RESPONDING TO THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE CRISIS HERE AND NOW: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SUPERVISION

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RESPONDING TO THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE CRISIS HERE AND NOW:
A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SUPERVISION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

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Dedication and Memorial

Dedicated to Hazel Bradford and Savannah Park, my darlings of delight, and my highest calling.

In Memory of Martha Bradford Wyche Bell. Bradford’s untimely death in 2003 was not only a devastating loss to her family and friends, but also to the most vulnerable of Richmond’s community for whom she spent a lifetime of service.
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ABSTRACT

RESPONDING TO THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE CRISIS HERE AND NOW: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SUPERVISION

Abigail Kauffman Wyche, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Major Director: Jenny L. Jones, PhD

In this dissertation, the author argues that there is strong evidence that the child welfare workforce continues to be in crisis. While a great deal of research has indicated that supervision is closely linked to the crisis, extremely high rates of turnover have not been notably reduced through the efforts of administrators or academics to change supervisory practices. Therefore, the author makes the case that it is time to employ an alternative methodology—constructivist inquiry. Constructivist inquiry is based on paradigmatic assumptions that make it distinct from the functionalist approach that researchers most commonly use to understand the child welfare workforce crisis and the role of supervision. Consequently, the organization and content of this dissertation follow the conventions of a constructivist process. In order to take advantage of the unique role and opportunity created by the philosophical assumptions of subjectivity, interactivity, and reflexivity, the author
incorporates an extensive discussion of her own tacit knowledge and practice wisdom along with the literature review. She then goes on to describe the phased, emergent, and participatory process used to examine the question: How do stakeholders in the local child welfare system value their experience of supervision? Finally, the author uses the data to tell the story in case report form and in a report of her own lessons learned. Through examination of the case report and lessons learned, the author intends for the reader to gain a more complex understanding of child welfare supervision and to evaluate for themselves how this understanding might be of value to their own role in the child welfare system.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The aim of this dissertation project was to produce findings with meaningful relevance in light of an ongoing child welfare workforce crisis in our nation. This is a crisis with substantial importance to social workers who are ethically bound to work to serve the interests of vulnerable populations, like the child victims of abuse and neglect who are far from insulated from the negative implications of such a crisis. Research questions that explore the nature of child welfare supervision, like those explored in this inquiry are well justified because of supervision’s previously established relationship to employee turnover. Specifically, this study poses the main research question: “What about supervision do Central Virginia stakeholders value?” It is an attempt to uncover supervision’s quality dimensions in the context of one local community child welfare system. This question and the constructivist design of this project are similarly justified by the lack of complexity available in the findings from, and methodological gaps present in, the literature base on quality child welfare supervision.

Consistent with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of the interpretive philosophical paradigm in which constructivism is based, the lead researcher in this project took a subjective stance that drew upon her years of experience as a professional working in the local child welfare system. This is the reason for the atypical use of the pronoun “I” to refer to the researcher which begins in subsequent sections of Chapter One through to the introduction of Chapter Four.
The use of the first person narrative not only establishes a subjective foundation of the knowledge presented, it also allows the reader to directly identify certain assertions or understandings as belonging to the researcher and to follow the process by which the researcher’s understandings evolved over time. In the first three chapters the researcher describes the circumstances by which she came to want to know more about quality of child welfare supervision, the phases in which she began engaging stakeholders about this question and how she acted as a “human instrument” of data collection and data analysis. In an effort to make the subsequent case report and lessons learned more transparent in their trustworthiness and authenticity, she describes how she followed accepted constructivist practices of acknowledging, reflecting upon and bounding researcher influence on and participation in the continuous hermeneutic dialectic.

In other portions of the dissertation, specifically Chapter Four, in order to enhance the story-telling nature of the case report, character-types are used to represent the multiple voices of stakeholders, including that of the researcher. These characters are given names that easily identify which stake-holding group they represent, like that of “Casey Supervisor” who makes statements that are linked to those made by actual participants in this project who’ve held the position of supervisor within the child welfare system. Similarly, the character of “Nina Moderator” mimics the role of the researcher in the project as she convenes a forum of stakeholders to discuss child welfare quality, and proceeds to solicit, facilitate, clarify and summarize the knowledge of stakeholders as it is constructed. Again these techniques of narration and characterization are designed to allow the reader to make clear distinctions between the voice of the inquirer and the participating stakeholders.
Finally, in Chapter Five, the researcher resumes taking the first person to describe the lessons which she alone can testify to learning. The intention of the researcher in outlining the new understandings she’s gained is to make clear the “tentative applicability” of these findings (Rodwell, 1998, p. 36). By making these statements personal, the author hopes to prevent readers from assuming generalizability, and instead encourage them to judge their “transferability” to other contexts as they see fit (p. 101).

**Workforce Crisis and Permanency in Child Welfare**

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). AECF explained the importance of this issue further when it stated that “workers are not interchangeable parts” (p. 5). In other words, the relationship in child welfare cases between client and worker are instrumental in creating and maintaining behavior change; and so in many cases, client progress can be significantly disrupted when a worker leaves his or her position. In fact there is 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).
Despite the tragic, long-standing declarations of crisis by credible sources, and the link to outcomes for children, prevalence studies continue to show high rates of turnover (Government Accounting Office [GAO], 2006). In addition, 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).

In Virginia, child welfare is a complex system of state-supervised, locally-administered public agencies and private for profit and nonprofit organizations. All of these entities share the victims of abuse and neglect in government custody as their primary clients. The Virginia system began formally recognizing crisis in 2007. At that time, the Administration of Children and Families (ACF) ranked Virginia 50th or worst in the country for achieving permanency for foster youth, with 32.2% of youth exiting foster care to emancipation, instead of adoption or reunification (ACF, 2006). This dismal statistic prompted the Virginia State Department of Social Services to work with the Annie E. Casey Foundation on a plan of transformation to improve outcomes for children in 2007. Yet the plan of transformation, or new practice model, adopted at that time does not make any reference to turnover or retention in the workforce, even with such an evident connection between workforce problems and permanency. Similarly, the practice model also only references supervision once as a tool for transformation—and does not provide any specific guidance on the quality of supervision—even though a great deal of research has connected supervision to turnover (Virginia Department of Social Services, [VADSS], 2007).

Progress in Virginia was recently made, at least in the acknowledgement that the role of workforce retention and supervision have in permanency, with the adoption of the State’s
5-year strategic plan (VADSS, 2010a). The plan outlines the goal to “cultivate a high performing, diverse and well-trained workforce engaged in continuous learning. . . .” by “attracting and retaining an exceptional, diverse workforce” (p. 7). However, even in that 110-page report, supervision of workers is only mentioned infrequently, and again, there is no explication of quality supervision.

Despite a 3-year-old practice model and brand new strategic plan, Virginia is still struggling with permanency. In fact, according to the website of a statewide advocacy organization, Voices for Virginia’s Children, as of March 1, 2009:

- More than 6,300 children are still in foster care.
- Nearly 54% of children in foster care are 13 and older (3,393 youth).
- 17% of all children and youth in foster care live in group homes and institutions (1,010 children and youth).
- For thousands of these children and youth (35%, 2,214 youth), the goal set forth in their foster care plan does NOT lead to a permanent family (“Snapshot of Children,” para. 5).

Over 300 children were in the custody of City of Richmond at the end of 2010 (VADSS, 2010b). With 5% of foster care census, the City of Richmond Department of Social Services is the second largest local agency in the State. There are seven other local departments of social services that surround the City of Richmond, and make up an additional 5% of the Virginia foster care population.

It is also important to note that this local area is also central in the Virginia child welfare system in that it was among the earliest to begin to address problems with permanency in the
state in a formal way. A few years before the statewide practice model was adopted, Richmond was one of the eight local departments of social services began its own reform efforts under the consultation of Annie E. Casey. In 2008, this agency and two more from the local area were selected by the Council of Reform (CORE) to lead the state’s transformation effort. The 14 CORE agencies were the first among 120 agencies in Virginia to pilot the new practice model.

The State of the Art and Science of Supervision

While a plethora of research suggests that supervision is associated with turnover, I argue that our current knowledge about the nature of supervision is entirely inadequate for the purpose of creating change amidst crisis. We have little data about supervision that captures what constitutes quality dimensions of the phenomenon. Therefore, there is little guidance for how social work practitioners at any level can manipulate the current state of supervision in a way that can stop or reverse turnover trends.

One explanation for this inadequacy may be found in the work of Martin and Kettner (2009), who describe quality as a concept relative to multiple perspectives. Since in social work, clients and other stakeholders are the “final arbiters” of quality (p. 52), any research knowledge about quality is incomplete if it is not diverse, and especially if clients were not sampled. Yet, little has been done to ground theories or definitions of supervision through systematic means of collecting, and inductively analyzing, data from the child welfare stakeholders themselves. Also, most studies that have isolated some version of supervision as a variable, have limited their samples to either supervisors or supervisees.

This leaves a glaring gap in the data from the child victims of abuse who are to be protected by the child welfare system and the families to which they are connected because,
according to Kadushin (1991), supervisors’ ultimate responsibility is to the client. But there are other stakeholders whose perspectives might be important, including: (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.

The other possible explanation for a lack of understanding about quality supervision may be 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. In my opinion, the empirical literature on child welfare supervision relies too much on an epistemology that emphasizes objectivity over creativity and interactivity, and therefore cannot capture the art or complexity inherent in the notion of quality. Without grounding in, and guidance on, quality, it is no surprise that the recent upsurge in the number of federally-funded studies designed to improve child welfare supervisory practices, have continued to show insignificant impact.

