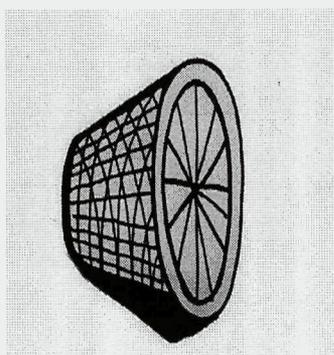


## Two Paths To Title IV-E: The Road of Qualitative Research

*Ruth Supranovich and Laurie Adam graduated from the San Diego State University MSW program in 1995 and 1996 respectively. They were both Title IV-E recipients and are currently employed by San Diego County Childrens' Services. During the course of their studies, they both completed qualitative research into different aspects of public child welfare at the agency where they are now employed. Prior to their graduate studies, Ms. Supranovich and Ms. Adam were colleagues in public child welfare. Their professional relationship developed in graduate school where they shared a common interest in research and an affinity for the qualitative approach as the most compatible research methodology for studying social work practice. They provided mutual support and encouragement as they worked on their theses. This narrative piece combines their reflections on their choice to work in Public Child Welfare, their involvement in the Title IV-E program, and the research experience and its relationship to social case-work.*

by  
**Ruth Supranovich, MSW**  
and  
**Laurel Adam, MSW**

San Diego County Health and  
Human Services Agency  
Childrens' Services.



### IN THE BEGINNING

**R**uth: When I reflect upon my choice of social work as a profession, public child welfare as a specialty, and my attraction to the qualitative approach to research, I can go back to my childhood. This would greatly please the psychoanalytic theorists among us. It was certainly not a conscious evolution, but one that, when reviewed, falls into place like a picture emerging from the turn of a kaleidoscope.

I was born in England, the daughter of two social workers. (Interestingly, I have an older sister who has absolutely no interest in social work – her narrative is another story.) My early childhood was spent in a group home setting where my parents were the “house-parents.” This arrangement afforded both of them the opportunity to achieve their credentials while raising young children. I can recall from an early age trying to imagine what it would be

like to have no parents, or parents who could not or would not care for me. I wept inside with pity and guilt when I left for Christmas and vacations with “my parents,” while many stayed “at home” with the staff. I knew how important even the most minimal contact with the most distant of relatives was to some of my friends. And all these kids were my friends – my peers that I learned to play with, fight with, negotiate with, and laugh with. I knew back then, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

When I was older, we moved into our own home, and my parents began to work more regular hours. The group home experience became a memory to be tapped into only at a much later date.

The next milestone in my professional development came in my teen years. In a moment of teenage boredom, I selected a book to read from my parents’ bookshelf called *Scream Quietly or the Neighbors Will Hear* by Erin

Pizzey (1974). In England in the early 1970's Pizzey spearheaded the Battered Women's movement that resulted in the opening of safe houses for battered women and their children. This book contains the stories of these women and children in their own words – essays, letters, pictures, and poems. No textbook has since come close to evoking the emotions generated by this narrative work. I admit I was perhaps an emotional adolescent, but nonetheless, the impact of this book was significant. To this day, I have used my understanding of the battered women's experience gleaned from those pages when counseling women and children exposed to violence. Here began my allegiance to the personal narrative as a tool to understand and help others.

**Laurie:** Today I supervise a unit of adoption social workers for San Diego County. I never suspected I would have a career in social work, much less child welfare. I didn't know the field existed.

I grew up in a middle class neighborhood in the suburbs of Washington, D. C. My father was a federal government civil servant; he produced training films for the U. S. Navy. My mother was a housewife who desperately wanted to work. She compromised by working part time, often for the federal government.

We were active in our church. I participated in civil rights demonstrations, and, when I was in high school, I mentored a young boy through a settlement house in southeast Washington. One of the high points of my high school years was Martin Luther

King Jr.'s, "March on Washington," which our church supported with members from local and distant congregations. Our church was integrated and diverse, but around us society struggled with the issue. When I saw my friends change loyalties from the civil rights movement to the anti-war movement, I became disillusioned with activism.

