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A typology of supervision in child welfare: Multilevel latent class and confirmatory analyses of caseworker–supervisor relationship type

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ABSTRACT

Based on survey data collected from 1460 public- and private-agency child welfare caseworkers in Illinois, this study examines the nature of child welfare supervisory relationships by empirically identifying a discrete set of modal caseworker–supervisor relationship types as defined by a combination of positive and negative supervisory support. This study also examines the degree to which differences in the nature of caseworker–supervisor relationships are attributable, respectively, to supervisors, supervisor–caseworker dyads, and agency settings. Results suggest the existence of qualitatively distinct caseworker–supervisor relationship types that coalesce into discrete mixtures of relationship types at the supervisory team level. In contrast, results suggest that little, if any, of the overall variability in supervisory relationship type is attributable to the agency level. Findings concerning the interrelationships among relationship type and caseworkers' job satisfaction and perceptions of their work environment underscore the salience of individual caseworker–supervisor dyads, and suggest the importance of relationship building as means to improve the effectiveness of supervision.

1. Introduction

Supervision has long been a central concern to the field of child welfare (Frey et al., 2012; Shireman, 2003). Effective supervision has been described as essential to ensuring good practice by front-line staff (Collins-Camargo, 2006; Jones, Washington, & Steppe, 2007) and helping child welfare agencies to more effectively serve children and families (Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, 2009; National Resource Center for Organizational Improvement, 2007). Although supervision is certainly important for the practice of social work broadly speaking (Fisher, 2009; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002), supervision may be even more important in the case of child welfare service delivery, given the degree of heterogeneity and acuity of child welfare caseloads, the high individual and political stakes associated with child protection and foster care, and the potential incongruence between the demands of child protection and the values and strictures of social work and other clinical professions (Beddoe & Davys, 2010).

Underscoring the salience of supervision for social work and child welfare practice are a number of studies that have found statistically significant relationships between measures of supervisory support and caseworkers' perceptions of their work environments. As described by several comprehensive reviews of supervision research (Bogo & McKnight, 2005; Carpenter, Webb, & Bostock, 2013; Harkness & Poertner, 1989; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Tsui, 1997), the quality of supervision has been found to be positively associated with staff job satisfaction, sense of empowerment, and perceived organizational support, and negatively associated with burnout, role ambiguity, role overload, and the intention to quit.

In studies that have examined the nature and influence of supervision, the construct of supervision has been conceptualized and measured in a variety of ways. For example, scholars have hypothesized, or empirically identified, different dimensions of supervisory support, including task-related assistance (Cearley, 2004), professional development (Curry, McCarragher, & Dellmann-Jenkins, 2005), and the provision of emotional and social support (Juby & Scannapieco, 2007; Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, & Lane, 2006).

Across almost all of these studies, there have been two potential limitations in the way that supervision has been conceptualized and measured. First, supervision has been operationalized almost exclusively vis-à-vis positive support. Positive support includes behaviors and interactions in which a supervisor acts affirmatively to support and guide a supervisee; examples might include providing casework guidance, possessing practice expertise, proving encouragement and emotional support, and being available or approachable (e.g., Boyas & Wind, 2010; Caplan, Cobb, French, Harrison, & Pinneau, 1975; Collins-Camargo & Royse, 2010; Juby & Scannapieco, 2007; Yankeelov, Barbee, Sullivan, & Antle, 2009).

Operationalizing supervision solely as a function of the receipt (or lack thereof) of positive support may, however, obscure salient aspects of the supervisor–supervisee relationship. Specifically, research in a number of areas, including social support (Lincoln, 2000) employment mentoring

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(Eby, Butts, Lockwood, & Simon, 2004; Eby, McManus, Simons, & Russell, 2000), and interpersonal relationships (Rook, 1998) have documented the importance of negative interactions for understanding the nature and impact of intentional supportive relationships. Also, within an organizational context, several studies have found associations between negative supervision and coercive, undermining, or aggressive employee behaviors (e.g., Mitchell & Ambrose, 2007; Skarlicki & Folger, 1997; Tepper, Henle, Lambert, Giacalone, & Duffy, 2008). Interestingly, some studies suggest that the impact of positive support may be substantially moderated by negative interactions and that the degree of this moderation may be domain-specific (e.g., Lincoln, 2000).

Second, prior research on child welfare supervision has either ignored the source of variation in supervision quality, or assumed that it is a proper characteristic of supervisors themselves. However, as a social interaction, supervisory support is actualized through individual relationships between supervisors and supervisees that play out over time within broader organizational settings (Barnlund, 2008; Endler, 1981). Thus, differences in supervision quality could reflect the influence of mechanisms attributable to various social systems or settings, including supervisor–caseworker dyads, individual supervisors, supervisory units or teams, or broader organizational settings. Understanding the degree to which differences in the nature of supervision are attributable to these various systems and settings could have implications for our efforts to understand and support supervision. If, for example, variation in supervision quality is attributable to caseworker–supervisor dyads (e.g., Mena & Bailey, 2007), then the operative task may be to examine the circumstances which yield productive supervisory relationships, and use this information to inform employment placement and targeted relationship support. If, on the other hand, variation in supervision quality is attributable to supervisors themselves, then efforts to train supervisors in the general tenets of supervision might be indicated. Alternatively, if variation in supervision quality is attributable to broader organizational contexts, then it may make sense to focus efforts on organizational management and culture.