Based on my analysis of the current state of our knowledge on child welfare supervision, it is justified that researchers look to employing methods based on alternative paradigmatic assumptions, in order to: (a) fill in the developmental gaps in the literature; (b) empower
individual stakeholders in the child welfare crisis, by giving them voice; and (c) propel scholars and practitioners forward in creating a future without crisis, by making sophisticated understandings of quality supervision a part of the documented knowledge on the topic.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

The forthcoming dissertation outlines a constructivist process designed to answer the guiding research questions:

1. What about supervision do stakeholders value? and subsequently,
2. How do stakeholders experience quality supervision?

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. 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.

In parallel, this study involved five methodological features which worked together to yield a highly complex understanding of the quality of child welfare supervision. Specifically, these five features are:

1. Rather than outlining one specific theory that guides this research, I chose to outline a larger paradigmatic framework within which certain theoretical perspectives and
conceptualizations will be emphasized. The paradigmatic framework explicates the ontological and epistemological assumptions at work amongst the multiple theoretical perspectives which have informed me, the researcher, at the onset of the project. It is with these multiple perspectives that I developed a set of personal working hypotheses, which functioned as a guide for initial exploration during data collection. These working hypotheses are labeled as “working,” to connote their indefiniteness.

2. I chose to reveal a robust explanation of the knowledge I hold as a child welfare professional and social work scholar concurrently. This knowledge was made transparent and available for scrutiny prior to and throughout the project. This choice to use a process of rigorous reflection and peer review is consistent with the assumption of a subjective reality in this kind of interpretive process.

3. Prior to the start of the project I was able to anticipate a three procedural phases of implementation, but major decisions and specific steps made in the process emerged only after data collection commenced.

4. I chose rigorous methods for collecting and analyzing qualitative data including individual open-ended interviewing; unitizing, categorizing, and constant comparison of verbal and nonverbal data; and comprehensive member checking.

5. I secured the services of a trained and experienced auditor to review the evidence of rigor and to help assert the trustworthiness and authenticity of the findings set forth.

**A Question of Paradigms**

Guba (1990) provides a framework for organizing theories into paradigms on the basis of assumptions about the nature of reality and how we come to know it. One of the primary
distinctions among paradigms is created by the subjective-objective continuum, or the question as to whether reality is itself a universal truth; a collection of the uniquely held truths of individuals; or something in between these two extremes. Because the guiding question for this research is about values, and therefore inherently about multiple perspectives on quality, the underlying ontological assumption is that reality is more subjective. More specifically, it assumes that reality of quality is, or can be, co-constructed through the dialectical interaction of individuals’ values and experience. This means that the following dissertation at least begins within the interpretive/constructivist paradigm. This paradigmatic standpoint sits in stark contrast to the primarily positivistic philosophical basis of the studies about the child welfare workforce and supervision expounded upon in the upcoming literature review. This alternative understanding of reality, and the choice to build the science upon it, allows the researcher to capture a more complex side of supervision that Munson (2002) might classify as the “artistic elements” of the phenomenon (p. 478). As Rodwell (1998) explains, the constructivist inquiry process can be judged based on the very rigor that documents the “inductive, grounded and creative processes involved in co-construction” (p. 97).

However, it was not clear at the onset of this project whether the moment in time that would be captured would remain seated in the constructivist paradigm or whether it would cross the philosophical boundaries into Guba’s critical paradigm. The second paradigmatic distinction Guba (1990) makes is about whether the state of reality is in constant flux, seeks perpetual stability, or again, is somewhere in between. The answer to this question has implications for epistemology. The view of supervision as posed in this research question is that it is an interactive experience that has repercussions on multiple stakeholders. This implies
an assumption that reality is at least somewhat fluid, again landing the research in a constructivist paradigm. However, it is important to recognize that this dissertation approach with its use of emergence, allows for the potential of paradigmatic shift in a way that is designed to maximize the utility of the findings.

In fact, as I employed this emergent, interactive, and contextualized approach to knowledge-building, I was able to incorporate knowledge about child welfare supervision into the knowledge of the child welfare workforce locally in a way that opened up the possibility for “transformative change” to occur (Rodwell, 1998, p. 78-79). Guba and Lincoln (1989) describe this potential in constructivist design in terms of its advantage over traditional functionalist methodologies by saying, “It is precisely because of our preoccupation with finding universal solutions that we fail to see how to devise solutions with local meaning and utility. It is precisely because of our preoccupation with control that we fail to empower the very people whom we are putatively trying to serve” (p. 47).

It is this opportunity for empowerment and consciousness-raising that creates the potential for criticality, especially when the researcher as the human instrument for data collection and analysis comes to the process with a prior feminist perspective. In this case, as a child welfare professional, I personally find value in Ritzer and Goodman’s (2004) description of the socialist feminist lens in understanding supervision in child welfare. This brand of feminism especially focuses on the “structural oppression” of women as a class. It attributes oppression to a history of male domination through “recurring and routinized large-scale arrangements” of “patriarchy, capitalism, racism and heterosexism” (p. 324).
As a researcher, I fall in line with the many scholars (Bleiweiss, 2007; Bogo & Dill, 2008; Busse, 2009; Cearley, 2004; Finn, 1990; Fook, 1999; Gould, 2000; Hardina & Obel-Jorgensen, 2009; Hair & O’Donoghue, 2009; Leitz, 2010; Noble & Irwin, 2009; Tsui & Cheung, 2009), who are in fact calling for the application of critical perspectives to the topic of social work administrative practices like organizational management and supervision. These suggestions are in part justified by the need to bring social work administrative practice in line with National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (2008) Code of Ethics and the historical philosophical roots of social work practice.

Therefore, the working hypotheses that I established and the Interview Protocol with Foreshadowed Questions (Appendix A) I used in Phase II of my dissertation both make reference to oppression. As I posed specific questions intending to prompt reflection on, and response to structural oppression, I expected that the responses of the stakeholders would vary greatly. The stakeholders’ responses seemed largely dependent on the knowledge they brought to understanding and valuing supervision. Posing questions related to oppression has the potential for instigating situations of conflict, either internally within individual stakeholders, between the participating stakeholders, or even between the stakeholders and the structures of oppressions themselves. What occurred in this process and what resulted in the findings of this research related to oppression, did begin to move into Guba’s (1990) critical paradigm, because it uncovered a broadly experienced culture labeled by stakeholders as “us vs. them.”

Guba’s (1990) critical paradigm is one that can really take any stance on the subjective/objective continuum of reality, but differs from positivism and constructivism in that
it assumes the more extreme state of reality. Not simply fluid or moving in nature, the critical reality is that which seeks chaos with conflicting actors in constant opposition. At any given point in time, some actors will be in relative positions of power over others, and where power lies with some groups of actors, oppression is experienced by others. The “versus” in us vs. them does demonstrate that stakeholders view their collective reality as based in conflict.

**Using the Human Instrument in Constructivist Methodology**

Journaling, peer review, member checking as well as auditing are all tools used in constructivist methodology designed to help bound *the human instrument* before, during, and after data collection and analysis. Consistent with the assumptions of the interpretive/constructivist paradigm, the concept of human instrumentation acknowledges that the researcher comes to the process with a priori knowledge, whereas in positivistic methodologies it is expected that the researcher remain an objective observer. Here, the knowledge of the researcher is considered valuable and even essential to co-construction. However, it is crucial that the researcher’s knowledge be well known at the beginning and throughout the process so that it can be distinguished from the new co-created findings of the research—or that the findings of the research can deemed trustworthy and authentically co-created. As a stakeholder in the child welfare workforce and the inquirer in this process, it is a crucial first step in a project of this kind for me to review, and thereby bound, my own knowledge as it relates to child welfare supervision. To that end, the first part of this dissertation makes accessible much of my prior knowledge about the subject under examination. My prior knowledge of child welfare supervision contains information about my
experience, my personally held values, and my personally held theoretical perspective, which I have gained both tacitly and by reading other peer-reviewed studies of the topic.

In Chapter Three, I offer a description of what took place in Phase II—the specific process through which I, as a human instrument was able to systematically join and simultaneously document the hermeneutic dialectic that is constantly occurring with others who are stakeholders in the local child welfare workforce. Phase III of a constructivist research project involves the development of the case report. It also includes the final stages of the research, verifying the rigor of the project and ensuring ethical treatment of participants in light of the use of a human instrument. The unfolding of Phase III steps are described in both Chapters Three and Four.
CHAPTER 2: BOUNDING RESEARCHER KNOWLEDGE

It is important in the first stages of the constructivist research process to explicate the context of the inquiry, in part to understand the boundaries of the context. The researcher’s own prior knowledge provides the foundation on which the research question and subsequent working hypotheses are formed. Rodwell (1998) suggests that prior knowledge is legitimately gained through personal experiences, but also through reviews of the literature related to the problem area (p. 61).

With the acknowledgement of the importance of prior knowledge in the constructivist design come measures that are designed to ensure rigorous bounding. Bounding, through exploration, discussion and documentation, reduces the possibility that the researcher’s prior knowledge will overshadow the voices of the other participants within the reportable findings. As a doctoral candidate embarking on a dissertation process, I feel that it is important to describe some of my prior knowledge in this proposal so that faculty on my dissertation committee can serve as one level of peer review. To that end, this proposal contains section headings for tacit knowledge and literature review.

Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge is that which is gained through feelings and experience. As a researcher exploring questions related to child welfare in Virginia, I come with a great deal of personal knowledge and experience that has led me to hold several working hypotheses as I
enter into a constructivist project. Since “the major role of tacit knowledge occurs in
reflexivity” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 133) and the practices of journaling, peer review and auditing
were be implemented in my study.