### THE UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE

**Ruth:** My undergraduate degree is in psychology at Leeds University in Northern England. In English universities, undergraduates must complete a thesis as part of their studies. This time the photographs in Kempe & Kempe's, *The Battered Child* (1980) inspired my research topic. I attached myself to a professor studying child abuse and neglect and we developed a study of maternal attributions. I was to compare the attributional statements of mothers who were on the Child Abuse Registry (a listing of families where child abuse or neglect was strongly suspected) with a comparison group of mothers who lived in the same neighborhood and attended the same pre-school or health clinic. It was a quantitative study in that we made a statistical analysis of the data. The mothers completed a Beck depression questionnaire and their attributional statements were coded from transcripts of interviews and interactions with their children. The children were videotaped playing with a toy house with a "disappearing ball." The hypothesis was that children learn attributions from their parents, and thus the control group

children would look for the ball longer, believing they had some control over their environment.

My first experience with experimental psychology in action was both enlightening and disappointing. The toy house data was soon rejected because the house kept breaking and the ball wouldn't disappear when it was supposed to or disappeared too soon. The way the children responded to this was, in my mind, still very interesting but could not be measured. Many of the mothers in both groups were illiterate, so I read the Beck questionnaire to them. If you have ever orally completed a pen and paper questionnaire with a subject, you will know that the written responses alone lack much rich and informative data; everything from misunderstanding the words and grammar to lengthy explanations of exactly when and why they had felt a certain way in the past. The interaction segment was very significant, qualitatively, but again had to be rejected quantitatively. Many of the parents, especially those in the experimental group, failed to interact with their children at all, providing no attributional statements to code and count!

But the most significant part of the study for me was the interviews. For example, one of the control subjects very quickly asked me if the interview was confidential. She understood it was to be taped but wanted assurance that the content would not be shared with the clinic staff. This was an easy assurance to make (I thought). The mother proceeded to remove her scarf from her head to reveal fresh bloody wounds.

staff. This was an easy assurance to make (I thought). The mother proceeded to remove her scarf from her head to reveal fresh bloody wounds. She described in detail, with little emotion, how her husband had beaten her over the head with a hammer the previous night. Her story took at least an hour, as she described how she had tried to leave him repeatedly but had been thwarted by threats of death to family and pets. She described the process of complete social and financial isolation. She fantasized every night that the car pulling in the driveway was the police coming to inform her that her husband had been killed in a car crash. This story did not make it into the study, but it did make it into my head.

**Laurie:** In the mid-sixties I went to college in New Orleans, Louisiana. In spite of the fact that Tulane University, where I lived on campus, has a School of Social Work, I still didn't give the field much thought.

My undergraduate major was sociology with a minor in social psychology. My exposures to experimental psychology were decidedly unpleasant. Once I experienced claustrophobia in a lab filled with pigeons in cages and too many fellow students. Another time, a rather large ape threw a handful of urine at a group of which I was a part. Social psychology interested me, and I participated as an interviewer in a survey for a professor. I have no recollection of the subject of the survey, but I do recall the professor telling me I now had a skill I could put on my resume!

### THE MIDDLE YEARS

**Ruth:** The next ten years I lived a life devoid of social work and

child maltreatment. I traveled in many countries and tried many different jobs. Then I settled down in Southern California and found myself talking about the need for a career and "a meaningful job." I called the United Way to become involved with some volunteer work. I cited no area of specific interest, so they gave me contact numbers for three social service agencies. The first I called was the YWCA. I didn't even know what that stood for – it was just at the top of the list. They needed help in their Battered Women's Shelter. Fate? Coincidence? The power of the unconscious?

I far preferred my volunteer work to my day job and began to peruse the help wanted ads. With an undergraduate degree, I was qualified for a number of low-paying jobs at group homes, child abuse prevention agencies, nursing homes or working with the developmentally disabled. I naturally gravitated to the group homes, and was interviewed for two positions by one agency. To my surprise, they turned me down for the group home but offered me a job in their home-based parenting program. I was to go into the homes of families identified by Child Protective Services as needing help with parenting. I had no kids, knew nothing about parenting, and had a barely operational car. I took the job.

I did read some books and got some minimal training. The rest I learned from the families. I listened to their stories. From them, I learned about addiction and recovery, labor and childbirth, depression and mental illness, generational abuse, family dynamics, domestic violence, the impact of

sexual abuse, learning disabilities, poverty, and racism. I took each client's story with me, and when talking to another mother, father or child, they might say, "It sounds like you know so much about this." I would tell them that I had heard similar stories in the past and then perhaps tell them some ways a person had told me that they had dealt with the experience. Although I didn't know it then, this was a type of qualitative research and its application in action.

