

**CHALLENGING THE
'NEW ACCOUNTABILITY'?**

**SERVICE USERS' PERSPECTIVES ON
PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT
IN FAMILY SUPPORT**

Natasha Cortis

Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Political Economy, Faculty of Economics and Business

The University of Sydney

March 2006

© Natasha Cortis

Declaration of originality

I hereby declare that this thesis is my own work, and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor any material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement is made in the text.

.....

Natasha Cortis

Acknowledgments

Like most things, this thesis would not have been possible without the co-operation and support of others. I am fortunate to have carried out the research as part of the ‘Currencies of Care’ collaboration linking researchers at The University of Sydney and the non-government child welfare agency, UnitingCare Burnside. I am grateful for the Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (no. LP0229120) that made it possible to undertake a PhD with Burnside as Industry Partner, and for Burnside’s impressive commitment to social justice, ethical research, and quality in child and family services.

I have benefited enormously from the guidance and co-operation of many members of the Burnside ‘family’. My heartfelt thanks go to the parents and family support workers who participated in the interviews and focus groups. Special thanks go also to Christine Gibson, Manager of Research and Quality Assurance, for her encouragement and advice throughout the project, and to Robert Urquhart and Claerwen Little who worked to establish the project in its early stages. Other Burnside staff helped with various aspects of the research, including Helen Townsend, Anne Hirst, Linda Mondy, Chris Sinclair, and Louise Smeaton. Burnside’s current and former Chief Executive Officers, Jane Woodruff and Rhonda Stien, generously supported the research, and numerous other Burnside staff members and volunteers helped with the field work logistics.

At the University of Sydney, I have been privileged to have expert supervision from Dr Gabrielle Meagher, senior lecturer in Political Economy. Gabrielle’s clarity, consistency and encouragement have greatly enriched the research experience. My associate supervisor, Karen Healy, Associate Professor at the University of Queensland, also gave critical advice and encouragement, and along with Gabrielle, identified the need for performance measurement research and established the collaboration with Burnside.

Other PhD students in Political Economy at the University of Sydney have also been a source of advice and support over the last few years– in particular Joy Paton, Dr Ben Spies-Butcher and Dr Christina Ho. As I have been writing up the thesis, I have also benefited from discussions with and encouragement from colleagues at the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Azadeh Fadaghi provided impressive Farsi interpretation and translation, and Dr Denise Thompson proofread the document in its final stages. Of course, any errors or omissions are my own.

Last but not least, Gina Dog and Daniel Person kept me walked and fed, snuggled and smiling over the years this research and writing has consumed.

Abstract

After two decades of public management reform, the ‘new accountability’ of performance measurement is a *routine* feature in the relationships between Australian government agencies and the non-profit organisations they fund to provide child and family services. While performance measurement offers to resolve tensions about how governments manage the quality and productivity of contracted services, the indicators they commonly adopt raise well-documented practical, political and epistemological challenges in social services. Left unresolved, these challenges risk biasing representations of service performance, by emphasising the most tangible dimensions of service activities (such as measures of client throughput) over relationship building and care. Capturing only part of service activity compromises the usefulness of performance data for managing quality and outcomes, and denies policy makers critical information about the value and meaning of care in users’ lives.

This thesis identifies and critically explores one set of challenges for performance measurement: the role of service users. Uniquely, I explore how user involvement in social service evaluation can make visible how these services enhance the quality of family and personal life. Using a case study of family support services in New South Wales, the research makes a series of empirical and theoretical contributions to problems of user involvement in social service evaluation.

Firstly, the research examines the performance indicators currently used by government to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of family support services in NSW. This shows that performance indicators in family support capture output more thoroughly than outcome, and confirms the minimal role that service users play in assessing service quality and outcomes. But while service users are largely excluded from participation in performance measurement, theoretical perspectives as diverse as managerialism and feminism treat service users as *well placed* to capture and report otherwise elusive information about care quality and outcomes. Further, participation in evaluation facilitates the exercise of users’ rights to self-expression and self-determination in the social service delivery and policy process.

After identifying the widespread exclusion of service users' perspectives from performance measurement in NSW family support, the thesis makes its more substantial contribution, in documenting findings from a detailed study involving adult family support service users (parents) and their workers (the 'Burnside Study'). This qualitative study was conducted in four socio-economically disadvantaged service delivery sites located around New South Wales. Using focus group, interview and observational methods and a modified grounded theory approach, the study contributes exploratory evidence of what these service users think of, and how they think about service quality, outcomes, and evaluation in family support.