In the following account, I reference many terms—noted in italics—that have
individualized meaning to me. These terms are commonly used, but not necessarily
consistently understood by social workers and scholars alike. Therefore, when published
definitions are available that I perceive to closely capture my own ideas, I make appropriate
citations to help clarify my meaning to the reader. When published definitions of such terms
are not available, but when more clarity is needed, I provide a definition in my own words.

In some cases it may also appear that I imply relationships between variable-like
concepts, but I do not necessarily intend to imply direct causation. In many cases the
relationships as I understand them are consistent with findings in the literature in studies of
turnover and supervision, and so where appropriate I make those citations as well.

Since 2000, I have held positions in organizations whose missions are to serve children
who have experienced, or are at high risk for experiencing, abuse and/or neglect. Working in
organizations with this mission in my mind constitutes working in the field of child welfare. For
the purposes of this project, I consider child welfare work as operating to prevent children from
experiencing abuse and neglect and/or entering foster care, protecting children by placing
them in custody, or helping children achieve goals of permanency (birth family reunification or
adoption) if they are already in public custody.

Currently, I hold the position of Executive Director in a nonprofit child welfare
organization providing short-term shelter and respite services to these children. The majority
of children served by this organization are in the custody of a local department of social services, and our shelter and respite services are provided by volunteer host families in conditions similar to foster care. Recently, this agency has become a licensed child placing agency, or that which has the authority to “place children in foster homes, adoptive homes, child caring institutions or independent-living arrangements” (VADSS, 1989, p. 2). As the leader guiding the agency through the licensure application process, I have become intimately familiar with the sections of the Code of Virginia and applicable state policies that govern the agencies that serve foster children in this capacity.

In 2008 and 2009, I held a temporary position within a local department of social services providing foster care placement and adoption services to children in public custody. Prior to that, I held several positions with another nonprofit agency whose mission was to prevent and treat abuse and neglect in the greater Richmond area—through public education, family support and education, and coordination of civil and criminal investigations of sexual and severe physical abuse. This agency primarily worked with children and families referred through the departments of social services in their area because of allegations of abuse and neglect. I also completed an internship with the Virginia Department of Social Services, working with the Child Protective Services, Foster Care, Adoption and Independent-Living Programs. All of the positions I have held have put me in direct regular contact with public and private child welfare workers (professionals) and clients (children and families receiving services) on individual cases as well as macro level change processes.

In each environment in which I have worked I have been supervised, and in several environments I have performed the role of a supervisor. In my understanding of supervision, I
incorporate probably the most commonly referenced definition of supervision supplied by Kadushin (1991):

A social work supervisor is an agency administrative-staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate the on-the-job performance of the 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. The supervisor’s ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in accordance with agency policies and procedures. Supervisors do not directly offer service to the client, but they do indirectly affect the level of service offered through their impact on the direct service supervisees (p. 23).

However, my own understanding of supervision moves beyond the function, purpose, position and process provided by Kadushin to include quality dimensions. First, because I have had a number of supervisors, I recognize variance in the practice of supervision which might be attributed to the concept of individually unique leadership style (Cameron & Quinn, 2006); of context-dependent organizational climate (Bednar, 2003; Shim, 2010); and of the relevance of competing values (Cameron, Quinn, DeGraff & Thakor, 2006) on the relationships I held with my supervisors and the organizations.

At this point in my life, I am very proud of my resume and find value in each of my career experiences, but many of these experiences are still connected to strong negative memories and feelings, and probably have led to my own assumptions and biases. I believe the role of the social service organization, and particularly that of supervision, is of critical importance in the professional resilience of child welfare workers and overall quality of the workforce.
The longest amount of time I consistently held a position within the workforce was 4 years, a time during which I felt largely dissatisfied with my job, and exhibited symptoms of what I term burnout. According to Maslach and Leiter (1997), “Burnout is the index of the dislocation between what people are and what they have to do. It represents an erosion in values, dignity, spirit, and will—an erosion of the human soul” (p. 24).

However, my own experience differs from Maslach and Leiter’s (1997) definition, in that I do not feel that my values were ever compromised. In addition, like the tests of validity and reliability on the above authors’ original tool to test an operationalized definition of burnout, I hold the most valid indicator of the eroding of the human soul is emotional exhaustion (Lourel, Gueguen & Mouda, 2008). I, like others, have also found additional fault with Maslach and Leiter’s conceptualization of burnout, in that gives little indication of root causes and provides no explicit reference to any theories of human behavior. This makes the concept hard to apply to the field of child welfare—which I hold as distinct from other helping professions like teaching or medicine to which burnout is also often applied.

Therefore, I have broadened my understanding of my own experience in the child welfare workforce to include notions compassion fatigue (Figley, 2002) and/or vicarious trauma (Pearlman & McCann, 1995) to help explain the panic attacks and other forms of anxiety that characterized my own emotional exhaustion. These authors hone in on professions in which the worker comes into contact with clients who have experienced trauma—like social workers who build relationships with victims of abuse and neglect, as in child welfare. And Pearlman and McCann (1995) use constructivist
self-development theory as the basis for understanding how vicarious traumatization might occur. However, even these conceptualizations lack for me enough of an emphasis on the strengths of the workers who experience the phenomena. That is why I find the terms job satisfaction and professional quality of life also helpful in my own understanding.

Stamm (2005) has added a strengths-based dimension in her work around professional quality of life. She has taken Figley’s compassion fatigue and Maslach and Leiter’s burnout and added a counter-balance termed compassion satisfaction in order to derive an overall measurement of professional quality of life in workers who work with trauma. Stamm states, “Compassion satisfaction is about the pleasure you derive from being able to do your work well” (p. 5).

While parts of all of these definitions do resonate with my own experience, and take a strengths-based approach, none of the above acknowledges systematic factors at work in the resulting phenomena. As a social worker with a person-in-environment orientation, I find this characterization too simplistic and too much like blaming the victim when burnout, vicarious trauma or compassion fatigue occur, or even when compassion satisfaction does not occur.

In my mind, Quinn made a good start when, in the 1970s, he first began conceptualizing and measuring job satisfaction in his research regarding discrimination and women in the workplace (Staines & Quinn, 1979). In a survey of working conditions, he found that there were five important dimensions of the concept including satisfaction with: (a) comfort aspects, (b) challenge provided by the job, (c) financial rewards, (d) coworkers, and (e) resources to do the job. This definition is strengths-based. While child welfare work is distinct from other occupations in many ways, there are elements, like those described in this definition of job
satisfaction, that seem to be universal to all paid employment. In my mind, these elements should not be discounted in understanding the child welfare workforce crisis.

In fact, I believe that the tendency to discount these dimensions of satisfaction—most of which fall under the responsibility of the organization to provide for workers—emerges from the history of oppression in our society and of social work as a profession. Supplying a strong critical lens, the parallels drawn by Wetzel (1976) between the women’s movement and the development of the profession, help to enlighten my perspective on worker satisfaction. As women helping clients in situations of vulnerability, the profession has had to fight for legitimacy in the broader society, like suffragettes had to fight for the right to vote. And so it should be no surprise that today, social work remains in the category of professions in which women are over-represented, and which fall among the lowest paid in the country (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006).

Likewise, I believe the kinds of oppression that act on the profession also have an impact within the profession. The bureaucratic structures that have characterized public child welfare organizations, and the emphasis on hierarchy present even in the private agencies in which I have worked, have often come into conflict with the feminist ideals that I hold as a social work professional. My personal experience is congruent with the ideas of Ferguson (1984) who asserts that “feminism is not compatible with bureaucracy” (p. 25). This conflict may create the kind of uncomfortable professional dissonance, like that explored by Taylor and Bentley (2007). According to these authors, professional dissonance creates distress for workers and occurs when conflicting “personal values and job tasks collide for workers” (p. 469).
My assumptions about oppression and child welfare supervision are supported by my memory of specific times working in child welfare, when my safe and comfortable worldview as a white, middle-class member of society was upset by how close I got to victims of poverty, violence, and oppression. In addition, there were times when I was angry, and felt an incredible sense of injustice, not only for my clients, but for myself as well. I feel that my supervisors took advantage of my willingness to submit to authority graciously and agency administrators used my skill and creativity without adequately and equitably compensating me. I was assigned impossible workloads by my supervisors, which impeded my ability to play the other roles expected of me as a professional American woman. I also feel that my efforts to advocate for myself and change within the system were quashed by my supervisors and agency administrators.

These feelings led me to leave one position without securing the next. At times, I actually filled out applications for corporate and sales jobs, despite my undergraduate and graduate social work education. These instances were examples of times I turned-over (GAO, 2006) or had an intent to turnover (Mor Barak, Nissley & Levin, 2001).

Alternatively, I left an organization dedicated to empowering women by helping them flee violent relationships after serving 1 year. I decided to leave after an abrupt management change left me in an extremely difficult situation. As a mid-level manager with supervisees of my own, I had to play the liaison between direct service staff and the executive director, my supervisor. Neither I nor my supervisees were able to develop trust in the competence or motivations of the new director, and therefore could not establish an effective or even comfortable working relationship with her. This experience might be consistent with the
findings of Morgen (1994). She reported that “in over ½ of the organizational histories compiled” from her research of feminist health organizations, there is “evidence that serious conflicts over personnel issues created some of the most divisive and challenging events in the lives of organizational members” (p. 665). Morgen acknowledges that the very emotional investment that is required on the part of workers to successfully manage and develop alternative organizations, could be partially to blame for burnout and stress among those workers.

