

2018

# How Social Workers' Perceptions as Mandated Reporters May Impact Reporting Suspected Child Abuse

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*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Dorothy Goulart

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2018

Abstract

How Social Workers' Perceptions as Mandated Reporters  
May Impact Reporting Suspected Child Abuse

by

Dorothy Goulart

MSW, Hunter College of Social Work, 1987

BA, Hunter College, 1984

Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Social Work

Walden University

November 2018

## Abstract

Child maltreatment is a worldwide concern. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, social workers are mandated reporters. When there is reasonable suspicion, they are required by law to report suspected child maltreatment to the appropriate Child Protective Services office. In this study, the research problem was the underreporting of child maltreatment, even when reasonable suspicion existed. The purpose of this study, as reflected in the research questions, was to understand social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters, to explore how their perceptions impacted reporting, and to develop recommendations that could be implemented to help ensure appropriate reporting. An action research study was conducted with master's level social workers in southern Virginia. Symbolic interaction theory was used in researching the social workers' role and their perceptions as mandated reporters interacting with clients. Qualitative data were collected from a focus group of 6 social workers and analyzed using specific coding protocols. Six themes emerged: (a) importance of the role of social worker as a mandated reporter, (b) role conflict, (c) negative consequences, (d) feelings, (e) increased knowledge of child abuse laws, and (f) education of clients. The findings of this study may be used by regulators and agency personnel to design education, training, and supervision to help ensure social workers are prepared to appropriately respond to mandated reporting requirements.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this study to all my social work colleagues, especially the six social workers who participated in my focus group who have demonstrated remarkable advocacy and clinical support for children and families, especially children most at-risk. It is my hope that the lessons-learned from this research will not only have a positive effect in addressing and treating child maltreatment in southern Virginia, but also throughout the commonwealth and nationally.

I thank my husband, Rick Goulart, who also has been at my side on my journey for nearly 40 years. His emotional support, love, nurturing, wisdom and professional editing skills also made possible my three-year commitment to this research and my DSW. Special thanks to my three children and daughter-in-law, Ryan and his wife Joanie, Jonathan, and Audrey who all cheered me on when I needed it most. I appreciate all my family, friends and neighbors who constantly supported and encouraged me during this three-year process.

All of this would not have been possible without my Chair and the Coordinator of the DSW program, Dr. Debora Rice, who counseled, coached, and guided me through the most difficult quarters of the program. I especially thank my second chair, Dr. Valerie Quarles, and the URR Reviewer, Dr. Cynthia Davis.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study and Literature Review

Child maltreatment is a worldwide concern. According to the World Health Organization (2013), 90% of child maltreatment cases are overlooked and children who suffer maltreatment are at risk for multiple physical, behavioral, and emotional problems that may extend into adulthood. As noted in Wekerle (2013), professionals who are mandated by law to report a suspected case of child maltreatment in the United States to Child Protective Services (CPS) begin the process of protecting children at risk. Krase and DeLong-Hamilton (2015) noted that social workers as mandated reporters are an important part of preventing child maltreatment and need to be appropriately trained to assess for it. By conducting an action research study with social workers in southern Virginia, I sought to learn how social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters might impact how they report suspected child abuse cases to CPS.

The overall organization of the first section begins with an introduction of the problem, purpose statement and research questions. I explore the nature of the doctoral project as well as the theoretical/conceptual framework used throughout the study. Social work values and ethics related to the study are discussed. This is followed by a review of the professional and academic literature and summary. In Section 2, I discuss the research design and methodology used, along with the data analysis and ethical procedures.

### **Problem Statement**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.) noted that CPS reports do not always reflect the actual number of children being maltreated. Pietrantonio et al. (2013) discussed barriers that resulted in underreporting of suspected child maltreatment.

This research identified barriers that interfere with social workers appropriately assessing and reporting child maltreatment. In this study, I use child maltreatment interchangeably with child abuse and neglect. Kruse and De Long-Hamilton (2015) noted that about 3.5 million suspected child maltreatment cases were reported in the United States in 2013. During the period of July 1, 2015 to June 30, 2016, 3,214 suspected child maltreatment cases were reported to CPS in a city in southern Virginia. But only 54% (1754) of these cases were accepted and 31% (548) were founded, meaning that these cases met the legal definition of preponderance of evidence (Virginia Department of Social Services, n.d.).

According to the United States Health & Human Services Administration (2017) there were approximately 3.4 million CPS reports in 2015. Younger children (infants to age 5) are at greater risk of child abuse (King, Lawson & Putname-Hornstein, 2013). Infants and young children are the most vulnerable to child maltreatment and can suffer lasting effects (Harden, Buhler & Parra, 2016). Physical neglect accounts for 75.3% of reported child maltreatment (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2015). In 2015, approximately 1,670 children died due to child abuse, and children under 3 made up 4.8% of these fatalities (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017).

Kruse (2014) observed that mandated reporters may have doubts about whether the information they have obtained warrants suspected child abuse reporting. Crowell and Levi (2012) noted that mandated reporters' understanding of reasonable suspicion of child abuse can affect whether they report a suspected child abuse case to CPS.

According to Tufford, Bogo and Asakura (2015), when social workers were unaware of

the appropriate protocol or ethical guidelines in reporting child neglect, they did not address their suspicions with the child's caregivers or make a CPS report.

Mandated reporters accounted for 63.4% of the 2.2 million reports accepted nationally by CPS. School personnel (18.4%) and law enforcement (18.2%) had much higher reporting percentages than social service professionals, who reported only 10.9% (Child Maltreatment, 2015). The United States National Child Death Review Case Reporting System (NCDR-CRS) noted that 101,501 child deaths were reviewed, representing 37 states where child neglect accounted for 51% of the deaths, with 82% of the physical abuse cases deemed preventable (Palusci & Covington, 2014). In this study, I gained an understanding of social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters, as well as what specific barriers need to be addressed to ensure that social workers routinely report child maltreatment to CPS whenever there is reasonable suspicion.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to understand social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters and how their perceptions affected their reporting suspected child maltreatment. Reporting child maltreatment is at the forefront of child abuse prevention. The research questions were designed to discern how social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters, and how such perceptions impact reporting.

RQ1: How do social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters?

RQ2: How does a social worker perception of their role as a mandated reporter impact reporting child maltreatment?

RQ3: What do social workers recommended to fill any gaps in social workers' skills in reporting suspected child maltreatment?

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2017), social workers have an obligation to society to report when a client is harmed or threatens to harm self or others. As discussed in Krase (2014), mandated reporters are required by law to report suspected child maltreatment when there is reasonable suspicion. What constitutes reasonable suspicion may confuse social workers, who then hesitate to make a report to CPS (Crowell & Levi, 2012; Levi et al., 2012).

State mandates vary regarding who is a mandated reporter. For this research study, Virginia's Code 63.2-1509 identifies social workers, regardless of whether they are licensed or unlicensed, as professionals who are required to report child maltreatment when they have reason to suspect a child has been abused or neglected. Child maltreatment is defined by the following codes:

Virginia's Physical Abuse Code 63.2-100 that states an abused or neglected child means any child younger than 18 years old whose parents or other person responsible for his or her care creates or inflicts, threatens to create or inflict, or allows to be created or inflicted upon the child a physical or mental injury by other than accidental means, or creates a substantial risk of death, disfigurement, or impairment of bodily or mental functions including, but not limited to, a child who is with is or her parent or other person responsible for his or her care either (i) during the manufacture or attempted manufacture of a Schedule I or II controlled substance, or (ii) during the unlawful sale of such substance by that

child's parents or other person responsible for his or her care, when such manufacture, or attempted manufacture or unlawful sale would constitute a felony violation. Neglect Code 63.2-100 that states an abused or neglected child means any child younger than age 18 who parents or other person responsible for his or her care neglects or refuses to provide care necessary for his or her health. Who is without parental care or guardianship caused by the unreasonable absence or the mental or physical incapacity of the child's parent, guardian, legal custodian. Whose parents or other person responsible for his or her care creates substantial risk of physical or mental injury by knowingly leaving the child alone in the same dwelling, including an apartment, with a person to whom the child is not related by blood or marriage and who the parent or other person responsible for his or her care knows has been convicted of an offense against a minor for which registration is required as a violent sexual offender. Sexual Abuse/Exploitation Code 63.2-100 that states an abused or neglected child means any child younger than age 18 whose parents or other person responsible for his or her care commits or allows to be committed any act of sexual exploitation or any sexual act upon a child in violation of the law. Emotional Abuse Code 63.2-100 that states an abused or neglected child means any child younger than age 18 who parents or other person responsible for his or her care creates or inflicts, threatens to create or inflict, or allows to be created or inflicted upon the child a mental injury or creates a substantial risk of impairment of mental functions and Abandonment Code 63.2-100 that states an abused or neglected child means any

child younger than age 18 whose parents or other person responsible for his or her care abandons the child (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

In Virginia, a suspected child maltreatment case can be reported to CPS if the suspect is under 18 years old; if the alleged perpetrator was in a caregiving role at the time of the abuse; and if the suspected abuse adheres to Virginia's Code of Child Abuse and Neglect as stated in the statutes (National Association to Protect Children, 2014).

### **Nature of Doctoral Project**

In this study, I used an action research methodology. According to Stringer (2007), action research is concerned with identifying solutions to specific social problems and are conducive to social work values by addressing the person in his or her environment. As stated in Fern (2010), action research allows the researcher to collect data from participants who are close to the research problem. Implementing an action research methodology also allowed social workers to participate in research that addressed any barriers to reporting child maltreatment.

I conducted a focus group and collected qualitative data that was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed for themes. As noted in Gaizauskaite (2012), focus groups stimulate participants to actively engage in a discussion around the research problem. Conducting a focus group also enabled the researcher to gather additional data that might not have been obtained by conducting individual interviews. For example, participants generated discussion based on their professional experiences as mandated reporters that led to various group responses.

By telephone/e-mail, I asked program managers and directors of social services agencies in southern Virginia to recruit at least 6-12 master's level social workers who work with families and children. After gathering names of candidates, I contacted each by telephone/e-mail to be part of this action research project to better understand the perceptions and responses of social workers as mandated reporters.

In this action research study qualitative data was collected from master's level social workers and analyzed; the analysis yielded themes about potential barriers that interfere with mandated reporters contacting CPS when there is reasonable suspicion of abuse. Data analysis was an ongoing process throughout the data collection stage. The data collected was analyzed using data immersion, coding, creating categories, and identifying themes (Green et al., 2007).

