

Walking the Tightrope: Using Power and Authority in Child Welfare Supervision

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Recognizing the importance of understanding the way in which supervisors in child welfare perceive their administrative responsibilities and use power and authority, an exploratory study was conducted. Supervisors in child welfare agencies in urban and rural settings participated in focus groups and discussed the impact of macro and micro factors on their performance. Policy changes, including using new approaches to child welfare and organizational culture had a major affect on the way they offered supervision. At the micro level, their use of power was related to elements in their relationships with frontline workers and their own professional development. Implications for child welfare practice and for new and experienced supervisors are presented.

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Supervisors occupy a crucial position at the nexus between child welfare agencies' mandate to protect children and frontline workers' need for guidance and support in their role. Central to the performance of the supervisory role is the way in which power and authority are understood and used as supervisors balance organizational accountability and administrative oversight with their commitment to the empowerment and professional development of frontline staff.

Despite agreement about the pivotal role that supervisors play in transforming organizations, supporting child welfare workers, and achieving positive outcomes for children (Collins-Camargo, 2006; Falvey & Cohen, 2003), limited empirical research about child welfare supervision can provide a foundation for an evidence-based model of supervisory practice. The study reported in this article was conducted in an attempt to contribute to further conceptual, empirical, and practice development for supervision in child welfare.

Literature Review

A repeated finding in recent research on factors related to job satisfaction, worker retention, and organizational outcomes in child welfare underscores the critical role of supervisors (Collins-Camargo, 2006; Dickinson & Perry, 2002; Landsman, 2001; Rycraft, 1994). Supervisors can strengthen the organizational culture and self-efficacy beliefs of staff and can provide support, a component highly valued by workers (Drake & Washeck, 1998; Ellett, Collins-Camargo, & Ellett, 2006; Jacquet, Clark, Morazes, & Withers, 2007). Workers' professional development needs are met through supervision as they report acquiring practice knowledge and skill (Diwan, Berger, & Ivy, 1996; Gleeson, 1992). Supervisors' help-giving behaviors influence workers' perceived sense of empowerment as

child welfare workers (Cearley, 2004). These findings support the importance of the educational and supportive functions of supervision identified by Kadushin (1976; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002) in his definition of supervision in social work; a definition which has withstood the test of time. Kadushin, however, highlighted the administrative and accountability aspects of the role by defining a supervisor as “a staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate the on-the-job performance of supervisees for whose work he or she is held accountable. In implementing this responsibility, the supervisor performs administrative, educational and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisee in the context of a positive relationship” (1976, p. 21; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002, p. 23). While the recent research provides evidence for the importance of educational and supportive functions, research on the issues associated with administrative functions is less available.

For supervisors in child welfare, administrative functions encompass accountability for workers’ practice, including the responsibility for the agency making life-altering decisions for clients. These decisions about the safety of children and the continuity of the family have significant short- and long-term effects on the health and well-being of all family members. Hence, supervisors are frequently expected to answer to agency superiors and the public for controversial decisions or decisions that resulted in negative consequences. Inherent in this view of supervisors’ accountability is the recognition that they have been given authority by the agency which legitimizes their use of power to make these decisions, in collaboration with, or as directives to, frontline workers (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002). Supervisors are also charged with setting appropriate limits and boundaries about acceptable behaviour. Scholars recommend, in contemporary learning organizations,

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that information about the power differential should be shared in a collaborative and transparent manner (Kaiser & Barretta-Herman, 1999). Shulman (1993) states that staff members view supervisors as having a powerful influence on their daily working lives; in their roles, they "evaluate a worker, and recommend promotions, merit raises, dismissals, or changes in assignments" (p. 41). The way the supervisor negotiates and demonstrates this power and authority affects the supervisor/supervisee working relationship in initial contracting and throughout their work together. Shulman encourages supervisors to discuss, in a direct and specific manner, how decisions will be made and how they will help workers perform their role.

