application for Professional Ethics

The social work profession is predicated on ethical principles and core values established by the NASW code of ethics. These principles and values are to be used by social workers as a guide to inform social work practice (NASW, 2008). When exploring the social work practice problem regarding how APS social work practice can be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors, relevant NASW values and ethics include social justice and integrity of the profession (NASW, 2008).

Social Justice

NASW (2008) identified the importance for social workers to pursue social change to ensure individuals have access to services and resources, particularly individuals or groups of people considered to be vulnerable and oppressed. In completing the action research study, data collected by eliciting information from APS and IHSS social workers identified several practice challenges, many of which included limited access to essential services. The findings of the study contribute to the area of social justice by raising awareness regarding the needs of the community, as well as informs on potential solutions to better assist APS social workers when serving this specific vulnerable population.

Integrity of the Profession

The NASW code of ethics indicates that, as an ethical responsibility, social workers are responsible for upholding the integrity of the profession (NASW, 2008). This ethical standard includes maintaining a higher standard of practice which can be done through research, discussion and responsible criticism (NASW, 2008). In conducting extensive research of the existing literature, I acknowledged the critical need to identify practice challenges that will assist APS social workers when addressing cases of self-neglect in the form of hoarding (see Burnett et al., 2014). In response, as a researcher, I collected data necessary to identify challenges and practice improvements from the experiences and insights of APS and IHSS social workers. As a result, findings of the study have generated an active discussion that addresses how APS practices can be improved and the changes that need to occur in efforts to do so.

The study findings may guide social work practice in the area of professional ethics by contributing to the knowledge base of the social work profession. NASW (2008) identified service as a core value that social workers should integrate in their professional role by drawing upon their knowledge and skill base to assist those in need. Because of gathering data to determine how APS social work practice can be improved when working with older adult hoarders, findings of this study can guide social workers and community stakeholders in upholding a professional standard of service.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice

The data collected in the study represents the experiences and insights from APS and IHSS social workers when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding

behaviors. Based on participants' responses, I identified several themes: (a) barriers to mental health services, (b) funding and client financial constraints, (c) changes to current practice interventions, (d) practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and (e) community education and support. Recommended action steps for clinical social workers that work in this area of practice include changes to current APS social work practices, establishing interagency collaboration efforts, and funding improvements.

Changes to Current APS Social Work Practices

Standardized intervention protocols. Participants expressed concern regarding not having a standardized intervention protocol to adequately serve older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Research indicates that when addressing cases of self-neglect, APS social workers face various challenges to providing effective practice interventions among older adults who hoard (Brown & Pain, 2014). Furthermore, APS agencies are recognizing the need for structured tools to promote valid and reliable decision making, resulting in improved application of necessary service interventions (Killick & Taylor, 2009.)

In efforts to address this concern expressed by APS and IHSS social workers, a recommended solution is to implement structured intervention methods to guide APS social workers when addressing cases involving older adult hoarders. Structured intervention methods can include existing tools adopted by social service practitioners when working in a similar capacity such as, processes for conducting hoarding safety assessments; guidelines in determining client insight and characteristics to hoarding; clutter image rating scale to determine the impact of hoarding on the client; and

guidelines to implementing an appropriate action plan (Frost et al., 2007). Ultimately, by implementing structured intervention methods in APS practice when working with older adult hoarders, APS social workers will have more confidence in approaching these cases as they can rely on consistent and reliable tools in their practice.

Improved time parameters. Participants also identified time limitations to providing direct practice services in APS as a challenge to adequately serving the older adult hoarding population. APS social workers are faced with time limitations as they are tasked to investigate reports of self-neglect, mitigate immediate risks, and subsequently discontinue APS services until an additional report of self-neglect is received (Sommerfeld et al., 2014). Focus group participant, Ashley, explicitly stated, “APS is crisis intervention, we pretty much put a Band-Aid on it and close it out.” Overall, participant responses revealed that time limitations presented social work practice challenges in the areas of rapport building, researching and implementing resource options, providing an ongoing support system, and the provision of direct practice mental health treatment when working with clients.

A recommended solution is to implement long-term case management services at the APS social workers discretion when working with cases of self-neglect involving older adult hoarders to fully resolve issues that impact the older adult’s health, safety and overall wellbeing. Change can be difficult, and individuals may require time to act upon change that will ensure their own health and safety; therefore, it is necessary to allow APS social workers to utilize their knowledge in determining the prognosis of continued APS involvement and determine if the client would benefit from long-term case

management services. Furthermore, by applying long-term case management efforts, APS agencies have the opportunity to explore necessary research avenues by evaluating the effectiveness and overall impact of long-term services in comparison to the short-term APS practice currently in place.