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is expected to become part of the social work literature, identifying barriers that prevent social workers from reporting suspected child maltreatment. By addressing these gaps with social worker training, social workers may be better prepared to assess and report child maltreatment. Social workers may also get a better understanding of the legal definition of reasonable suspicion and their legal responsibility to report suspected child maltreatment. When clinicians are aware of how their perceptions as mandated reporters influence whether they report suspected child maltreatment, less underreporting of cases that meet the mandated reporting criteria will be a key result. And with increased awareness of the barriers involved in not reporting



suspected abuse, social workers may be better able to discuss their concerns with supervisors who will assist them in their mandated reporting role.

The role of a mandated reporter is to help prevent child abuse and deaths associated with child maltreatment (Krase, 2013). Increased knowledge and awareness of child maltreatment may lead to increased reporting of suspected child abuse (Pollack, 2007). Seventy-one percent of child neglect cases resulting in death were preventable (Palusci & Covington, 2014). Social workers are among the over 35 million professionals who are mandated to report child abuse (Crowell & Levi, 2012). The more suspected child abuse cases that are reported to CPS, the better chance there is that social workers are protecting children from future abuse and death.

### **Theoretical/Conceptual Framework**

Sociologists George Herbert Mead, Charles Horton Cooley, William James, and Herbert Blumer are credited with developing symbolic interaction theory (Crooks, 2001), which postulates that individuals ascribe meanings of expression to their interaction with others, who either confirm or contradict individuals' roles or identity (Turner & Stets, 2006). Depending on the meaning ascribed, the individual will experience positive or negative feelings (Turner & Stets, 2006). Human beings are thoughtful, reflective and social creatures (Crooks, 2001; Turner & Stets, 2006).

According to symbolic interaction theory, a person's identity is formed within the social structure of society (Crooks, 2001; Turner & Stets, 2006). As individuals interact with others, they learn to understand themselves in relationship to others in the world.

People's choices evolve as they understand situations and how they interact with and conform to specific roles (Crooks, 2001; Turner & Stets, 2006).

I used symbolic interaction theory in this research. The theory was helpful to understanding a person's perspective and the reality of the various roles they have in society. Symbolic interaction theory discusses the person in his or her environment and perceptions of self in relationship to others. According to this theory, individuals look toward others for validation of their perceptions (Turner, 2011).

As social workers learn that a child may be at risk, they may bring their own feelings into the relationship with clients that may interfere with their role as a mandated reporter. How social workers define their interaction with parents also will drive their behavior during the assessment, and affect whether they will report a case to CPS (Bernasiwicz, 2011). A social workers' use of self and how each situation with a client is defined will determine the course of treatment and intervention (Oliver, 2012).

Symbolic interaction is a verifiable theory and recognizes humans have minds and are thoughtful creatures with the ability to makes choices (Stryker, 2002). This theory has been historically rooted in social work and has become foundational to social work practice (Forte, 2004). The theory can be applied to how a social worker addresses social issues and impacts change (Forte, 2004). Symbolic interaction theory was used in this research to explore whether social workers' perceptions as mandated reporters impact their decision to contact CPS, as they interact with and assess clients where there may be reasonable suspicion of child abuse.

### **Social Work Values and Ethics**

The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) states that social workers deal with social problems and help those in need. Social workers have an ethical responsibility to report clients at risk of harming themselves or someone else. This responsibility aligns with the Code of Virginia 63.2-1509, which requires any social worker or mental health professional to report suspected child abuse. Social workers are mandated reporters and have an ethical and legal obligation to report suspected child maltreatment and to understand the mandated reporting laws in the state where they practice (Krase, 2013). The Council on Social Work Education has responsibility to ensure that social workers in undergraduate and graduate programs are taught their legal, ethical, and professional responsibilities as mandated reporters, including being prepared to respond appropriately to the prevention of child abuse (Krase & De Long-Hamilton, 2015).

As noted in Krase and De Long (2015), social workers have to juggle their ethical responsibilities of confidentiality and commitment to the client with the legal responsibilities as a mandated reporter. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), social workers are committed to advocate for the client's best interest. As a mandated reporter, this would include alerting clients that they would need to break confidentiality in order to report suspected child maltreatment to advocate for the safety and best interest of the child. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017), Section 1.07 (d), states that

The general expectation that social workers will keep information confidential does not apply when disclosure is necessary to prevent serious, foreseeable, and imminent harm to a client or others. In all instances, social workers should

disclose the least amount of confidential information necessary to achieve the desired purpose. (p. 17).

The NASW Code of Ethics (2017), Section 1.02, discusses the social worker's responsibility to the client's self-determination. However, social workers have an ethical obligation to report any suspected child maltreatment regardless of a client's self-determination. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) supports social workers in protecting others when a client's behaviors may cause harm to another person; the social worker may then limit "[the] client's right to self-determination" (p. 7).

Krase and De Long-Hamilton (2015) discussed the fact that social workers have a unique profession in that they have ethical responsibilities to question and object to social injustice toward individuals and society. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) under Social Welfare, Section 6.01, notes that social workers must "promote the general welfare of society" (p. 29) and "promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice (p. 29). As mandated reporters, social workers must advocate for children who are vulnerable to abuse and report suspected child maltreatment whenever it is deemed necessary so that CPS and the legal institutions can promote social justice to protect children.

The knowledge gained in this study is expected to contribute to a better understanding of the barriers that prevent social workers from being compliant with a state mandate of reporting child maltreatment. This knowledge could affect social work training and education and better prepare social workers to be mandated reporters. Should supervisors incorporate the results from this study into their supervision, the preparedness

of social workers as mandated reporters would be enhanced on an ongoing basis in their places of employment.

### **Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

A thorough literature review was conducted. The following databases, PsycARTICLES, PsycINFO, and SocINDEX, are social work, psychology, and counseling databases that have information on social work and practice; they were searched for peer-reviewed academic journal articles for the years 2012 through 2017. The titles of more than 800 articles and books were generated by searching these databases using the following phrases: *social work, mandated reporting, child maltreatment, mandated reporting, reporting child abuse, child maltreatment reporting, and barriers to reporting child abuse.*

The literature review acknowledges that there are barriers to reporting child maltreatment. A lack of training, knowledge and confidence of social workers in recognizing child maltreatment can affect whether a suspected child abuse case is reported (Alvarez, Donohue, Kenny, Cavanagh & Romero, 2005; Krase, 2014; Krase & De Long, 2015). Social workers can misinterpret the definition of child abuse and reasonable suspicion (Alvarez, Kenny, Donohue, & Carpin, 2004; Crowell et al., 2012; Tufford et al., 2015). Ethical dilemmas of reporting child maltreatment may arise that prevent social workers from making a report to CPS (Feng, Chen, Fetzer, Feng & Lin, 2012). Cultural beliefs and bias may also be factors whether a report is made to CPS (Benbenishty et al., 2014; Choo, Walsh, Marret, Chinna & Tey, 2013; Nadan, Spilsbury & Korbin, 2015; Raissia, Dierkhising, Geiger & Schelbe, 2014) as well as time

constraints and fear of negative consequences (Alvarez et al., 2004; Feng et al. 2012; Tiyyagura Gawal, Koziel, Asnes, & Bechtel, 2015).

### **Lack of Training and Knowledge About Mandated Reporting**

Ongoing training and up-to-date knowledge about mandated reporting protocols are needed in assisting social workers (Feng et al., 2012; Kruse et al., 2015; Pietrantonio et al., 2013). The more experience and training that a mandated reporter has in making a CPS report, the more likely he or she will report a suspected child abuse case again (Lusk, Zibulsky & Viesel, 2014). The difficulty in assessing child maltreatment makes it arduous to recognize child abuse that is crucial for mandated reporters (Kruse, 2013; Pietrantonio et al., 2013; Wekerle, 2012). Raissian et al. (2014), using secondary analysis of a national data set from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System, found statistically significant fewer CPS reports alleging child maltreatment for adolescents ages 13-18 years old than for younger children and stated that this age discrepancy may be reflected in the difficulty in recognizing child maltreatment in older children. Increased education to assess child maltreatment during adolescence can contribute to increased reports to CPS that will enable older children to receive necessary assistance before they age out of the child welfare system (Raissian et al., 2014).

Domestic minor sex trafficking is defined as a form of child sexual abuse and is categorized as child sexual exploitation (CSE). In a study where 577 mandated reporters who work with females ages 10-17 participated in an online survey it was found that 60% of them were not trained in child sex trafficking or child prostitution; 32% received “general training on related issues” and 9.2% received “training specifically on sex

trafficking/child prostitution” (Hartinger-Saunders, Trouteaud & Johnson, 2016, pp.198-199). It was reported that 34.9% of mandated reporters surveyed stated they perceived making a report was “usually effective”; 57.6% stated it was “somewhat effective” while 7.4% stated it was rarely effective (Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016 p. 200).

In addition, the results noted that 60% of the participants had a lack of knowledge about CSE and stated female teenagers make a choice to become prostitutes (Hartinger-Saunders, 2016). Identifying sex trafficking is complicated and specific training is needed in order to protect a child from further abuse. Training should consist of forensic approaches to build cases against the abuser and help protect families and victims as well as increasing specific CSE awareness and training for mandated reporters to increase their knowledge to assess and report CSE (Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016; Southall & MacDonald, 2013).

In a research study to evaluate the understanding of early childhood educator’s practices of reporting child maltreatment, 135 early childhood educators, who worked at early childhood centers in Florida, participated in a self-report questionnaire. According to the results, 88% of the participants stated they never made a child abuse report and 4.4% (six participants) stated they did not report a suspected child abuse case where one reason was lack of confidence in reporting (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015). Most of the participants in the study, 82.5%, had received mandated reporting training. The study showed a discrepancy in the number of child abuse cases reported nationally and in the number of child abuse cases reported by the participants in the area of the study, speculating that there should have been more cases reported (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015).

Many trained early childhood educators stated they would report suspected child abuse internally, despite that most mandated reporting regulations state that the mandated reporter should file a report with a child protective agency (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015). This study concluded that there is a positive correlation between increased confidence of mandated reporters with an increased understanding of their purpose as a mandated reporter. (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015). The early childhood educator is more likely to report child abuse when they have a clear understanding of the protocols and legal expectations of their role as a mandated reporter (Dinehart & Kenny, 2015).