Little is known, however, about the way child welfare supervisors actually experience and use their power and authority. Descriptions of training curriculum include the topic and note its importance to supervisors. For example, a long-standing clinical supervision training program for social workers in a range of human service agencies includes the power differential between supervisor and supervisee and the effective use of power and authority (Kaiser & Barretta-Herman, 1999). The authors address supervisors' difficulty in holding workers accountable. Training focuses on direct communication in the face of resistance and the importance of a detailed contract and specific performance criteria. Participants in the institute expressed the tension they experience between their motivation and desire to be supportive, empowering, and respectful when faced with instances where they need to set limits and hold workers accountable to organizational and professional expectations. This response is similar to findings that supervisors shy away from the evaluative and confrontational components in their role (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002).

Faller and colleagues asked participants in focus groups about the importance of a range of topics culled from the literature (Faller, Meezan, Mendez, Tropman, Vandervort, & Willis, 2004). Supervisors identified topics such as managing disagreements between worker and supervisor, managing relationships within the

agency and network, and working with workers and others with strong opinions. Among other topics, training focused on achieving agreement about tasks, priorities, and expectations; conflict management; resolution by using new communication tools; developing emotional self-awareness; and the ability to handle others' emotional reactions. These topics all relate implicitly to using power and authority in the administrative role of supervisor.

Some authors suggest that as supervisors develop in the role, they become better able to address power and authority issues with workers (Blair & Peake, 1995; Itzhaky, 2000). Growing ability is attributed to greater confidence and competence and to greater comfort in acknowledging the power differential. Heid (1997) proposes that experienced supervisors use power "as needed for the benefit of supervisees and clients, but not to the detriment of supervisees or clients nor for personal needs for control" (p. 146).

In summary, increased conceptual and empirical attention is being given to supervision in child welfare. From the literature review it appears that the theme of power and authority is recognized as salient with notional and practice suggestions offered. To develop evidence-based supervision, this dimension requires exploration in contemporary child welfare settings. These settings are characterized by continuing policy, program, and employee changes rendering the role of supervisor challenging (Faller et al., 2004).

Methodology

The aim of this study was to contribute to the practice of supervision in child welfare through illuminating the experiences of child welfare supervisors. Since there is little research about child welfare supervision, a qualitative design was chosen. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), qualitative research methods are appropriate "to uncover and understand what lies behind phenomena about which little is known" (p. 19) and to build, rather than test, theory. The goal was to develop concepts and practice principles for child welfare supervision and to serve as a basis for further research.

Findings of the entire study are reported elsewhere (Dill & Bogo, in press); the findings reported in this paper focus on the way supervisors think about and use their power and authority.

Five focus groups were held with child welfare supervisors from across the province, representing urban and rural, and small, medium, and large size child welfare agencies. Supervisors were asked to discuss the key components of supervision in child welfare and the factors that supported or impeded their work. Member checking was conducted through presenting the emerging findings to 50 supervisors from a large urban agency who had not participated in the focus groups (Dill & Bogo, in press). Questions from the audience about the study participants' views on power and authority in supervision in child welfare highlighted that little information on this topic had emerged in the first phase of the study. As a result, following Charmaz (2006), theoretical sampling was undertaken and three additional focus group sessions were held at child welfare agencies who had not previously participated in the research. The Research Ethics Board at the University of Toronto approved the protocol and participants provided informed consent.

Two groups were held at large urban agencies and the third was at a smaller, predominantly rural agency for a total sample of 13 supervisors. Female supervisors were the predominant participants with two male supervisors also attending. Supervisors ranged in age between 38 and 63 years old, 69% possessed a master's degree in social work, and they had on average more than 5 years of experience as supervisors. With respect to demographic characteristics, this sample was similar to the larger sample in the original study.

A grounded theory method guided the conduct of the focus groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). One question was posed at the beginning of each session, "How do power and authority issues get played out in the context of your child welfare supervision?" The researcher's role was to reframe and explore ideas and issues that were not fully formed, to return to thoughts that required more elucidation. The researcher guided the discussion, "mining" the concepts for further clarity and formulation.