Of course, it was undisciplined, unpublished, underpaid, and "paraprofessional" work. But after three years I knew, (1) My passion was working with abused and neglected children and their families, and (2) I needed a professional qualification that had a multi-dimensional approach to understanding this population.

This job brought me into close contact with Child Protective Services. I heard both the good and bad stories from clients and had some stories of my own to tell from working interactions. I was astounded to find that many CPS workers had no Master's-level education and that some openly espoused little regard for the families they served. And yet, I was aware how incredibly important these social workers were to families—how far a kind word would go and how wounded someone could be by an offhand remark or a missed visit. The Title IV-E program beckoned me.

**Laurie:** After college, I married and had children. We moved to San Diego. As a full time housewife and mother, I stagnated. My salvation was the Navy Relief Society. I volun-

teered, and in no time I was an "interviewer," educated by a traveling trainer from the Navy Relief Headquarters. Little did I know that I had entered the world of "welfare," Navy Relief being the Navy's own welfare system. I remember telling another volunteer that I would probably want to get an MSW eventually.

From there I got a paying job with the American Red Cross. By now it was the mid-eighties. My job title was caseworker. I took to casework immediately. It was not so different from "interviewing" Navy Relief clients. I was still working with the military and still on a Navy base. I had a feeling of accomplishment as I followed a case from the intake phone call, to the client contact, to the final disposition, which might have included financial assistance with a repayment plan. I was quickly promoted to supervisor, and I enjoyed training staff and volunteers and developing supervisory skills under the mentorship of my boss, who was a long time employee of the National Red Cross. But the local chapter was reorganizing, and my boss eventually returned to the National organization, leaving San Diego.

By now, I needed a job to support my three children and myself. A former Red Cross colleague had gone to work for the state of California. She sent job postings, which led me to believe I might qualify as a social worker for the County of San Diego. I applied, took the test, and did well. At my interview, I was asked whether I was interested in a position in Childrens' Services or in Adult and Employment Services. Since I was a mother, I figured

Childrens' Services sounded good. I had no information to base a decision on; it was a roll of the dice.

I proudly told my parents about my new job. My mother had little reaction, but my father's reaction floored me: "I'm sorry some little kid has to get beat up so you can have a job!" We eventually worked out that little kids were getting "beat up" independent of my job status, and that I might actually be able to help some of them. In hindsight, I realized that my father had been an abused child. It was a different world at the beginning of the last century—he was born in 1908. He told me about an incident when he was about ten years old. The postmistress in the town where they lived asked him where he got the marks on his legs. He innocently told her that his father had beaten him with the razor strop. She commented, "Well, we'll see about that!" and my father was never beaten again. Not that the abuse stopped, but that is another story.

The County sent me to six weeks of initial training, beginning in January 1988. I absorbed the information. It was all new and totally outside my frame of reference, especially the information about incest. My bachelor's degree in sociology and classes in social psychology gave me some background, but I felt challenged and excited to be entering this field.

So I began casework again. I was one of the bachelor's level social workers with whom Ruth came in contact. Probably my biggest deficit was risk assessment; I had no concept. Fortunately, another worker took me aside and ex-

plained the basic concepts. About the same time, the Agency implemented a standardized risk assessment format.

Visits to the homes of poor people opened my eyes. I related to my clients as individuals. I was appalled by the circumstances some lived in. "Minimum standards" my supervisor said, "Alternate lifestyles." People need not live up to middle class standards; people need not provide maximum environments for their children. "Minimum health and safety standards" was the mantra.

I was radicalized by my work experiences. I identified my values. I became an activist again. I found kindred spirits in the social workers' union. I spent my work hours trying to help people build support systems. I saw the union as a support system for social workers. It is a vehicle to accomplish goals for the workers, for the clients, and for society. In conservative San Diego, this is a radical idea.

## THE MSW, TITLE IV-E, AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

**Ruth:** It was 1992 and the era of family preservation. This philosophy fit well with my experiences—the group home kids who desperately wanted a family, the families I had worked to keep together for the past three years, and, perhaps on a personal level, my emerging desire to have my own family. This soon became my topic for papers in graduate school. I voraciously read all the literature, and when it was time to design a research study, I began to try to isolate the variables I wanted to measure. I was never

satisfied with the simple yet doable research design. There were just too many variables to consider and I wasn't willing to eliminate any of them. I wasn't sure which ones would be important ones.

