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# The Lived Experience of the Mandated Reporter

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# The Lived Experience of the Mandated Reporter

by

Courtney J. Duvick, B.S.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### Abstract

The purpose of this research study was to explore the lived experience of the mandated reporter. The research question for the study was as follows: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? This question was explored through the use of a qualitative research design, which in the case of this research project, included the use of interviews to obtain the necessary data to answer the research question. This research is important to the field of social work because all social workers are mandated reporters, whether they specifically work with children or not.

The sample in this study consisted of two licensed social workers who have previously made reports to Child Protection Services. Of the two research participants, one was a Licensed Graduate Social Worker (LGSW) and the other was a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW). Both individuals that were interviewed also happened to be school social workers, one in an elementary school and one in a high school. Findings of the research study revealed the following main themes: lack in training of mandated reporters; inadequacy in Child Protection Services addressing abuse concerns; need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, mandated reporters often have a preference on child protection screeners. These findings reveal the need for future research to further address the topic of the lived experience of the mandated reporter. It is important to continuously address this topic, as mandated reporters and Child Protection Services are constantly working with one another.

### Acknowledgments

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### The Lived Experience of the Mandated Reporter

In 2012, approximately 3.4 million referrals were made to Child Protection Services (CPS) agencies throughout the United States (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2013). While anyone can make a report to CPS, certain professions require that workers make a report if there is suspected child abuse. Law enforcement officials, social workers, medical and mental health professionals, teachers, and child care providers are often individuals that are required not only by their profession, but by law, to report suspected child abuse (Child Welfare Information Gateway, n.d.; Krase, 2013). These professionals made three-fifths (58.7%) of all reports in 2012, with legal and law enforcement personnel, education personnel, and social services personnel making a large majority of those reports (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2013).

Despite the number of suspected child abuse reports that are made each year, the concept of mandated reporting is relatively new in the United States (Krase, 2013). It is only within about the last 50 years that child protection services made the move from the private sector to the public sector, as the government previously had little to do with identifying and protecting children from abuse (Krase, 2013). In 1962, a group of doctors led by Dr. C. Henry Kempe published an article entitled *The Battered Child Syndrome*, which at that point in time “was regarded as the single most significant event in creating awareness and exposing the reality of child abuse” (The Kempe Foundation for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect, 2008, “Mission/History” section, para. 4). It was this study that exposed the fact that child abuse is more prevalent than had ever previously been believed, which in turn caused a demand for the government to

address the issue of child abuse through legislation (Krase, 2013). Due to this push for legislation, by 1967 medical personnel became required by law to report suspected abuse, thus making them mandated reporters, with the definition of mandated reporter evolving over time to include individuals from other professions (Krase, 2013).

Social workers should be interested in mandated reporting and CPS for a number of reasons. First and foremost, social workers are mandated reporters by law throughout all 50 states (Krase, 2013). Children are a population that social workers provide services to throughout many different settings, such as schools, hospitals, and mental health clinics, and in these settings they may encounter instances of child abuse (Krase, 2013). Social workers are afforded the opportunity to be an advocate for children that have experienced abuse, which includes reporting to CPS. Another reason social workers should be interested in CPS specifically is that when they are reporting suspected abuse, more often than not they are making the report to CPS. Because social workers work closely with CPS when making a report, having an interest in and knowledge of how reporting to CPS works may prove to be incredibly beneficial.

The research question for this research study is as follows: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? Why this is an important topic to look at will be further explored within the literature review.

## Literature Review

### **Definition of a Mandated Reporter**

Before diving into the specifics about mandated reporting, first, one must understand what being a mandated reporter even means. According to Krase (2013):

Mandated reporters are individuals required by the law of a given state to report concerning suspicions. Most often the term “mandated reporter” refers to individuals required to report suspicions of child abuse or neglect, but in some states the law may require some people to report elder abuse, institutional corruption, or other behaviors (p. 14)

The key phrase in this definition of a mandated reporter is “required by the law”. While anyone can report suspected abuse, it is individuals that are required by law in their state to report abuse that are considered mandated reporters. For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect.

### **Laws and Policies Surrounding Mandated Reporting**

Laws and policies surrounding mandated reporting are relatively new in the United States. According to Gushwa and Chance (2008):

All 50 states have legislation in place that establishes child protection agencies and reporting procedures, required by the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (1974), which links federal funding to the stipulation that states must enact mandatory child abuse reporting laws (p. 78).

Since the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act wasn’t created until 1974, that means that federal regulations surrounding mandated reporting have only been in existence for roughly 40 years. As previously noted, there are a number of professions that are required by law to report any suspected child abuse. Professions in which individuals are often considered to be mandated reporters include child care center staff, clergy, dental professionals, family child care providers, foster parents, group home staff,



guardians and litem, hospital administrators, law enforcement, medical personnel and professionals (i.e. physicians, nurses, and other health-care workers), probation and correctional services, psychiatrists, psychologists, school administrators, school support staff, social workers, teachers, and therapists (Gushwa & Chance, 2008; Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division, 2012; Morelen & Shaffer, 2012; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children's Bureau, 2014). The need for these individuals to make a report may vary state to state, as the Child Welfare Information Gateway (2014) points out:

The circumstances under which a mandatory reporter must make a report vary from State to State. Typically, a report must be made when the reporter, in his or her official capacity, *suspects* or *has reason to believe* that a child has been abused or neglected. Another standard frequently used is in situations in which the reporter has knowledge of, or observes a child being subjected to, conditions that would reasonably result in harm to the child (p. 3).

Although there are, as stated, typical situations where a report must be made, it is important for mandated reporters to be aware of the laws and policies in their own state in order to make sure they are making reports when they need to be made.

Terminology is incredibly important to understand when dealing with mandated reporting and the laws and policies surrounding it, as there are numerous forms of abuse, and it may vary state to state how they describe each form of abuse. The Minnesota Department of Human Services (MDHS), for example, provides definitions for neglect, physical abuse, threatened injury, mental injury, and sexual abuse in order to help

mandated reporters located in Minnesota better understand what they need to be looking for and reporting, with threatened injury and mental injury being categorized under physical abuse (Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division, 2012). Looking first at neglect:

Neglect is the failure by parents or caretakers to provide a child with necessary food, shelter, clothing or medical care. Neglect also includes failure to ensure that a child is educated, although this does not include a parent's refusal to provide the child with nervous system stimulant medications. Neglect also may occur when the person responsible for the child's care fails to protect the child from conditions or actions that seriously endanger their physical or mental health when reasonably able to do so. In addition, neglect includes failure to provide for appropriate supervision or child care arrangements after considering a child's age, mental ability, physical condition, length of absence or environment (Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division, 2012, p. 7).

The next definition that the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division (2012) provides is for physical abuse when they state:

Physical abuse is defined as:

- Any physical injury, mental injury or threatened injury, inflicted by a person responsible for the child's care, to a child other than by accidental means
- Any physical or mental injury that cannot reasonably be explained by the child's history of injuries

- Any aversive or deprivation procedures, or regulated interventions, that have not been authorized under the law for use in facilities serving persons who have developmental disabilities or related conditions (p. 7).