Focus group sessions of approximately two hours were recorded and transcribed. Following the transcription of the data, both researchers independently read the transcripts and began to review the data for emerging codes, categories, and themes using a staged data analysis process (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The first stage involved an overall review of the data to determine emerging codes and ideas. Following this analysis, the researchers went back to the literature to further conceptualize the ideas contained in the emerging analysis. In the final stage of the analysis, codes were grouped into categories and further refined into broader themes related to power and authority in supervision. A constant comparative method was used and themes with agreement between the two researchers are presented in this final analysis and report.

Findings

Interconnected themes emerged related to child welfare supervisors' use of power and authority. These themes are presented in two domains: (a) macro issues associated with policy change and organizational context, and (b) micro issues associated with supervisors' relationships with frontline workers and supervisors' own professional development. An overarching theme, "walking the tightrope," integrates these themes and is considered in the discussion section.

Macro Issues

Policy Change

This study was conducted as the government in Ontario, Canada introduced a child welfare change initiative. The aim was to transform child welfare practice from a predominantly risk-focused protection approach to a differential response model. The intention was to engage children's parents, extended family, and community where possible in a collaborative, strengths-based manner. This includes sharing the decision-making process for the welfare of

children and using both clinical and alternative dispute resolution approaches for permanency planning.

In the focus group discussions, a theme that emerged was supervisors' concerns about the nature of their power and authority in this new approach—how it would be negotiated with workers and clients. The participants were enthusiastic about a practice approach more consistent with social work values. However, they expected tension between promoting a more collaborative style of intervention while still retaining responsibility for protecting children. Since the child welfare agency's mandate remains ensuring the safety of children, the participants noted that supervisors and workers will need to "figure out" how to collaborate with parents and families without abdicating this responsibility for child protection.

Supervisors felt they were "the messenger or harbinger of change" particularly in changing the system's culture to a more collaborative and strength based model of practice. In their agency role they communicate new policies and expectations to their staff and ensure change occurs. These supervisors found it difficult to maintain a collaborative relationship with staff members while introducing these new mandated policies and practice protocols. Staff members experience the new demands as requiring "more time" and their supervisors as "making unrealistic demands on them to protect children, use new approaches... with limited resources." Supervisors expressed the old adage "don't shoot the messenger" to express feeling beleaguered in the face of staff members' strong reactions to these new practice demands.

Organizational Context

Organizational culture is also a determining factor related to how power and authority issues are played out in supervision. In one focus group session, participants identified a "culture of fear." This culture of fear was seen in defensive and angry reactions to cases portrayed in a negative way in the media. Consequently supervisors interpreted a message that "accountability is the predominant

driver in the supervisory relationship.” In another focus group session, the participants shared how organizational culture is influenced when working in a rural setting. Participants highlighted that they know each other in the community and “we are a tight little group.”

Supervisors also noted their need to think about power issues and rarely did their own senior managers provide a place or space for critical reflection, although participants wanted an open dialogue. They expressed the need to discuss how power and authority is a pervasive dynamic in relationships in child welfare—with clients, staff, and senior managers. They believe that such conversations could be a catalyst for critical reflection about the influence of power at various levels of the child welfare system.

Micro Issues

Relationship Dynamics

The relationship between supervisors and frontline workers was viewed as unique and influenced by a range of factors, which in turn affected how supervisors use their power. Many supervisors spoke about the link between their perceptions of workers’ competence and their trust in workers’ practice judgment and ability. Supervisors want to share their authority with staff members, believing it promotes worker competence in decision making. The aim is to empower workers to take charge of making case-related decisions, in consultation with the supervisor. When they perceive workers as skilful and trustworthy, they are comfortable to delegate authority to them. When they have concerns about workers’ performance and competency issues, however, supervisors seem to “shift gears” from a collaborative working relationship to one where their power and authority is an ever-present and tangible aspect of the relationship. They were more conscious of the power differential between themselves and their supervisees that could entail discipline or termination of the employees. Similarly as one participant stated, “Trust is a huge part... when you are sitting at

your desk, you have to assume what is being told to you is true... being sure what is being told is accurate and if you can't trust, it is not a nice feeling and it can be very dangerous." Lack of trust influences supervisors' interactions with the supervisees and erodes the capacity to develop an open and honest relationship.