The parents' accounts of using family support capture their unfulfilled social ideals and the broader visions of the justice they hoped these social services would help them achieve. Their criteria for measuring service outcomes and service quality, and their views on evaluation methods embody core themes that social theorists have struggled to analyse, about the purpose of social services and the nature of 'a good life'. The theoretical framework I develop highlights the role of family support in the context of service users' struggles for social justice, and in particular, their struggles for self-realisation, recognition and respect (Honneth, 1995). The research extends theories of recognition beyond publicly articulated social movements to those struggles in social life and social politics that exist in what Axel Honneth terms the 'shadows' of the political-public sphere (2003a: 122).

After establishing a conceptual framework that facilitates deeper interpretation of users' perspectives, I present the findings in three categories: users' perspectives on service outcomes; users' perspectives on service quality; and users' perspectives on evaluation methods.

The findings show how service users define 'service outcomes' in the context of their struggles for recognition and respect, highlighting the contribution welfare services and welfare professionals make beyond the managerial 'Three E's' of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness.

Further, the findings confirm the importance of 'helping relationships' to the quality of service delivery in family support, despite the invisibility of service relationships in

existing performance indicators. The complexity of worker-client bonds highlights the difficulty of evaluating social services using simple numerical counts of client or service episodes, and plays into broader debates about strategies for revaluing care work, and the role of care recipients.

Finally, the findings show the role performance measurement processes and methods might play in facilitating users' struggles for recognition. Users identified a role for evaluation in making visible the contribution of family support in pursuing their social justice goals, and saw evaluation as an opportunity *in itself* to facilitate recognition and respect.

Overall, the thesis offers concrete evidence about how family support service users experience and define service quality and outcomes, and how they see their own role in evaluating the services they use. The research shows how users' perspectives both contest and confirm the 'new accountability' of performance measurement, pointing to new directions, and further challenges, for conceptualising– and evaluating– social services.

Contents

Tables and Figures.....	x
Abbreviations.....	xi

Introduction

The problem of performance measurement.....	13
Performance measurement research in child and family services.....	15
Performance measurement, service users and care.....	18
Research approach	20
Outline.....	22

Chapter One

The growing significance of family support services.....	26
1.1 Introduction	26
1.2 The evolution of family support services in Australia.....	28
1.2.1 Phase One: Family support and family breakdown	29
1.2.2 Phase Two: Family support and child protection	29
1.2.3 Phase Three: Family support and community development	32
1.3 The growth of family support in the 1990s	33
1.3.1 Family support service users in the 1990s.....	33
1.3.2 The family support workforce in the 1990s.....	35
1.3.3 Family support in the 1990s: summary.....	36
1.4 Challenges in measuring family support.....	38
1.4.1 The conceptual ambiguity of family support	39
1.5 Conclusions	45

Chapter Two

Performance measurement and the public management of family support	47
2.1 Introduction	47
2.2 Public management reform: ideas and practices	48
2.2.1 Purchaser-provider relationships: the core of public reform.....	51
2.2.2 Purchase-provider relationships and child and family services	55
2.3 Purchaser-provider relationships and performance measurement	58
2.4 Problems of performance measurement in community services.....	61
2.5 Conclusions	67

Chapter Three

Government performance indicators and family support	68
3.1 Introduction	68
3.2 Data sources	71
3.3 National performance reports	74
3.3.1 The Report on Government Services: indicators for Federal oversight	74
3.4 New South Wales Government performance reports	78
3.4.1 Service Efforts and Accomplishments: indicators for State oversight	78
3.5 Agency performance indicators	81
3.5.1 DoCS performance indicators: corporate reports	81
3.5.2 Program level performance indicators: the CSGP	82
3.6 Conclusions	86

Chapter Four

Service users in the ‘New Evaluative State’	88
4.1 Introduction	88
4.2 Users and performance measurement	90
4.2.1 User involvement and government evaluation priorities	91
4.2.2 Users’ characteristics and evaluation: ‘deficit’ factors	93
4.3 Rethinking the scope for user involvement: conceptual frameworks	97
4.3.1 User involvement as an essential source of data	99
4.3.2 User involvement as a right	100
4.3.3 User involvement as both an essential source of data and a right	102
4.3.4 The need for empirical research	104
4.4 Conclusions	105

Chapter Five

The Burnside Study	107
5.1 Introduction	107
5.2 The qualitative approach	107
5.3 Introducing the field work	108
5.4 Data gathering: design & process	112
5.4.1 Site selection: The family centres	112
5.4.2 Observations: entering the field	116
5.4.3 Sampling strategies	117
5.5 Study Participants	118
5.5.1 Service user participants	118
5.5.2 Focus groups and interviews with service users	119
5.5.3 Interviews with staff	122
5.6 Potential limits of the study	124
5.6.1 Addressing possible bias	124
5.6.2 Monetary incentives	125
5.7 Analysis	126