However, I do have some positive memories of supportive (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002) experiences in which I was encouraged, praised, listened to by my supervisor, as well as times when I agree that my supervisors educated (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002) me about best practices using their own social work knowledge (Imre, 1984). My most positive experiences within the child welfare system have come since I began pursuing my Ph.D. I believe that furthering my education has allowed me to critically reflect, or deconstruct my experiences with an eye toward oppression, and has brought me to a place of empowerment, or sense of having resources and responsibility to maintain or change my own situation (Fook, 1999). I also believe that achieving status as a Ph.D. candidate has lent me the credibility within the system to be placed in the powerful role of executive director of a nonprofit child welfare agency. While I seem to have resolved my own problems with professional quality of life (Stamm, 2005) and feel highly committed (Bednar, 2006) to staying in my current position, I struggle ethically with how to proceed in the role of director in a way that enhances my staff’s experiences and does not promote further oppression. I find this extremely challenging in a capitalist society,
even in a nonprofit, when accessing resources and funds to support our work still involves bowing to power brokers.

I do try to use those good supervisory and peer experiences that I did have previously, as well as what I have studied as a model for my current practice as often as possible, and feel I have found some success in enhancing professional quality of life within my agency. Examples of my own supervisory and administrative style include flattening out the traditional organizational structure with a more team-oriented decision-making model and being as transparent about decisions as possible—valuing input from all staff members (Caringi et al., 2008). Because of what I have read about tactics for reducing burnout and other turnover related antecedents (Mor Barak et al., 2001), I try to encourage and participate in peer debriefing; try to provide supportive guidance and direction based on my own professional knowledge and ethics; and I try to implement strategies for keeping workloads reasonable and schedules flexible (Bell, Kulkarni, & Dalton, 2003). Because of my personal and professional ethics, I also try to engage in critical reflection as a natural part of my work and attempt to point out when I think a feminist perspective applies to situations as they occur (Payne, 2005).

Literature Review

The literature offers multiple perspectives on the problem in a way that adds to the researcher’s own knowledge, but also provides justification for embarking on a constructivist design. It does this by describing the child welfare crisis in terms of its scope and impact, by exploring possible factors leading to the crisis empirically, and by evaluating efforts to improve supervisory practice.
Scope and Significance of Turnover

There are two ways in which the child welfare workforce crisis can be described: scope and impact. Over the years, just a few studies have been done which attempt to capture the extent to which turnover is occurring. Those same studies and others have attempted to describe the negative consequences caused by or related to any level of turnover on human services agencies and the clients they serve.

Starting in the early 1980s, authors began estimating 2-year turnover rates among child welfare workers as ranging from 46% to 90% (Harrison, 1980; Jayaratne & Chess, 1984; Jayartne, Himle, & Chess, 1991; Shannon & Saleeby, 1980). Later estimates have been more conservative ranging from 23% to 60% (Drake & Yadama, 1996), with the most recent reports from the General Accounting Office estimating rates to be between 30% and 40% annually nationwide, “with the average tenure for child welfare workers being less than 2 years” (GAO, 2003, p. 5).

Though estimates of prevalence seem to be decreasing, a 2007 GAO report cites results of a survey of all 50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico in which state social services agencies listed “recruitment and retention of caseworkers” among the top three “most important challenges to be resolved” (GAO, 2006, p. 2). This focus on workforce is likely associated with the notion that turnover “wrecks havoc inside child welfare agencies” (Caringi et al., 2008, p. 565), especially in terms of service quality and agency performance, which in turn has obvious consequences for the children whose well-being these agencies are to be overseeing. According to Mor Barak et al. (2001), turnover creates a costly and “weary cycle of
recruitment-employment-orientation-production-resignation that is detrimental to the reputation of social work as a profession,” but it also can “disrupt the continuity and quality of care to those needing services (p. 627).

Despite the prevalence of child welfare workforce problems, and the vulnerability of the clients served, the body of literature that explores the relationship between the two is scant. To date, studies point to a reduced number of services received by the child in care (Unrau & Wells, 2005) and a reduced likelihood that a child in custody will achieve permanency (Strolin, Kollar & Trinkle, 2010).

**Turnover and Supervision**

DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) have probably produced the most comprehensive review of the literature as it pertains to the factors associated with turnover among child welfare staff. They did a preliminary screening of 154 published and unpublished studies and reports, dated 1974 through May 2004, which resulted in a list of 25 original studies to be systematically reviewed. Each of the included studies was specific to child welfare worker population and focused on retention or turnover as the dependent variable. Among 14 factors determined to influence turnover/retention, professional commitment and level of education were the most consistent personal factors, while supervisory support and workload/caseload were identified as the most consistent organizational factors.

Research since DePanfilis and Zlotnik’s (2008) systematic review has largely echoed the above findings; however, some new distinct trends are emerging in the literature. First, researchers have begun to show greater interest in a more resilient or strengths-focused understanding of retention, commitment, and compassion satisfaction (Byrne, 2007; Ellett,
Also, researchers have developed a more sophisticated understanding of the role of burnout in turnover to include concepts/factors related to burnout like Vicarious Trauma, Secondary Traumatic Stress, and Compassion Fatigue (Bride, Jones, MacMaster, & Shatila, 2003; Conrad & Kellar-Guenther, 2006; DePanfilis, 2006; Jankoski, 2003; Nelson-Gardell & Harris, 2003; Pryce, Shackelford, & Pryce, 2007). Studies have been done recently with the intention of drilling down on organizational variables and to expose more sophisticated relationships between organizational variables like supervision, culture, and caseload and their relationship with individual worker and client variables (Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Ellett, 2009; Faller, Grabarek, & Ortega, 2010; Giffords, 2009; Jayaratne & Faller, 2009; McGowan, Auerbach, & Strolin, 2009; Mor Barak, Travis, Pyun, & Xie, 2009; Shackelford, Sullivan, Harper & Edwards, 2006; Shim, 2010; Smith, 2005; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007; Travis & Mor Barak, 2010; Weaver, Chang, Clark, & Rhee, 2007; Yamatani, Engel, & Spjeldnes, 2009).

Finally, as concluded by DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008), research has continued to confirm that supervision has one of the strongest links (Mor Barak et al., 2009) to turnover and retention. While even Mor Barak and her colleagues have concluded that further research is needed to “distinguish the supervisory dimensions” and “their relative importance” (p. 27), the science has moved onto developing interventions targeted at supervisory practice.

**Supervision Intervention Research**

The federal government has been promoting the use of evidence-based practice in the field as a strategy for producing change in the practice of child welfare supervision. Specifically, in 2004, The Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center for Child Protection issued grants
to public child welfare agencies in four states to “test models of structured clinical supervision in achieving organizational, social worker and client outcomes” (Collins-Camargo, 2007, p. 21). While researchers involved in these projects have since published important findings from their studies, many have come to conclusions similar to that of Solomon who sees a “lack of fit” between traditional causal research designs and large child welfare agencies which are subject to extremely complicated contextual influences (Solomon, 2002, p. 385).

For example, Murphy and Goodson (2007), who employed a mentoring model of supervision in Arkansas, discuss the problems they encountered with achieving and measuring success using a more positivistic program evaluation design. They point to significant policy changes in the 1990s that led to a “child welfare system experiencing more changes in the last decade or so than in its entire history” (p. 97), therefore requiring a significant investment on the front end of a research design which emphasizes rapport building with child welfare supervisors. In other words, in an environment fraught with efforts to change, the results of which have not always been viewed positively by workers and supervisors, anyone or any project aiming at even more change may be viewed as suspect upon entry. They admit that their design had significant limitations in projecting generalizable findings because of convenience sampling and lack of random assignment.

These same researchers pointed to the limitations of quantitative research in capturing “the entire story” of an intervention. In fact they suggest that efforts to generate evidence, based solely in quantitative outcomes defy the ecological perspective which is a hallmark of social work practice and ignore the contextual and process factors like high caseloads, vacant
positions, and hiring freezes that run rampant in the real world of child welfare (Murphy & Goodson, 2007, p. 98).

Similarly, Steppe and Jones (2007) reported how external factors impacted significantly their ability to employ a longitudinal design in Tennessee. They cited the emotionally charged nature of child welfare work and lack of control of front-line workers over their daily schedule and workload that impacted levels of participation and attrition. Additionally, a chain-of command mentality that does not allow for the use of true randomization as well as organizational challenges such as changes in leadership that often correspond with changes in organizational culture and priorities, negative media attention and impending lawsuits, could serve as historical threats to internal and external validity on any findings of the research.

After a 2-year intervention based in 360 Degree Evaluation, Kelly and Sundet’s (2007) study conducted in Missouri supports that behavioral changes can occur that impact organizational outcomes. They report that “organizational constraints” like having to cover workloads for vacant positions, among other demands on their time, become a “significant confounding variable” that affects the level to which an individual supervisor can apply what they have learned in specialized training (Kelly & Sundet, 2007, p. 158).

In other states outside of the Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center funding have also implemented interventions and tested them for effectiveness. In Arizona, a group service model was added to supervisory practices and was found to have an impact on the level of critical thinking engaged in by workers (Leitz, 2008). However, Leitz also reported limitations based on convenience sampling methods, and discussed how qualitative data helped to tell a more complex story about critical thinking in supervision than the quantitative data alone. For
example, Leitz’s qualitative data triangulated the conclusion that group supervision does not replace a positive one-on-one supervisory relationship when it comes to enhancing critical thinking skills. The biggest limitation of this study of supervision from the standpoint of a child welfare workforce in crisis is the researcher’s choice and measurement of the outcome indicator or dependent variable, critical thinking. Operationalization in this study of critical thinking amounted to a self-report of perception, which in positivistic standards is the least rigorous form of measurement. In addition, this study has limitations in what it can tell us about quality supervision because critical thinking was not linked theoretically, or empirically to turnover or retention.

Caringi et al. (2008) used an action intervention or participatory model when they implemented the use of design teams (DTs) and probably can boast the most success in reducing intentions to turnover among child welfare staff. These authors described their DT intervention as “forming a team of agency representatives who help them use research and critical thinking to identify and remedy causes of turnover in that agency” (p. 566). They found that “the systems that received the DT intervention improved significantly by 22%, from 76% down to 54%” in workers intent to turnover (p. 572).