Establishing Interagency Collaboration Efforts

Participants indicated that a significant barrier in social work practice with older adult hoarders included access and availability to resources such as mental health and affordable cleaning services. A recommended solution, also identified by study participants as a method of improving APS practice, is to establish a multidisciplinary team (MDT) that serves Riverside County residents in support of APS social work practitioners when addressing cases of self-neglect involving older adults participating in hoarding behaviors.

This recommendation is supported by previous research that indicates professionals have recognized an increased need to use a multifaceted approach in situations involving older adults with hoarding behaviors to address the complexities of hoarding behavior by utilizing diverse agencies (Koeing et al., 2013). As a result of establishing an MDT consisting of various Riverside County agencies including, but not limited to, code enforcement, mental health, law enforcement, public health department, animal control, professional organizers, and community volunteers, this recommended solution can contribute to the improvement of APS social work practice by implementing collaborative efforts to adequately address the needs of the client through enhanced access and availability of services for the older adult.

Participants also discussed their concerns regarding lack of community knowledge and the need for education regarding the APS social work scope of practice. Previous research indicates that there have been limited research efforts to advance the knowledge of professionals regarding the collaborative efforts between social and public service agencies to mitigate APS cases (Daly et al., 2005). The establishment of an MDT to support APS social workers in Riverside County, California can present the opportunity for community agencies to gain knowledge regarding APS practices, as well as potentially contribute to the furthering of research regarding collaborative efforts between community and APS agencies.

Funding Improvements

Participants in the study recognized APS funding and client financial barriers as essential areas in need of improvement when working with older adult hoarders. Participants indicated that the overall social issue of hoarding is underfunded, and clients commonly face individual financial constraints that limit their ability to access community services, particularly with assistance in home cleaning. Previous research indicates that without standardized risk assessment approaches and intervention methods with measurable outcomes, it is foreseeable that APS agencies will maintain a disadvantage in stable funding and opportunities for growth (Henderson, 2011).

A recommendation is for stakeholders in the community to conduct further research regarding cases of self-neglect that involve older adult hoarders to identify both the need for financial assistance to access services and potential improved outcomes because of providing financial assistance to clients, such as decreased APS recidivism

rates (e.g., reduction of additional self-neglect reports for the same client after initial APS intervention). Subsequently, as APS general funding for Riverside County, California is directly allocated by the California Department of Social Services, stakeholders must submit research-based proposals to the California assembly budget subcommittee chair holders to recognize the cost benefits of additional APS funding in this area of service. Because of increasing APS funding to provide financial assistance to clients, APS programs can better offset the direct costs incurred by clients when accessing services in the community, potentially improving the effectiveness of social work practice interventions.

Impacts on Social Work Practice

Action Researcher's Practice

The findings of the research study resulted in an identified need for support on an organizational level to assist APS social workers working with the older adult hoarding population in Riverside County, California. These findings impact my practice as an administrator working with community programs that provide services to older and disabled adults in Riverside County, California as APS services are a resource to ensure the safety and well-being of the clients I serve. In efforts to assist APS social workers in working with the older adult hoarding population, I anticipate taking on the role of supporting the community in establishing a collaborative effort among agencies to create a hoarding task force that operates in Riverside County, California. The hoarding task force will consist of multiple agencies in an MDT format to allow for the gathering of

likeminded individuals in efforts to support APS social workers when working with clients that exhibit hoarding behaviors.

Application to Clinical Social Work Practice

Utilizing action research methodology, the study involved collaboration and participation between myself as a researcher and community constituents to address the problem, how can APS social work practice be improved when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors? Findings of this study included, (a) barriers to mental health services, (b) funding and client financial constraints, (c) changes to current practice interventions, (d) practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and (e) community education and support. In general, these findings are transferrable to clinical social work practice as they provide a foundation of information communicated by APS and IHSS social workers that can be used to inform potential solutions.

One area of clinical social work practice that can apply these findings was the area of changing APS social work practice to incorporate a standardized intervention protocol for APS social workers when working with older adult hoarders. Participants expressed concern regarding a lack of direction when conducting interventions in cases of self-neglect involving older adult hoarders. Research and a review of the literature conducted in this action research study identified the need for APS agencies to improve and evaluate practice interventions. As a result of creating a standardized intervention protocol, APS social workers have the opportunity to utilize appropriate interventions, therefore ensuring efficacious social work practices are being used when working with older adult hoarders

Another area of clinical social work practice that can apply these findings was the area of establishing an MDT that involves community agencies to assist APS social workers when working with APS cases of self-neglect involving older adults with hoarding behaviors. The data collected provided insight regarding the challenges that APS and IHSS social workers face regarding lack of community support and education. One participant clearly stated that APS social workers need to have an MDT in situations involving older adults who hoard. Another participant also stated that a collaborative effort is needed when working with APS cases involving older adults who hoard. These examples provide support to the existing literature that recognizes the increased need to use a multifaceted approach in situations involving older adults with hoarding behaviors. Utilizing an MDT method of approach to APS cases can assist APS social workers in establishing relationships within the community, as well as gain access to necessary resource allocation and various levels of expertise.