Sharing power and authority was viewed as empowering and a central tenet in a supportive and collegial relationship. Sharing power was demonstrated through delegation of tasks; "Sometimes with some workers you delegate some tasks, and diffuse power and authority, [it is then] good for the growth of the worker and is a good example for the team." Tasks include asking members to chair team meetings, mentor newer staff members, or provide informal coverage when the supervisor was absent. Sharing tasks was seen as demonstrating trust while allowing the supervisee to develop further competence. Disseminating rather than conserving their power and authority is offered in the hopes that this would lead to a "trickle-down effect" that would see supervisees sharing their power and authority with their clients.

Supervisors noted the impact of modeling and the parallel process that can exist between relationships of supervisors and their own managers, of supervisors and their workers, and of workers and clients. Participants observed, "How you treat your staff is a model for workers with their clients." They also highlighted how they benefited from a supportive manager to help them negotiate the often complicated world of the supervisory process. As noted, senior managers who facilitate discussions about power give supervisors the opportunity to think through the many complicated issues associated with sharing, negotiating, and using power. However, many participants shared how their relationship with their own manager was focused solely on the administrative aspects of the work. As one participant stated, "Very few senior managers are able to have these conversations with supervisors, a lot of what happens, it becomes very administrative... [I have had very few] opportunities to talk to my manager about these issues [power and authority and transference]."

Participants highlighted the need for experienced supervisors to also receive supervision. "[The belief is] that when you get to a certain level, you don't need supervision anymore... but there are always issues that you need to deal with... as a supervisor, very few times, I had the opportunity to talk to my manager about these issues." Supervisors wanted the opportunity to focus on clinical issues in cases, critical thinking, parallel processes, and personal issues related to using their power and authority. These opportunities were rarely available.

Transference and countertransference emerged as dynamics affecting supervisory relationships. Some participants highlighted how their own feelings and responses to their supervisees affect the guidance they provide. For example, one supervisor noted how every time she assigned a domestic violence case to a particular staff person, the supervisee would become emotionally upset to the point that the supervisor had to refer the employee to an employee assistance program. The participant noted that she would begin to feel that she must play the role of therapist, rather than of supervisor. Participants recognized the importance of attending to their own reactions to offer help and shift the focus from the supervisees' emotional reactions to the children and family's needs. The supervisor had to find a way to continue to assign cases and emphasize service delivery while remaining sensitive to the worker's emotional needs.

Finally, the issue of boundaries was viewed as salient. While participants strongly noted that supervisors need to effectively negotiate boundaries with staff members and clients, some mixed feelings were expressed. Socializing with staff members and developing a relationship outside of the supervisor/supervisee context was a challenge. Some noted that not every relationship with supervisees could be clearly defined; "I just don't like to get everything into a box. It doesn't always have to look the same. We are all human beings." On the other hand, participants noted that when boundaries were not clearly maintained there could be too much self-disclosure on the part of the supervisee or supervisor; "I had a worker self-disclosing a lot of things, and it became a

very tricky thing in assigning workload. You don't want to become your worker's therapist" and lose the focus in supervision of client service delivery.

Supervisors' Own Professional Development

Supervisors discussed their professional histories as having an affect on their current perceptions and use of power. Being a good clinician and understanding one's power as a frontline worker was viewed as essential prior to becoming a supervisor. Participants highlighted that child welfare organizations have a unique protection mandate that other social service agencies do not have. As social workers they feel the responsibility to carry out the mandate in a way that is respectful of clients. Participants believe that an essential function of supervisors is to model self-awareness about their power. When asked what happens if a child welfare worker does not understand the complexity of the role, participants were quick to respond that when these individuals become supervisors they in turn become "micro managers," focus exclusively on the administrative aspects of the work and ignore clinical issues. They are limited in their capacity to negotiate their power in a respectful manner with staff members and clients.