Gaps and Opportunities

Valuing Supervision

In order to take a closer look at child welfare supervision in this inquiry, it is important for me to outline the parameters of my understanding of the concept. This outline is similar to the process of operationalization that might take place in a functionalist study, in that it allows for common understanding among the researcher, participants, and reviewers. But it is quite
different in that it is only an initial position owned only by the inquirer. Also unlike the process of deriving an operational definition of a concept, this process is intended to be flexible capable of transforming during and after the data collection and analysis stages of the process as outlined in the latter sections of this proposal.

Prior to the start of this dissertation project, I came across the following definition of supervision:

Supervision is a professional relationship that provides support, education, monitoring of quality and creates a safe forum to reflect on professional practice. It should encourage constructive confrontation and critical thinking that informs and improves the practice of all parties. Respecting the inherent hierarchy in the relationship it should accept the responsibility to use power in a thoughtful manner. The dynamics of the supervisory relationship can create a parallel process in all other relationships including that of client/worker. Ultimately supervision should be the vehicle to create dynamic growth, establish high professional standards, and enhance quality and culturally competent services (Delano & Shah, 2006, p. 7).

This definition not only captures many of the components of supervision as I understand it but also references certain values that I hold. The specific components include support, education, and monitoring and closely mirror that of Kadushin (1991). These components might also be said to line up with more functionalist human behavior theories as those described by Monte & Sollod as “humanistic” (2003, p. 460) and those described by Longres as “social learning theory” (2000, p. 451). Delano and Shah (2006) state that there is also the presence of other components like “constructive confrontation and critical thinking that improves the practice of all parties” (p. 7)—(implying the supervisor as one of the parties)—that reflect a more participatory paradigm. Also new are the values that explicate the author’s sense of quality supervision and that might be paralleled with social work values and ethics. For instance, the recognition that the worker being supervised has the potential for dynamic
growth and that supervision should be a safe process parallels NASW (2008) Code of Ethics’
value of the dignity and worth of persons. Additionally Delano and Shah’s (2006, p. 7) idea that
supervision should assist in “establishing high professional standards,” matches the NASW
(2008) values of integrity and competence. Finally, the Delano and Shah’s reference to cultural
competence mirrors that of the Code’s value of social justice.

**Methodology**

From my review of the literature about child welfare workforce (including those focused
on supervision) three types of methodological gaps are present. First, only recently have
workforce intervention studies begun to emerge. In 2008, DePanfilis and Zlotnik agreed that
there were only a “limited number of studies that actually evaluate a recruitment or retention
intervention” (p. 231). Since then some new interventions have been tested, but only a few
have had significant findings that offer promising practical strategies for addressing the crisis
(Glisson, Dukes, & Green, 2006; Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez, & Schwab, 2010; Lawson et al.,
2006); among those even fewer have had significant findings related to supervisory practice.

Second, with some exceptions (Gomez et al., 2010; Janokoski, 2003; Lawson et al., 2006;
Shim, 2010; Strolin et al., 2010), nearly all of the studies above are grounded in functionalist
assumptions about the nature of reality and how we come to know it, thus there exists a great
opportunity to examine the child welfare workforce with an alternative set of assumptions.

Finally, neither the observational research which has pinpointed supervision as a factor
in the child welfare workforce crisis nor the intervention research which attempts to change it,
have any elements which qualify the concept in a way that is highly useful to workforce
stakeholders. While there may be widely accepted definitions of supervision published in the
conceptual literature, there are no studies which ground those definitions in data, nor those which help us understand what constitutes quality supervision.

The assumption upon which functionalist and constructivist methodologies diverge is ontological, or regarding the fundamental nature of reality. Functionalism regards reality as objective, or that which has existed “prior to man” and contains universal truths and those of us seeking to know reality as “observers” of those truths (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 106-107). Therefore, studies based on this ontology strive for a standard of rigor that is most effective when the researcher is most removed from the phenomena under examination. Since the convention of relying primarily on quantitative measurement is viewed as one of the best ways to handle any bias coming from the researcher view, most studies of child welfare workforce place emphasis on statistical findings. Since random selection and assignment of study subjects are gold standards of functionalist research because of the ability to estimate the perspective of the average, few to no studies on the child welfare workforce have delved deeply into the complex perspective of an individual or small group. Because most researchers aim to generalize findings in a way that speaks to universal truths, few to no studies on this topic have had the explicit primary intention of directly affecting the participants as stakeholders in a localized problem.

Kadushin and Harkness’ (2002) supportive function of supervision has been the focus of some exploration of the notion of quality, especially related to supervisors’ expressions of empathy. However, even these authors report that “it appears that empathetic supervisory relationships both exacerbate and ameliorate stress for the worker” (p. 231). It is here, between these seemingly inconsistent findings where reductionism can create insurmountable
paradox, and where added complexity can bridge a gap in our knowledge of supervision. This is likely why Kadushin and Harkness write that it is important that research continue to “identify additional factors and variables that influence the development and quality of the supervisory relationship” (p. 195). Tsui (2008) levels a similar critique of the literature base when he writes that there is a “noticeable lack of critical and in-depth discussion on the state of the art and evidence-based practice of social work supervision.” Tsui also asserts that “little theory or model building, and very few attempts to place supervisory practice within an organizational setting in a greater cultural context” (p. xiii).

And so, in addition to the many reasons related to fit, focus, and feasibility that help to justify the use of a constructivist method, this methodology can also be justified by the need to create a complex and robust body of knowledge related to a social work problem which has been defined as a crisis, and the need to evaluate supervision in a way that achieves an understanding of its quality dimensions.
CHAPTER 3. CONSTRUCTIVIST METHODOLOGY

Building and Testing Researcher Theories of Supervision

In a traditional dissertation proposal, the author will often set forth the grand theory which is to be either built or tested. Grand social work theories are generally understood to be useful explanations of a particular human behavior under study and/or helpful guides or models for intervening when problems in human behavior are identified. However, constructivism is not concerned with building or testing such grand theories. It does acknowledge that the researcher and participants may hold, and test or build personal theories, constructs or narratives, internally or in interaction with each other. Those less-than-grand theories may help the researcher and the participants understand their experience and may or may not help guide them in creating future experiences. In constructivist inquiry, the researcher can take on the role of “reality shaper” or he/she who “facilitates the dissemination and testing of perspectives” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 93)

Therefore as I engaged stakeholders in this process through questioning, it was important for me to share, and thereby bound, what theoretical perspectives I draw on in understanding the child welfare workforce and supervision. Because there are widely published classifications of social work theories, I will outline here which of those most closely relate to my personally held theories about child welfare supervision. While social constructivism stands alone as a theory in many published classifications, I will show how
constructivist methodology becomes a highly suitable match for building and testing my personal perspectives.

My views of the child welfare workforce crisis and supervision are most closely associated with what Payne (2005) calls a modern critical perspective. Using this perspective, I hypothesize that many of the negative experiences of child welfare workers, including those that are supervisory, can be related to oppression. In addition, my critical perspective implies that a strategy for alleviating the crisis might come through empowering stakeholders to voice and reflect on the nature of oppression in the workforce. In these perspectives I am not alone. Many other social work scholars have alluded to the same, and have been doing so for quite some time.

In 1990, Finn used a feminist perspective to explain burnout as the result of the “powerful oppression that occurs when a person who is motivated by a sense of caring and responsibility, and a belief in individual worth and mutual support, attempts to ‘help’ within an antagonistic system fueled by conformity and authority” (p. 64). Finn’s remedy was to bring practice back to its historical feminist roots. She asserts that social at its foundation was defined by a helping process that was more naturally collaborative. Today Finn says workers and clients need the opportunity to “give voice to their experiences,” and to gain a new understanding of professionalism and the helping process that removes the authoritative structures (p. 67). She further suggests that the education of social workers should in and of itself be an empowering process (p. 68).

Tsui and Cheung (2009), nearly 20 years later, are also concerned with the trend of managerialism within social work administration. They argue that in capitalist countries based
on “free market and private ownership” principles, managerialism “neglects the needs of the working class” (p. 151). They suggest a different kind of professionalism, distinguishable from Finn’s perspective that implies rejecting power dynamics alone as the primary way to disrupt the negative impact of managerialism. Tsui and Cheung instead place the emphasis on social work “values, knowledge and skills” in social work professionalism (p. 151). This view of professionalism places particular focus on the social work value of social justice, knowledge of client need and perspective, as well as the skills of relationship-building and advocacy.

In line with Finn (1990), Tsui and Cheung (2009), Noble and Irwin (2009) suggest that the personal is political when they state, “As the social work landscape has to contend with a more conservative and fiscally restrictive environment, so too has practice supervision become more focused on efficiency, accountability and worker performance at the expense of professional and practice development” (p. 25). In different terms, Noble and Irwin also make recommendations for combatting the oppressive structures of capitalism and patriarchy in order to bring social work administration and supervision more in line with the values and history of the profession, and thereby enhance the quality of these practices. These authors emphasize the educative dimension of supervision, and suggest that the best remedy is applying a critical lens to reflection in supervision.

Fook (1999) describes the process of critical reflection in education and Gould (2000) describes the learning that can occur in organizations when administrators use critical reflection. According to Fook (1999), reflection crosses the boundary into critical reflection when a social worker not only processes “her own personal reactions,” but also acknowledges “personal influence,” develops a “sense of agency in a situation” and a “capacity for change”
(1999, p. 195-200). When this type of learning happens Gould explains, “The learning experience is more pervasive and distributed than that delivered through a specific designated training or educational event; learning incorporates the broad dynamics of adaptation, change and environmental alignment of organizations takes place across multiple levels within the organization, and involves the construction and reconstruction of meanings and world views within the organization” (Gould, 2000, p. 14).