Transferability

Transferability is described as the ability to show that research findings can be applicable in other contexts (Amankwaa, 2016). The literature reviewed in this action research study identifies that as a result of little federal oversight upon the initial establishment of APS agencies, APS systems currently differ in various areas including eligibility, resources, funding and intervention tools (Dong, 2017; Mosqueda et al., 2016). As findings of this study provide information by gathering in-depth insights and experiences directly from APS and IHSS social workers regarding practice challenges and improvements, findings of the study can be applied to the broader field of social

work practice in efforts to create continuity among APS agencies. This can be achieved by utilizing information gathered regarding social work challenges and improvements to identify and implement solutions necessary to better serve older adult hoarders in the areas of intervention, interagency collaboration, resource allocation, and funding.

Limitations

Instrumentation. Data collection methods involved using a 6-item semi-structured qualitative interview schedule to elicit responses from study participants. With assistance of my capstone research chair, survey questions used in the focus group discussion were developed based on their ability to address the research study questions and informed by past qualitative research in this topic area. The interview questions developed were original and not used in previous research. As a result, this presented a possible limitation to the rigor of the study.

Trustworthiness. The process of independently utilizing each participant's data to create a thematic framework, followed by indexing and charting techniques presented limitations to the credibility of the findings in the study. During the construction of the thematic framework and use of indexing and charting techniques, I determined the significance of the data and the relation to the themes I identified. These methods presented the potential for researcher bias in the findings of the study.

Generalizability. The findings of the study maintained a focus on identifying APS social work practice challenges and improvements based on responses from purposefully selected study participants that included APS and IHSS social workers. As a result of eliciting information only from social workers that provide protective services,

generalizability of the findings may be limited as social service professionals that do not provide protective services to the older adult hoarding population may have varying scopes of practice which do not involve the same challenges and improvements identified by participants in this study (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Recommendations for Further Research

Dauenhauer, Mayer, and Mason (2007) indicate there is limited research regarding the evaluation of APS social worker efforts, such as investigation, triage, intervention, and service planning. Findings of the study provided data regarding social work practice challenges and improvements to determine potential solutions to APS social work practices when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. As I ensured the study maintained a strong focus in the specialized area of social work in protective services, as well as a specialized population base of APS cases involving self-neglecting older adults who hoard, this creates the opportunity for APS agencies to utilize study findings to further evaluate the improvement in social work practices when the challenges identified in this study are addressed.

Overall, further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of APS social work practices in the long-term stabilization of older adults who hoard. APS agencies currently face a high number of case recidivism rates, resulting in the need for constant crisis intervention, and additional use of agency and community resources. Researchers must begin to explore selected APS cases in efforts to conduct long-term studies that evaluate the type and frequency of social worker practice intervention and their effectiveness in stabilizing APS clients long-term. Furthermore, although findings of this

study are limited due to maintaining a specific focus on APS social work practice with older adults who hoard, APS agencies need to continue exploring other types and subtypes of elder and dependent abuse and self-neglect by using the same method of inquiry by gathering information directly from social workers to identify practice challenges and areas of improvement.

Dissemination of Findings

To make the action research project available to community stakeholders, I will electronically deliver written communication in the form of an executive summary. Dissemination of the action research project will allow stakeholders, including agencies that serve older adults in community of Riverside County, to review findings and recommendations of the study and determine approaches to improving APS social work practice when working with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Furthermore, the study may be published in the form of an article in a peer-reviewed journal.

Implications for Social Change

An implication for social change on a micro or direct practice level includes APS social workers providing long-term case management services with older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. Long-term case management efforts may give the APS social worker a greater opportunity to establish rapport with the client, implement resource options, offer ongoing support, and provide direct practice mental health services. Ultimately, as a result of implementing long-term case management, APS cases involving older adults who hoard may be better resolved as the client and APS social worker have

adequate time to establish a strong relationship and work collaboratively to implement changes that ensure the safety and well-being of the client.

Exploring social change from a mezzo level perspective, implications include the integration of an MDT comprised of multiple community agencies to assist APS social workers working with older adults who hoard. Approaching APS cases involving older adults who hoard by using a collaborative effort allows for agencies to become better aware of hoarding as a problem that impacts the community and to effectively assist APS social workers. Challenges related to serving the older adult hoarding population such as access to services, community support, and financial constraints are not unique to APS social work practices, but to various practitioners in the community that also work with older adult hoarders; therefore, MDT efforts may extend beyond working with APS cases involving older adult hoarders.