It is important that clinicians working with children and families understand how to assess for emotional maltreatment, which appears to be underreported (Marshall, 2012; Bunting, Lazenbatt & Wallace, 2010). An administrative study reviewing emotional maltreatment reports from the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System (NCANDS) found considerable discrepancies in the definition of emotional maltreatment that can lead to difficulty assessing (Shpiegel, Simmel & Huang, 2013) and then making a report. Emotional abuse can have lasting developmental consequences in children and it is important that abuse is recognized, reported and that timely treatment is offered in preventing further abuse (Shpiegel et al., 2013). Mandated reporters comprise up to 58% of the reported suspected child abuse cases nationwide (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Training mandated reporters to be more knowledgeable of the details that are necessary in all suspected child abuse reports may lead to more substantiated cases regardless of the type of abuse (King et al., 2013). Twenty-one percent of 105 nurse practitioners surveyed reported they did not have adequate training



in child abuse (Herendeen, Blevins, Anson & Smith, 2014). Physicians and PNP both stated that they felt more confident in making a report after receiving further training in child abuse acknowledging the importance of improved training for health professionals in the prevention of child abuse (Herendeen et al., 2014).

Mandated reporters sometimes question if it is their responsibility to make the report (Robertson, 2016). Sometimes health professionals do not report a suspected child abuse case but make a referral to another provider. In a survey of 643 nurse practitioners, 52 reported they referred the patient elsewhere and 105 admitted they did not report all suspected child abuse cases (Herendeen et al., 2014).

Medical staff also reported feeling incompetent to assess for child abuse in patients who have had brief contact with staff in the emergency room (Tiyyagura et al., 2015). Providing education on a case-by-case basis and increased communication with CPS would benefit staff in assessing and reporting child maltreatment (Tiyyagura et al., 2015). Mandated reporters want to believe a parent's story as one physician reported feeling: "I am a trusting person...I want to believe what people tell me" (Tiyyagura et al., 2015, p.450). It is important that health care providers feel competent in assessing for child maltreatment (Jordan & Stellman, 2015). Jordan and Moore-Nadler (2014) reported that after 31 emergency room pediatric nurses received training on child maltreatment, they correctly answered 90% of questions referring to child abuse, as opposed to 76% answering correctly prior to the training. Another study measuring 114 health care professionals' attitudes in reporting child maltreatment noted a positive

correlation between training and the confidence and commitment of staff in having less concerns in making a report to CPS (Foster, Olson-Dorff, & Reiland 2017).

### **Social Work Education**

Several studies consisting of surveys and self-reflection have addressed social work preparedness as a mandated reporter (Bogo Regehr, Katz, Logie, Tufford, & Litvack, 2011; Bogo, Regehr, Logie, Katz, Mylopoulos, & Regehr, 2012; Katz, Tufford, Bogo & Regehr, 2014; Kruse & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015) An online survey representing 37 states with graduate and undergraduate social work programs was conducted to assess how the schools prepare students as mandated reporters(Kruse & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015). There was a response rate of 29%, with 97% of the sample stating that they provided education on mandated reporting. The schools that participated in the study might be representative of the schools that provide education on mandating reporting (Kruse & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015). Evaluating the effectiveness of the training is important when assessing how prepared social workers are as mandated reporters.

A review of the literature found a lack of in-depth training for student teachers regarding child sexual abuse and mandated reporting that led to them being unprepared in making a child abuse report (Golmand & Grimbeck, 2014). When a university surveyed 321 undergraduate and graduate students training to be teachers, they found that students preferred learning about their role as mandated reporters and assessing child abuse while at school (Goldman & Grimbeck, 2014). This was the first study to research how teachers prefer learning about mandated reporting and concluded that specific training on child

abuse and mandated reporting in schools will benefit children at risk (Goldman & Grimbeck, 2014).

The Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) is a reliable and verifiable method used to assess adequate learning for students in many health professions and was adapted for social work by adding a reflective dialogue related to practice (Bogo, et al., 2011; Bogo et al., 2012). A study that involved 109 masters in social work students who reflected on two case examples, where one involved suspected child abuse, found students scored lower on the Reflection scale indicating that they had less practice with suspected child abuse cases (Krase & DeLong-Hamilton 2015). Using OSCE in social work education has proved to be effective in assisting students in learning to recognize and regulate their emotions when a challenging clinical situation is simulated by an actor instead of role-playing with another student (Katz, Tufford, Bogo, & Regehr, 2014).

### **Lack of Confidence in Child Protective Agencies**

Social workers' lack of confidence in child welfare agencies may lead them to question if reporting suspected child maltreatment will result in a positive outcome for client and family, thus, determining if they make a report to CPS (Pietrantonio et al., 2013; Steen & Duran, 2014). Social workers do not always trust that a report to CPS will not result in more harm to the child, escalating the parent's abusive behavior (Feng et al., 2012). Mandated reporters who had a negative experience with CPS are less likely to make another report to protect their clients (Flaherty, Schwartz, Jones, & Sege, 2012).

### **Misinterpretation of the Definition of Child Abuse and Reasonable Suspicion**

How mandated reporters understand the law and what constitutes reasonable suspicion needs to be part of training (Crowell et al., 2012; Krase et al., 2015). Crowell and Levi (2012) noted that mandated reporters' understanding of reasonable suspicion of child abuse can affect when they will report a suspected child abuse case to CPS. Their study of 1233 professionals who completed a questionnaire on their understanding of reasonable suspicion, found that increased education on child abuse resulted in assessing and reporting child maltreatment sooner (Crowell et al., 2012). Tufford, Bogo and Asakura (2015) found that when social workers were unaware of the appropriate protocol and ethical guidelines in reporting child neglect, they did not address their suspicions with the child's caregivers or make a CPS report. In another study, nurses who provided home visitations disclosed that they were uncertain if children exposed to intimate partner violence warranted a CPS report and were ill-prepared to make a distinction of reasonable suspicion of child maltreatment when intimate partner violence was present (Davidov, Jack, Frost & Coben, 2012).

Benbenishty et al. (2014) studied referral decisions made by child protection teams (CPTs) in six medical hospitals. The role of the interdisciplinary team is to assess if there is reasonable suspicion of child abuse in a medical case. Social workers filled out questionnaires regarding the disposition of 968 cases. The findings indicated statistical significance in the consistency of the CPTs' referral decisions to either CPS, the police or to a community agency. This study is an example of how mandated reporters may benefit

from using an assessment that accounts for variables that may put children at risk for maltreatment.

A study asking 1,012 pediatricians open-ended questions regarding their perceptions of reasonable suspicion found how diverse their definitions could be. Of 70% of the pediatricians who defined reasonable suspicion, two-thirds of them offered a definition of reasonable suspicion to include any suspicion. Twenty-three percent stated there had to be another variable other than “mere suspicion” (Levi, Dellasega & Boehmer, 2012). Mandated reporters are held to the definition of reasonable suspicion which is the driving force in making a report and therefore need to understand what constitutes reasonable suspicion in order to make a CPS report.

### **Culture and Biases**

Culture and biases can affect how people perceive child abuse (Benbenishty & Schmid, 2013; Feng et al., 2012; Fledderjohann & Johnson, 2012; Ho & Gross, 2015; Humphries et al., 2016; Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017; Kesner, Kwon & Lim, 2016; Tishelman & Fontes, 2017). Religion, societal attitudes about parenting, and socioeconomic and cultural differences all have an impact on how child abuse is perceived (Welbourne & Dixon, 2016). Race, personal attire, education, profession and where a caregiver resides can contribute to biases that may impact a mandated reporter making a CPS report (Krase, 2013; Tiyaqura et al., 2015).

In a telephone survey of 3,679 participants, it was found that age, education, and gender would impact a person’s decision to report child abuse as well as how they would define it (Fledderjohann & Johnson, 2012). How a person presents and how they are

perceived can influence a mandated reporter's suspicion of child maltreatment.

Characteristics of the parents such as income, clothes, education, mannerisms and where they live, can impact whether a CPS report is made (Tiyyagura et al. 2015). Physicians who participated in the study stated that a patient that presents smelling of smoke and wearing a bathrobe while in the emergency room would be perceived as more suspicious than someone else who is nicely dressed (Tiyyagure et al., 2015).

There are a disproportionate number of African-American children represented in CPS in some geographic areas (Krase, 2013). Bias may be one variable that supports this disparity (Krase, 2013; Nadan, Spilsury & Korbin, 2015). Reporting bias was noted in a study reviewing the records of 388 children treated for fractures at a hospital; more African-American children were reported to CPS than white children with the same injury (Krase, 2013; Lane, Rubin, Monteith & Christinan, 2002).

The cultural background of the mandated reporter can impact his or her perception in recognizing child maltreatment and being willing to follow-up on a CPS report (Choo et al., 2013). In many cultures a child is still considered the property of the parents and corporal punishment is not seen as child abuse (Benbenishty & Schmid, 2013). Mandated reporters may be uncomfortable assessing child maltreatment when asking questions of parents from cultures that use harsh punishments (Feng et al., 2012). In a survey of 105 teachers measuring their attitudes about corporal punishment, although their beliefs varied depending on race, their attitudes did not affect their reporting appropriate, alleged child maltreatment (Kesner, Kwon & Lim, 2016). Ho and Gross (2015) found that it is difficult for mandated reporters to differentiate between abuse and discipline when

assessing suspected child abuse in different cultures and stated that mandated reporters need to understand how their culture could impact how they assess and report suspected child abuse

A cross-sectional, opportunistic sampling study of 252 participants was conducted to learn of men's and women's attitudes about reporting child sexual abuse in the United Kingdom using an opportunistic sampling (Humphries, Debowska, Boduszek & Mattison, 2016). The participant's attitudes about sexual abuse, their level of resilience and masculinity, a self-report psychopathy scale and a teachers' reporting attitudes scale for child sexual abuse were measured. The results indicated that there were not any significant difference between men's and women's attitudes about reporting sexual abuse but different factors affect gender beliefs (Humphries et al., 2016).

Men's beliefs about reporting child sexual abuse were not affected by an increase in their support system whereas woman's beliefs were positively affected by a support system. Women who scored higher on masculine characteristics had a less positive outlook of reporting child sexual abuse. There was a significant positive correlation between age and attitudes toward reporting among women. Men's attitudes toward reporting child sexual abuse was only affected by interpersonal manipulation, which is speculated might lead to less altruism (Humphries et al., 2016). These results can be incorporated into training programs to help in understanding attitudes that affect reporting child abuse.

Members of the clergy are considered mandated reporters in 28 states and Guam (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2016) Cultural issues can especially be barriers to

reporting child sexual abuse in religious communities where religious leaders will be told of the abuse but not report it to the authorities (Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017; Tishelman & Fontes, 2017). Some religious leaders may offer protection and safety when learning of child sexual abuse while others may respond clandestinely supporting the feelings of shame and guilt experienced by the victim (Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017; Tishelman & Fontes, 2017). The child sexual abuse scandal in the Catholic Church is an example how religious institutions can perpetuate child abuse (Collins, O'Neill-Arana, Fontes, & Ossege, 2014).