**Hallmarks of Constructivist Inquiry**

The present study is designed to address gaps in the literature, using ontological and epistemological assumptions in its methods, so that the resulting findings can have their maximum utility in addressing the workforce crisis in child welfare. Nearly all of the research done in this area of inquiry has been based on functionalist assumptions with the goal of achieving generalizability. One of the most significant challenges for researchers working within the functionalist paradigm is that meeting all of the conditions to achieve results with the ideal level of internal and external validity (i.e., random selection, control groups, longitudinal design, replication) is nearly impossible in the context social-behavioral research. In part because of the imperative to treat human participants with the highest ethical standards of voluntariness and social justice, and in part because of the real impact of cost feasibility on design choices, findings of such studies must be held as highly tentative. In addition, most study subjects are informed at the onset of the study that they should not expect any benefit (other than incentives provided artificially) as a result from participating. Therefore, it is not fair or ethical to expect significant change in the problem the research is designed to address.
However, there is an alternative field of social work inquiry with an entirely different set of assumptions available to researchers who desire to see their findings immediately translated to practice. In stark contrast to functionalism, interpretivism assumes, along a continuum, a subjective nature of reality. In other words, no single truth exists in the reality of all individuals. Instead, individuals hold their own unique truths built on their experiences. Within the broader interpretivist paradigm, constructivist theorists assert that reality is built, or constructed, on those experiences or interactions that occur between and among individuals. And so, because findings are not expected to be generalizable beyond the boundaries of the reality of those participating, there is no reason in which to attempt to achieve randomization or nearly any of the other hallmarks of rigorous experimental design when using a constructivist methodology.

**Qualitative Methods and Inductive Analysis**

Tsui and Cheung (2009) explore the underlying mismatch of business administration concepts for application in social work in an article published in the *Journal of Social Work*. They assert that business administration, which seeks to “maximize profit,” is inherently different from social work administration which seeks to maximize “human well-being” (p. 151). That difference in motivations leads to differences in roles, accountability, strategy and values. Therefore, evaluation methods that use quantitative measurement and treat subjects as passive objects leave out entirely the integral role of social work values in human services operations.

Rodwell’s (1998) explanation of constructivist inquiry is then congruent with Tsui and Cheung’s (2009) recommendation for future research methodology in several ways. First, Tsui and Cheung suggest administrative researchers employ qualitative methods. This matches
Rodwell’s explanation that in constructivist inquiry “aggregate data of the sort that are derived through quantitative methods are viewed as being insensitive to uniqueness and differences,” and that language-based or narrative based data are preferred, because they “give voice to the unique” (Rodwell, 1998, p.18). Further, Tsui and Cheung (2009) write that participants should be viewed as “actors with motives” (p. 155), and in constructivist inquiry there is no “subject-object dualism” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 17). Instead both the inquirer and the participant are “free and involved in a proactive role in the creation of reality” (p. 17). Finally, constructivist inquiry takes full advantage of values by making them explicit and using them to bound the process and the findings.

Given the inherent challenges of accurately capturing a complex process like that of the hermeneutic dialectic, there are certain preferred techniques for data collection and analysis that help to enhance rigor. According to Rodwell (1998), qualitative methods are preferred in constructivist inquiry because the language/narrative-based data is “sensitive enough to differences” and “gives voice to the unique” in a way that can capture the multiple perspectives involved with questions of value and quality (p. 18). Further, inductive analysis, or that which classifications or categorizations of data moves from a lower level of abstraction to higher levels, is favored over deduction where categories or themes of data are establish prior the placement of data within them. Induction allows for emergence in a way that deduction can not, and therefore, “allows for accurate reconstructions of personal accounts” (p. 18).

The Hermeneutic Dialectic and Reflexivity

As introduced earlier, in order to achieve the utmost rigor, the researcher assumes the role of a dynamic human instrument. This instrument is human not only in its characteristic
prior knowledge base but also in its cognitive ability and capacity for interaction and communication. Like a rope jumper joining a game of double-dutch, the researcher interjects his or her own perspective into the ongoing hermeneutic dialectic or process in which subjective theories are constantly being tested and built. Hermeneutics describes the circular conversation between stakeholders as they construct reality together. These hermeneutic interactions become dialectical when tension or conflict occurs in the conversation—this is the same point at which a constructivist inquiry can move into the Guba’s (1990) critical paradigm.

In a highly trustworthy study, the results may be viewed as a sort of moving picture capturing a brief moment in time during which that game of double-dutch is being played. And when viewed by the participants, they agree it is an accurate and meaningful documentary. In a study that is rigorous at the catalytically authentic level, the study actually changes the rhythm of the game. In fact, the turners and the jumpers may report learning a new sing-song chant. If ALL the turners and jumpers agree that the new chant was better than the last, than a tactically authentic study was produced.

The concept of reflexivity in constructivist inquiry is related to the hermeneutic dialectic and is similar in some ways Fook’s (1999) critical reflection. Rodwell (1998) defines reflexivity in the constructivist process as “the ability of the human mind to turn back on itself and therefore, know that it is knowing” (p. 262). This describes the ability of both the researcher and participants to also be the audience watching the game of double-dutch. Camelleri (1999) suggests that another way social workers can respond to “the new managerialism [discourse of rational and technical achievement]” is by “constructing a new discourse” (p. 35).
According to Noble and Irwin (2009), this process of constructing a new discourse that incorporates social work values can happen in social work supervision if we apply a critical lens and reflection. Fook (1999) describes the critical approach as not only involving “a rejection of positivism” (on which managerialism is based), but also involving “interactional processes in the generation of this knowledge,” and the added element he calls “the emancipatory project” (p. 195). In other words, if managerialism leaves unfair power structures intact and unchecked, then critical reflection in administration and supervision should identify and deconstruct them in a way that empowers previously vulnerable stakeholders.

**Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

Instead, constructivist research has its own standards of rigor—trustworthiness and authenticity. According to Rodwell (1998) there are four aspects trustworthiness including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In order to achieve credibility, the constructivist inquirer must employ techniques of prolonged engagement with the participants in the natural setting/context over time so that persistent observation can occur. In addition, the researcher can and should use other sources of data to support findings beyond stakeholder written or oral communication. The researcher can collect and analyze data from observing the setting and reading or reviewing written artifacts from the setting in order to triangulate the findings in a way that enhances credibility of the findings. Documenting the steps of the inquiry process with a methodological journal help support the dependability of the findings by assuring that the research has adhered to acceptable constructivist practices. Member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trailing also help support the trustworthiness of the data by establishing a trail of data that is confirmable, or grounded in multiple perspectives.
The dimension of transferability is the characteristic of the findings that helps the readers of the findings determine for themselves how relevant the data is to their own situation.

There are also five aspects of authenticity. The first, fairness ensures that there is a balanced view in the findings. Similar to a mainstream understanding of fairness, it is the inquirer’s responsibility to ensure that all stakeholders have equal voice, serving almost as a referee in the dialectical process. The next dimension of authenticity is ontological, and is represented by the complexity in the findings of the research. Educative authenticity describes the level at which it can be asserted that participant stakeholders developed an increased understanding of the constructions of others, through engaging in the hermeneutic dialectic. It is the last two dimensions of authenticity which could be classified by Guba (1990) as research built on critical paradigmatic assumptions. These two are catalytic and tactical authenticity, which tend to be the least feasible dimensions to assert about research findings. In order to boast catalytic authenticity of the findings, the researcher must demonstrate that the process facilitated, stimulated or evoked action. For tactical authenticity, that action has to be confirmed as effective from the point of view of ALL stakeholders.

Process of Inquiry

According to Rodwell (1998), there are six “aspects of inquiry” in constructivist design that occur in three phases (p. 54). In Phase I, there is entry and design. In Phase II, there is data collection and analysis, and in Phase III there is rigor and product.

Phase I

Besides the reflection upon a priori knowledge and the research questions already discussed, Phase I in this project also included an analysis of “fit, focus, and feasibility” which
purveyed more detailed information about the setting of the inquiry and its boundaries. In Phase I, I was able to establish working hypotheses that followed the main question and provided the guidance for soliciting information from participants during data collection. Finally, the sampling frame was determined for the purposes of guiding the purposive strategy for recruitment of participant stakeholders.

**Focus, fit and feasibility.** According to Rodwell, besides the researcher’s own knowledge base and theoretical perspective, Phase I should also consist of an exploration of the intent of the research question and contextual factors which bound the naturalistic setting of the inquiry in an examination of “focus, feasibility and fit” (1998, p. 37).

The focus of a constructivist line of inquiry is determined by the type of research to be conducted: “pure, evaluation or policy” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 38). Two characteristics of this research that help determine its focus are its emphasis on understanding the experience of supervision as a phenomenon, and the less-than-formal boundaries of the public child welfare context as I have established them. In other words, while values are an important part of the guiding question, the experience being scrutinized is not taking place within one agency or other legal entity in a way that presents a programmatic evaluand. This means that the focus of this research is pure.

However, even though the initial focus is determined at the onset of the project by the researcher, what is advantageous about this constructivist design is its ability to start as phenomenological research, but to emerge as program evaluation, policy analysis, both or all three. For example, if snowball-like method of sampling leads to a strong representation of stakeholders with connections to a single agency in which there are particular standards of
supervisory practice, data collected might contain information on the merit or value of that particular practice to those particular stakeholders. Similarly, if stakeholders share the consensus that there seems to be a consistent policy, formal or informal, at work among their experiences of supervision, that policy could then become the focus of the inquiry. In this particular constructivist project, which begins with a pure focus, the resulting findings also provide commentary on public policies, like “Transformation” and evaluate what are perceived to be regionally common practices of supervision, like crisis response by supervisors.

