Responding to the Child Welfare Workforce Crisis
Here and Now:
A Constructivist Approach to Understanding Supervision

Abigail Kauffman Wyche, MSW, PhD

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, VA

Statement of the Research Problem

This paper outlines describes the process and results of constructivist inquiry designed to answer the guiding research questions:

1. What about supervision do stakeholders in the child welfare system value?

2. How do those stakeholders experience quality supervision?

Research Background and Hypotheses

Since at least 1989, researchers have been pointing to evidence of high turnover and vacancy rates, poor working conditions, and insufficient recruitment pools to declare the American child welfare workforce in crisis (Pecora, Briar, & Zlotnik, 1989; Alwon & Reitz, 2000). In response, national foundations like the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation (AECF) have distributed reports which emphasize the critical implications of this crisis on the nation's children. CWLA declared in 2002 that "No issue has a greater effect on the capacity of the child welfare system to effectively serve vulnerable children and families than the shortage of a competent and stable workforce" (p. 1). In fact, there has been evidence to show that in agencies where the turnover rate is higher, reunification with birth family, typically considered the best possible child welfare case outcome, takes much longer to achieve (AECF, 2003).

In recent years, because a specific link between staff supervision and turnover has been established in the literature (DePanfilis and Zlotnik, 2008; Mor Barak et al., 2009), academics and administrators have been attempting to overcome the crisis with supervision-focused interventions. However, these efforts have met with very limited success. In fact, prevalence studies continue to show high rates of turnover (Government Accounting Office [GAO], 2006) and systematic literature reviews have revealed that many of the factors associated with turnover, like supervision, have remained the same over time (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Helfgott, 1991) or even worsened (CWLA, 2002).

One reason for the inadequacy of interventions may be suggested in Mor Barak's and her colleagues' conclusion that further research is needed to "distinguish the supervisory

dimensions" and "their relative importance" (p. 27). In other words, supervision is a complex phenomenon, and there is still little understanding related to what constitutes quality supervision. As Martin and Kettner explain, quality is a highly relative, value-laden concept that which depends on multiple perspectives (2009). Therefore, traditional research designs, with their focus on one objective, generalizable reality, may not be sufficient to close the gap in what we know about supervision. And, without understanding of what it is interventions are attempting to achieve, it is justifiable that their results would fail to give clear implications for what can be done to subvert the workforce crisis. Also according to Martin and Kettner (2009), in social work, clients and other stakeholders are the "final arbiters" of quality (p. 52). This notion of final arbitration of quality justifies the need to engage a variety of stakeholders in supervision, not just the direct service workers and their supervisors, but also clients, and a host of other important stakeholding groups in determining the quality of supervision. Example stakeholding groups include (a) the child welfare agency administrators who are trying to achieve organizational effectiveness, (b) those who are family members and friends of workers that have or might turnover, and (c) any other members of communities in which child abuse and neglect occurs.

Another important notion in attempting to understand the quality of supervision is related to Munson's (2002) extensive discussion of social work practice, and the supervision that supports it, as both scientific and artistic (2002). Like Munson, I agree that labeling the "indescribable quality of the what and how" of practice and supervision as "art" has evoked such a sense of "mysticism" and vagueness that the legitimate role that creativity and curiosity play in these processes has been diminished (p. 480). Munson goes on to argue that relying on "observation without imagination," (p. 481) amounts to neglecting the interactive and self-determined relationships of client with worker, and of supervisee with supervisor. The empirical literature on child welfare supervision relies heavily on an epistemology that emphasizes objectivity over creativity and interactivity, and therefore cannot capture the art or complexity inherent in the notion of quality.

The constructivist approach to inquiry is based in ontological and epistemological assumptions of reality that differ from positivistic scientific philosophy in fundamental ways. Consequently, there are hallmarks of the design that are very different from that of traditional designs. First, with an emphasis on subjectivity, the design does not test or build on a universal theoretical truth and therefore has the capacity to capture multiple stakeholding perspectives. Second, the design acknowledges and esteems the researcher as a human instrument of data collection and analysis. Third, it is an emergent design that limits the use of highly structured, predetermined protocols. Fourth, there is a strong emphasis on qualitative data over quantitative data. And fifth, the rigor is judged on the basis of trustworthiness and authenticity, in place of internal and external validity.

As a convention of constructivist inquiry working hypotheses were established by the researcher prior to the start of the project. These working hypotheses are labeled as "working," to connote their indefiniteness and in concordance with the grounded and emergent nature of the research design. These hypotheses were:

- Stakeholders' evaluations of their experience of supervision would be associated with stakeholders' personal values and ethics.

- Stakeholders' evaluations of their experience of supervision would be associated with their own personal and professional quality of life.

- Stakeholders' evaluations of their experience of supervision would be associated with their perception of the state of the local child welfare workforce.

- Stakeholders' evaluations of their experience of supervision would be associated with stakeholders' perspective on the culture of the organizational context in which the supervision takes place.