### **Ethical and Practice Dilemmas**

Social workers can become concerned about negatively impacting the therapeutic relationship if they report suspected child maltreatment (Tufford, 2014; Tufford, 2016). Social workers need to know how to work with families or caregivers and understand how they perceive CPS. Implementing certain procedures, disclosures, and interventions would help social workers address their concerns about reporting child maltreatment, and help address the impact reporting has on suspected child maltreatment and the therapeutic relationship (Pietrantonio et al., 2013; Tufford, 2014; Tufford, 2016). Additional ethical concerns arise when mandated reporters believe that the child is better off with the biological parent instead of children being removed from their homes and placed in foster care (Feng et al., 2012).

In a study of 439 social workers, a survey was completed to assess the impact on the therapeutic relationship when the social worker made a CPS report (Tufford, 2016). Making a CPS report can be very emotional for both the social worker and client.



Although some clients felt relieved that they would be provided with the help they needed, feelings of betrayal, denial, distrust, and anger were reported by other clients (Tufford, 2016).

### **Time Involved in Making a Child Abuse Report and Fear of Negative Consequences**

Tiyyagura et al., (2015) conducted a qualitative study interviewing 29 emergency room personnel and found some staff would not report a case to CPS because of the time constraints involved in making a report to CPS. Staff stated that “I am not reporting this because they’re gonna keep me on the phone for 30 minutes” (p.450). “It’s a lot of effort and time you put into it and then it’s nothing that really comes back” (p. 450). Staff also expressed concerns that they would be subpoenaed to testify in court and felt concerned about ramifications from the family if the report was not substantiated by CPS or if they had inconvenienced the family who then might want to harm the professional who made the report (Tiyyagura et al., 2015). Social workers surveyed on the impact of the professional relationship with a client after making a CPS report stated that although the report negatively affected the therapeutic relationship with some clients, it did not result in any legal or physical retaliation toward the mandated reporter (Tufford, 2014).

Fifty-six physician experts in child abuse responded to a 10-question written survey. Seventy-seven percent reported that making a CPS report resulted in unfavorable outcomes including 52% reporting concern for their safety; 50% reporting parents verbalizing criticism to their employer; 23% receiving unfavorable media attention; 16% suffering a lawsuit and 13% experiencing a negative report to their licensing board (Flaherty, Schwartz, Jones & Sege, 2012). Many of the physicians who responded had

received more than one of the above negative consequences as a result of making a CPS report (Flaherty et al., 2012). In a study of 105 nurse practitioners the most common concern was losing patients after reporting child abuse (Herendeen et al., 2014).

### **Summary**

Keeping children safe is a worldwide concern, which, in the United States, is addressed when mandated reporters assess and report child abuse and neglect (Sidebotham & Appleton, 2014). The literature addressed many barriers that mandated reporters may face when working with children and adolescents. Recognizing and reporting child maltreatment are multifaceted and require ongoing education, training, reflection, and supervision. Legal implications, such as delays in prosecuting the offender when a crime has been committed, is associated with not reporting child sexual abuse (Bunting, 2014). Sexual abuse can be difficult to evaluate in younger clients, even when mandated reporters have been trained (Katzenstein & Fontes, 2017).

Social workers are on the front line to prevent child abuse. It is important to understand how their perceptions of their role as mandated reporters affected their decisions to call CPS. The research discussed in the literature review surveyed mandated reporters. By conducting an action research study, where social workers participated in a focus group and had an opportunity to discuss their perceptions of their role as mandated reporters, I gained the knowledge necessary to further help social workers prevent child maltreatment.

It is important to understand the barriers that prevent social workers from reporting suspected child maltreatment to CPS. In Section 2, I discuss the research

design, methodology, data analysis, and ethical procedures used in conducting an action research study to better understand how social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters and how that perception impacts reporting suspected child maltreatment.

## Section 2: Research Design and Data Collection

Child maltreatment is a worldwide concern (World Health Organization, 2013). I conducted an action research study with social workers in southern Virginia to learn how social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters impact how they report suspected child abuse cases to CPS. When social workers better understand the barriers to reporting child abuse, they may be able to better train and supervise social workers who are charged with protecting children. These research findings may also contribute to agency protocols to help social workers become more effective mandated reporters. In section 2, I discuss the research design, methodology used along with the data analysis, and ethical procedures.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to understand how social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters affected their reporting of suspected child maltreatment. The research questions focused on how social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters and how their perceptions impact reporting.

RQ1: How do social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters?

RQ2: How does a social worker perception of their role as a mandated reporter impact reporting child maltreatment?

RQ3: What do social workers recommended to fill any gaps in social workers' skills in reporting suspected child maltreatment?

The problem addressed by this research was the underreporting of child abuse, even by mandated reporters (Pietrantonio et al. 2013). I learned of barriers that interfere

with social workers appropriately assessing and reporting child maltreatment. I explored how social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters and what can be recommended to fill gaps, if any, in social workers' skills in reporting suspected child abuse.

I used an action research and conducted a focus group to collect qualitative data. According to Stringer (2007), action research is concerned with identifying solutions to specific social problems and aligns with social work values by addressing the person in his or her environment. Fern (2010) stated that action research allows the researcher to collect data from participants who are close to the research problem and actively involved in the research. And by implementing an action research methodology, social workers also participated in research that addresses their reporting child maltreatment.

The key definitions in this research study were:

1. Mandated Reporter as defined according to Virginia's Code 63.2-1509 that includes social workers regardless if they are licensed or unlicensed as professionals that are required to report child maltreatment (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.).

2. Child maltreatment as defined by the definition of Virginia's Physical Abuse Code 63.2-100; Neglect Code 63.2-100; Sexual Abuse/Exploitation Code 63.2-100; Emotional Abuse Code 63.2-100 and Abandonment Code 63.2-100 (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.)

3. Criteria to report a suspected child maltreatment case to CPS in Virginia states the suspect must be under 18 years old; the alleged perpetrator was in a caregiving role at

the time of the abuse and the suspected abuse adheres to Virginia's Code of Child Abuse and Neglect (National Association to Protect Children, 2014).

### **Methodology**

As previously stated, I conducted an action research study and used a focus group to collect qualitative data. Throughout the literature review, the majority of studies assessing mandated reporters' behavior have been self-report surveys (Benbenishy et al., 2012; Crowell & Levi, 2012; Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Flaherty et al., 2012; Fledderjohann & Johnson, 2012; Goldman & Grimbeck, 2014; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016; Herendeen et al., 2014; Humphries et al., 2016; Kesner et al., 2016; Krase & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015; Tufford, 2014; Tufford, 2016). Conducting an action research study using focus groups with master's prepared social workers also provided me opportunity to gain additional knowledge of the experiences of mandated reporters who each shared and reflected on their individual practice (Dustman, Kohan, & Stringer, 2012; Thiollent, 2011).

### **Instrumentation**

I prepared an interview guide with 10 open-ended questions informed by symbolic interaction theory and based on my findings from my literature review (Linhorst, 2002). In addition, I asked each participant some basic demographic information regarding how long they have been a social worker, when they graduated from social work school, and how long they have worked with children and families.

## **Participants**

I used a combination of convenience and snowball sampling to recruit at least 6-12 participants. Convenience and snowball sampling are both non-probability sampling (Sedgwick, 2013; Waters, 2015). Convenience sampling allows you to recruit participants who are convenient and easily available to the researcher (Sedgwick, 2013). By using convenience sampling, I was able to contact social workers whom I know work with children and families in southern Virginia and recruit these clinicians to participate in my research. Snowball sampling is often used in studies where it is difficult to recruit participants and allows the researcher to ask eligible participants for referral information to other individuals who might be interested in participating in the study (Waters, 2015).

Social workers are on the front line as mandated reporters. They have first-hand experience in reporting suspected child maltreatment. I contacted master's level social workers whom I know in southern Virginia, either by telephone or e-mail, and asked each if they were interested in participating in my action research study. I also asked each person that I contacted if they knew at least two other master's level social workers whom I would contact. The sample of participants was master's level social workers who are not employed alongside the researcher and who counsel children and families in southern Virginia.

As noted in Gaizauskaite (2012), a focus group should be small and may consist of 6-12 participants, but it is advisable to try to plan for the maximum number of participants to be prepared for those recruited who may not show-up. Gaizauskaite (2012) stated that the ideal number of focus group participants can vary from 5 -15, but reiterates

that the group should be modest in size to allow all participants the opportunity to share their knowledge and yet large enough to have a variety of knowledge shared.

### **Data Analysis**

The data collected in the focus group was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription agency. As noted in Green et al. (2007), the four steps in data analysis I deployed included data immersion, coding, creating categories, and identifying themes. Data immersion was the first step in analyzing the data collected to begin a process of becoming familiar with the data and understanding how the data collected relates to the research (Green et al., 2007). Coding is the second part of data analysis. I labeled what each participant shared in the focus group, and defined and coded their statements (Saldana, 2016). The next step in data analysis was categorizing the coded information into common classifications (Green et al., 2007). From the categories generated, I identified themes that connected with the literature and symbolic interaction theory, so as to allow me to interpret the data and report on its findings (Green et al., 2007)

As noted in Stringer (2009), member checking can increase the credibility of the research project. I provided focus group participants with a copy of the transcription to review the data collected, while also commenting on its veracity. This procedure allowed the researcher to make any necessary corrections or revisions to ensure the accuracy of the data.

Stringer (2007) stated that it is important that participants have the opportunity to discuss any concerns/feelings regarding activities connected with the research topic in order for them to confirm the integrity of the project. I was transparent about the research



topic with participants to enable them to evaluate the integrity of the research so that it may be transferable. I ensured that the research project was well documented and reported, and that an inquiry audit took place to allow for the research to be considered dependable, and that an audit trail was conducted for the data collected to be deemed confirmable (Stringer, 2007). This researcher also provided the necessary information to ensure that the appropriate protocol was taken in this project to validate its reliability and trustworthiness.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Participants in this action research project signed an informed consent form detailing the purpose of the research, participants' right of refusal to participate or withdraw without their written consent, as well as a statement stating that information will not be shared with any employer, CPS or the Board of Social Work. Data collected was confidential and used for data analysis. During the recording of the focus group, each participant was identified by a different a number in order to protect confidentiality when the data was transcribed and reported. The data was kept in a secure place and only the researcher had access to it. The data will remain in a secure place and be destroyed after five years.

