



“Hands on” versus “empty”: Supervision experiences of frontline child welfare workers

Melissa Radey*, Lauren Stanley

Florida State University, College of Social Work, USA



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ABSTRACT

Quality supervision positively relates to frontline child welfare worker job satisfaction; worker empowerment and self-efficacy; the quality of client outcomes; and worker retention. Despite the importance of supervisory experiences, few studies describe workers' perceptions of their relationships and experiences with their supervisors. The study applied the tenet of self-perpetuating, reinforcing relationships within the social exchange theory to understand newly-hired workers' experiences of supervision. We used inductive, thematic analysis to examine interview data focused on workers' transitions from training to casework including their supervision experiences. The qualitative subsample ($N = 38$) was drawn from the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), a statewide sample of recently-hired frontline child welfare workers. Approximately one half of workers considered their current supervisory experiences as “hands on” and cooperative while the remaining half, conversely, described them as “empty” and detached. Findings reflect interactions in four domains: supervisor availability and approachability; consistency of provided information; level of micromanagement; and level of support. Workers, regardless of their experiences, expected supervisors to be available, knowledgeable, micromanagers, and supportive. Congruent with self-perpetuating, reinforcing relationships, almost universally, workers with cooperative experiences had their expectations met in each domain while those with detached experiences struggled in each area. Findings yield implications for training to guide relationships between supervisors and newly-hired workers: provide “hands on” supervisors and “check in” with newly-hired workers; provide micromanagement, including periodic accompaniment on home visits; provide an agency-approved checklist to guide workers through case processes; and support workers holistically.

1. Introduction

Frontline child welfare workers, including child protective investigators and case managers, are responsible for protecting children in cases of alleged or substantiated maltreatment or neglect. Child protective investigators primarily conduct investigations (e.g., home visits, school visits) and secure out-of-home placements for children when necessary, and case managers primarily work with families (e.g., client assessments, case plans) for parents to keep or regain child custody. The work's high risks (e.g., child death) translate to a high-demand, complex work environment. Typically, frontline work includes long hours, high caseloads, unpredictability, and low salaries (e.g., Benton, 2016; General Accounting Office [GAO], 2003). The nature of the work, including investigative home visits, vulnerable clients, traumatized clients, and the nature of worker-client contact, often cause high emotional tolls (e.g., McPhaul, Lipscomb, & Johnson, 2010; Shields & Kiser, 2003).

1.1. Background

Approximately 20 to 50% of frontline workers leave child welfare within the first few years of hire (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Smith, 2005), resulting in an average length of child welfare employment under two years (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2003). From 2012 to 2015, approximately 45% of Florida's frontline child welfare workers left their positions (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2016). High turnover creates additional stress on remaining workers as caseloads are reassigned with consistent outcome expectations regardless of worker vacancies (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2016). The child welfare workplace, as any workplace, operates within a highly structured, complex environment including diverse organizational, job, and worker characteristics interconnected with interactions between each of these levels (Glisson & Durick, 1988; Wilke et al., 2018). Although many factors undoubtedly influence turnover, workers' initial agency and field experiences are factors that influence their decisions to stay or leave their positions

* Corresponding author at: Florida State University, College of Social Work, 296 Champions Way, Tallahassee, FL 32303-2570, USA.
E-mail address: mradey@fsu.edu (M. Radey).

(e.g., Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010; Kim & Kao, 2014; Wilke et al., 2018).

Supervisory relationships and support, the focus of this study, are one element of agency and field experiences that influence worker wellbeing, worker turnover, and, ultimately, client wellbeing (e.g., Boyas, Wind, & Kang, 2011; Frey et al., 2012; GAO, 2003; Hunt, Goddard, Cooper, Littlechild, & Wild, 2016). Effective supervision generally contains effective goal-setting, clear expectations, shared information, staff monitoring, feedback, empathy, and coaching (Rand, Mahoney, & Mahoney, 1990). Studies examining retention in child welfare suggest that supportive supervisors promote successful work environments and increase retention through both what they do and how they do it. They tend to encourage atmospheres that respect clients, and they empower frontline workers through balancing the provisions of worker direction and autonomy (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapmen, & Dickinson, 2008). Supervisors, however, often are new to their jobs and may benefit from training on the qualities of effective supervision (Clark et al., 2008; Milner & Hornsby, 2004). For example, in a statewide sample of supervisors in California, although most supervisors had at least master's degrees (74%), and, on average, had been in the field of child welfare for over 14 years, more than one third had been in their supervisory positions less than one year, and only 28% had been in their positions for more than five years (Clark et al., 2008). Despite the importance of workers' relationships and experiences with supervisors, few studies describe workers' perceptions of their supervisory relationships and the impact of these relationships on their experiences, particularly during the first few months of the job as they learn their position responsibilities.