In her discussion of fit, Rodwell (1998) explains that the problem under investigation must be “context-dependent” (p. 41). In the case of this study, there are a number of complex contextual factors at the national, state and local levels of the child welfare system, which become extremely important to account for when examining this question, and which add to the argument that a constructivist method is best suited to answering the question.

Virginia, like other states is embedded in the highly dynamic federal child welfare system and is fraught with the kinds of organizational constraints referenced by previous researchers employing traditional research models in studying supervision in this context (Bride et al., 2003; Kelly & Sundet, 2007; Steppe & Jones, 2007).

But further complexity is added to this context at the state level that justifies the use of alternative research strategies when it is understood that Virginia is one of the few states in the United States that employs a state-supervised, locally administered system of government agencies. That means that while the Virginia Department of Social Services (VADSS) is the agency charged with interpreting the Code of Virginia as it relates to child welfare into written policy and for distributing state and federal funding, it is the 120 local, city and county,
governments (and their local departments of social services [LDSS]) which are responsible for actually implementing child welfare policy. This creates tremendous diversity in the day-to-day practice of child welfare across the state.

In addition, conducting research in the contemporary setting of Virginia child welfare brings about even further complexity and diversity among local agencies because VADSS has recently embarked on a process of extreme change aptly titled “the Transformation,” which includes the implementation of a new practice model. This practice model, which is intended to bring the focus of child welfare work to family and community engagement to bring about permanency for children, has been piloted in 14 CORE localities, while the remaining 106 localities have just recently begun implementing parts of the new practice model.

Finally, in the local area of Virginia from which stakeholders will be recruited for this study there are contextual characteristics that add even further complexity. Richmond is a city that struggles with strong racial and socioeconomic divides. The legal boundaries, which separate the city from its surrounding counties also closely delineate the geographic distribution of the African American poor in the area, the concentration of minorities employed by the local government agencies, and the relative solvency of the tax base and local government budgets. The local departments of social services are not immune to these long-standing problems, especially when in it comes to the impact of racial issues on the clients they serve, the resources they have to deliver services, how they are staffed and administered, and not when it comes to how workers are supervised (Gooden, 2006).

Because constructivist design is firmly rooted in the assumption that reality is highly subjective and active, it allows for answers to research questions that are contemporary and
highly complex in perspective. First, the emergent nature of the design allows for the frequent changes that occur in child welfare policy and practice at all governmental levels to influence stakeholders and the data that they share—rather than attempting to shield them and their data from history and maturation, as in an experimental design.

Second, the steps in the constructivist process, especially around sampling and member checking, are intended to allow for maximum variation among the voices and values of a variety of supervision stakeholders. This means that racial, ethnic, and geographic minority stakeholders’ perspectives should have just as much weight in the findings as those of the majority. In addition, power differentials related to resources and authority are to be purposely minimized by the inquirer, who is responsible for being aware of and bounding those differentials and by protecting the identity of the stakeholders.

Feasibility is an important consideration in constructivist research because the very aspects that focus the research, as well as make it both a good fit and a highly relevant process also make it a risky proposition for all those involved. The process of co-constructing can bring about a complex consensus, but it can also be fraught with conflict (Rodwell, 1998). The process of consciousness-raising in and of itself could be viewed as change that is individual and incremental, but it can also incite change that is structural and radical.

In terms of co-construction and conflict, I discussed earlier how power differentials are at play here in Richmond within and among the local agencies, and in how I already understand supervision itself. However, I this project proved to be feasible in this setting, because I as the researcher was able to make the following considerations:
1. As the inquirer and stakeholder, I currently hold a position in the private sector of child welfare, which holds no formal authority over any other stakeholders likely to be sampled.

2. By conducting individual interviews, I will be able to de-identify data as it is shared among participants be they supervisors or supervisees, former clients or former workers, Black or White, male or female, or differing in any other classification where power is either implied or explicit. In the present study, the issue that surfaced during data collection with the most potential for conflict occurred between stakeholders that held divergent views of the role of government in child welfare. However, even between the most contrasting points of view, markers of consensus were able to be achieved. These specific points of consensus are described in the case report and lessons learned, in two themes: the insufficient nature of government policies to meet the challenges faced by the child welfare system, and in the aspirations we hold for child welfare case outcomes.

In this process the exact nature of change was intentionally out of my (the inquirer’s) hands. However, I was diligent to ensure the informed consent and voluntariness of my participant stakeholders by providing a full description of the study. The informed consent document (Appendix B) that was signed by all participants was designed with the intent of providing sufficient information enabling participants to make their own decisions about the risk. Further, as I recruited stakeholders to participate, I maintained a level of control over the concentration of potential change within any one organizational entity. As it turned out, my natural connections with gatekeepers from an array of local public departments of social services and private child welfare agencies, it appears that no one agency alone became vulnerable to the unfolding impact of an emergent design.
Besides participant risk, there are other considerations of feasibility when it comes to dissertation research logistics, especially around time and resources. Conducting the study with local stakeholders and using face-to-face interviews, phone calls and emails as the primary methods of data collection, helped to maximize the use of time while keeping costs like printing and mailing to a minimum. One critical logistical consideration is the time available to conduct the intensive qualitative data analysis required. In order for me to “conquer a mountain of material” and arrive at a point in which I could “tell a story” with my data, it was imperative for me to become immersed in the data in such a way that I could engage in creative, critical thinking, and sense-making in order to bring the data forward into the case report writing process (1998, p.174). It became apparent during this phase of the inquiry that significant time and space for secluded, continuous data analysis needed to be incorporated into the timeline for project completion. That time and space became invaluable in allowing me to make important strategic decisions around how I would convey findings through narration, decisions related to “the audience and desired effect;” “the ‘voice’ of the report;” and issues of “style and format” (1998, Rodwell, p. 176.)

Another decision made for feasibility’s sake centered around the choice to use only free outlets for advertising opportunities for participation and not to utilize financial incentives to encourage participation, because of the significant cost associated. It is likely that in this way feasibility considerations leveled the greatest limitations in the findings of this inquiry, since it is reasonable to expect that wider advertising and the use of financial incentives might have elicited more participants from the client subgroup of stakeholders (Berger, Begun, and Otto-Salaj, 2009).
Feasibility also factored into the decision to plan for an audit of only three of the dimensions of authenticity as outlined earlier. The two authenticity criteria that were not considered by my auditor were that of catalytic and tactical authenticity. With an emergent design such as this, there is no telling when the actions and change that demonstrate this level of authenticity might occur. It likely would not have been a reasonable expectation that the study’s 16 month timeline would allow for collecting evidence of catalytic and tactical learning and changes within and among participants.

**Questions and working hypotheses.** The guiding research questions I sought to answer with this inquiry were:

1. What about supervision do stakeholders value?

2. How do stakeholders experience quality supervision?

In Phase I, the researcher is expected to use his or her knowledge and experience to initially bound the problem and its context, and to develop working hypotheses for exploration in later phases (Rodwell, 1998). These working hypotheses become a starting point for Phase II, but because of the critical assumption in the constructivist process that acknowledges they are subjective and emerge over time with experiences these initial hypotheses are owned solely by the researcher. It is expected that they will be more fully developed, or even radically changed through interaction with the research participants throughout the inquiry’s progression. Eventually, in a rigorously authentic and trustworthy project, hypotheses can be owned by the whole group.

As the researcher in this project, the working hypotheses that I developed at the outset were that:
• 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.

The first four of these hypotheses served as the springboard for unstructured interviewing and critical reflection in the data collection process guided by the Interview Protocol with Foreshadowed Questions (Appendix A). As predicted, the initial interview protocol proved to be a dynamic document, evolving incrementally as stakeholders presented their own working hypotheses during data collection and informal analysis. For example, in the very first interview, I prompted the stakeholder to discuss organizational culture as it related to her experience with child welfare supervision. At that she introduced what she labeled as an “us vs. them” culture to describe how child welfare workers treat both foster parents and birth families—as outsiders with a somehow less than position and knowledge when it comes to
determining the best interest of their children. I then turned this into a new prompt in subsequent interviews, and was able to build strong validation that such a culture was a common experience among stakeholders.

Another illustration of the emergent nature of data collection in this project came when one stakeholder was simply asked to explain how she saw herself as a stakeholder in the child welfare system. It was at this point that she introduced the idea of parallel relationships between supervisor and worker and worker and client. To her, this image helped to explain her stake-holding position, being that she was the top administrator at a non-profit who works to prevent child abuse and neglect. To me the inquirer this idea seemed to equate to a whole new working hypothesis that needed to be tested and built with the remaining stakeholders. When prompted, stakeholders continued again to validate and expand upon this idea throughout the rest of the data collection process.

**Sample Size and Characteristics.**

The standard of rigor in determining sample size in many qualitative research designs including constructivist inquiry is based in the notion of saturation. Determining the point of saturation is a challenge for the researcher, who must listen for signals of redundancy in the data during the process of data collection. In addition, Bowen suggests the presence of persistent observation can help affirm the researcher’s sense of saturation (Bowen, 2008, p. 137).

Two strategies for developing an ear for redundancy that I found helpful were the early transfer of knowledge in writing extended field notes, and the start of unitization of interviews before data collection was complete. This allowed me as the researcher to become immersed
in the qualitative data in a way that familiarized me with developing schema in the words of stakeholders. In this study the first signs of data redundancy occurred during interview 18, where it seemed as though all the data offered by the stakeholder had been referenced by other stakeholders in previous interviews. However, I proceeded with already scheduled interviews allowing for the opportunity for additional new data to emerge. During interview 21, with a stakeholder who was the single representative of a group who holds political position, when it became clear that new themes were no longer developing. Even that stakeholder from his unique perspective offered only data that I believed was connected to previously identified schema, and in fact, was able to confirm what he viewed as the validity of developing schema as I presented them for his consideration.