### **Summary**

The data collected in the focus group was transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription agency and I manually analyzed the data for themes. Data analysis included data immersion; coding; creating categories, and identifying themes (Greene at al., 2007). Data analysis will be discussed in Section 3.

### Section 3: Analysis of the Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand how social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters affected their reporting of suspected child maltreatment. The three research questions were: How do social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters? How does that perception impact reporting child maltreatment? What can be recommended to fill any gaps in social workers' skills in reporting suspected child maltreatment? The data were collected using an action research methodology, with a focus group, which was conducted to collect qualitative data.

Section 3 presents the data collection process used in the recruitment of focus group participants, the data analysis and validation procedures used, and the research findings, followed by a summary of how the findings relate to the research questions.

#### **Data Analysis Techniques**

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board of Walden University (05-07-18-0589250), I began recruiting masters-prepared social workers who had worked with children and families in southern Virginia. I sent out e-mail messages with an invitation to participate in my research. I reached out by phone to one social worker, e-mailed 17 other social workers, two of whom forwarded the invitation to three other potential participants. It took two weeks before I was able to set a time and date to meet for the focus group; six social workers were available. With my confirmation of the meeting, I included consent forms for them to review.

On the day of the focus group, all six participants were present. I had prepared packets with a confidentiality agreement, informed consent, and demographic forms that

each participant completed prior to starting the group. Each participant had a copy of the focus group questions. I arranged numbers at each table seating and had a microphone for professional recording in the middle of the table, connected to a recording software on my laptop. I also used a back-up recording device. The participants were informed that video recording was prohibited.

Before I started the focus group, I reviewed the ground rules, including the importance of mutual respect and confidentiality. I confirmed that all participants would have the opportunity to talk and that when they spoke, they would need to refer to their assigned number so that the transcriber would be able to note who was talking. I reminded participants that should anyone want to respond to another participant, each person should be referred to by their number. I informed the group participants that the focus group must not exceed 90 minutes per the approval of the Internal Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. There were not any questions, so I started the focus group at 9:36 and it lasted a little over an hour.

During the focus group, I took notes and monitored the time spent on each question to ensure ample time for all ten questions. At the conclusion of the focus group, when the microphones were disconnected and recording stopped, the participants continued to talk about their experiences of being a mandated reporter. Clinicians also reviewed their knowledge of Virginia's mandated reporting laws.

As evidenced by the continued conversation, participants were engaged with each other. Participants encouraged me to submit the findings to NASW's social work journal for publication. Participants were also very curious about my original question

development for the research. I explained that the data collected during the focus group was rich and that it would add to the knowledge of the profession. I informed the participants that they would receive a copy of the transcript within a week to review for accuracy; a strategy termed member checking.

The transcription service returned the transcript of the focus group in three days. I read the transcription three times and took notes. I highlighted words and sentences on the transcript and made notes in the left margin of the pages. I listened to the audio recording and compared it to the transcript for accuracy.

I reviewed Saldana's (2016) book as well as Laureate Education (n.d.) handout on coding to familiarize myself with the different ways qualitative data could be coded. I also reviewed Bree & Gallagher's (2016) article on coding procedures as well as a Spencer, Basualdo-Delmonico Walsh and Drew (2014) article on how coding was used in their research.

My first round of coding used in vivo coding, which is also known under many other names such as literal coding, verbatim coding, and others (Saldana, 2016). This process allowed me to use participant's words or phrases. I wrote in vivo codes in quotation marks in the left margin of the transcript. I marked this transcript in vivo coding and collected 143 codes.

I then took another copy of the transcript and labeled it value coding. According to Saldana (2016), value coding looks for participant's values, beliefs, and attitudes. Value coding was selected because it aligned with symbolic interaction theory, which is the theory selected for this research project. Symbolic interaction theory helps to

understand the person in his/her environment and their perceptions of themselves in relationship to others. Saldana (2016) defines values as “the importance we attribute to ourselves, another person, thing, or idea” (p. 131). An attitude is defined as “the way we think and feel about ourselves, another person, thing or idea” (p.131). Belief is defined as “a system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals and other interpretive perceptions of the social world” (p. 132).

I proceeded to label certain words and phrases with either an “a” for attitude, a “b” for belief, or a “v” for value. There were 97 value codes. Value coding allowed me to account for the participant’s perceptions when answering the focus group questions.

When I completed coding, I developed a three-column chart and listed all of the in vivo codes on the left margin and all the value codes on the right margin. I labeled the middle column similarities and created categories. By reviewing each code, an appropriate category was listed. The nine categories listed were: (a) accountability to protect children; (b) practice dilemmas; (c) social work role/conflicts; (d) ambiguity of the interpretation of the law; (e) perceptions/feelings; (f) lack of confidence in CPS; (g) culture of employer; (h) negative consequences; and (i) social work education.

After reviewing all of the codes, I reviewed Miller, Parsons (2016) thematic analysis process that highlighted the steps involved in thematic analysis. The last stage in data analysis is identifying themes. I developed and color-coded similar themes that answered the three research questions. The six themes noted were: (a) importance of the

role as a mandated reporter; (b) role conflict; (c) negative consequences; (d) feelings; (e) increase knowledge of child abuse laws; and (f) education of clients.

### **Validation/Limitation Process**

To increase the validity of the research, I e-mailed participants a copy of the transcript and asked each of them to review the transcript for accuracy and report any needed corrections. One participant clarified that one of her statements referred to her client and not herself. I noted and confirmed this on the transcript. I sent out another e-mail reminding the participants to review the transcript and contact me if there were any corrections. No other participants contacted me with any corrections.

I used an inquiry audit and audit trail information to confirm the research's dependability and confirmability. A copy of the transcript and coding notes were provided to my chair. Member checking and a copy of the transcript and audio recording provide evidence of the research veracity. During the focus group, participants were candid and voluntarily answered questions based on their professional experience as mandated reporters.

## **Findings**

### **Participants**

The focus group consisted of six participants who were all licensed clinical social workers. Participant experience ranged from 10 years through 46 years in the field. The participants consisted of two men and four women ranging in age from 37-72. All participants were Caucasian and, as noted, have been in the field for at least 10 years. The participants have a varied work history and have worked in the private sector as well as

government and non-profit agencies. All participants worked with children and families. Participants were given pseudonyms: P1 was Marsha; P2 was Chloe; P3 was Joe; P4 was Debbie; P5 was Jack and P6 was Barbara.

In the following section, I share findings, organized by research question. Quotes from the participants enhanced the description of the material collected during the focus group.

### **Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 explored how do social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters. According to the data collected, social workers perceive their role as mandated reporters as central to their role as social workers. For the participants, this theme of the role of the social worker spoke to their “obligation” and “the great responsibility” of being a mandated reporter. They felt “entrusted to protect children” and felt that “the community expected them to act” as “gatekeepers.” Barbara stated: “It is basically our community telling us that because of whatever your role is with the family, your education, your knowledge; we are trusting you to monitor this and to take action when necessary to protect children.”

Participants noted that “the welfare of the child” came first. Another participant, Joe, referred to the role as a mandated reporter as a hat we wear: “I am realizing that the hat is always on. I just walk around kind of just not even thinking about that hat. Then all of a sudden there it is.” Jack agreed with Joe and stated: “It is a hat I do not think we ever really take off ever.” Chloe acknowledged wearing the hat as well:

It unfortunately bleeds into other areas of my personal life. When I am out in public, I cannot ignore certain things. I have even had to, in my private life, make phone calls that I felt like were warranted because I did not know the content of the situation. A lot of times they [children] were a risk. It is very difficult to take that hat off...it is part of my responsibility as a human being. It is also because I take this job very seriously.

Debbie acknowledged how being a mandated reporter is part of being a social worker: "I guess it is just kind of one in the same, ...it is what it is. It comes with being in the helping profession. It is something that we have to do when the situation comes up."

### **Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 explored how does perception impact reporting child maltreatment. Because they view mandated reporting as central to the role of social workers, participants reported conflicts, feelings and concerns that social workers are doing what is best for the client. The themes: role conflict, negative consequences and feelings were generated in the focus group that responded to this question.

**Role conflict.** Role conflict was something most of the participants acknowledged when determining to make a suspected child abuse report to CPS. Joe stated:

It is here people are coming for help, and I am going to act like a police officer...they are also tiptoeing around these major issues of abuse, neglect, or emotional abuse. How do you help them? You are wearing two hats. On the one hand you are wearing the hat of the police officer.



On the other hand, you are wearing the hat of an empathetic person that is trying to understand. I find that awfully confusing at times.

It was discussed that once clients know you are a mandated reporter it changes what information they may tell you. Barbara stated:

We can only treat what is brought to us. Sometimes there is that elephant in the room. You know there is stuff going on, but the client is not going to tell you because they are afraid. They know you are a mandated reporter. They are afraid of how it is going to impact them.

Participants also discussed the pressure to report or not. Debbie stated:

At my agency, when in doubt, report it out. If you have any questions or if you have any kind of gut feelings or concerns, report it. You let CPS figure out whether or not it rises to their level to go out to the home, do an assessment or investigation.

For others, the culture and the mission of the agency may discourage calling CPS right away. Barbara noted:

It is sort of the culture of the agency to avoid reporting. It stems from the desire to keep the clients. On the nefarious side, it is so that they will not lose money. Our mission is to prevent children from being removed from the home. I get pressure from the owner. If you make a report, we are not really doing what we say we are going to do.

It can be difficult for even seasoned social workers to make a report to CPS of suspected child abuse. Participants acknowledged that they begin to second guess

themselves asking: “Am I making a good decision?” “Is there something I am not seeing?” “There is worry or anxiety to be getting the information wrong.” Once the report is made, social workers’ lack of trust in CPS adds to additional concerns. Barbara stated:

I have had times when I have been very passionate that the child is in danger. I felt like I am having to convince this person on the other end of the phone that they need to look into this. It is just not feeling heard and not feeling respected for my role. I do not just pickup the phone every day and make CPS reports. I am making this report and I am telling you that the child is in danger. Please take this seriously.

Barbara added:

I think most of the time when you call to make a report, you hear the burnout. You are not getting somebody on the phone typically who has great customer service skills. Never do you hear, thank you for making this report and being concerned about this child. It is like, another report.

When the report is taken, there can be concerns that it was not written down by the CPS worker as reported. Chloe, who also is a former CPS worker, stated:

Sometimes people’s interpretations of those reports when you gave it to them, was not the same as what you gave. Trying to make sure you understood clearly what was being said on the receiving end as well as when you gave the report is so important.