Meanwhile, in other classes we discussed the ecological approach and the "person-in-situation." This seemed more than a little incongruent with the isolation of one or two measurable variables. Here we were discussing how an individual's behavior was influenced by a myriad of factors from the intra-psychic to cultural/societal norms, while I was trying to determine which one or two factors determined a family's "success" in an Intensive Family Preservation Program (IFPP). Then, of course, I had to determine what "success" meant. "Success," in the literature, appeared to mean something in dollars; i.e., keeping kids out of foster care. What about the client's meaning of success?

An open-minded professor affiliated with the IV-E Program introduced me to qualitative literature. He also introduced me to a retired professor who was considered to be way out of the mainstream but who shared an affinity for this research approach. At this point I had a gut feeling that qualitative research was the way to go, but my grasp of the evidence to support this feeling was pretty poor. I can liken it to a CPS investigation. You interview the child whom you feel certain has been abused, but there are no visible physical injuries and the child hasn't disclosed anything. You can choose to close the case and move on, or dig around a

little, contact collaterals, interview family, build rapport with the child, and maybe go back for a second or third interview. The literature and the retired professor were the beginnings of my digging and provided the proof I needed that this was a real and valid approach to research. But, I also encountered the familiar obstacles of the investigation—denial (this approach is useless and devoid of merit); minimization (this has minimal value; quantitative research is the only true scientific methodology); and circling the wagons (don't bring that type of research in here and ruin our family).

The more subtle form of resistance was that found among some faculty who generally thought qualitative research to be "cute" but not "real research." One professor in particular was a mixture of support for my project but general distrust of the methodology. In retrospect, he was challenging me intellectually in advance of my capabilities at that time. I can now appreciate the time and thought he gave to our many debates and conversations about research, the scientific method, and the study and measurement of social work practice. However, at the time I felt outgunned. He was, after all, a researcher with many years of experience with quantitative measures. I was a novice and intellectually out of my league. I could not keep up with the philosophical challenge of understanding and then debating the relative merits of the two approaches to research. But, these debates helped when it came time to face the thesis committee. By then, I

was much more confident in my research and stood my ground.

**Laurie:** I had long dreamed of returning to college. Even prior to going to work for the County, I had taken psychology graduate-level classes in night school, but my goal was to attend school full time. Another goal, to do research, grew out of my casework experiences. It is debilitating to work forty hours a week with dysfunctional families. I set myself a goal of researching "functional" families and writing a book to tell us all how to avoid the problems and pathology I saw every day.

I wasn't sure how to return to school and still support my children. By now I had remarried, this time to a social worker who shared my values. The Title IV-E program was the answer. With my husband's salary, and my children's health insurance provided by their father, the financial assistance made it possible for my return to school. I had no health insurance for each of the four semesters of my MSW program, only the university provided health clinic. A serious accident or catastrophic illness would have been devastating. It was a chance I was willing to take.

When I returned to graduate school, I was determined that this was a first step toward a Ph.D. My decision to put together a research project and write a thesis was a result of this determination. From the day I set foot on campus for the orientation, I was looking for a research project.

I had taken statistics classes both as an undergraduate and in the part-time psychology program. I was exposed to

many research studies in both programs. I firmly believed that quantitative research had limited value in the social arena. In the field of social work, I saw a profession in search of credibility, trying to quantify the unquantifiable. I believe my attitude came from a conversation about breast-feeding I had with my mother. She had chosen to bottle feed me because assembling a bottle of formula was "so scientific." I came to believe that quantitative research was "so scientific" that something vitally important was lost in the process.

Ruth was one year ahead of me. She was performing her research, and writing and defending her thesis, while I was in my first year of the graduate program. I had worked in IFPP immediately prior to graduate school. Her project interested me because of my practical knowledge of the program, and I became fascinated by her methodology.

The history of child welfare was all the more meaningful to me, having already worked in the field. My fellow students groaned under the volume of reading required by our classes; I read compulsively, every opportunity I had. Gradually my research topic began to coalesce: African American children are over-represented in the foster care population. Why? Many more scholarly than I had already examined this topic. How could I break it down into a manageable project?

Together with a fellow student who shared my curiosity, we developed a project with two parts. I was to examine the social workers who made the deci-

sion to file petitions that removed children from their families, while she looked at the families from whom the children had been removed.