Participants highlighted how new supervisors tend to be more self-conscious about their perceived power and authority over staff members. In time and with more experience, this self-consciousness becomes more integrated and an assertive style of working with staff members emerges. For example, one participant acknowledged that when he first became a supervisor, "I acknowledged the power difference with workers and discussed it as part of our relationship, but I haven't done it since."

Limitations

While the findings reported in this article provide interesting insights into the way in which supervisors in child welfare experience power and authority in their role, there are several limitations as a result of the design. Although 51 supervisors participated in the

original sample only 13 supervisors were in focus groups specifically discussing power and authority. However, that the supervisors in the original groups did not spontaneously discuss these concepts is an important finding, and is explored in the following discussion section. Second, the research took place in one region, southern Ontario. Had supervisors from a range of geographical locations, including northern and remote areas, been included, different themes and issues may have emerged. Third, the perceptions of frontline workers and of managers about the ways in which supervisors use their power and authority were not obtained. Lack of inclusion of their views was a result of resource limitations for the project. Despite the design limitations, the study can be seen as a preliminary exploratory investigation with findings illuminating some relevant themes for further research with a larger and more diverse sample.

Discussion

“Walking the tightrope” is the metaphor that emerged as an overarching theme to describe the experiences of child welfare supervisors. One side of the tightrope relates to their relationship to the workers they supervise and indirectly to the workers’ clients. In this instance, they aim to balance worker empowerment, trust, and autonomy with their responsibility to ensure that clients’ needs were met. They struggle to achieve enough trust about their workers’ competence and practice so that they can share power with these workers. The other side of the tightrope refers to their relationship with those senior to them, their managers, the agency director, and the government ministry that decrees new legislation and policy. Despite suggestions in the literature that supervisors can serve as the agent of organization change (Collins-Camargo, 2006), these supervisors do not view themselves as leaders or generators of change. Rather, they feel like conduits, like messengers, and like they are in the middle between senior administrators and frontline workers. Whereas staff might perceive them as having power, they experience an illusion of power.

Power and authority in child welfare practice is delegated by the state to agencies, supervisors, and frontline workers. Depending on the country, regional and national laws define the conditions of maltreatment, when children need protection and should be removed from their homes, and the required investigations and interventions. Given this context of child welfare it is of interest that in the original study, which sought to elicit child welfare supervisors' opinions about the key components in their role, no mention was made of power and authority (Dill & Bogo, 2007, in press). When asked to discuss issues and concerns pertinent to supervision, the original sample of 38 supervisors did not spontaneously discuss this concept. It was only when presenting study findings to a larger audience that this glaring omission was identified. The researchers returned to the field, recruited an additional 13 supervisors in three agency-based focused groups, and asked them specifically to discuss how power and authority issues were played out in their child welfare supervision. Of interest was that when these supervisors were asked directly about power, they talked openly, passionately, and at great length. As evident in the findings, they were able to reflect in depth and to provide numerous examples of the use, misuse, and challenges regarding power. The discussions were important for them, and they wished to continue to explore these concepts with each other and with their managers. As evident from our first round of focus groups, they highlighted that this topic was rarely discussed in a spontaneous or transparent manner. Consistent with the emphasis on reflective practice for professional development of social workers and related health professionals (Bogo, 2006; Ruch, 2002; Schon, 1987), it is not surprising that these experienced professionals want structured time to reflect with peers and others on their practice and engage in critical thinking. Initiatives that enable supervisors to examine the underlying assumptions and feelings that influence their reactions to their workers, the clients served by the agency, and the nature and context of child protection, are likely to support their work.

Given the importance of power and authority in child welfare, research is needed to explore factors that both contribute to and serve as barriers to further discussion and analysis in child welfare. Studies could further explore how power is used and negotiated at the frontline between workers and clients, in supervision between supervisors and workers, and in agencies between managers and supervisors. Studies that clarify the links between these three systems are timely as child protection authorities are currently moving away from exclusive focus on risk assessment to more collaborative and strengths based approaches to working with families (Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2005). Risk assessment models are governed by rules and criteria. Collaborative models require skilful clinical practitioners, able to engage and work with clients in a way that shares, but does not abdicate, power.

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