CPS workers do not always follow up with clinicians or clients. Debbie’s experience was as follows:

When you need to get a piece of information and you cannot reach anybody, you are calling for a month straight trying to reach the worker or the investigator.

They are not returning your phone calls and you have no idea what is going on with the family. It can slow up our process. Families mention that they have been calling their CPS worker and trying to get an update. It has been several weeks, and they have not received a return phone call. Where are they? I never understand why it takes so long to return a phone call.

**Negative consequences.** Negative consequences were another theme identified in how social workers' perception of being a mandated reporter impacted their reporting child maltreatment. Negative consequences included how the relationship with the client may be impacted and concerns of retaliation toward the child. Social workers also felt that making a report created a crisis for the family and made things worse. Chloe stated: sometimes it can impact your relationship with clients when you are following the rules that mandate you to report child abuse.”

Joe described that a “power problem” is created in a client's relationship with the social worker noticing that “the child sitting there will be very careful about what they say.” Jack agrees saying: “I know it definitely affects the relationship. I can almost visually see the change on their face when I say that I am a mandated reporter, and I have to report X, Y and Z. That forever colors the relationship. It is a dual-edge sword.”

Barbara agreed stating “It can create a lot of issues therapeutically.”

Marsha noted that after telling parents she had to make a CPS report, “They quit coming. I lost that relationship. Lost that ability to help the child and the parent.” Debbie

added that “I think it is always the concern that when you start talking about being a mandated reporter, your relationship with the client changes. They just become a little bit more closed off and they do not freely share what is going on at home.”

As mandated reporters social workers risk negatively impacting the therapeutic relationship when making a CPS report. Joe noted,

I think that everything that I do the first time I meet with people is establishment and continued maintenance of the therapeutic relationship. Making a report, anytime information leaves the session, it is going to have a detrimental effect on that relationship. Of course, I am always concerned about that.

Participants see themselves as responsible for mending the therapeutic relationship if necessary when making a CPS report. Jack noted: “It is up to me to figure out how to best ameliorate that impact.” Barbara added that “the practitioner has a huge part in how it impacts the relationship, but there are other factors as well. Where you are in the relationship. Is this your first session and you have to make a report? Have you been seeing this person for six months? Have they been reported on before?” Marsha adds: “If you have had the relationship a long enough time, it can heal. But again, in the first session, that is a real tough one.”

Social workers are most concerned with the welfare of the child. After making a CPS report, social workers will be concerned about retaliation toward the child. Debbie noted: “Knowing that making a phone call to CPS will be helpful to some degree, but it is also worrisome that the child is going to get hit for talking.” Chloe agreed saying,

“Sometimes there is fear, that it may put the child at greater risk based on how long it takes CPS to get out and review the child with the parents or caregivers.”

Participants agreed that making a CPS report may make things worse. Joe stated: “It is going to create a crisis. They are already living in crisis, and I am going to intensify it.” Debbie note, “ Sometimes you know that it is going to make it [situation] worse....It just makes it a lot harder for what we are doing.”

**Feelings.** How social workers personally feel about making a CPS report also impacts their reporting child maltreatment. Jack noted saying,

There are feelings of helplessness, feelings of fear that this is going to spin out of control. There are feelings that just are powerlessness. When I make the report, this is out of our hands. You do not have a whole lot to say. The ball starts rolling, and sometimes the ball becomes a boulder.

Barbara added: “There are feelings of frustration because of prior experiences when making reports.” Chloe stated, “Maybe there is some anger at some point. Again, you know that child is at great risk.” Regardless of role conflicts, negative consequences or feelings about making a CPS report, participants stated they would still report maltreatment.

As Debbie stated “It does not stop me...you have that obligation to report.” Jack stated clearly that “It is just something I have to do because I am told to do it, and for all the right reasons. I understand the necessity of doing it. It does not mean I have to like it necessarily.”

### Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked what could be recommended to fill any gaps in social workers' skills in reporting suspected child maltreatment. When social workers become more knowledgeable about state child abuse statutes it would help them as well as their clients. Themes that respond to this question from the focus group are: increase knowledge of child abuse laws and education of clients.

**Increase knowledge of child abuse laws.** The participants did not easily interpret child abuse laws because the laws are not always very clear. Marsha noted these feelings stating "...it is not always black and white. Sometimes there is some gray in there. There is the difficulty. Is this child being abused or not? It is very clear that you are supposed to report, but sometimes that gray line in there can make it really tricky." Participants seemed comfortable reporting the "real obvious stuff." As Marsha noted.

It is the less obvious things that are difficult to differentiate. It is that gray line stuff that is harder to know. Is that child abuse or is that something that we need to help educate the parent and say that is not the best way to do it. Maybe it is not child abuse.

Perceptions can also complicate the social workers interpretation of the law.

Chloe noted,

I think it is important to be able to interpret the law in the context with which it is presented wherever you are working, or the jurisdiction that you are practicing. For example, in the Commonwealth there has to be a visible mark. Whether the child is spanked or not there has to be a mark in order for us to be a mandated

reported. Some may agree, and some may not that the discipline may be excessive. Some people have their personal beliefs that will then lead into how they perceive discipline/abuse

Jack agreed with the struggle of differentiating what is abuse. He stated,

There are actually two definitions of child abuse for me. There is what I am told by where I am working is child abuse. Then there is how I value or believe myself. Sometimes the two do not agree. Sometimes they are in perfect agreement. It is a constant struggle for me. It is ultimately what is in the best interest of the kid.

Emotional abuse seems to be more difficult to assess than physical abuse. Barbara stated,

I think emotional abuse is the hardest to assess and to report. When you report emotional abuse, you have to show that the child's mental health has been impacted in some way. I think where is the line between—I do not know a parent who has not said something they should not say to their kids.

Participants also acknowledged the difficulty in having CPS accept a report for emotional abuse. Barbara stated,

I had a positive experience recently with that emotional abuse report I had to make. I think in 24 years, it is the first emotional abuse report I have made that had been accepted actually. It was very simple. After I made the report, like five minutes later, I got a call back from a supervisor. She asked me one question. As a clinician, do you believe that what this parent is doing is having a negative

impact on the child's mental health? I said, yes. She said, that is all I need to know. They took the report.

Chloe stated,

You met that criteria. We have to know as clinicians how to word thing. It is not to manipulate the outcome, but to make sure you give them [CPS] what they need to do their job. That is why it is so difficult to prove emotional abuse.

Chloe is a former CPS worker and added "I wanted to take them [emotional abuse reports] as a CPS worker more than I can count. But without someone making that statement and willing to put their reputation on the line, we were not allowed to take it."

Mandated reporters would benefit from better understanding how a CPS report needs to be communicated, as well as how the suspected allegations violate the child abuse laws. This additional knowledge will add to effectively collaborating and working with CPS and feeling more empowered in protecting children.

**Educate clients.** Participants viewed their role as mandated reporters to also educate their clients about CPS. Clients seem to still have incorrect views of the role of CPS agencies. As noted by Barbara:

Everyone is afraid of their kids being taken away. They always go to that worst-case scenario, and do not realize that a lot to times just recommendations are going to be made. The fact that they are getting help is probably going to make their situation, if CPS is involved, a lot better. That is not where they are in their minds.

Chloe added:



I spend a great deal of time educating parents on what mandated reporting means and how it impacts them in the long-run. When I worked for CPS, people had this idea of you are going to take my kid and put them in foster care. That is not realistic if their life is not threatened. I spend a lot of time dispelling those myths.

Two participants, Joe and Chloe, discussed how they empower their clients and ask them to make the report to CPS. Joe stated,

It is to empower the person to say I am going to be here while you report this stuff to make sure that everything gets said. That is my concept of being a mandated reporter. If they are not going to do it, then I got to do it. But I want to tell them. I want to empower you so you can do it yourself. I will be here as you call social services.

Chloe noted,

I will say what I need you to do is make that phone call. Then you call me later today and let me know who you spoke to so that I can follow up. I want you do it knowing that you have some control over this, rather than you to feel like you cannot trust what I have said.

### **Unexpected Findings**

It was a very humbling experience to recognize that the participants were committed enough to take time out of their busy lives to commit to participating in a research project addressing barriers to mandated reporting. And that they continued the conversation of their role as mandated reporters long after the focus group ended. This

appeared to me to be a reflection on their level of commitment to the social work field and their need to keep the conversation going.

I was very surprised when Barbara commented in the focus group that CPS never thanks her for making a report to protect children. This comment brought to the forefront how mandated reporters help CPS in their mandate to protect children and prevent child abuse. As noted in the Virginia Department of Social Service website (n.d), the goal of CPS is to identify, assess and provide services to children and families in an effort to protect children, preserve families, whenever possible, and prevent further maltreatment. We are indeed all on the same page hoping to improve and care for our children.

During the focus group, many participants discussed a desire to work with the parents if appropriate as much as they could to avoid a CPS report. Barbara discussed a specific case where a colleague wanted the therapist to make a CPS report of emotional abuse and Barbara commented,

My thought is give us a chance to get in there for a couple weeks and see what we can do. It was not physical abuse. Let us educate the parent, see what we can do and what is going to happen.

In this situation, an employee had insisted a report be made for emotional abuse. Chloe had also made references to trying to work with the parents who were in a divorced situation where one parent was addressing some concerns about the other parent's parenting and home situation. Chloe commented, that she tried to find consensus between both parents in regard to how to keep that child safe.

If we cannot find consensus, then I may still have to call CPS. It is letting them know that there is a buy-in here that we can all work together to understand how to best protect that child and keep them safe.

Despite the participants lack of confidence in CPS, most of them acknowledged that CPS workers have high caseloads and a stressful job. Jack stated,

I will acknowledge whole-heartedly that I cannot do that job—CPS. I cannot imagine the number (of cases) they must be getting in. It is just trying to stay on top of it and that ongoing fear of making a mistake or not doing something. What happens when social services drops the ball, so to speak, and what can potentially happen, I do not want to be one of those that drops the ball.

Chloe added,

Social Services is a bureaucracy. Unfortunately, it is not a well-oiled machine. They are short-staffed. Their caseloads are unreasonably high. Most of the time it is a very unpopular job. So, you can imagine that you get burned out very quickly.

As a former CPS worker, Chloe added how she felt when working at CPS.

How do I help everybody else understand that I am doing the best I can with the resources that I have. You spend a lot of time with the families doing counseling, and you are not the counselor. You are trying to make sure that they felt supported, though on paper it looked like it was an impossible feat to keep the kids or parent their kids when there was really nothing hold them up.