It is also important though to note that, “Physical abuse does not include reasonable and moderate physical discipline of a child administered by a parent or guardian that does not result in injury” (Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division, 2012, p. 7). The last important definition provided by the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Child Safety and Permanency Division (2012) is about sexual abuse where they state, “Sexual abuse means the subjection of a child to sexual contact by a person responsible for the child’s care, a person with a significant relationship to the child, or a person in a position of authority” (p. 8). It is important for mandated reporters to be aware of such definitions so that they understand what is considered abuse, and also so that they know what to be looking for when working with children.

### **Issues Surrounding Mandated Reporting**

Despite the fact that both CPS and mandated reporters work towards protecting the lives of children, mandated reporters do not always believe that CPS does a suitable job doing so. Studies have shown that mandated reporters at times believe CPS does not do an adequate job of addressing abuse concerns (Kenny, 2001; Flaherty, Jones, & Sege, 2004). In a study looking at teachers perceived deterrents in reporting abuse, Kenny found that of the 197 teachers that were surveyed, 16.1% noted feeling as though CPS did not generally offer help to maltreated children as a deterrent in reporting abuse (Kenny,

2001). While this study specifically looked at teachers perceived deterrents in reporting abuse, other studies have addressed primary care physicians' experiences in identifying and reporting injuries caused by physical abuse (Flaherty, Jones, & Sege, 2004). Flaherty, Jones, and Sege (2004) looked at primary care physicians' experiences in identifying and reporting injuries caused by physical abuse through the use of a focus group that included six Chicago-area primary care physicians. They found that some of the physicians questioned the consequences of an investigation and the value of making a report to CPS, as one particular physician noted an experience where after a CPS investigation had been made the child had been fatally abused (Flaherty, Jones, and Sege, 2004).

Regardless of the fact that there are laws in place that require mandated reporters to report suspected child abuse, individuals may not always report as they are supposed to. Previous studies have addressed reasons why mandated reporters do not report suspected abuse to CPS (Gunn, Hickson, & Cooper, 2005; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000). In a study looking at factors that affect pediatricians' reporting of suspected maltreatment, Gunn, Hickson, and Cooper (2005) found that of the 195 pediatricians who completed the survey, individuals that had chosen not to report suspected abuse often noted poor experiences with child service agencies as a deterrent. These poor experiences ranged from frustration with CPS' inaction to difficulty contacting appropriate people (Gunn, Hickson, & Cooper, 2005). While this study specifically addressed factors that affect pediatricians' reporting of suspected maltreatment, other studies have addressed pediatricians' experiences with the child protection system. Vulliamy and Sullivan surveyed 25 pediatricians and found that CPS was the most noted reason as a failure to report suspected abuse, based on previous experiences with CPS. These previous

experiences included never receiving feedback from CPS, frustration with not being assured of a competent, prompt response to a report, feeling as though they had to convince CPS that they should look into an issue, even when there was physical evidence, and that the social worker appeared to overreact even when the physician attempted to prevent an overreaction (Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000).

As previously stated, there are laws in place that require mandated reporters to report suspected child abuse, but it is possible that mandated reporters' perception of CPS may influence their reporting habits. Previous studies have looked at whether or not mandated reporters' perception of CPS had an effect on reporting suspected abuse (Ashton, 2007; Hansen et. Al, 1997). In their study in which 520 social workers were surveyed on the impact of organizational environment on the likelihood that social workers will report child maltreatment, Ashton (2007) found that the worker's perception of CPS had no effect on reporting suspected abuse. The findings of this study are in contrast though to a previous study conducted by Hansen et. Al that looked at the influence of case and professional variables on the identification and reporting of child maltreatment among licensed psychologists and masters social workers. Unlike Ashton, Hansen et. Al found after analyzing the completed surveys of 125 licensed psychologists and 85 certified masters social workers that the worker's perception of CPS actually did have an effect of reporting suspected abuse (Hansen et. Al, 1997).

Mandated reporting experiences may vary from person to person, situation to situation. Past studies have attempted to identify what mandated reporters experiences with CPS have been like (Strozier, Brown, Fennell, Hardee, & Vogel, 2005; Zellman & Antler, 1990). In their study looking at the experiences of mandated reporting among

family therapists, Strozier et. Al (2005) surveyed 101 family therapists and found statistical significance in relation to four specific items. They found that the family therapists that responded to the survey had found CPS to be inefficient, incompetent, too slow, too busy, or underfunded. They believed CPS had overreacted or reacted inappropriately to a report, that CPS does not provide feedback after a report is made, and that CPS did not do what the therapist expected after a report was made (Strozier et. Al, 2005). While Strozier et. Al specifically looked at family therapists' experiences with mandated reporting, Zellman and Antler (1990) looked at the experiences of mandated reporters in general with CPS. In their study addressing mandated reporters experiences with CPS, Zellman and Antler found two specific themes among the mandated reporters. First, mandated reporters noted issues with communication, specifically that telephone access was a problem and that often it took reporters a long time to be able to file a report. Second, they found that mandated reporters were frustrated with the fact that they did not seem to receive any special treatment from CPS. Mandated reporters stated that they felt they should receive special treatment, specifically that they should be given special access and greater credibility when they do report, when working with CPS due to the fact that they are obligated to report suspected abuse (Zellman & Antler, 1990).

### **Changes in Funding to Child Protection Services**

An important issue to address when discussing the topic of mandated reporting is the changes in funding to CPS. CPS's funding plays into the services that they provide, and in turn may affect the experiences that mandated reporters have when working with CPS. Sciamanna (2014), a consultant for the Children's Welfare League of America, stated when discussing omnibus bill HR 3547:

While there were some relative “winners” such as Head Start and pre-kindergarten, even those increases are far from what would have been envisioned last year (pre-K) or several years ago (Head Start and Child Care). Most of the child welfare programs continued to experience erosion in funding both through discretionary cuts and mandatory spending cuts (para. 2).

As stated, “most of the child welfare programs continued to experience erosion in funding”, which would include CPS since it is a child welfare program. The fact that programs such as CPS have continued to lose funding may help explain some of the issues that mandated reporters run into when working with CPS. When funding is cut a variety of issues may arise, from having to cut the number of workers in an organization to limiting the number of resources that are available. As stated, all of these factors are likely to affect the services that CPS provides, and thus affects mandated reporters experiences when working with CPS.

While the aforementioned budget cuts to child welfare programs addressed child welfare cuts within the United States as a whole, child welfare funding also can vary state to state. Looking at Minnesota for example, according to the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota (2013):

Minnesota is one of 12 states operating a state-supervised, county-administered child welfare system. In this structure the state assumes the responsibility of federal compliance, sets program requirements through the issuing of policy, and oversees county implementation of policy. Counties are responsible for implementation of day-to-day services, administering programs, and engaging the

community in collaboration and integration of services. In Minnesota, counties also hold the primary funding responsibility for child welfare services (p. 3).

Issues exist with counties holding primary responsibility for funding child welfare programs. As the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare at the University of Minnesota (2013) points out, issues include:

- Outcomes vary widely from county to county
- Funding levels are not stable over time
- Financial pressures on counties affect resources available for at-risk children
- State supervision is limited in its capacity to influence county outcomes and performance
- Early Intervention and Prevention services are often the first to be cut (p. 3).