From a macro level perspective, overall society may benefit from older adult hoarders receiving more effective services as a result of APS intervention. Hoarding poses a significant public health burden due to potential outcomes that occur as a result of hoarding behavior, such as poor physical health, increased social service involvement, housing challenges, and occupational impairments (Tolin et al., 2008). If the findings of this study result in improved APS practices when working with older adults who hoard, society may begin to see a reduction of these greater implications that occur as a result of hoarding behavior.

Summary

APS practice when working with older adults exhibiting hoarding behaviors in Riverside County, California requires improvement. APS social workers have the unique opportunity to mitigate issues related to hoarding behaviors in the community, which is otherwise a very hidden problem. APS and IHSS social workers who participated in the study identified various practice challenges when working with older adults who hoard including, barriers to mental health services, funding and client financial constraints, changes to current practice interventions, practice challenges related to right to self-determination, and community education and support.

APS and IHSS social workers expressed concerns regarding their ability to adequately serve the study population due to limited funding, resources, time limitations and lack of established protocol when approaching older adult hoarding situations. Furthermore, social workers indicated that interagency collaboration is needed in efforts to improve community support, and ensure adequate resource options are made available to older adults who exhibit hoarding behaviors. In order to improve APS social work practice and ultimately, better ensure the safety and well-being of the older adult hoarding population in Riverside County, California, APS agency stakeholders must recognize these practice challenges faced by APS and IHSS social workers and implement necessary APS service improvements.

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Appendix A: Focus Information Session and Group Discussion Guide

I. Information session

A. Initial Information: I will conduct the information session by conducting the following:

- i. Introduce self and role.
- ii. Explain:
 - a. The purpose of the study.
 - b. The purpose, dates and times of the focus group discussions.
 - c. The reasoning for participant selection.
 - d. What will be done with the information collected.
 - e. Review confidentiality guidelines

B. Consent Process

- i. Consent form: All individuals' in attendance to the information session will be provided a consent form. After the information session, I will hold an individual debriefing allowing for potential participants to individually submit a completed the consent form. Completed consent forms will be required, prior to participating in the focus group discussion. I will complete the following:
 - a. Hand each participant a consent form to read, sign and date.
 - b. Answer questions related to the consent form.
 - c. Confirm with the participant they understand the consent form.
 - d. Provide the participant a copy of their signed and dated consent form.

II. Focus Group Discussions

A. Logistics: I will explain the logistics of the focus group as follows:

- i. Review the duration of the focus group.
- ii. If at any time participants need to stand up or excuse themselves, feel free to do so.
- iii. Identify the location of exit and bathroom.
- iv. Participants can help themselves to refreshments.
- v. Inform participants that an audio tape recorder will be used to collect information.
- vi. Hand out and collect individual sign in sheets requesting the participants to sign and date documenting their attendance and document demographic information including, age, gender, the

number of years employed as a social worker, and level of education.

B. Guidelines: I will explain the guidelines of the focus group as follows:

- i. Everyone is encouraged to participate.
- ii. Review the importance of confidentiality
- iii. Do not have side conversations.
- iv. Place cell phones on vibrate.

C. Initial Questions: I will ask the participants if they have any questions before beginning the focus group discussion and address all questions asked by participants.

III. I will turn on the audio tape recorder.

IV. Focus Group - Discussion Questions

A. Lead in Question: I will initiate the discussion by asking the following question:

- i. What are your initial thoughts about working with older adults that exhibit hoarding behaviors?

B. Discussion Questions: I will ask the following discussion questions:

- i. What do you think causes older adults to participate in hoarding behaviors?
- ii. From a cognitive-behavioral perspective, could you tell me how you address cases involving older adults that hoard?
- iii. Could you tell me what cognitive-behavioral service interventions you have used when addressing cases of self-neglect involving older adults that exhibit hoarding behaviors? What were the outcomes?
- iv. How can current service interventions used by social workers be improved when working with elderly hoarders?
- v. Could you tell me what you think are your biggest challenges when addressing cases of self-neglect involving elderly hoarders?

V. Closing

A. Closing Questions: I will ask the following closing questions:

- i. Of all things we have discussed, what is the most important to you?
- ii. I will summarize main themes captured from the discussion and ask the group, is this summary accurate?

iii. Do you have any questions before the concluding of the group?

B. Follow-up: I will provide the following:

- i. Facilitator contact information.
- ii. Review informed consent and ensure participants have been provided copies of the signed informed consent form.
- iii. Offer participants a copy of the final action research project paper
- iv. Offer participants the opportunity to debrief.