### THE DETRACTORS AND THE SUPPORTERS

**Ruth:** While some faculty were suspicious of my chosen research methodology, nothing could prepare me for the next obstacle: the CPS researcher trapped in an unfulfilling job and eager to squash the aspirations of any young upstarts who think they can do her job. Well, this is a little mean-spirited on my behalf, but after five years, my emotional reaction to this next experience still lies not far beneath the surface.

The County Administrator in charge of the IFPP in San Diego welcomed me. This program is housed within CPS and is staffed by protective service workers. This administrator willingly shared her relative ignorance of research methodology, but asked us to work with her assistant, a Ph.D. who appeared to have some kind of research/evaluation function within the program. This assistant was quick to jump on my proposal. She saw no value in my approach to research and quickly demanded that my proposal include some quantitative measurements. I boldly tried to argue the philosophy behind my approach, while trying carefully not to malign her favored research method (it is too easy to get into the "my way is better than your way debate," and I was still a quick loser in this battle). But it was pretty pathetic – I tripped over my words, I made weak arguments, my hands were sweaty, and my

voice began to tremble. This may sound like an extreme reaction, but I felt like my research proposal was facing make or break time, and it needed a better advocate than I. The conversation ended with the following interchange:

County Researcher: "What you are proposing is nothing more than journalistic pap and to call this research brings shame on those of us who consider ourselves real researchers."

Me: "Well, thank you for your time in this matter."

That was it—the end of my research; the relegation of my chosen methodology to the ranks of the National Enquirer. I was ready to abandon my thesis and begin preparing for the comprehensive exams.

Salvation came from three people. I telephoned an old college friend in England, who was a Ph.D., commanding academic respect and making a fine living as a qualitative researcher. She cast some perspective onto the interchange. After several years of qualitative research, she had heard all the insults and was ready to fire back on any attack to her research. I could hear her salivating at the chance to face off with this opponent. But calmly, she pointed out that this particular person showed little respect for a novice researcher and social worker in training. Her use of demeaning name calling was out of place in the mentor-student relationship and was "totally inappropriate." I liked this reframe and felt a little less pathetic.

Then entered the professor described above. After months of espousing the merits

of quantitative research, he was distraught that I was so readily giving up my quest. He may not have agreed with my approach, but I think that he recognized the overarching role he played as a professor in supporting my ambitions and professional development. He wanted me to follow the project through to its conclusion, rather than focussing on winning or losing the debate. He went to "talk to people."

Thirdly, I had a connection. A fellow student and friend was completing her administrative internship in the IFPP, working under the Administrator. They had developed a close working relationship, and my friend, upon hearing my plight, took it upon herself to talk with the Administrator personally about the experience I was having with her staff member.

Through some combination of the above, I was called into the Administrator's office, told not to deal with her assistant any longer, and sent out to begin my interviews.

**Laurie:** Perhaps my lack of detractors had to do with Ruth's experiences; I think she led the way for my project. Certainly my co-researcher and I benefited from her experiences, both on campus and in the agency.

There is a procedure in the agency for approval of research. Neither Ruth nor I were aware of this procedure. Neither were the staff members we talked to. Because I didn't know the procedure, and because no one I asked knew either, my co-researcher and I made an appointment with the Deputy Director of Childrens Services. We explained

our project to her and received permission to proceed. She didn't know the actual procedure, either, but after our meeting with her, the people with the procedure contacted me. By then, approval was a formality because the boss had already approved.

### CONDUCTING THE RESEARCH

**Ruth:** This was where the fun began. Finding willing subjects was a piece of cake after dealing with professors, administrators, and my own demons of self-doubt. Only one subject objected to being taped, but she allowed me to scribble copious notes throughout our interview. All but one invited me into their homes and into their worlds. For people with little reason to trust, they exhibited a candor and thoughtfulness that astounded me. The subjects seemed to really value that some researcher, even a student, cared enough about their opinion to ask them for it.

Meanwhile, I worked on my interview style. I was repeatedly challenged to stay in my role as researcher and not social worker. I felt the urge to turn the subject into a client and to begin some problem solving with them. My usual social work approach is fairly active, and I had to force my lips together to stop myself from leading the subject down one path or another, or filling in a silence while a thought was brewing. The rewards of this self-discipline, of becoming a qualitative researcher, were soon obvious. I didn't choose the variables. I didn't decide what was important to measure. I shut up and let the subject determine the outcome—

the ultimate in client empowerment.

