



Evidence and
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Behavioural and Implementation
Science Interventions
Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine



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#73 - The way we want to make it fit: How child protection practitioners 'resist' systemic reform

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Objectives/aims

The study examined the role of psychological empowerment as a facilitator of change within child protection systems in Australia. Despite numerous reviews and reforms, most child protection systems in Australia face the same barriers to improved practice. There is concern that managerialism has reduced the autonomy of practitioners, leading to top-heavy systems incapable of change.

Methods

A mixed-methods explanatory design was used to analyse the data in three separate phases. In phase one, a quantitative survey was constructed from two measures: the psychological empowerment instrument and a measure of variable responses to systemic change. Descriptive statistical analysis of the survey responses (n = 106) identified separate patterns for how practitioners experienced the four sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment (meaning, self-determination, competence, impact) in their work roles. A series of one-way ANOVA were conducted to determine the practitioner characteristics (length of employment, role, education, and sector) associated with psychological empowerment. Finally, a hierarchical multiple regression analysis examined the amount variance contributed by the sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment towards practitioners' response to change. In phase two, a nested sample of practitioners (n = 19) were interviewed using an a priori coding frame. Phase three then integrated the data to explain the findings of phase one.



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Main findings

Overall, psychological empowerment accounted for 21% of the total variance predicting practitioners' response to change in their child protection systems. The sub-dimensions of psychological empowerment were experienced differently by practitioners. They found their work meaningful, and their sense of meaning was most predictive of their response to change within the child protection system (15% of the variance). No other practitioner characteristics were significantly associated with meaning. Practitioners typically reported high rates of competence, with years of experience being significantly associated with increased competence. Practitioners did not feel that they impacted their organisations, and frontline practitioners reported the lowest sense of impact. While practitioners initially felt that they had high levels self-determination, there was a statistically significant decrease after their first year of practice, which then improved after five years of experience in the child protection sector.

The qualitative results explained these findings, showing that child protection practitioners responded to implementation as fit their local context. As practitioners struggled to manage the ongoing chaos of a crisis driven environment, and function within rigid implementation constraints, they found creative ways to enhance their sense of psychological empowerment. This often meant resisting implementation efforts that did not align with what was meaningful in their context. Many of these ways of resisting subverted traditional implementation data collection methods, potentially resulting in confusion about why change had not been successful. The perceived power difference between executive level and frontline staff created a further barrier as practitioners felt they were protecting children and families from poor decision-making.