Measurement issues in home visitation: A research note

Craig W. LeCroy a,⁎, Judy Krysik b,1

a Arizona State University, School of Social Work, 140 N. Commerce Park Loop, Suite 250, Tucson, AZ 85743, United States
b Arizona State University, School of Social Work, Mail Code 3920, 411 N. Central Ave., Suite 800, Phoenix, Arizona 85004-0689, United States

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The measurement of concepts that cannot be measured directly is replete with methodological challenges. Although outcome measurement in research and program evaluation has improved in recent years, problems remain that have yet to be addressed. The field of home visitation to prevent child abuse and neglect provides a good example of issues in outcome measurement that have not undergone sufficient critique. Research has focused on substantiated CPS cases as an outcome indicator, however, increasingly this is being recognized as a seriously flawed measure (Harding, Galano, Martin, Huntington, & Schellenbach, 2007; Olds, Eckenrode, & Kitzman, 2005). Researchers confronting the challenges of using CPS reports have sought alternative measures for outcome assessment that represent constructs associated with child abuse. For instance, measures of maternal depression and quality of the home environment are used as alternatives to CPS reports. In a well-known comprehensive review of home visitation programs, Gomby (1999) noted that over 100 different measures were used to evaluate outcomes in various studies of home visitation. Some of the more common standardized outcome measures used in the evaluation of home visitation include: the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) instrument (e.g., used in Kemp et al., 2008), the Beck Depression Inventory (Ammerman et al., 2007), and the North Carolina Family Assessment Scale (used in de la Rosa, Perry, Dalton, & Johnson, 2005). Although all of these researchers are interested in home visitation outcomes in programs with similar goals, they have selected very different outcome measures to examine program impact.

In spite of the plethora of constructs considered and measures being used, a central thesis of this paper is that some of the frequently used measures selected for outcome evaluation are not relevant for use in an applied setting (Ogles, Lambert, & Fields, 2002). At the core of the issue is that some of these measures were not specifically designed as outcome measures and, therefore, have limitations when used to document client change from intervention programs. For example, some measures were created within cross sectional studies and, therefore, the reliability and validity estimates are limited to one point in time. Some measures were developed to measure one concept such as parenting stress, or to predict the risk of child abuse and neglect, and were not designed to measure program outcomes per se. Recent meta analyses in the field (Geeraert, Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004; Sweet & Appelbaum, 2004) have also raised similar measurement issues. The following article will discuss some of these limitations and suggest why measures designed as outcome measures are preferable to some of the frequently used measures used in home visitation evaluations.

1. Home visitation and the measurement of outcomes

Since the 1980s there have been a number of outcome studies of home visitation programs aimed at preventing child abuse and
2. Common measures used in home visitation research

2.1. The Parenting Stress Index

The PSI is a good example of how evaluations of home visitation programs may be attempting to measure outcomes that are less amenable to change. The PSI consists of 120 items with six child subscales, seven parent subscales, and a total scale score. An examination of the PSI reveals some items that relate to underlying personality and temperament characteristics. For example, the five items listed in Table 1 form the PSI child-related subscale for mood. These items may tap more directly into heritable traits that are believed to be stable and less amenable to change over time (Seligman, 2007). In recent years, evolutionary psychologists have been convincing in their studies of how extensive heritable traits are, and how resistant they are to change (Pinke, 2002). Furthermore, personality and temperament, even if not heritable traits, are often considered difficult to change. Seligman (2007) addresses this topic directly by discussing the research literature on what problems are amenable to change and what problems are not likely to change with psychological intervention. Intervention research has not examined this issue with much depth; yet this analysis can help us better understand intervention outcomes.

2.2. The CAP Inventory

The CAP Inventory is a widely used measure in home visitation studies. This instrument provides an example of two aspects that are problematic when attempting to measure change. For example, the 11 items from the CAP Inventory presented in Table 2 illustrate items that reflect static rather than dynamic characteristics. Having been abused by one’s parents, for example, or having a physical handicap are static characteristics. That is, no amount or type of intervention is going to change one’s status on these items over time. Although these items may be predictive of an outcome in the general population such as potential for child physical abuse, using them to evaluate a secondary prevention program in which the majority of participants are likely to have experienced them is implicitly contributing to the use of “outcomes” that cannot show change. Indeed, the presence of parental risk factors such as childhood history of abuse is commonly used to determine eligibility for home visitation programs.