An intellectual grasp of my research came during data analysis. I employed the grounded theory method of data analysis. I didn't use a computer program but instead relied on the old-fashioned method of cutting up the narrative transcripts and sorting them into piles. The objective is to identify themes and patterns from the subject's responses to help answer the research question. My research question was fairly broad. I wanted to know how the clients perceived the services and outcome of their involvement with the IFPP. To answer this question, I had piles of small cuttings of paper strewn across my living room floor. I would title and retitle these piles, as new themes and patterns emerged. This process is both extremely tedious and exciting at the same time.

The kaleidoscope image comes to mind again. Day by day, the piles would alter with the emergence of a new concept or theme. Stepping back from the process was very important. Some of the greatest "ah-ha" moments came when I was walking the dogs or lying in the bath. I got used to carrying a paper and pen with me everywhere, in case I got a flash of brilliance that I had to bring back to the data to check out. I had to constantly encourage myself to look at the bigger picture and free myself of my own notions and categories of thoughts—to allow the subjects' voices to take control.

**Laurie:** My co-researcher and I had two subject populations to interview: social workers were

my subjects and clients were hers. Problems developed immediately. My assumption was that Monday mornings would be the best time to observe my subjects. My original plan was to observe social workers who had just received a new case, to watch them review the referral, and to accompany them into the field to observe their interviews with the child and with the parents. Popular wisdom in the agency is that Monday mornings are when there are many cases to be assigned. My experience didn't bear that out. Quickly, my project evolved into interviews with the social workers, rather than observations. We also realized the difficulty of matching the social workers and the specific families they were working with for research purposes, so my co-researcher developed a different way to identify families for her project.

Gathering the data was fascinating. Typing the interviews was grueling. Finding the meaning was a wonderful experience. We invited Ruth to assist us with the evaluation of the data. We created a committee of subject matter experts: It included social workers, supervisors, and an administrator from the agency. Members of the committee were an African American, a Vietnamese immigrant, and a European immigrant (Ruth). My co-researcher is an African immigrant, and I am a European American.

By the time I was writing the thesis, I discovered there were computer programs that exist to synthesize qualitative data. Our committee functioned as a computer program, helping us evaluate the meaning in our data. It

also became a safe place to discuss race and racism in our lives.

### THE AUDIT

**Ruth:** As much as I strove to be neutral and hear the subject, I was acutely aware that the major criticism of qualitative research is its lack of objectivity. I employed an informal audit by discussing my data and the data analysis process with fellow students. Laurie was among those I called upon as an expert in the IFPP and child welfare, and for her burgeoning interest in my research methodology. I also asked the retired professor to review some complete narratives to provide feedback as to my interview technique and attempts at objectivity. His feedback was positive, although the room for improvement was duly noted. The comment I most remember was his observation that during interviews I began to employ the subject's own speech patterns and vocabulary. While I was concerned that I was speaking too much or might appear phony, he felt that I maintained the narrative as the client's, sharing their words and story rather than imposing my own. With this reassurance I was ready to face the committee.

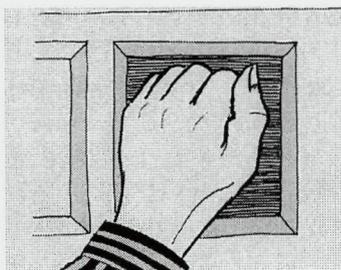
**Laurie:** Again, Ruth assisted me in this aspect of my research. She helped me get in touch with the retired professor who was a supporter of qualitative research. I contacted him and he met with me twice to review my research. He reviewed my final draft and pronounced it fine.

### THE DEFENSE

**Ruth:** I was surprised to find that I was less nervous when facing the thesis committee to present my defense than I was with the county researcher many months before. This was to be, for the time being, the last defense. I had been challenged throughout the process, and experience had built confidence. I can liken it to my first child abuse investigation. Investigating social workers may recall how nervous they felt the first time they knocked on the door of an unknown family to inform them of abuse allegations. After a few months, you don't even hesitate as you walk up the driveway, clipboard in hand, and pound on another unsuspecting family's door. I had confidence in my skills as well as some familiarity with what I would face that made for a bearable and at times enjoyable experience. I now had the skills to deal with the family dynamics of the thesis committee. Neither denial nor hostility could provoke panic or withdrawal. I could calmly present my case, align with committee members as needed without losing ground, and leave the room knowing that I had made my mark.

**Laurie:** Two of the three members of my faculty thesis committee were also on Ruth's committee. I hadn't realized that when I assembled the committee, but it was fortunate for me. The committee was receptive to the methodology. I prepared a presentation for them, complete with overheads. Perhaps because I had returned to school in my mid-forties and in mid-career, I was not intimidated by my committee.