- Stakeholders' evaluations of their experience of supervision would be associated with their understanding and experience of power and oppression.

- Critically reflecting on their experience of supervision would be associated with change in stakeholders' consciousness.

Methodology

Constructivist inquiry, never before used by researchers in study of child welfare supervision, is employed because it is one of the most fitting methodologies available to capture the complexity of a notion like quality. This dissertation captures multiple stakeholders' perspectives on the quality of child welfare supervision, during a moment in time, in a localized environment. It uses a standardized process, intended to achieve trustworthy and authentic results, for which practitioners, supervisors, administrators and researchers alike may find tremendous value. The study's design is informed primarily by methodological authors Rodwell (1998) and Guba and Lincoln (1989).

Sample

A group of 21 individuals from public and private agencies representing supervisees (direct service workers), supervisors, administrative/leadership representatives, and other community members who viewed themselves as stakeholders in the local child welfare system was derived from a purposive sampling frame. The sample included: three males and 18 females; three stakeholders who were African-American and 18 stakeholders who were White; as well as stakeholders with ages ranging from late twenties to early fifties.

Data collection

The primary method for data collection in this study was the in-person interview, conducted by the researcher using an "Emergent Interview Guide with Foreshadowed Questions" to prompt vigorous interactive discussion which were denoted in written transcripts.

Data Analysis

Using inductive analysis, the transcripts word data was unitized, lumped and sorted to enable constant comparison and category creation. Categories were then defined and displayed in an animated, idiographic representation (The Quality Kaleidoscope, Figure 1 available upon request) which was shared back with interviewees in a member-checking process.

Finally, the author created a coded audit trail linking the case report findings to original units of data. A qualified auditor was then able to review the final version of the case report (as described below), methodological and reflexive journal entries, and original data. After review,

the auditor deemed the findings of the study trustworthy at the levels of confirmability, credibility, dependability and transferability, as well as authentic at the levels of fairness, ontological and educative authenticity.

Results

The case report resulting from this research endeavor centers on the question, "Who is responsible for the death of Tasha Hall?" Tasha, while not a real life person, is a composite character created from a several actual examples of youth who spent time in the foster care system as described by Central Virginia stakeholders during this project.

With just the snapshot of details provided in the fictional news article about Tasha, the other characters in the story seek to share their perspective on how and why such tragedies as Tasha's occur. They share their insight in an online discussion board, moderated by Nina, a character who closely mirrors the role of the real-life researcher. Four of the characters, Delores Worker, Casey Supervisor, Sam Powerplayer, and Olive Collaborator, represent composite perspectives of the four primary stakeholding groups who were interviewed in this project as well.

There are three additional character illustrations, each of which have been developed in an effort to voice a fifth unrepresented stakeholding group, that "silenced voice" of the client. Ms. Lee, Anonymous Alumnus and Tasha herself, help to express the nature of this voice without falsely professing to channel the actual words of clients, who essentially did not participate in this research project.

The conclusions that are reached by the characters in this case report center on the following five areas: 1. The Welfare of Children; 2. The Vicious Cycle of The Usual Supervision; 3. Insufficient Policy Answers; 4. Us vs. Them; and, 5. Missing Voices, Missing Answers; as they relate to their own experiences of child welfare supervision.

The Welfare of Children in Supervision

Though it sounds rhetorical, the case report reveals that stakeholders' answer to the question, "What about child welfare supervision do stakeholders value?" is "the welfare of children, of course." In other words, the assumption that stakeholders held was that supervision is one layer in a stratum of accountability practices that in the end are failing our children. From Tasha herself to Tasha's birth family and community to the social workers, foster parents, supervisors, and even to the judges and politicians, it seemed there were missed opportunities to prevent tragedy.

The Vicious Cycle of the Usual Supervision

In this case it became apparent that supervision could not be labeled as strong or high-quality as long as poor or even ambiguous outcomes continue to occur for children. However, the view of typical supervision also can not be fairly categorized as "poor," even when the outcomes for children are not good; because, a direct chain of blame can not be established. Instead, what seemed to occur was "the usual supervision" with the descriptor "the usual" referring not only to its wide occurrence, but is also to connote its overall inadequacy. Further, because of a complex interaction wherein high turnover leaves a competence shortfall in the pool

of in-house candidates for supervisory positions, it is not just that workers seem to leave when supervision is poor, but it also seems that supervision is poor when turnover is high.

Insufficient Policy Answers

Stakeholders viewed policy making as contentious; mired in questionable intent; and guided by unclear, inconsistent and illogical decisions. For them, these traits create a mixed bag of positive, negative and unintended consequences for the quality of supervision and the quality of outcomes for children involved in the child welfare system. They recognized a true lack of resources available to help families, and a battle for access to the sparsely existing ones. The decision-making impact of money on child welfare policy seemed quite evident to most stakeholders and might have been stated best by the stakeholder who asked, "Are we trying to save a buck or save a child?"

