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Guardrails Needed for Social Science Research

Research on Social Work Practice
1–2
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Readers of this journal are surely familiar with the problem of poorly done research and with many of the reasons why it exists and gets published. Also familiar is the problem of policymakers' misusing or misreading research reports. Readers will likely also be aware of ethical constraints on how research is conducted, for the sake of protecting subjects—in particular, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process. These initially emerged out of concern for the physical dangers that profit-driven pharmaceutical research might pose for participants in drug trials, but they now extend also to social science studies, out of concern that researchers' drive to publish could lead them to engage in practices that endanger subjects' psychological and emotional well-being and privacy. What might be less familiar are ideological causes of bad research in the social sciences and the need for ethical constraints to protect persons on whom research-influenced social programs operate. Agenda-driven social scientists and research funders can shape law and policy governing social work in various areas of life by generating bad research that appears to support their policy preferences, and this can cause substantial harm to people whom social workers serve, through policy experiments that ultimately do not serve their ostensible aims.

In an article written for a legal audience, *The Most Dangerous Branch of Science?: Reining in Rogue Research and Reckless Experimentation in Social Welfare*, (Dwyer, 2022), I illustrated this phenomenon by describing what has happened in the child welfare world in recent decades. In the article, I recommend legal reforms to address the problems, including mandating a more robust IRB review, broadening the concept of unethical research, treating policy experimentation as research subject to ethical rules, and authorizing lawsuits against those who purchase or conduct intentionally skewed studies that result in harmful policy innovations. I offer here a summary of the article's main points and would be happy to send the full article to anyone who requests it.

Child welfare policy is often characterized as a pendulum swinging between child protection and permanency, on one side, and on the other side, family preservation, which might be viewed as protection of parents' interest in retaining or regaining custody of their children and/or as furthering children's interest in maintaining ties to parents. Arguably there have been too few changes in direction to confirm the

pattern that the metaphor suggests. Broadly, the 1970s and 1980s saw federal legislation pushing states to do more to avoid separating children from parents; the 1990s and early 2000s saw federal legislation pushing states to prevent maltreatment and to achieve permanency for maltreated children more quickly; and the past two decades have seen a series of policy innovations aimed at preventing child removals and terminations of parental rights. The recent innovations have received critical support from research reports, and a major force behind the innovations has been a massive foundation ideologically committed to parents' rights, Casey Family Programs. It has purchased research and then lobbied with it in hand. In addition, many individual researchers in the field are independently predisposed to generate studies that support family preservation, because the child welfare system is widely regarded on the left as a partner to the criminal justice system in the project of oppressing people of minority race. "Child protection" is, on this view, really a "family policing system" targeting black families in particular, and many have called—in all seriousness—for abolition of child protection agencies. The fact that agencies serving predominantly black populations are staffed predominantly by black social workers, who view parents rather than children as their clients and express determination never to give up on parents, has not given pause to abolitionists.

From a research perspective, the problems with the family preservation push are two: First, a lot of published research is bad, because its funders or researchers are outcome-driven. The design flaws are glaring, and the interpretations of results are patently distorted. Second, there has been a lot of policy experimentation on maltreated children that is very much like research yet not treated as such, so not subject to safeguards such as preapproval, checks on researcher bias, piloting, and informed consent from those who will be experimented on or reliable proxies for them. Both problems are manifested in the recurrent cycle of new proposals followed by rapid and widespread adoption followed by a retreat from the policy when it turns out actually to be ineffective and harming children. The succession of family preservation "magic pills" has included Intensive Family Preservation Services, Differential Response, Family Drug Courts, Prison Nurseries, Racial Bias Training (for Child Protective Services social workers, who, again, are generally of the same race as most of the families they serve), and most

recently what I call The Kincare Craze (Dwyer, 2025).¹ All have been driven initially by bad research and later debunked by good research. All have threatened to leave children at risk of maltreatment and/or permanent impermanence.

If you are inclined to resist this characterization of child welfare policy, think of any other realm of social work where you believe wild hopes have elevated ideas that ultimately turned out to be bad ones, and consider how harm might have been avoided by imposing systemic precautions. With respect to research claims proponents advance, consider how narrow are existing checks on unethical work. Researchers must disclose ownership of an interest in, or funding by, businesses that would profit from particular results. They do not have to disclose funding by organizations with an ideological preference for particular results, nor the researchers' own personal ideological leanings. And the concept of profit is narrowly construed as economic, so there is no bar to research conducted by individuals, or funded by organizations, who are invested in the success of social policy experiments in noneconomic ways—for example, judges studying new court programs they created, academics studying service programs they themselves started or worked in (Dwyer, 2014), foundations paying for research on programs they lobbied legislatures to adopt. A problem in child welfare research that might be unusual but not necessarily unique is that “informed consent” to participation is given, if at all, not by research subjects themselves (children) but by persons who might, in connection with the program under study, have conflicting interests (parents).

With respect to policy innovation, consider how safeguards applicable to research narrowly construed simply do not apply, even though what is going on is really a kind of research. Legislatures and agencies undertake experiments on human individuals, by trying new policy interventions, and then examine the results thereafter. Yet there are no formal checks on such experiments of the sort one sees with studied interventions that are regarded as research. No one needs to make an evidence-based initial case that the intervention is likely to be an improvement over existing approaches or have the intended effect without significant adverse side effects. No one involved needs to disclose how they might personally benefit from the experiment or from a positive spin on results. No piloting is required. Impacted persons are not treated as research subjects, so no informed consent is required and ethical rules for treatment and monitoring do not apply.

As an antidote to ideologically driven research, I propose a broader IRB inquiry into researcher motivations, preclusion of funding by organizations with a vested interest in particular study results, more rigorous assessment of research design,

treatment of all persons who might be substantially impacted by research—including by perpetuation of a program applied to them—as subjects, and appointment of an independent representative for nonautonomous research subjects whenever their legal guardians might have conflicting interests (e.g., a guardian ad litem for an individual child, an ombudsperson for a large group of children).

To counteract reckless policy experimentation, I recommend that all new programs treating vulnerable populations be preceded by impact studies, subjected to preliminary assessment based on definite and appropriate standards, approved by an ombudsperson for the targeted population, and in some cases treated in some ways such as research—specifically, subject to expert vetting, piloting, informed-consent requirements, and external monitoring of subjects' safety. Some versions of some of these safeguards already exist, but the current regime is patently inadequate to prevent the harm.

As a further measure, to foster self-policing by researchers and policy innovators, I suggest the law authorize anyone who can show they have been harmed by corrupt research or ill-advised experimentation to sue the bad actors and recover compensation from them. The “mens rea” requirement (strict liability, negligence, knowing the likely consequences, reckless indifference, etc.) might differ by the type of defendant or particular cause of action. In any case, establishing causation will likely be quite difficult, so research and innovation should not be unduly chilled. But the very possibility of being held legally accountable could communicate most clearly to the players in any field of social work policy that their actions have consequences for real people and they ought to proceed with greater caution and honesty.

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