Marsha responded to Chloe acknowledging “it was interesting to hear the other side” as it helped Marsha to better understand “our frustrations on this end.” Many

participants also were able to report that they had some positive experiences with CPS and had tried to establish a good working relationship: Jack noted,

I will say, however, the contact that I had with CPS in this area for the most part has been very positive. It is with a couple of exceptions. They are mostly timely and responsive given the incredible caseload that they must have. They have an incredibly, almost thankless job. For me, it is to understand be polite, and cooperative with them. I try to build a relationship with people on that end as much as possible.

After hearing Chloe share her experience as a former CPS worker, it also appeared that the participants and CPS workers might even share similar feelings. Chloe stated, “You are dreading those phone calls when they come in. You are hoping that you make the best decision possible for everyone involved, especially the kids.”

These statements sound very similar to what the participants expressed when they are assessing whether they should be making a CPS report. Throughout the findings, participants second guess themselves, hoping that they are making the right decision. As Barbara noted, “It is not an easy role. It is not a fun role.” And as Debbie stated, “Knowing that making a phone call to CPS will be helpful to some degree, but it is also worrisome that the child is going to get hit for talking.” This ambivalence seems to be shared by both the social worker and CPS professional.

### **Summary**

The data collected resulted in six themes from the focus group to answer the three research questions. With reference to Research Question 1, participants clearly perceived

their role as social workers as synonymous with that of a mandated reporter. The participants have a commitment to protect children and recognize it as their community obligation.

With reference to Research Question 2, their perception as mandated reporters does impact reporting child maltreatment. The participants discussed concerns, feelings and conflicts with their role as a practitioner who establishes a therapeutic relationship with clients versus their role as a mandated reporter that can lead to clients not trusting them and limiting the information they share in future sessions, should they even decide to remain in treatment.

With reference to Research Question 3, all participants agreed that interpreting child abuse laws can be difficult, except when there isn't any "gray area." As Marsha noted, "Broken bones, physical bruises, welts or when the child says they hit me with X YZ. Those are the easy ones. They are black and white." Barbara added, "When a child reports that they are currently being sexually abused." Or as Debbie noted: "When we get a report of domestic violence and there are children that are involved or witnessed trying to stop the abuse." For Chloe it is clear "when it is child on child sexual abuse. We have to report to CPS and we then report to the police department."

But the more familiar social workers become with the state's child abuse laws, the more confident they may be in assessing and reporting child maltreatment. As discussed in the focus group, when clinicians have a good understanding of the law and are able to confidently communicate their concerns using words that reflect a violation of the law,

CPS workers might be more likely to accept the report. We all have the same goal in mind: to protect children and prevent child maltreatment.

To discuss how social workers may be able to implement the changes necessary to become better educated with child abuse laws, Section 4 will discuss the application for professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, implications for social change, and a summary of the research study.

#### Section 4: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Social Change

The purpose of this research study was to understand how social workers' perceptions of their role as mandated reporters affected their reporting suspected child maltreatment. The following themes emerged out of the focus group: (a) importance of the role as a mandated reporter; (b) role conflict; (c) negative consequences; (d) feelings; (e) increase knowledge of child abuse laws; and (f) education of clients. These themes extend the current knowledge about social workers' perceptions, concerns, conflicts, and feelings when considering a report of suspected child abuse to CPS, and the education necessary to improve their level of confidence as well as clients' confidence whenever a report is made.

Section 4 will describe the application of professional ethics in social work practice, recommendations for social work practice, and implications for social change from the findings, and a summary of the research study.

#### **Application for Professional Ethics in Social Work Practice**

The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) presents several ethical responsibilities that are related to this research study. The first ethical standard is Section 1.01, Commitment to Clients. It discusses the social worker's main concern for the client's welfare. However, because social workers are also mandated reporters, they must inform clients whenever the law overrides this commitment because of their legal and ethical responsibility, as social workers, to protect children (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017). Another relevant ethical standard is Section 1.02, Self-Determination. It discusses the client's right to self-determination. However, if a client's behavior appears to be a threat to others, such as

when a child reports maltreatment by others, the social worker may interfere with the self-determination of the client and report a suspected child maltreatment case to CPS and sometimes even to the police. (NASW, 2017).

The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) also discusses, in Section 1.07, Privacy and Confidentiality of the client. This section clearly states that social workers must “respect client’s right to privacy” (NASW Code of Ethics, 2017, p. 11). However, as a mandated reporter, the social worker at times must share certain information in order to protect others. When this becomes necessary, the social should inform the client first before disclosing information. In addition, social workers should always discuss with the client ahead of time the limits of client confidentiality, especially when mandated reporting becomes necessary (NASW, 2017).

According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), Section 6.01, Social Welfare, Social workers should promote the general welfare of society” (p. 29) and should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice. (p. 29)

Each of these ethical standards guides social workers when taking necessary action for the welfare of society, that is, when faced with a decision to report child maltreatment. The vulnerable, such as our children, need to be protected. When social workers are faced with a situation of suspected child maltreatment, these guidelines also remind social workers that they are not just legally mandated to report but have an ethical responsibility to society to report a suspected child abuse case to CPS.



Social workers are mandated reporters. The findings from this research study acknowledged some of the conflicts, concerns, and feelings that surface whenever social workers are considering a CPS report. In interventions with our clients, we help them to identify the problem so that we can agree on the next steps that need to be taken in order to move forward.

This research study has identified that despite the ethical responsibilities found in the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), social workers' perceptions impact their reporting of suspected child abuse. By acknowledging the concerns, conflicts, and feelings that impact social workers when considering a CPS report, social worker supervisors can better support their supervisees when faced with a suspected child abuse case. In addition, social work educational programs can better prepare future social workers by providing training in interpreting child abuse laws that will help future social workers become more confident in their role as a mandated reporter.

### **Recommendations for Social Work Practice**

Study participants clearly viewed their role as mandated reporters as central to their role as social workers. They acknowledged that the welfare of children was more important than the therapeutic relationship. However, they struggled with making a CPS report. When referring to child abuse laws, they used words such as "gray areas," "difficult," "not black and white," and "struggled."

In the literature review, it was noted that ongoing training and up-to-date knowledge about mandated reporting protocols are needed in assisting social workers (Feng et al., 2012; Krase et al., 2015; Pietrantonio et al., 2013). A mandated reporter's

experience and training is positively correlated with being more likely to make another CPS report in the future (Lusk, Zibulsky & Viesel, 2014). The study participants revealed in the focus group that when making a suspected child abuse report to CPS, the report must meet the criteria according to the state statutes of child abuse. It is important that mandated reporters are familiar enough with the law that they feel confident and “willing to put their reputation on the line... so that the CPS worker can take the report” as noted by Chloe, who is a social worker and former CPS worker in Virginia. Therefore, training social workers on their role as a mandated reporter is essential.

The Virginia Department of Education (n.d.) requires that educators who are newly licensed or renewing their license must take a required online training titled “Child Abuse and Neglect Recognition and Intervention.” This class is also available on their web page for mandated reporters. The Board of Social Work in Virginia (n.d.) requires bi-annually that licensed clinical social workers receive 30 hours of continuing education and “a minimum of two of those hours must pertain to ethics or the standards of practice for the behavioral health professions or to law governing the practice of social work in Virginia.” Based on the research contained in this study, I recommend that continuing education of social workers, those newly licensed or renewing their license, also be required to take the hour-long online class for mandated reporters available on the Virginia Department of Social Service site.

The purpose of the “Child Abuse and Neglect Recognition and Intervention” course (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2016) is twofold. It begins by educating the mandated reporter on the role of CPS and clearly dispels the fear of CPS “wanting to

take your child away.” The training outlines that CPS is responsible for responding to child maltreatment reports, helping families to become stronger, and offering appropriate services (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2016).

The training is offered in two 30-minute modules. The first module supports the mandated reporter by acknowledging that the child abuse legal definitions can be confusing and that CPS offers informative guidelines on how to assess and recognize child maltreatment. Operative child abuse definitions are discussed and given more clarity by asking the mandated reporter questions that provide a better understanding of the definitions while offering additional information.

The second module discusses how to respond and report suspected child abuse and the role of CPS during this process. This module clearly states that “as a mandated reporter you play a critical role in preventing any future harm to children...and you need not prove that abuse has taken place” (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2016). The training also acknowledges some of the frustrations that were discussed in the focus group such as reports not being accepted and fear for the safety of the child after making a report. Mandated reporters are encouraged to contact a CPS supervisor if they are not satisfied that a report was not accepted. It is discussed that if you are concerned for the safety of the child, you do not have to alert the parents that a report was made (Virginia Department of Social Service, 2016).

Throughout the course participants are asked a total of 19 questions. If you want to obtain a certificate of completion for the one contact hour course, you can take the quiz

over as many times as you like but must score at least 90%. Upon completion, you can print a certificate stating that you completed the course for Mandated Reporters.

The Board of Social Work in Virginia has a Petition for Rule-making form that follows the Code of Virginia (S2.24007) and “requires a person who wishes to petition the board to develop a new regulation or amend an existing regulation to provide certain information” (Virginia Department of Health Professionals, 2002). The petition process may take at a minimum 4.5 months. Upon completion of my DSW, I plan to research further how petitions to the Board of Social Work are managed and petition the board to add a new regulation that requires social workers to take the online mandated reporting course annually and when they are newly licensed.

Until such change at a state policy level is achieved, I will encourage supervisors to conduct mandated reporter training at their place of employment on a yearly basis. This will allow those mandated reporters who do not consistently make reports to CPS to refresh their skills and learn from more experienced mandated reporters. Social work interns should also receive mandated reporting training when they are at their field placements.

Based on my understanding of the findings of this research study, it should be a supervision requirement that supervisors discuss mandated reporting laws throughout the year in supervision, not just when the supervisee has a suspected child abuse case. Mandated reporters need to become more familiar with child abuse laws so that they are better able to assess child maltreatment and be more confident when making a report. Social workers need to learn from CPS workers the criteria needed that will result in CPS

accepting a suspected child maltreatment case. Again, keeping in mind what Chloe mentioned in the focus group about making a CPS report: “We have to know as clinicians how to word things. If you do not know the laws...you can always look it up...but to make sure you give them what they need to do their job.”