5.7.1	Early analysis	127
5.7.2	Corroborating themes with theory	131
5.7.3	Corroborating themes and theory with participants	131
5.8	Conclusions	132

Chapter Six

Interpreting users' perspectives: a social justice framework		133
6.1	Introduction	133
6.2	Users' perspectives on service performance: emerging themes	134
6.2.1	Users' perspectives on outcomes.....	136
6.2.2	Users' perspectives on quality	142
6.2.3	Users' perspectives on evaluation methods	145
6.2.4	Summary: reinterpreting 'performance' as social justice	147
6.3	Competing conceptions of social justice	149
6.3.1	Justice as social inclusion	150
6.3.2	Justice as capabilities.....	152
6.3.3	Justice as recognition.....	154
6.4	Conclusions	165

Chapter Seven

Users' criteria for evaluating service outcomes: a case study in the politics of recognition		167
7.1	Introduction	167
7.2	Outcomes of distributive justice.....	169
7.2.1	Material resources	170
7.2.2	Affordable activities.....	171
7.2.3	Education and employment	173
7.3	Outcomes of recognition.....	176
7.3.1	Love.....	178
7.3.2	Self-love.....	182
7.3.3	Familial love.....	183
7.3.4	Legal Status	187
7.3.5	Solidarity.....	191
7.4	Conclusions	199

Chapter Eight

Users' perspectives on service quality: Recognising the helping relationship.....		201
8.1	Introduction	201
8.2	Relationships and service quality	204
8.2.1	Users' perspectives.....	204
8.2.2	Family workers' perspectives	205
8.3	Research about helping relationships.....	207
8.3.1	Helping relationships and social service outcomes	207
8.3.2	Good helping in child and family welfare	209

8.3.3	Evaluating helping relationships	210
8.4	Establishing a conceptual framework	211
8.4.1	Helping relationships as therapeutic alliances	211
8.4.2	Critique of the therapeutic alliance construct	212
8.4.3	Helping relationships and recognition	213
8.5	Bonding.....	215
8.5.1	Worker dispositions and bonding: service quality as ‘love’	216
8.5.2	Bonding and status boundaries	226
8.5.3	Bonding and solidarity: eliminating stigma and judgment	230
8.5.4	Bonding and users’ struggles for recognition.....	234
8.6	Collaboration.....	235
8.6.1	Agreement on goals.....	235
8.6.2	Negotiating tasks.....	237
8.7	Conclusions	241

Chapter Nine

Users’ perspectives on evaluation.....	244	
9.1	Introduction	244
9.2	How users know services are working.....	245
9.2.1	Making ‘love’ visible	246
9.2.2	Making ‘legal status’ visible.....	249
9.2.3	Making ‘solidarity’ visible.....	252
9.2.4	Difficulties in evaluating performance: Saleema’s perspective	255
9.2.5	Workers’ ways of knowing	257
9.3	Users’ and workers’ visions for evaluation systems	264
9.3.1	Users’ view of how services should be evaluated.....	264
9.3.2	Workers’ views on service evaluation	272
9.4	Conclusions	277

Chapter Ten

Users’ perspectives: Challenging the ‘new accountability’?	280	
10.1	Service users and performance measurement in family support.....	280
10.2	Family support as a case study in the politics of recognition	284
10.3	Rethinking outcomes in family support	285
10.4	Rethinking quality in family support.....	287
10.5	Rethinking performance evaluation	292
10.6	Conclusion.....	295

Bibliography.....	296
--------------------------	------------

APPENDIX A	Performance measures for family support.....	326
APPENDIX B	Invitation to Parents	327
APPENDIX C	Information Brochure.....	328

Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1	Key trends in NSW family support.....	34
Table 2	CSGP performance indicators.....	85
Table 3	Data collection techniques	110
Table 4	Questioning route for service users	121
Table 5	Questioning route for staff	123
Table 6	Summary of Honneth’s construct of recognition	164
Table 7	Summary of relationship themes.....	214

Figures

Figure 1	Clients and staff in NSW family support, 1992-2000.....	37
Figure 2	DoCS referrals and full time staff in family support	37
Figure 3	Relationship between four performance reports.....	72
Figure 4	Client involvement in four performance reports	86
Figure 5	Summary of arguments for user involvement	98
Figure 6	Secondary preventative services	113
Figure 7	Summary of interpretive framework.....	168
Figure 8	The structure of helping relationships.....	214

Acronyms & Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
Burnside	UnitingCare Burnside
CCQG	Council on the Cost and Quality of Government (NSW)
CSGP	Community Services Grants Program
DoCS	Department of Community Services (NSW)
IFSS	Intensive Family Support Services
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
NSW	New South Wales (Australia)
SEA Reports	Service Efforts and Accomplishments Reports