I considered them peers and recognized that I was the subject matter expert as far as the agency was concerned. This is not to say that the defense was not an emotional experience; I was very nervous. But I was confident as well, and no challenges were issued that I could not meet.



### BACK TO THE WORKPLACE

**Ruth:** Within a month or so, I was knocking on the door of a family to investigate child abuse for the first time. Before many months, I was doing this for the hundredth time. I spent a year and a half doing investigations and court intervention. From there I went to family reunification services for a couple of years. For the past year or more, I have been assigned to the Office of the Ombudsman. This current assignment suits my appreciation of the client's perspective. I frequently need to employ a mixture of social work and researcher skills. I am not the case manager and initially had to fight this urge in myself—a battle I had fought before. I have to strive for neutrality, even when I feel aligned to the social worker or feel horrified by the client's allegations. I have to remember not to dismiss a client's concerns because I am soon aware of a debilitating mental health condition or personal-

ity disorder. The saying that "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not talking about you," comes to mind – it is very often the disturbed clients who are the most difficult to serve, press the most buttons, and are the neediest. A neutral source to check out their perceptions of the situation versus reality is essential. And even when reality clashes diametrically with their perception, I try never to lose respect for their perception and challenge it only in the gentlest manner.

**Laurie:** Because I was a full time employee when I started school, I worked in the agency during semester breaks and summer vacation. I'm not sure the agency realized that my return at graduation was a permanent one. Title IV-E was still relatively new, and not all the administrators seemed to be aware of it. However, I received a call and discussed options with one of the section chiefs. Given the options, I chose placement in an intake unit. This was an area of the agency in which I had never worked. In addition, the unit was a specialty unit; cases assigned were reports of child abuse and neglect of medically fragile children. As things developed, many of the cases were of mentally ill teens who were classified as "medically fragile" according to agency criteria, and I did have experience managing cases of children in group home settings.

I had felt from the first semester break that my casework practice had been enhanced by my experiences in graduate school. My first semester practice class taught me to listen to

clients at various levels, and that new skill was very helpful. The policy classes gave me a broader perspective of the context within which I practiced casework. However, the research experience may have influenced me most when I returned to work full time. I was now performing the same tasks as the social workers who were the subjects of my research. Because I had spent so much time and energy devoted to the issues of race, culture, and ethnicity, I was very aware of these issues as they unfolded in my cases.

### PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT, THE ROLE OF TITLE IV-E, AND THE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

**Ruth:** Looking back on our beginnings, a combination of life experiences and a dose of serendipity, led Laurie and me to social work in public child welfare. My early childhood equipped me with the humility to know that, had life circumstances been different for me, I could easily be the one in need of help. I remember this with every client I meet. I tap into this when I deal with the most horrendous abuse in order to relate to the child and the parent. That parent could have been my playmate – could have been me. But compassion and empathy, while essential, are not enough. My graduate education provided the discipline, tools, and skill to use this emotion more effectively to help clients.

I don't want to present the MSW or Title IV-E program as the savior of public child welfare. There are many non-graduates who provide excellent service with

passion, sincerity, and great technique. They are the "naturals." And there continue to be those in the field motivated by their own need for power and authority, who seem to care little for the families they are assigned to serve. These folks are in most need of the discipline, but are least likely to avail themselves of the opportunity. And there are those, like Laurie and me, who found an educational experience that enabled us to hone our skills, increase our understanding of social work practice and public child welfare, and stimulate our intellect.

Specifically, from the Title IV-E program, I was introduced to the historical perspective and the societal values that have shaped public child welfare today. This perspective also helps me understand better the changes that continue to occur – for example the swing from Family Preservation only seven years ago, to the emphasis on permanency planning and adoption of today.

The graduate school emphasis on advanced clinical skills was extremely relevant. At times, it was difficult to fit the instructor's experiences in private practice with the work of a CPS social worker. Much of this came later for me, as I pursued my LCSW and supervised student interns. One lecturer, who also has a private practice, was able to make the connection for me when she stated, "Every time you interact with your client it is a clinical interaction." This is so true. The meaning clients attached to the interaction is extremely clinical – they shared this much with me during the research. The investi-

gating interview, the brief exchange in the Juvenile Court hallway, transporting a mother to an NA meeting or a child to a sibling visit, a phone call to schedule an appointment – all are opportunities for clinical intervention and all such interactions should be treated as clinical interactions. Once I grasped this, I was able to better appreciate the value of the clinical practice classes.