The fact that “outcomes vary widely from county to county” is important to note in relation to changes in funding to CPS and how that funding affects mandated reporters experience when working with CPS, because experiences may vary county to county due to the funding available in the specific county. Due to this set-up, larger counties will have more funding for child welfare programs than smaller counties, thus allowing for more funding to be funneled specifically into CPS. This may affect mandated reporters experiences when working with CPS because the more funding a county has, the more resources they’ll have to handle any child abuse and neglect reports being made by mandated reporters.



## **Ethics**

Ethics is something that is brought up often when thinking about mandated reporting. Numerous professional bodies have created a code of ethics that individuals in that specific profession must adhere to, including the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the American Psychological Association (APA), and the American Medical Association (AMA) (Gushwa & Chance, 2008; Morelen & Shaffer, 2012). One standard to note when looking at the NASW's Code of Ethics, for example, is section 1.07 Privacy and Confidentiality. This section discusses clients rights to confidentiality, under what circumstances confidentiality may be required to be broken, and about how, if possible, it is important to discuss with clients when confidentiality will be broken and what that means for them (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).

There are numerous ethical dilemmas that mandated reporters may face throughout the course of their career in relation to making reports. For example, when and if they should report may possibly be an issue, for various different reasons. In a study looking at the experiences of mandated reporting among family therapists, Strozier, Brown, Fennell, Hardee, and Vogel (2005) found that, of the therapists they surveyed, "...about 60% of the therapists say they may be reluctant to report because CPS may make the situation worse" (p. 183). This is similar to the findings of Anderson et al. (1992), when discussing how therapists feel about mandated reporting laws it was stated:

Our therapists accepted the necessity for mandatory reporting legislation, though they characterized it as a "necessary evil" or a "problematic good." Several said

that harm to the therapeutic relationship would not matter if the child was helped or protected. Given it was a legal obligation, and given penalties for not reporting, therapists accommodated themselves to the necessity to report, saying it was not their job to judge, but merely to report. However, they had serious questions about whether good would result from reporting. This lack of confidence in the usefulness of mandated reporting compounds therapists' ethical distress about violating confidentiality (p. 244).

Both studies pointed out mandated reporters worries in relation to whether or not reporting actually helped. The ethical dilemma here is that reporters, as stated, have worries about whether reporting suspected abuse to CPS actually helps, but they also are legally mandated to make a report if they suspect that a child is being abused or neglected. When situations such as this arise it is important to review the laws and policies on reporting in whatever state the reporter is in, and it is also important to review the ethical guidelines of whatever professions they are a part of in order to make the best decision for the child that would be affected by the decision.

Another ethical dilemma that mandated reporters may run into in relation to reporting is the issue of reporting versus keeping the child at hand safe. As Anderson et al. (1992) states:

A primary concern for many therapists in decision making about mandatory reporting is the issue of children's safety. Although the goal of the law is to protect children and therapists make reports for that purpose, concerns also arise about how children will be treated as a result of the report having been made.

Therapists reported experiencing a dilemma about whether the report would cause additional harm to come to the child (p. 247-248).

As stated previously, when an ethical dilemma such as this arises, it is important to review both laws and policies surrounding mandated reporting, as well as the ethical guidelines of whatever profession the reporter is a part of. In a case such as this, for example, psychologists would want to be aware of APA Standard 3.04 (Avoiding Harm) as "...it requires psychologists to take 'reasonable steps' to avoid harming their clients or to minimize the harm if it is unavoidable" (Morelen & Shaffer, 2012, p. 192). Thus, if a psychologist was faced with the ethical dilemma at hand, they would have to make a decision regarding whether or not to follow mandated reporting laws, or to follow the ethical guideline of avoiding harm.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework that will help in developing an understanding of the lived experience of the mandated reporter is general systems theory. According to Gregory (n.d.):

General systems theory at a simple level can be defined as: elements, which are in exchange, and which are bounded. These components constitute a "system", which functions or operates within a field or an environment. Elements can be virtually anything you wish to label as such, the exchanges are any relationships that exist between elements, and the boundary is what you can see, hear, feel, or sense that separates "system" from the background or environment (para. 2).

Essentially what general systems theory does is look at various systems and how they interact with one another. The use of this conceptual framework is key when developing an understanding of the lived experience of the mandated reporter because mandated reporting is affected by numerous systems and how they interact with one another, as will be discussed below.

The purpose of using general systems theory as a conceptual framework when attempting to better understand the lived experience of the mandated reporter is that the concept of mandated reporting involves numerous systems. Systems that influence mandated reporting may include the family, the mandated reporters, Child Protection Services, and the legislature that creates the laws surrounding mandated reporting. How these systems function separately and as a whole will have a huge impact on mandated reporting. Whether that means merely looking at how the legislature that creates the laws surrounding mandated reporting system on its own, or looking at looking how the legislature system and the mandated reporter system influence one another.

Based off of all this information, it is clear that mandated reporting is an incredibly important and complex issue that needs to constantly be addressed. The research question for this study, as previously stated, is as follows: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter?

### Methods

The purpose of this research study will be to examine the lived experiences of mandated reporters. Thus, the research question for this research project is as follows:

What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? How this research question will be answered will be addressed throughout the methods section.

### **Research Design**

The research question for this research project was as follows: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? This question was explored through the use of qualitative research design, which in the case of this research project included the use of interviews to obtain the necessary data to answer the research question. A qualitative research design was used due to the fact that it allows for open ended questions to be asked and it allows the opportunity for the interviewee's to elaborate upon each of the questions that were asked. Interviews were conducted face to face.

### **Sample**

To obtain data regarding the lived experience of the mandated reporter, individuals that are considered mandated reporters in the state of Minnesota were interviewed. Subjects were recruited through the use of a snowball sample. The committee members for this research project informally let licensed social workers that they know that this research study was taking place and that if they would like to participate that they could contact the researcher. The researcher's contact information was provided as part of this informal introduction and it was requested that if the individual is interested in being part of the research study that they email or call the researcher to set up an interview. The interviewee had the option to select where the interview took place, with the researcher giving the option of the researcher traveling to

the interviewee's place of employment to conduct the interview in the interviewee's office.

It was a requirement that the individuals that were interviewed had to have worked with Child Protection Services in the past. This was a requirement due to the fact that the focus of this project was looking at the lived experience of the mandated reporter and the interviewees needed to have experience in making reports to Child Protection Services in order to be able to properly answer all of the questions that were asked as part of the interview. This requirement was addressed during the informal invitation from the committee members to the potential research participants, as well as during the initial contact made between the potential participant and the researcher.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Prior to each interview the interviewee was required to sign a consent form that had been approved by the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB) in order to ensure respondent protection (see Appendix A). The informed consent form was sent to the participant via email by the research for the participant's review if they chose to participate and set-up an interview. If after reviewing the informed consent form the participant still agreed to participate, they were required to sign the consent form and give it to the research when they met for the interview before the researcher asked any of the interview questions. The consent form discussed the steps that were taken to protect the respondent from harm, including issues such as confidentiality. For the purposes of confidentiality, each signed consent form was kept in a locked filing cabinet. In addition, the questions asked as part of the interview were non-threatening, the study had minimal

risks, the respondent was given the option to withdraw from the study at any time, and the data was destroyed following its use for the research study. As stated, for the purpose of this study, the IRB at St. Catherine University was charged with approving the research study, the research questions, and the consent form. Audio from each interview was recorded, and the recordings were stored in a password protected file on the researcher's computer. Each interview was also transcribed, and the transcriptions were also stored in a password protected file. Only the researcher and her research chair had access to the data at any point in time throughout the research study. The data was kept from the date of the initial interview until May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015 upon which the data was destroyed.