1.2. Social exchange theory applied to the supervisory relationship

Supervision is a professional, reciprocal process provided within a relationship between a worker and more experienced superior that provides support for learning workload responsibilities and navigating the work environment (Munson, 2012). The tenet of self-perpetuating, reinforcing relationships within social exchange theory offers a perspective to understand how frontline workers interact and develop relationships with their supervisors. Social exchange theory suggests that mutually-reliant, bi-directional transactions between two or more entities may result in reward and, in turn, reinforce continued transactions (Blau, 1964; Cook, 1977). Typically, within social environments, social exchange relationships result from the process of reciprocal positive gains from social exchanges that perpetuate future transactions and generate mutual obligation and benefit (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Emerson, 1976; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009). However, social exchange relationships only sustain under conditions of reciprocity rules (e.g., supervisor and worker agree on and benefit from relationship of reciprocity), mutual benefit (e.g., supervisor is investing time in worker to create a better worker), and value placed on reciprocity (e.g., supervisor and worker value the norm of reciprocity) (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005).

Social exchange's tenet of reciprocity highlights the importance of workplace relationships creating a mutual process of support and investment for workers and supervisors. Within workforce settings, social exchange relationships aid in the development of workers' job expectations and appropriate responses to the work environment (Sandfort, 1999). The reciprocity of workplace relationships creates self-reinforcing cycles that can have positive or negative outcomes for workers (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Smith, 2005).

Applied to child welfare settings, studies suggest that perpetuating, reinforcing relationships underlie quality supervision. Quality supervisory relationships promote skill development, worker satisfaction, and worker retention (Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Little, Baker, & Jinks, 2018; Nissly, Mor Barak, & Levin, 2005). For example, workers with supportive supervisory relationships exhibited better practice skills and clarity for work tasks than their

peers without support (Little, Baker, & Jinks, 2018). In addition, Boyas, Wind, and Kang (2011) found that positive supervisory relationships helped to mitigate relationships between emotional exhaustion and intent to leave through strengthening workers' organizational commitment and buffering negative effects of emotional exhaustion. Likewise, the absence of such supportive relationships may be problematic. Child welfare workers who received minimal supervisory support (e.g., supervisory focus on case closures) experienced feelings of isolation (Hunt, Goddard, Cooper, Littlechild, & Wild, 2016; Sweifach, 2018), feelings of accusatory surveillance (Little, Baker, & Jinks, 2018), and too much independence with their caseloads (Scott, 1999).

We apply the tenet of the self-perpetuating nature of relationships within social exchange framework to the current study of supervision of newly-hired child welfare workers. We consider how supervisor-frontline worker relationships shape workers' early job experiences and satisfaction. Within this framework, we consider whether workers perceive relationships as largely unidimensional and if their experiences of supervision reinforce one another creating almost uniformly positive or negative relationships. In this way, the supervisory relationship may serve as an important point for intervention to improve frontline worker well-being and decrease turnover.

1.3. Experiences in supervision for frontline workers

Child welfare workers develop relationships with supervisors for both managerial and emotional support to develop workers' professionalization in the domains of administration, education, and personal wellbeing (Bogo & McKnight, 2006; Gibbs, 2001; Hair, 2013; Tsui, 1997). In terms of administrative support, workers benefit from supervision that provides direction in terms of relevant documentation and timelines. In terms of educational support, workers benefit from supervisors who provide expertise and skills to meet clients' needs. And, in terms of personal wellbeing, workers benefit from supervisors who assist workers in handling the emotional toll of the work (e.g., dealing with traumatized clients in traumatizing situations). Workers who engage in positive supervisory relationships experience higher levels of job satisfaction (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapmen, & Dickinson, 2008; Strand & Dore, 2009), better adaptation to job-related stressors (Cahalane & Sites, 2008), more positive perceptions of their organization (McPherson, Frederico, & McNamara, 2016), and increased job commitment (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapmen, & Dickinson, 2008; Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005; Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010; Jaquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2007) than workers who do not receive such support.

Supportive supervisors also provide essential emotional support to engender feelings of normalization and comradery. Workers who felt their supervisors responded to the emotional impact of their work exhibited stronger organizational loyalty and agency satisfaction than those who did not (McPherson, Frederico, & McNamara, 2016). Additionally, workers valued supervisors' encouragement of self-care, perceiving such supervisors as emotionally supportive (Hair, 2013). Demanding work environments, however, often contribute to sporadic, task-focused supervision, leaving little time for workers to process job experiences including work-related emotional stress (Gibbs, 2001). For example, Sweifach (2018) found that workers without access to supervisors for emotional support expressed feelings of isolation, stunted professional growth, and stunted skill development.

Despite supervision's importance for administrative, educational, and emotional support, a systematic literature review from 2000 to 2012 found that few articles considered child welfare workers' relationships and experiences with their supervisors (Carpenter, Webb, & Bostock, 2013). In addition, only one study (i.e., Gibbs, 2001) examined relationships among newly-hired workers, the focus of the current study. Available studies examined workers' perceptions of supervisor characteristics, supervision logistics, and support for supervision within organizations contrasting ideal supervisory experiences with realistic

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