A particular clinical phenomenon that is too frequently overlooked in this field is that of transference and countertransference. As a graduate intern, I remember struggling with the identification of this process. After only a year or two in the field, the issue was extremely apparent. The relegation of this clinical phenomena to the therapist's office is absurd – those of us going into people's homes and environments every day are much more exposed to both the pitfalls and the therapeutic opportunities that transference and countertransference can pose. I will credit my involvement with Title IV-E students, both as a field instructor and as an occasional presenter of seminars, with my continued focus on the refinement and understanding of the role of clinical social work in the public child welfare arena.

I remain interested in research and hope one day to become more involved in the research and evaluation of child welfare services. My attraction to qualitative research is not exclusive, and I greatly value the role of quantitative studies in the field. I would like to see more proactive research directing policy and practice, rather than the common

scenario of implementing legislation first and studying the issue later. The Multi-Ethnic Placement Act is a prime example – the research as it stands can be read either way depending on one's position on the issue. I would personally feel much better about this legislation if some more solid research were the foundation for the reform.

I would strongly urge any graduate student to consider a research thesis over the comprehensive exams. He or she will have ample opportunity to make time-limited case analyses, but few opportunities to become familiar with the research process. A more research savvy student body may lead to a more research savvy child welfare community. And maybe, just maybe, a Title IV-E program for the doctoral student?

**Laurie:** It was less than a year after I received my MSW that I was promoted to supervisor. I had sought out the promotion, but I left casework with some regrets. In fact, as a supervisor, I occasionally assign myself a case to keep aware of the challenges facing the staff I supervise.

I did not pursue licensure, and since my promotion I have taken an interest in management. This is quite a surprise for a union activist! I feel quite comfortable in the role of supervisor, and my style of supervision has been well received by the staff I have supervised, as well as my chiefs.

At first opportunity, I became a field instructor for SDSU. I feel a responsibility to the profession and to the agency. I no longer feel a burning desire to pursue a doctorate; my niche may

be in management.

My research experience has retreated to the background, along with my goal of writing a book. I sometimes pull out a copy of my thesis when supervising students and encourage them to pursue a research project if they are interested. I now know whom to contact to get a project in the agency approved.

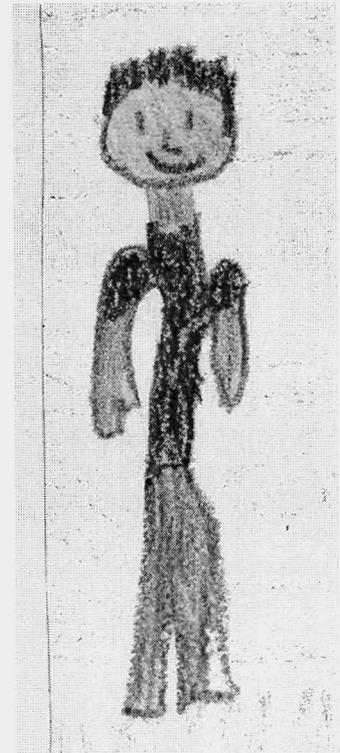
I might have been promoted to supervisor without the return to graduate school, and I might have climbed the bureaucratic ladder without an MSW. The experience of returning to school, devoting my full attention to my education, and the research project and thesis writing vitally enriched my understanding of child welfare and social work practice.

I join with Ruth in recommending that Title IV-E be expanded to include doctoral students. We are in need of an organized evaluation of child welfare practice to guide policy and procedures at the local, state, and national levels.

□

## References

- Adam, L. (1996). African-Americans' entry into foster care: social workers' decision-making process. Unpublished master's thesis, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA.
- Kempe, R.S., & Kempe, C.H. (1980). *The battered child*. London:Open Books.
- Pizzey, E. (1974). *Scream quietly or the neighbours will hear*. Middlesex:Penguin Books.
- Stratton, P. & Swaffer, R. (1988). Maternal causal beliefs for abused and handicapped children. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology* 6, 201-216.
- Supranovich, R. (1995). A qualitative analysis of an intensive family preservation-program: client perception of services and outcome. Unpublished master's thesis, San Diego State University, San Diego, CA.



Copyright of Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping is the property of Cleveland State University and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.