### **Data Collection**

Upon selecting respondents to be interviewed, interviews were conducted in order to obtain the necessary data. Interviews were estimated to last anywhere between half an hour to an hour depending on how much the respondent had to say about each question asked, with the interviews actually lasting a little less than a half an hour each. Each interviewee had the option to select where the interview took place, with the researcher giving the option of the researcher traveling to the interviewee's place of employment to conduct the interview in the interviewee's office. Each participant elected to have the researcher travel to their place of employment and conduct the interview in their office. Only the participant and the researcher were present at the time of the interview in each interview. Ten questions were prepared that were asked as part of each interview, which were approved by the IRB at St. Catherine University for content quality (see Appendix B). The ten questions were open-ended and addressed varying aspects surrounding

mandated reporting and working with CPS. The questions were formed by the researcher after completing a review of the literature and noticing what has been addressed in the past, as well as what appeared to be missing. The interview questions began simple, and gained complexity as they progressed. The format of the questions was intentionally written this way in order to narrow in on the specifics of the lived experience of the mandated reporter, looking mainly at their experiences when working with CPS. The entirety of each interview was recorded and then they were each transcribed for data analysis purposes. The entirety of each interview was transcribed in order to help connect themes found between each of the interviews.

### **Data Analysis**

**The Sample.** The sample included social workers who are licensed in the state of Minnesota by the State of Minnesota Board of Social Work. This included individuals that have a LGSW license and a LICSW license. The individuals that were included as part of this study are also mandated reporters and have all worked with CPS at some point during their career. As part of the interview, the researcher asked the interviewee about their level of licensure, how many years they have been practicing, and to describe the current agency that they work for.

**Research Question.** The research question for this research study was as follows: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? It was hypothesized that themes that would emerge from the interviews would include the following: that mandated reporters have found there to be issues with communication with CPS; that mandated reporters do not always believe that CPS does an adequate job at addressing abuse



concerns; and finally, that mandated reporters are often frustrated with how CPS is run. These three themes were hypothesized to be found within the research study based off of what was found as part of the literature review. The research question was answered through the use of qualitative analysis, which in the case of this research project included the use of interviews to obtain the necessary data to answer the research question. Ten questions were prepared that were asked as part of the interview in order to help answer the research question. The questions that were asked were open-ended and addressed varying aspects surrounding mandated reporting and working with CPS. A list containing the questions that were asked as part of the interview can be found on Appendix B. To analyze the data, a qualitative coding strategy called simple content analysis was used. Each individual interview transcript will be carefully examined in order to find themes within the data.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There are both a number of strengths and limitations that can be seen within this particular study. This study is beneficial to the field of social work as it may help bring about a better understanding of what the lived experience of the mandated reporter is. It also provides information as to what mandated reporters think about Child Protection Services and their experiences working with CPS, which is beneficial because it allows CPS to reevaluate their services and attempt to improve how they work with the individuals that are making reports. Another reason this study is beneficial is that it provides information as to how mandated reporters think the current policy around mandated reporting is working, which will be beneficial to lawmakers as it will help show them what needs to be improved in terms of policy around child welfare. While

there are a number of strengths to this study, there are also limitations as well. One potential limitation of this study would be respondent bias; it is possible that some individuals that were interviewed may have only had bad experiences when dealing with mandated reporting which may hinder them from being able to talk about any positives to mandated reporting, or they may have had only positive experiences when dealing with mandated reporting thus hindering them from being able to speak about anything that needs to be improved. Another possible limitation to this particular study is that the number of respondents used within the study was rather limited due to the length of time that the researcher has to complete the study.

### Findings

The research question for this study was: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? Subjects for the research study were recruited through the use of a snowball sample, with the committee members for the project informally introducing license social workers that they know that the research study is taking place and that if they would like to participate that they can contact the researcher. In order to participant in the study, participants had to be licensed social workers, and they had to have made reports to Child Protection Services (CPS) in the past. A total of two individuals were interviewed for the purpose of this study. Of the two research participants, one was a Licensed Graduate Social Worker (LGSW) and the other was a Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker (LICSW). Both individuals that were interviewed also happened to be school social workers, one in an elementary school and one in a high school. The main problem faced when trying to find people to interview was not that people were not interested in the study, but that after telling the committee member that introduced them

to the study that they were going to contact the researcher, the majority did not actually follow through. After reviewing the interview transcripts, a variety of themes were identified. Throughout this section, the themes will be identified and discussed through the use of quotes from the actual interview transcripts. The following main themes will be discussed:

- Lack in Training of Mandated Reporters
- Inadequacy in Child Protection Services Addressing Abuse Concerns
- Need to Involve Other Agencies When Reporting Abuse Concerns
- Mandated Reporters Often Have a Preference on Child Protection Screeners

In relation to the final main theme, that mandated reporters often have a preference on child protection screeners, it is that they have a preference on what screeners they speak to when they are calling to report suspected child abuse or neglect.

Additionally, subthemes found within the main themes will also be discussed.

These included the following: that there is a desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school and that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment, both of which were found within the main theme of there being a lack in training of mandated reporters; the concept of not being heard by CPS and that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, which were found within the main theme of inadequacy in CPS addressing abuse concerns; that there are discrepancies between police and CPS and the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, both of which were found within the main theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, that mandated

reporters sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS, which was found within the main theme that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to.

### **Lack in Training of Mandated Reporters**

The first theme that was found within the interview transcripts was that there is a lack in training of mandated reporters. The following quotes from the interviews are examples of this theme.

*Um, I never got any training in my program, my social work program, which I thought was funny. And then, um, I actually requested training at the group home that I was at cause I was actually the team lead and I was having a lot of concerns with kiddos that were expressing things after they had been placed with us and none of us knew what to do.*

The individual that stated this continued on to discuss how they ended up requesting that the county that they worked in come in to provide training for their organization.

Additionally, they stated that every job after, they often ended up being the trainer on child protection reporting. Further quotes from the interviews which are examples of the theme of a lack in training of mandated reporters are as follows.

*I also wish they trained people in school. Like, I don't get that. Like, you have all these mandated reporters, or even in the school district we don't train mandated reporters.*

*Oh my, like training on child protection reporting is, really just what I've learned through the ethics committee. I was the first social worker at this school so I*

*didn't have training at this school but it was just the training that I received in undergrad and graduate school.*

The theme of a lack in training of mandated reporters was a clear theme that was evident throughout the interview transcripts. This theme identifies not only the lack in training that is provided for mandated reporters across settings, but it also encompasses the importance of having training on mandated reporting. As one of the interviewees stated, *...none of us knew what to do.* Making sure that mandated reporters are trained on reporting is vital. It is important that mandated reporters know the procedures when placed in a situation where a report needs to be made.