The measurement of change is best when based on dynamic rather than static constructs. Many of the items in the CAP Inventory represent more static constructs and do not contain any reference to time, whereas a dynamic construct includes items that show patterns of change over time. For example, the question, ‘Have you ever been arrested?’ is a static indicator. Rewritten with a reference to time, e.g., ‘Have you been arrested in the past six months?’ the question becomes a dynamic indicator. If our interest is in reflecting change in a construct over time then the manner in which the construct is measured should be able to capture such change (see Stoolmiller, 1994).

Measures used for outcome assessment are often missing an assessment of how the items contribute directly to a reflection of change. Bereiter (1963) issued sage advice long ago—create change items to create reliable measures of change. He suggested that when a measure is used at two points in time, the raw difference score for

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Example items from the Parenting Stress Index mood subscale.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My child cries and fusses.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>My child seems to cry or fuss more often than most children.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When playing, my child doesn't often giggle or laugh.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My child generally wakes up in a bad mood.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel that my child is very moody and easily upset.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
each item in the measure should be computed for each subject and then the set of item difference scores could be used to examine the value of the measure as an indicator of change. When the majority of items change in the same way across time, then the measure is a good measure of change. Alternatively, one could compute the weighted average or slope of the repeated measure for use as a variable in outcome analysis.

In fairness to the developers of the PSI and CAP Inventory, they developed measures that were more concerned with screening and assessment rather than documenting change. It is the application of these measures that has been problematic, rather than the measures.

Cultural relevance is a second issue in outcome evaluation that is illustrated by the CAP Inventory. Items such as “I enjoy having pets,” may reflect an upper-income and ethnic bias. Many of the participants in home visitation programs have extremely low incomes, are transient, and have difficulty providing for their family’s basic needs. For many, the reality of poverty is not conducive to pet ownership. Some participants of home visitation, for instance, those with a Mexican heritage, typically do not favor house pets. A second item from the CAP Inventory, “my telephone number is unlisted,” also reflects a middle-class bias and does not take into consideration that a number of families rely on cellular telephones which have unlisted numbers. Fit with the program context is also an important consideration. The item shown in Table 2 states “right now I am deeply in love,” although undoubtedly intended to reflect stability and decreased risk for child physical abuse in the general population, tends to represent misplaced trust and elevated risk in a population of parents who fall in and out of love frequently with partners whom they barely know.

3. Conclusions and recommendations

In summary, the more items an outcome measure includes that relate to heritable traits, static conditions, and that are culturally biased or a poor fit with the program context, the less likely it will demonstrate program impact. This suggests that for some programs, such as home visitation, to most effectively measure program outcomes there is a need to use or develop outcome measures that are tailored to the context and are explicitly designed for the purpose of outcome evaluation. The measure should pertain to what the program purports to change. Additionally, instruments used for program evaluation, beyond increased relevance and sensitivity to change, should yield information that is immediately useful in practice. That is, the best outcome instruments would assist practitioners to identify areas of need and concern, as well as areas of strength that could be used in treatment planning.

One of behavioral psychology’s significant contributions has been the development of objective and specific measures of change (Eddy et al., 1998). It is important to not lose this emphasis as outcome evaluation and evidence based practice becomes main stream. A vital need in intervention research is critical examination of measures. The effectiveness of interventions cannot be discovered without well designed measures that are sensitive to change. Lambert’s work (Lambert, 2007; Vermeersch et al., 2004) provides a model as the OQ-45.2 outcome instrument was designed for repeated measurement and the ability to show change. The authors instruct those completing the measure by stating: “Looking back over the last week, including today, help us understand how you have been feeling.” This measure has been shown to produce total scores that are sensitive to change in clients over short time periods and can predict outcomes documenting improvers, no changers, and deteriorators—providing practitioners with feedback directly relevant to their work. Although there are books with measures and related psychometric information (see for example Fischer & Corcoran, 2007) and review articles that list commonly used measures and related psychometric information on specific issues (see for example DeVoe & Kantor, 2002), the consideration of measures for use in outcome evaluation should go beyond a standard review of validity and reliability. Evaluators would do well to consider criteria such as sensitivity to change, heritable traits, static versus dynamic indicators, method variance, and program context. With increased attention to measurement issues we can improve the quality and value of home visitation research.

References


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