As social workers become more confident as well as knowledgeable of child abuse laws, they will be in a better position to also empower their clients before a CPS report may be warranted. During sessions, they could provide more assistance to clients on how to avoid child maltreatment thus preventing a CPS report. This may include providing alternative parenting skills, referrals to parenting classes, and alternative coping skills for parents/caretakers. As noted in the focus group, many of the study participants discussed educating and working with clients to “work together to understand how to best protect the child and keep them safe.” Empowering clients by helping them understand mandated reporting and child abuse laws also could help preserve the therapeutic relationship.

Clients may experience social workers as more trusting as they try to dispel myths about CPS. Chloe and Joe each described how they empower their clients and ask them to make the CPS report. By allowing clients to report on themselves, they may feel less like a victim of something happening to them. As Chloe said, she wanted the client to feel like they had some control over the situation rather than “you cannot trust what I have said to CPS.

### **Impact on Social Work Practice**

These findings will allow me to impact change on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. On the micro level, I will be able to empower my clients by providing psycho-education about the role of CPS and the benefits of collaborating with CPS to achieve treatment plan goals. When necessary and if clients are in agreement, I would encourage them to call CPS on themselves. As noted, this can assist in preserving the therapeutic relationship and maintaining a level of trust in the relationship.

It is my responsibility to be familiar with the mandated reporting legal requirements of child abuse. I have taken the online course “Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse and Neglect” (Virginia Department of Social Service, 2016) and will encourage clients to take it as well. In addition, there is a pamphlet entitled “Recognizing, Reporting & Preventing Child Abuse & Neglect in Virginia” that provides physical indicators and behaviors related to child abuse and neglect. I will make it available to clients to empower and educate them on child abuse and CPS. The pamphlet also provides a list of practical self-care information and parenting tips for families.

On the mezzo level, as a director of an outpatient clinic, I plan to establish protocols and policies for supervisors and clinicians to receive ongoing education on mandated reporting. Starting September 2018, all onboarding interns will be required to take the one-hour online course “Recognizing & Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect” at the Virginia Department of Social Services (2016) web page. In addition, all clinicians will be required to take this course and pass it as part of the agency’s annual training requirements.

I will also recommend that leadership at the agency consider making the mandated online class a requirement for all non-clinical mandated reporters at the agency. I will provide each intern and clinician with the booklet “A Guide for Mandated Reporters in Recognizing & Reporting Child Abuse & Neglect” that is offered by the Virginia Department of Social Services and provides step-by-step information to mandated reporters on the reporting process. Supervisors will be instructed to provide ongoing education to their supervisees regarding empowering clients and being proactive in preventing child abuse.

On the macro level, I have the opportunity to effect change by advocating for policy changes that can affect system changes. I have volunteered to participate on a child advocacy committee that discusses ways to prevent child abuse in southern Virginia. The committee consists of agency leaders within public and private sectors who have developed many working relationships in southern Virginia. At the last meeting, strategic steps were discussed in how to best help the young people in the area who might be victims of sex trafficking. One suggestion was to educate the court system in becoming more trauma informed when sentencing or making referrals. We will be meeting monthly to continue such dialogue that explores viable options for social change in southern Virginia in the prevention of child abuse.

I also have the opportunity to work with my agency’s leadership team in exploring grant proposal options. I am presently involved in seeking a grant to help disconnected youth with substance abuse and mental health issues. The grant will take a two-pronged approach and provide trauma informed care education to the probation and

parole staff in a city in southern Virginia, as well as providing treatment for youth from 16-24 years old. Because we will be also working with the Department of Social Services in obtaining referrals, we will propose to provide trauma informed care training to the Department of Social Services CPS staff and use this opportunity to better collaborate and build a healthy working relationship.

### **Transferability of the Findings**

As noted in Stringer (2007) action research studies are not transferred beyond the specific study participants. This research was specific to southern Virginia and mandated reporting laws and training in the Commonwealth of Virginia. However, the detailed data collected provides information that may contribute to improving education, supervision, and community partnerships in other states in the goal to prevent child abuse. It is up to the reader to determine the applicability of the findings in this study to their specific location and or facility.

### **Usefulness of the Findings**

The findings from this research study transcend the practice of social work and consider the necessary policy changes and research opportunities. The study participants discussed at length their difficulty in interpreting child abuse laws that mandate them to report suspected child maltreatment. If each state were to consider requiring social workers receive annual mandated reporting training, this would potentially increase and sustain social worker knowledge and confidence as mandated reporters. It is always necessary to build on existing research to continue to provide a broader lens to view solutions to social work problems. Most of the research addressing the barriers to



mandated reporting were conducted using surveys (Benbenishy et al., 2012; Crowell & Levi, 2012; Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Flaherty et al., 2012; Fledderjohann & Johnson, 2012; Goldman & Grimbeck, 2014; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016; Herendeen et al., 2014; Humphries et al., 2016; Kesner et al., 2016; Krase & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015; Tufford, 2014; Tufford, 2016). It would be beneficial to have additional action research studies to compare and contrast the findings of the barriers and perceptions social workers might have to mandated reporting.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This research study addressed social workers' perceptions of mandated reporting in southern Virginia. The study participants all worked with families and children for over 10 years. Because regulations and implications of training mandated reporters can vary outside of the Commonwealth of Virginia, this study is limited to the study participants in Virginia. Although the research study participants were diverse in their work experiences, the study was limited in that they all were Caucasian and their primary language was English. As noted in the literature review, a person's culture can influence their perception of child abuse (Choo et al., 2013). Therefore, a social workers culture can also affect their perceptions of being a mandated reporter and may impact their reporting child maltreatment.

This sample was a significantly experienced group of social workers. Social workers who are not licensed or have the same length of experience might have different outcomes. The literature noted a correlation with the level of experience of a mandated

reporter and the likelihood of reporting a suspected child abuse case (Lusk, Zibulsky & Viezel, 2014).

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

As noted earlier, most of the studies addressing mandating reporting behaviors have consisted primarily of surveys (Benbenishy et al., 2012; Crowell & Levi, 2012; Dinehart & Kenny, 2015; Flaherty et al., 2012; Fledderjohann & Johnson, 2012; Goldman & Grimbeck, 2014; Hartinger-Saunders et al., 2016; Herendeen et al., 2014; Humphries et al., 2016; Kesner et al., 2016; Krase & DeLong-Hamilton, 2015; Tufford, 2014; Tufford, 2016). If additional action research studies would be implemented, it would expand the research outcomes of this study. This study consisted of a small sample of six master prepared social workers. A larger study would also contribute to more data to expand on the research question of how mandated reporting might be affected by the social worker's perception.

### **Dissemination the Research**

The first opportunity to share the results of this research will take place in the fall of 2018 when I facilitate a training at my agency for interns and staff about mandated reporting and the results of my research. There are many mandated reporters at my agency who are not clinicians. Presenting the results of my research will allow them to engage in a conversation with other, more experienced mandated reporter staff to empower them and allow them to feel more confident.

The other opportunity will be at the 2019 NASW Virginia Annual Conference in March. I plan to submit a proposal to present my research and discuss mandated reporting

at a 1.5-hour skill-building workshop. My goal is to create a safe and supportive environment where social workers will be comfortable to discuss their concerns and questions about mandated reporting and benefit from the research results.

As mentioned earlier, one of the study participants recommended that I publish the research in the journal “Social Work.” This journal notes that some of the topics of interest include research on social problems and evaluation of social work practice (NASW Press, 2018). I believe this research qualifies under both of these topics and I plan to write a manuscript to disseminate my research findings after I complete my DSW.

### **Implications for Social Change**

This research has implications for positive social change on the micro, mezzo, and macro levels as well as in practice, research, and policy. The research study participants provided rich data. Change on the micro level begins with social workers better understanding their role as mandated reporters and becoming more knowledgeable of child abuse laws. As noted in the literature review, Crowell and Levi (2012) found a positive correlation with knowledge of child abuse and making a report to CPS earlier. The Virginia Department of Social Service (2016) training on mandated reporting acknowledges the urgency in preventing further child abuse by making a report as soon as you become suspicious. One CPS role is to strengthen families. The earlier CPS can become involved, the sooner CPS can offer support to the family.

On a mezzo level, families can be strengthened by encouraging them to seek parenting classes, support from family, friends, or their church, or enter counseling. The CPS worker could provide support services for the family as well as advocate for them

when needed. Families can be better educated to learn a role of CPS is to preserve the family. With increased knowledge of CPS, myths and fears can be eradicated and the goal to strengthen families can replace the myth that CPS wants to remove children from their homes.

On a macro level, state policies for obtaining and maintaining a license to practice can be changed to support social workers increasing their knowledge of child abuse laws and the role of CPS. Requiring that social workers take the Virginia Department of Social Services course on mandated reporting as newly licensed social workers, and annually when they renew their license, is a first step to ongoing education on mandated reporting for social workers. Part of the requirement will be that they pass the quiz and produce a dated certificate of completion. To reiterate findings already presented from the literature review, there is a correlation with increased knowledge of mandated reporting and an increase in earlier mandated reporting.

This research has provided rich data that can effect positive social change on all levels when implemented. It is important to build on the research to broaden the scope of social change to include other disciplines and include more of a diverse group of study participants. Additional knowledge will continue to broaden the different perceptions mandated reporters have in assessing and deciding to report suspected child maltreatment.

### **Summary**

Social workers who participated in this research significantly contributed to the social work profession. They emphasized that social workers need to obtain the necessary

support and education to become more proficient in their role as mandated reporters, in their mandate to prevent child abuse. Making a suspected child abuse report to CPS is difficult and not taken lightly. It creates multiple feelings and concerns about the therapeutic relationship as well as the welfare of children. Social workers recognize that being a mandated reporter is a “community obligation” and a “great responsibility.”

Throughout the focus group, not one study participant expressed concern about the risk of a fine for failure to report a suspected child abuse case. In Virginia if a mandated reporter does not report within 24 hours, he or she risks an initial fine of \$500 and a subsequent fine of not less than \$1,000 (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2016). Social workers in the research study are committed to the welfare of children. Leaders in the social work profession also are committed. Together we can follow-up on the recommended social work practices, research, and policies that support and educate social workers in their role as mandated reporters, for protecting our children from further child abuse is an undisputed goal.

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## Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

1. What does it mean to you to be a mandated reporter?
2. How do you define child abuse?
3. How might being a mandated reporter affect with your relationship with a client?
4. When there is a concern about child abuse, what situations might prevent someone from making a CPS report?
5. What concerns do you think social workers might have when considering a CPS report?
6. How do you think making a CPS report might impact the therapeutic relationship social workers have established with clients?
7. What feelings might come up for social workers when considering a CPS report?
8. How do you identify with your role as a mandated reporter?
9. What is your experience with CPS?
10. When do you not hesitate to make a CPS report?