Additionally, while the main theme found here is that there is a lack in training of mandated reporters, two subthemes also exist, including that there is a desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school and that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment. In relation to the desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school, one of the interviewees stated, *I also wish they trained people in school. Like, I don't get that.* This is a valid point, as all social workers are mandated reporters, even if they do not work with children. Training these individuals in their respective academic programs may be the only training they get on mandated reporting, especially those that don't work with children. In regards to the subtheme identified that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment, as one of the individuals interviewed expressed, they often ended up being the trainer on mandated reporting at their place of employment. The interesting point here is not that they had to be the trainer in one, or even two, of their jobs, but at multiple places of employment. That shows that there was not a trainer

already in existence before they started working at each place, which is definitely concerning, as it is likely then that individuals at those places did not receive much if any training before the interviewee started working there.

### **Inadequacy in Child Protection Services Addressing Abuse Concerns**

The second theme that emerged from the interview transcripts was that the interviewees felt as though CPS did an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns. The following quotes from the interviews are examples of this theme. For the first quote, a bit of backstory is necessary. The interviewee had been speaking about a situation where they had called in on a Friday to make a child protection report, and had been informed that CPS does not assign cases after that particular time on a Friday, and so it wouldn't be assigned until after the weekend was over, which would have been a Tuesday as that Monday was a holiday. At that point in time the interviewee only knew of three children in the home and the interviewee had asked who they needed to speak to in order to get the situation taken care of. After the screener put them on hold to go and speak to someone, the screener gets back on the line and accuses the interviewee of not telling them the whole story, as there were actually four children in the home, not three like the interviewee had originally thought. It is after speaking about all this where the first quote comes in.

*I said oh so you're telling me you know this family, you know this family and aren't going to follow up with anything, so, let's just say I was a little livid, and she goes, okay, and I said, well I don't think you're handling this correctly, and so I will just call the police myself and do a welfare check, because you're not hearing me. And she goes well, um oh cause originally I said what're you going*

*to do about this, like we're not going into the weekend like this. It's not going to happen. I'm not letting that happen. I'm not sending these kids home. And so, um, she goes, well anyway, so the kiddo wouldn't show me her bruise. Or whatever, and that was the big catching point apparently, even though she was holding her chest all day cause she couldn't breathe. Um, so, um, I ended up hanging up the phone with her, with some not, I did share that I felt like, I, my kiddo had to die before someone cared.*

Further quotes from the interviews that are examples of the theme of CPS doing an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns are as follows.

*Um, probably that one with that case where that kiddo had literally got punched in the, you know in the chest and it wasn't taken. I've also had a lot of teenage kiddos that I'm like, hello this kid's being abused, they're not safe in the home, they have marks, you know like, what else do you need for them to feel like they are heard?*

*Right, right, and I just, I in the past I've tended to trust their [Child Protection Services] judgment a smidge more than I have recently. And so I would just trust it, and that's why I even tell like the teachers here I'm like you have to trust that they're doing their job, and I, I've been having difficulty cause I don't know if I trust it. But, it is what it is.*

The next quote, like the very first quote that was provided, also needs a bit of backstory. The interviewee had been speaking about a situation where it was not until after a huge situation had occurred where six police officers had to come out to the school where the

report had been made, two in the morning to take the report and four in the afternoon since the parent who the report was made on attempted to take matters into their own hands, did CPS take things seriously and remove the child from the home.

*But, it was almost like, yeah we don't really believe that this kid doesn't feel safe to go home and we have to have an extreme thing happen, and I had said on the phone with the officers present and the child protection screener, I said, I don't want to err on the side of being wrong here and have something happen to this kid at home tonight. And I believe something would have happened to that child had they not, had things sort of blow up here at school. And us pull them out of that house, so they have, that child has not been back at that house since and probably will not be back in that house before she turns eighteen. If she chooses to at that point, and who knows how that will go. But yeah it was a really weird situation all in one case. Like when it came to that really critical place child protection stepped in, but it took a lot to convince them that this was serious. And that was concerning for me.*

One final quote that is an example of the theme of CPS doing an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns is as follows. Before stating this quote, the interviewee spoke about how the student at hand had reported that her mother had warrants out for her in another state, and that the mother was using drugs and taking her daughter with her on drug deals, which is then where the quote provided comes in.

*That same mom had hit her daughter and there were marks on her daughter, the morning that she reported all this including the drug stuff to me and the, the warrants in another state, and all that information was given to child protection,*



*and some really bizarre behaviors it sounds like codependent stuff happening in the family around this mom and her use and her abuse, and, protecting her, and you know, the whole thing that can happen with chemical um addictions. Um, and somehow, they closed the case and said there was not substantiated evidence of any abuse happening or any endangerment, and I strongly disagreed with that.*

The theme of CPS doing an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns was another clear theme that was evident throughout the interview transcripts. The quotes provided give clear examples of situations where the interviewees felt as though CPS was not doing an adequate job of addressing the abuse concerns that they had. The interviewees clearly stated within the interview that how CPS handled certain cases concerned them, even expressing this to CPS, such as when one interviewee stated, *Um, so, um, I ended up hanging up the phone with her, with some not, I did share that I felt like, I, my kiddo had to die before someone cared.*

While the main theme identified here was the theme of CPS doing an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns, two subthemes also exist, including the concept of not being heard by CPS and that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS. In relation to the subtheme of not being heard by CPS, one interviewee specifically stated in the interview that they have said to a child protection screener, *you're not hearing me.* Additionally, it was also stated in one of the interviews:

*I've also had a lot of teenage kiddos that I'm like, hello this kid's being abused, they're not safe in the home, they have marks, you know like, what else do you need for them to feel like they are heard?*

The concept of not being heard by CPS is not only something that mandated reporters experience, but also the children who are being abused, as the previous quote points out. In regards to the subtheme identified that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, as one of the interviewees had stated:

*...I in the past I've tended to trust their judgment a smidge more than I have recently. And so I would just trust it, and that's why I even tell like the teachers here I'm like you have to trust that they're doing their job, and I, I've been having difficulty cause I don't know if I trust it.*

The individual here specifically notes that they, particularly as of late, have struggled to trust CPS' judgment. This is an important subtheme to note, as mandated reporters and CPS are a team, and trust is needed in order to make sure that they can effectively work together.

### **Need to Involve Other Agencies When Reporting Abuse Concerns**

The third theme that emerged from the interview transcripts was the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns. The following quotes from the interviews are examples of this theme.