Us Vs. Them

The "us vs. them" culture in the Central VA child welfare system was firmly established by a variety of stakeholders. They painted a picture of divisiveness between system insiders and outsiders, and dividing lines between groups of stakeholders drawn by race, culture, socio-economic status, education, ability, purposes and power.

Missing Voices, Missing Answers

Those exact vulnerable stakeholders speak very clearly in this study by not speaking at all. The biggest limitation of this study comes out of the recruitment and sampling strategies that were insufficient to engage the voice of current and former "clients of the Central VA child welfare system." Without the real life participation of someone like Tasha Hall, her grandmother or her mother, what we are left with is other stakeholder's interpretations of their experiences.

Utility for Social Work Practice

For child welfare practitioners, what these lessons bring to light are questions about the importance of their own personal standards of accountability. If the extent to which their local child welfare system is lacking in terms of providing oversight and ensuring quality service provision, it becomes important to ask how they chose to fill those gaps in their daily practice? Especially for social workers who esteem the classic value of social justice in their practice and who are faced with the same kind of divided, and oppressive culture as described by the Central VA stakeholders. What scholars are coming to know about a practitioner's professional resilience, or commitment, health, happiness and effectiveness, is that it seems to be linked to workers' own sense of empowerment. Like the stakeholders who talked about how they've incorporated coping strategies for dealing with the usual supervision and stayed committed to their work, there are ways in which workers can exercise freedom of choice within their situation and gain some sense of power over their circumstances.

For supervisors, it seems that asking yourself the questions, "To what extent can I recognize how barriers between myself and my staff, my staff and their clients, my administrators and myself?" and "What strategies might I use to help my staff become aware of those divides and empower them to achieve greater connectedness?" As one supervisor noted in this study, "I just think it is inherent in most human interactions to be aware of differences like race, religion, sexual orientation, station in life and it comes more into play when you are in

different worlds, like work, home, etc. And the majority of people make decisions based on that mentality. Supervisees need to provide the opportunity for workers to discuss it, and so they can either work within it or change it." In this way, this study further supports the use of workforce interventions like that of Caringi, et al (2008) and Leitz (2008, 2009, 2010), that rely on critical thinking and empowerment as key strategies for supervision.

For administrators, it is important to note stakeholders' collective desire to see better outcomes for children. While those of us who administer programs are well aware of the external and internal pressure to provide evidence of good outcomes, many of us struggle to determine the best way to operationalize good outcomes and to fairly connect them to worker performance. Indeed, the findings of this study confirm that these relationships are highly complex. Yet, they also suggest that supervisions role in accountability cannot be ignored.

Specifically, administrators should be asking questions that assess the level to which supervisory relationships in their programs model what is expected in terms of the relationship workers have with clients. Are supervisors given sufficient time to build trusting relationships with their staff where individualized support and guidance can be shared? Are promotion policies exacerbating a problem with putting competent, knowledgeable supervisors in place? And finally, are supervisors given tools which help them evaluate their staff's performance using client related data of any kind?

In this study, participants strongly supported the notion of getting feedback from foster parents that could aid in understanding how a worker performs on the job. While the idea of including client input into performance evaluation seemed fraught with infeasibility for several stakeholders, many others felt that there were practical options out there for gaining insight from clients.

References

Alwon, F., & Reitz, A. (2000). *The workforce crisis in child welfare*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America:

Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2003). The unsolved challenge of system reform: The condition of the frontline human services workforce. Baltimore, MD: Author.

Child Welfare League of America. (2002, September). *Child welfare workforce*. Research Roundup. Retrieved from http://www.cwla.org/programs/r2p/rrnews0209.pdf.

DePanfilis, D., & Zlotnik, J. L. (2008). Retention of front-line staff in child welfare: A systematic review of research. *Children and Youth Services Review, 30*(9), 995-1008.

Government Accounting Office. (2006). Child welfare: Improving social service programs. Training and technical assistance information would help address long-standing service-level and workforce challenges. (GAO 07-75). Washington, DC: Author.

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Helfgott, K. (1991). *Staffing the child welfare agency: Recruitment and retention.* Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America.

Martin, L. L., & Kettner, P. M. (1996) *Measuring performance of human service programs.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Mor, Barak M. E., Nissly, J. A., & Levin, A. (2001). Antecedents to retention and turnover among child welfare, social work, and other human service employees: What can we learn from past research? A review and metanalysis. *Social Service Review, 75*(4), 625-661.

Mor Barak, M.E., Travis, D. J., Pyun, H., & Xie, B. (2009). The impact of supervision on worker outcomes: A meta-analysis. *Social Service Review, 83*(1), 3-32.

Pecora, P., Briar, K., & Zlotnik, J. (1989). *Addressing the program and personnel crisis in child welfare: A social work response*. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Workers.

Rodwell, M. K. (1998). *Social work constructivist research*. New York, NY: Garland.