2. Current study — objectives and expectation

The goal of the current study is to begin to address the limitations described above by pursuing three related objectives. The first is to elucidate the nature of child welfare supervisory relationships by empirically identifying a discrete set of modal caseworker–supervisor relationship types as defined by a combination of positive and negative supervisory support. The second is to examine the degree to which differences in the nature of caseworker–supervisor relationships are attributable, respectively, to supervisors, supervisor–caseworker dyads, or agency settings. The final objective is to ascertain the significance of this typology by examining the interrelationships among supervisory relationship types and the characteristics, experiences, and organizational settings of caseworkers.

Because the first objective is primarily exploratory, I do not offer any specific hypotheses about the nature of caseworker–supervisor relationship types. However, several general hypotheses can be posited concerning the (a) organizational levels to which differences in supervision might be attributed and (b) respective relationships between the nature of supervision and the characteristics, experiences, and organizational settings of caseworkers.

2.1. Organizational level of variability in supervisory relationships

Based on the fact that supervisory teams share a common supervisor, and a common set of supervisees, we would expect a substantial degree of the overall variability in supervisory relationships to coalesce at the supervisory-team level.[1] Conversely, because each supervisory relationship contains a different supervisee, we would expect a substantial degree of variability in supervisory relationships to coalesce at the level of caseworker–supervisor dyads. Put another way, given that supervisory relationships are dyadic relationships, we would expect both parties – supervisors and caseworkers – to exert substantial influence on the nature of the relationship. Finally, although the influence of agency settings on supervisory relationships may be indirect, some studies have reported associations between supervision and organizational climate (e.g., Glomb & Liao, 2003; Mawritz, Dust, & Resick, 2014; Restubog, Scott, & Zagenczyk, 2011; Robinson & O'Leary-Kelly, 1998). Thus, we also expect to see some coalescence at the agency level.

2.2. Supervision and caseworker characteristics, experiences, and organizational settings

2.2.1. Individual-level caseworker characteristics

Significant associations between the nature of supervision and individual caseworker characteristics could occur for several different reasons. First, individual characteristics may indicate differences in the needs, expectations, or perceptions of caseworkers, which would then lead to different assessments of supervisory behavior. For example, less-experienced caseworkers may derive greater benefit from supervision than more-experienced workers (e.g., Lazar & Erera, 1996) and, thus, may be more likely to assess supervisory support in a positive light. Second, the characteristics of caseworkers may be associated with real differences in supervisory behavior. For example, the interactions between supervisors and caseworkers may vary depending on whether there is congruence between caseworkers and supervisors on certain characteristics (e.g., gender, race, age) (e.g., Solomon, 1983). Finally, observed differences in supervision quality across caseworker characteristics could reflect various selection processes. For example, less-experienced workers might be assigned to supervisors who are viewed as effective mentors.

2.2.2. Organizational setting

Based on prior research, there are several organizational setting attributes that may be related to supervision (Milne, Aylott, Fitzpatrick, & Ellis, 2008). First, several studies have described differences in management strategy and leadership style based on unit or organizational size (Chuang, Collins-Camargo, McBeath, Wells, & Bunger, 2014; Foster & Meinhard, 2002; Guo & Acar, 2005). These findings have been interpreted as reflecting differences in financial and human resource capacity, ability to coordinate the efforts of subordinates, and the nature of intra-unit interactions and collaboration. In light of this evidence, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the nature of supervision could vary depending on the size of supervisory teams and agencies.

A second attribute of organizational settings that may be associated with the nature of supervision is the service environment. As described by a number of scholars, child protection work is increasingly characterized by stringent regulations and proscribed practice, high levels of surveillance and media scrutiny, and adherence to quantitative performance standards (e.g., Littlechild, 2008; Scourfield & Welsh, 2003; Wattam, Parton, & Thorpe, 1997). As a result, supervision in these contexts may have increasingly assumed a managerialist focus, in which supervision is limited to work performance monitoring and risk aversion at the expense of professional development (Noble & Irwin, 2009).

It may be the case, however, that some service environments within the child welfare service array are more likely than others to evidence these phenomena. For example, agencies or supervisory teams whose caseloads are comprised of children placed in substitute care may experience work environments characterized by higher degrees of risk, and higher levels of monitoring and control, than agencies or supervisory teams who provide in-home services. As a result, we might expect to see differences in the nature of supervision between these two service environments.

[1] The term 'supervisory team' refers to a supervisor and their supervisees working within a semi-autonomous unit.