*Yeah, down here in Hennepin I've had to involve the police which I have no problem involving police if I need to, um, in Stearns and Sherbourne I've also had to use probation at times to get, I feel like I got an in, um specifically, I can't remember if it was Benton or Sherbourne, I never had any Stearns issues it was mostly Benton or Sherbourne where sometimes I'd have to get their probation officer involved and be like, um I need you to hear me and can you hear this*

*kiddo, but um, yeah otherwise just the police and they do what they can, and I feel like they have their own contention against child protection, especially more recently and I can see why and, so it's interesting to have these two really large entities that are supposed to be helping care for kiddos and protect kiddos and they don't agree with each other.*

*Um, well I think that child protection always says that if there are marks on a child you should have a, a squad come out and take photos. Um, and make the report to the squad. So, you know, typically for me, any time that I'm reporting to child protection they will, they will say make a police report when I screen it. Then, I would say, pretty much every time, it's based on a physical, um you know physical evidence of an injury, and I don't feel comfortable to not have the police take photos of that. So, I always, you know either ask them to bring a camera car along um, or they will radio a camera car to come out if they see that there are in fact marks, so they sometimes will do that later, but at no point have I made a child protection report where I haven't had a police case number. So that kind of goes hand in hand for me.*

The theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns was yet another clear theme that was evident throughout the interview transcripts. As evidenced by the quotes provided, other agencies, particularly law enforcement, are almost always involved when reporting abuse concerns to CPS. As one of the interviewees stated, *...but at no point have I made a child protection report where I haven't had a police case number. So that kind of goes hand in hand for me.* While police involvement appears to be somewhat commonplace when making child protection reports, as one of the

interviewees pointed out, they also have had to involve a child's probation officer at times. The need for these other entities to be involved in the reporting process raises the question as to why it is necessary for them to be involved in the first place.

Additionally, while the main theme found here is that there is a need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns, two subthemes also exist, including that there are discrepancies between police and CPS and the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment. In relation to the subtheme that there are discrepancies between police and CPS, one of the interviewees had stated:

*...and I feel like they [the police] have their own contention against child protection, especially more recently and I can see why and, so it's interesting to have these two really large entities that are supposed to be helping care for kiddos and protect kiddos and they don't agree with each other.*

The idea that the police and CPS cannot effectively work together is concerning, particularly since, as the main theme here showed, the police and CPS often end up having to work together. In regards to the subtheme that it is important to document physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, one of the interviewees stated, *Then, I would say, pretty much every time, it's based on a physical, um you know physical evidence of an injury, and I don't feel comfortable to not have the police take photos of that.* It is important to document physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, because as noted here, often proof of those physical injuries is one of the most important parts of a report. This may help explain some of why police involvement, as the main theme points out, is prevalent when making child protection reports.

**Mandated Reporters Often Have a Preference on Child Protection Screeners**

The fourth and final theme that emerged from the interview transcripts was that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners when they report suspected abuse. The following quotes from the interviews are examples of this theme.

*I think it depends more on the worker. And that's what I mean, like, I start to pay attention to names. And there's one if I get her I'll just say I'll call back later. And it's that one that told me they don't take. Cause clearly, hello, that person whatever. Has too much on her plate, or I don't even know I don't even care. But um, yeah there's a like two that I actually prefer to ask. So sometimes I'll ask for them. Because I know that they're thorough and they inform me on what's going on, and I don't know. I just feel like they're helpful.*

*Um, I have a couple of go to people at Ramsey county that I've learned about based on trial and error, and so I really try to go straight to the one or two people that are, I consider the best in their job at the county and the ones that are most efficient and um just supportive.*

*Um, like I said in the previous answer, I find that, um, some of the workers are really good. And they know they're stuff and they're straight shooters and they're concise and they're very clear in what they think you should do. Um, some of them are newer or maybe burnt out, been there too long, whatever the reason, they're just kind of, uh, maybe there it seems like more for their own livelihood than for the benefit of the child. Now this is first point of contact, this is usually*

*the screeners that I'm talking about, not necessarily the actual um investigators that they put with the case.*

The theme of mandated reporters often having a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to, again, was a clear theme that was evident throughout the interview transcripts. The quotes provided above clearly show that the interviewees seek out particular child protection screeners when reporting suspected child abuse. They feel as though these screeners are the best at doing their job.

Additionally, while the main theme found here is that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to, one subtheme can be identified, which is that mandated reporters sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS. As one of the interviewees stated, *Um, some of them are newer or maybe burnt out, been there too long, whatever the reason, they're just kind of, uh, maybe there it seems like more for their own livelihood than for the benefit of the child.* The idea that mandated reporters may question what the motivation of child protection workers is for working for CPS is definitely a concern and something that should be noted, as one would hope that their reasoning for being a child protection worker would be to help out children in need, rather than just as a way to provide for themselves.

### **Findings Conclusion**

Throughout this section a variety of themes were identified that were found within the interview transcripts. The main themes found within the interview transcripts included the following:

- Lack in Training of Mandated Reporters
- Inadequacy in Child Protection Services Addressing Abuse Concerns
- Need to Involve Other Agencies When Reporting Abuse Concerns
- Mandated Reporters Often Have a Preference on Child Protection Screeners

Additionally, subthemes found within the main themes were also identified. These included the following: that there is a desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school and that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment, both of which were found within the main theme of there being a lack in training of mandated reporters; the concept of not being heard by CPS and that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, which were found within the main theme of inadequacy in CPS addressing abuse concerns; that there are discrepancies between police and CPS and the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, both of which were found within the main theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, that mandated reporters sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS, which was found within the main theme that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to. Both the main themes and subthemes identified throughout this section will be discussed in further detail throughout the discussion section.

### Discussion

The research question for this study was: What is the lived experience of the mandated reporter? Upon reviewing the themes that emerged from the interview

transcription data, similarities and differences to previous studies were revealed. The main themes identified within the findings section included the following: lack in training of mandated reporters; inadequacy in CPS addressing abuse concerns; need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, mandated reporters often have a preference on child protection screeners. Additionally, subthemes found within the main themes were also identified. These included the following: that there is a desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school and that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment, both of which were found within the main theme of there being a lack in training of mandated reporters; the concept of not being heard by CPS and that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, which were found within the main theme of inadequacy in CPS addressing abuse concerns; that there are discrepancies between police and CPS and the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, both of which were found within the main theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, that mandated reporters sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS, which was found within the main theme that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to. These main themes and subthemes will all be further discussed throughout this section. It should be noted that it was hypothesized that themes that would emerge from the interviews would include the following: that mandated reporters have found there to be issues with communication with CPS; that mandated reporters do not always believe that CPS does an adequate job at addressing abuse concerns; and finally, that mandated reporters are often frustrated



with how CPS is run. However, only the theme that mandated reporters do not always believe that CPS does an adequate job at addressing abuse concerns was found within this study.

The first theme, that there is a lack of training of mandated reporters, was evident throughout the interview transcripts. Participants' clearly identified that mandated reporters do not always receive training on mandated reporting, whether it be in their academic programs or at their place of employment. One of the participants stated, *Um, I never got any training in my program, my social work program, which I thought was funny*, in regards to the fact that they did not receive any training on mandated reporting in school. While the theme that there is a lack of training of mandated reporters was not spoken about in the initial literature review, there is existing literature that has looked at training of mandated reporters. Bryant and Baldwin (2010) looked at both what training mandated reporters felt was helpful, as well as where they felt they were lacking in training. In regards to what training mandated reporters felt was helpful, they found that training on procedures, responsibilities, child abuse legislation, defining and identifying types of abuse, and identifying signs and symptoms of abuse was helpful. In relation to where mandated reporters felt they were lacking in training, it was found that training on the various types of abuse, on how to work with children and families where either abuse has occurred or is suspected, and on how to work within the system of CPS and the law is where they felt they were lacking in training. The findings of this particular study differ from the current study, as in the current study, it was identified that there is a lack in training overall of mandated reporters, where the previous study did not find a lack in overall training on mandated reporting, rather a lack in specific areas of reporting.

Additionally, both subthemes found within the main theme of there being a lack in training of mandated reporters, that there is a desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school and that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment, were also evident in the interview transcripts. In regards to the first subtheme, it makes sense that there would be a desire for mandated reporters to be trained in school, as it is possible that school would be the only place where some individuals would be trained. The second subtheme that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment also makes sense, as social workers know that they are mandated reporters, and thus it is plausible that they will have the desire to make sure that training is made available.

The second theme, that the interviewees felt as though CPS did an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns, supports the findings of previous studies (Kenny, 2001; Gunn, Hickson, & Cooper, 2005; Vulliamy & Sullivan, 2000; Strozier et. Al, 2005). The research participants in the current study provided various situations in which they did not feel as though child protection was responding to their abuse concerns properly. This aligns with what Kenny (2001) found, as the participants in that study did not generally feel as though CPS offered help to maltreated children. Additionally, Gunn, Hickson, and Cooper (2005) noted that some participants noted a frustration with CPS' inaction as a poor experience that they've had with child service agencies. While this study was looking at factors that affect pediatricians' reporting of suspected maltreatment, the fact that some of the participants noted a frustration with CPS' inaction aligns with the current study in that the individuals did not always feel as though CPS was doing an adequate job. Furthermore, Vulliamy and Sullivan (2000) found that some participants felt as

though they had to convince CPS that they should look into an issue, even when there was physical evidence. This specifically aligns with the current study as in one situation described in the current study it was noted that, *...it took a lot to convince them that this was serious*. In another case, a participant stated that, *I did share that I felt like, I, my kiddo had to die before someone cared*. This is concerning, as mandated reporters should not have to feel as though they need to convince CPS that a child is being abused in order for them to take it seriously.

Yet another previous study that aligns with the findings of the current study is the study conducted by Strozier et. Al in which it was found that participants believed CPS had overreacted or reacted inappropriately to a report (Strozier et. Al, 2005). This aligns with the current study due to the fact that in the current study it was clear that the research participants did not always believe that CPS reacted appropriately to a report that they were making.

Additionally, both subthemes found within the main theme that the interviewees felt as though CPS did an inadequate job at addressing abuse concerns, the concept of not being heard by CPS and that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, were also evident in the interview transcripts. In regards to the first subtheme, it makes sense that mandated reporters may not feel as though they are being heard by CPS, particularly if they feel as though a case should be taken and it isn't. In relation to the second subtheme that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, it is plausible that this is due to a similar reason as the first subtheme, in that they may feel as though a case should be taken and it isn't, causing trust issues in relation to trusting CPS judgment.

The third theme, the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns was evident throughout the interview transcripts, in particular that law enforcement is often involved when making child protection reports. The reason that law enforcement is involved may vary from situation to situation, with some situations being that the reporter needs law enforcement to do a welfare check to needing law enforcement to come out and take photos of bruises on a child. While the theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns was not spoken about in the initial literature review, there is existing literature that has looked at this topic. In their article titled *The Role of Law Enforcement in the Response to Child Abuse and Neglect*, Pence, Wilson, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1992) discussed how law enforcement is involved with CPS in a variety of ways, including prevention/advocacy, reporting, support to CPS, immediate response, investigative role, and victim support. This aligns with what was found in the current study, as it shows that other agencies, in this case law enforcement, are often involved in the reporting process, in particular that law enforcement is used for immediate response and investigation aligns with what was found in the current study.

Additionally, both subthemes found within the main theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns, that there are discrepancies between police and CPS and the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, were also evident in the interview transcripts. In regards to the first subtheme, discrepancies between police and CPS may exist due to differences in how each organization approaches dealing with child maltreatment, as Pence, Wilson, and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (1992) point out. In relation to the

second subtheme of the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, this makes sense, as having proof of physical injuries helps to prove that abuse has occurred.

The fourth and final theme, that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to, was clear throughout the interview transcripts. This theme was apparent within the interview transcripts merely due to the fact that multiple participants noted that they have a few specific individuals that they prefer to report to. As one of the interviewees stated:

*Um, I have a couple of go to people at Ramsey county that I've learned about based on trial and error, and so I really try to go straight to the one or two people that are, I consider the best in their job at the county and the ones that are most efficient and um just supportive.*

This theme is important to note though specifically because both participants noted this, which calls in to question why there is a need for mandated reporters to be selective in who they make reports to.

Additionally, the subtheme found within the main theme that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to, that mandated reporters sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS, was also evident in the interview transcripts. The idea that mandated reporters may sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS is important to note, as it brings up the question as to why they feel that way. It is important

for mandated reporters to feel as though child protection workers are in their job for the right reasons, because otherwise they may feel as though the child protection workers do not truly care about the child abuse concerns that they are reporting.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

In relation to implications for social work practice based off of the findings of the current study, a few things can be noted. First and foremost, it was noted that one of the themes found within this study was that there is a lack of training of mandated reporters. It is impossible to draw any conclusions from this as the N (the number of participants) for this study was quite small. However, the fact that the small number of respondents in this study noted this should concern the field of social work and child welfare. This should concern anyone within the social work field, as all individuals that are social workers are mandated reporters. Knowing how to make a report is vital in order to help protect the children and adolescents that social workers work with across settings. Whether this means that it needs to be mandatory that social work programs have a course dedicated to teaching students how to make a report to CPS, or that social workers take charge within their respective agencies and make sure that all individuals are properly trained on reporting, something needs to be done in order to address this concern. Even though there are social workers that will never work with children, these individuals still need to be trained on mandating reporting because due to their title of social worker, they are mandated reporters. If they are informed of or suspect any abuse, they are required to report it, just as those that actually work with children. For example, if they are working with a parent in therapy and the parent discloses that they have hit their child, they are required to report that. Training these individuals in their respective

academic programs may be the only training these individuals would get, and so it is important to make sure that they get that training somewhere. Additionally, not only should training on mandated reporting of child abuse exist and be required of those that are social workers, but training on mandated reporting of elder abuse and vulnerable adult abuse should also exist and be required of those that are social workers, because as with child abuse, social workers are also mandated reporters of elder abuse and vulnerable adult abuse.

Another implication for social work practice is that social workers that work for CPS should attempt to provide further understanding to mandated reporters as to why decisions are being made the way they are. While there are policies and requirements that they have to follow, at the very least letting reporters know that the situation matters to them and explain their reasoning behind any decision being made may be a step in the right direction. Perhaps the social workers that are working for CPS need to be more active in attempting to receive feedback from individuals that are making reports in order to address any concerns that the reporters have. Mandated reporters and the individuals that work at CPS need to be on the same page in regards to policy and why decisions are being made the way they are, and perhaps it is the social workers that work in CPS' job to make sure that that happens.

### **Implications for Policy**

In relation to implications for policy based off of the findings of this study, a couple of things can be noted. First, due to the lack of training of mandated reporters that was found within this particular study, it would be feasible for legislators to create policy around training for mandated reporters. Whether that be requiring schools to teach

students how to make a report or requiring agencies to teach workers how to make a report, the lack of training that currently exists needs to be addressed. Additionally, the fact that there is a need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns is something that legislators may want to look at. Perhaps current laws and policies surrounding child protection need to be reevaluated in order to figure out why it is necessary for law enforcement to get involved in the child protection process as often as they do.

### **Implications for Research**

Future research needs to further address the topic of the lived experience of the mandated reporter. It is important to continuously address this topic, as mandated reporters and CPS are constantly working with one another. It would be helpful if in the future a wider number of mandated reporters were surveyed in order to get an even better understanding of what the lived experience of the mandated reporter looks like. Additionally, research on what mandated reporters training on child maltreatment was like is a topic that future researchers may want to address, as that was a clear theme found within the current research study. Furthermore, researching the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns may be another topic of interest for future researchers. Whether that be researching how often other agencies are involved in the reporting process or researching why other agencies need to be involved in the reporting process, either topic would be beneficial to research in order to help broaden the understanding of mandated reporting. Yet another area that future research may want to address is looking at how often mandated reporters have a preference on the child protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to. Going along with that, future



research may also want to address what characteristics of a child protection screener makes a mandated reporter want to report to them versus what characteristics make them not want to report to an individual. In addition, researching differences between counties and states may be of interest, as policies surrounding mandated reporting varies depending on where the mandated reporter is located. Additionally, future research may want to interview CPS workers and/or law enforcement regarding their opinions on mandated reporting. Since these individuals have a stake in the reporting process, it would be interesting to see what they have to say about the subject.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

There were a number of strengths and limitations to this particular research study. Looking first at the strengths of the study, one of the strengths of the study was that the individuals that participated in the study were able to provide clear answers to each of questions that were asked within the interview. They knew what they wanted to say, and were able to be open and honest with their opinions of CPS. Additionally, another strength to this particular study is that clear themes were present throughout the data. It was clear when reading through the transcripts of the interviews when a theme appeared and why it was a theme within the data. In regards to limitations to this particular study a bit more can be said. First and foremost, the biggest limitation to this particular study is that there were only two participants in the study, when initially the hope was that there would be between eight and ten participants. While it was not from a lack of trying to get participants, the sample did not turn out the way that was hoped. Additionally, another limitation to this particular study was the time constraint put on the study. There were only a few months in order to gather data between when the IRB approved the research

and when the research needed to be complete. If there had been more time to complete the research, it is possible that more individuals may have participated in the study. While there were both clear strengths and limitations of the study, it still was able to help bring about a better understanding of the lived experience of the mandated reporter, and it provides a plethora of ideas for future research.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, a multitude of themes were identified throughout this study. The main themes identified within the study included the following: lack in training of mandated reporters; inadequacy in CPS addressing abuse concerns; need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, mandated reporters often have a preference on child protection screeners. Additionally, subthemes found within the main themes were also identified. These included the following: that there is a desire for mandated reporting training to occur in school and that social workers may end up as the trainer on mandated reporting in their place of employment, both of which were found within the main theme of there being a lack in training of mandated reporters; the concept of not being heard by CPS and that mandated reporters may have trust issues with CPS, which were found within the main theme of inadequacy in CPS addressing abuse concerns; that there are discrepancies between police and CPS and the importance of documenting physical injuries when reporting child maltreatment, both of which were found within the main theme of the need to involve other agencies when reporting abuse concerns; and lastly, that mandated reporters sometimes question what the motivation of child protection workers is in regards to why they are working for CPS, which was found within the main theme that mandated reporters often have a preference on the child

protection screeners that they report suspected abuse to. The identification of these themes provides a number of implications for social work practice, policy, and future research. Further research on the topic of the lived experience of the mandated reporter is crucial going forward, because the more understanding there is of what mandated reporters experiences is like in regards to reporting child abuse, the more society can do in order to help address the issue of child abuse.

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## Appendix A

**What is the Lived Experience of the Mandated Reporter?****INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM****Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the lived experience of the mandated reporter. For the purpose of this study, the lived experience of the mandated reporter will be defined as the experiences that individuals that report to Child Protection Services have had in relation to making Child Protection reports. This may include experiences the reporter has had with the client and their family after a report was made and/or experiences with Child Protection Services. This study is being conducted by Courtney Duvick, a graduate student at St. Catherine University under the supervision of Sarah Ferguson, a faculty member in the Department of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you were identified as an individual who possess a license in the field of social work, as well as being identified as having experience working with Child Protection Services. Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived experience of the mandated reporter. Approximately 8 to 10 people are expected to participate in this research study.

**Procedures:**



If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with the researcher one time in order to conduct a face-to-face interview, in which audio of the interview will be recorded, where a number of questions will be asked in relation to topics surrounding mandated reporting. This study will take approximately 30-60 minutes over one session. The location of the interview is the choice of the interviewee.

**Risks and Benefits of being in the study:**

The study has minimal risks. Participant's may find that answering some of the questions asked as part of the interview will evoke some emotional discomfort, as they may get emotional while answering the question.

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

I will keep the research results in a password protected folder on my computer, I will keep the informed consent forms in a locked file cabinet in my home, I will keep all audio recordings from the session in a password protected folder on my computer, and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2015. I will then destroy all original reports and identifying information that can be linked back to you.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships

**New Information:**

If during course of this research study I learn about new findings that might influence your willingness to continue participating in the study, I will inform you of these findings.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Courtney Duvick, at 612-619-3548 or at [funk0104@stthomas.edu](mailto:funk0104@stthomas.edu). You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Sarah Ferguson (651-690-6296 or [smferguson@stkate.edu](mailto:smferguson@stkate.edu)), will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739 or [jsschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jsschmitt@stkate.edu).

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study.

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I consent to participate in the study and I agree to be audiotaped.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Researcher

Date

## Appendix B

## Research Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself including: a general description of the agency that you work for, not including the name of your agency, and what your position is there; your level of licensure and how long you have been practicing; and lastly, what your training on reporting child maltreatment was like.
2. What county to you currently make Child Protection reports to and what is your relationship like with them?
3. Have you ever had to work with different counties Child Protection Services? Have you experiences been different depending on the county, and if so how?
4. What have your experiences with Child Protection Services typically been like when you call to report suspected abuse? Can you give me an example of when you felt it wasn't handled well? When you thought it was handled well?
5. Has your confidentiality been maintained throughout the reporting process? If it was not maintained, how did it affect your relationship with the client? Has this concern caused you to hesitate to report?
6. What type of cases has Child Protection Services taken that you didn't necessarily think they would?
7. What type of cases has Child Protection Services not taken that you definitely thought they would?
8. Have you ever had to go through other services such as law enforcement or other government agencies in order for Child Protection Services to take a case? What were they, and what was that experience like?

9. If you could make a suggestion to improve the Child Protection Service intake system, what would it be?
10. Is there anything else that you want me to think about as part of our understanding of reporting to Child Protection Services?