In addition, because the 21 interviews were conducted over a period of time spanning four months, my use of persistent observation helped to support the assertion that the point of saturation had been achieved. Therefore, the final sample was made up of 21 stakeholders.

The group of 21 stakeholders included three males, 18 females; three African-American stakeholders, and 18 White stakeholders; all with ages ranging from late twenties to early fifties. Geographically, the sample came out of agencies serving the greater Richmond area. Fortunately, in less than a day’s travel distance from Richmond, many stakeholders work, reside and/or regularly interact with child welfare agencies serving in urban, rural, and suburban communities. And so, the final sample did contain stakeholders who had experiences with child welfare supervision connected to each of these types of local environments.

Yet the area in which the sample contained maximum variation was within the roles that stakeholders held in relationship to the child welfare system. Specific recruitment
strategies and sampling choices brought about vast differences in experience and knowledge about supervision held by participants. The original purposive sampling frame was developed in order to “increase the scope and range of the data exposed in the search for multiple realities” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 56), and was established based on the work of several important experts in social work administration and National data.

Tsui and Cheung (2009) state that “when supervision is viewed more comprehensively as an interactional process involving four parties (i.e., the human service organization, the supervisor, the frontline worker, and the client) in a societal culture, we need to identify the factors that affect all four participating parties.” These authors also reinforce the “critical need for researchers to study supervision in specific cultural contexts, both societal and organizational” (p. 142). In addition, the GAO (2003) reports that “national survey data confirm that both state and private child welfare agencies are experiencing similar challenges recruiting and retaining qualified caseworkers” (p. 5). Further, because Perlmutter, Bailey, and Netting (2001) stated that the “literature on supervision to which most have been exposed is primarily oriented to interactions with front line workers” (p. xii).

Therefore, the intention of the purposive sampling technique I used in this study sought participation from five groups of potential stakeholders: workers, supervisors, administrators, clients, and other community-based stakeholders. Additionally, I chose to recruit the participation of both the child welfare workers who have experienced supervision in a public agency, and those that have experienced supervision a private agency. The final group did in fact include supervisees from public and private agencies, supervisors from public and private
agencies, administrative/leadership representatives from public and private agencies, and other community members who viewed themselves as stakeholders in the local child welfare system.

This variation in the sampled participants was a key contributor to the complexity of the findings for this research project. For example, a board member of a nonprofit agency may have limited understanding of the day-to-day supervisory practices in that agency, but may have strong ideas about what he or she expects those practices to achieve in terms of agency effectiveness. In contrast, a supervisee from a public agency who experiences supervision first hand, but who isn’t exposed to outcomes reports, might only have strong opinions about what they think works for his or her own supervision. Similarly, a former foster child might be under the impression that it was the supervisor’s decision to move them from a home they liked, even though their worker advocated that they stay. Whereas, the savvy supervisor knows that in many cases in order to preserve the client-worker relationship, workers often use them as the scapegoat for unpopular, but necessary placement decisions.

Two other characteristics of this sample added to the richness and depth to the overall case of quality child welfare supervision in central Virginia presented here. First, all but five of the stakeholders have held more than one child welfare stake-holding role during their lifetimes. For example, almost all supervisors had once been direct service workers. Meaning that even as supervisors, they can incorporate the perspective they gained from being a supervisee. In some cases, stakeholders simultaneously hold multiple stake-holding roles. Other examples of multiple stakeholder-ship came with the two Executive Director who are also adoptive parents. In this way those individual stakeholders were able to speak from both the perspective of a power player and/or a community collaborator.
Second, in this sample, five participants represented the stake-holding group of foster parents. Obviously, foster parents naturally have a position closest in physical proximity, if not emotional connection to, the foster children who live in their homes. Yet, heretofore these key child welfare stakeholders have not been interviewed about the topic of supervision.

Unfortunately, despite efforts followed in the original recruitment plan to also recruit stakeholders that represented the voice of former clients of the child welfare system, the final sample included only one former client of the child welfare system. Also, this token representative of the client voice was complicated by the fact that he simultaneously holds the roles of other stakeholding groups (i.e., public agency supervisor), and because his child welfare case did not occur in the Central VA system. This characteristic of the sample lends the greatest limitation to the study findings, in that they do not directly express the voice of one of Martin & Kettner’s two “classes of final arbiters” of quality in social work programming: the clients (1996, p. 42).

Phase II. Focused Exploration

Data collection. Rodwell (1998) states that “only the human instrument is capable of grasping the meanings of an interaction. . .or engaging in communication, the basis of co-constructed reality” (p. 57-58). Therefore, in order to make the most of myself as the inquirer and human instrument, the primary method for data collection I used in this study was the in-person interview, with answers recorded by my own hand, rather than video or audio recording device. Telephone interviewing was used at the convenience of the stakeholders on two occasions. In order to ensure confidentiality and to diffuse the impact of the power
differentials between various stakeholding groups on the information that was shared, the interviews were conducted one-on-one, in private locations.

I took handwritten notes during each initial interview in a field journal that included references to both the participants’ spoken words and to pertinent nonverbal communication. I typed and expanded notes as soon after each interview as possible, in order to provide as much detail as possible for data analysis later. I also made written notes of any follow-up phone conversations and copies of any emails exchanged to be included in my field journal.

Besides the field journal, I employed the use of a methodological journal and a reflexive journal. The use of both of these tools added rigor to the study, both as the process occurred and after it is complete. The reflexive journal helped me with binding my personal perspective during the research with the help of a peer reviewer. Throughout the inquiry, as I developed my own knowledge, experience, thoughts and feelings, I documented them on an internet-based program, where it was made available to my peer reviewer.

My peer reviewer, Dr. Sharon Foreman Kready, was a critical part of this constructivist process; she has been selected based on the requirements as outlined by Rodwell (1998): trust and competence. Having known Dr. Kready professionally and personally for more than five years, we have built a trusting relationship, that has already involved supporting each other during various scholarly undertakings. Although she no longer lives locally, we have continued to maintain regular contact in person, over the phone, and via internet-based video chat and email. Also valuable in my selection of my peer reviewer was that she completed specialized training on constructivist social work inquiry, during which she practiced the role of inquirer, peer reviewer, and auditor, prior to engaging in this research.
The methodological journal tracked decisions I made regarding the data collection and analysis process as they emerged and was included in the package of auditable materials made available to my auditor once data analysis was complete.

**Data analysis.** Data analysis was inductive and took place at two levels in this study, informally and formally. The first informal process occurred as I engaged with the hermeneutic circle of information flow, and might be described as a form of “ongoing member checking” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 165). During interviews I interacted with participants, checking, clarifying and expanding the meaning of their responses. Between interviews, I was able to begin to integrate information from one interview into the next, changing and focusing questions. I was also able to go back and follow up with previous participants for their perspectives on new themes as they emerged. The results of this level of analysis were tracked in the methodological journal. Data shared between participants was entirely de-identified in order to maintain confidentiality and to dilute concentrations of power that were likely present in stakeholder relationships.

The more formal data analysis began once data collection ceased, and utilized the kind of constant comparison technique that Dye, Schatz, Rosenberg and Coleman compare to a kaleidoscope (2000). I began by unitizing and coding all typewritten data in Microsoft Word, so that each unit of data could be printed on individual cards in preparation for a process of lumping and sorting, but can still be traced back to their original data source. The specific coding system is outlined in the methodological journal, but included indicators related to the order in which the interview was conducted, the stake-holding group represented by the stakeholder, the page from the extended field notes from which it was extracted, and the
sequence within the interview transcript the unit of data occurred. This labeling method was developed for the purpose of simplifying the audit process to come.

Lumping and sorting is a process of categorizing data that allows each unit of data to be compared with each other unit of data. The process starts with provisional categories of data, but over time creates more complex categories of data with specific labels and decision rules which help determine whether units of data belong in those categories. Categories may result at different levels of abstraction, meaning that there may be categories and subcategories of data. Labels and decision rules for both categories and subcategories were kept in the methodological journal.

Toward the end of the data analysis process, an idiographic representation was developed to identify and define the parameters of categories and subcategories of data, and to demonstrate how the categories related to one another. Once a draft of this picture was made it was presented to the group of stakeholders in the form of an animated slide presentation (Appendix C) and bulleted thematic points attached and sent via email.

Participating stakeholders were asked to review the slides and answer the following questions: Do you see yourselves in the graphic and short explanation of the findings? Are the graphics and statements understandable? Do both make sense to you?

As a part of this grand member check, feedback on the presentation was sent back to the researcher by five of the 21 participant stakeholders. Feedback resulted in some minor changes to the orientation of the graphic to assist with understandability. However, each of the five stakeholders responded that they could hear their own voice included in the slide presentation.
Phase III. Product and Rigor

The grand member check moves a constructivist process from Phase II into Phase III. Grand member checking also allows for further negotiation of the findings if members do not agree that their perspectives are represented. In this case, The Quality Kaleidoscope was developed as the idiographic interpretation of the findings, and was included in the slide presentation. After receiving feedback from participants during the grand member check, I further manipulated the graphic in order to achieve greater understandability. It was from the slide presentation that I began to develop a case report illustrating the findings in a more narrative way (Figure 1).

The case report can take many forms, but should ultimately be a narrative description of the framework of categories as presented to and approved by the members. In order to verify that the case report is grounded in the data, I created an audit trail (Appendix D), linking each assertion in the case report with specific units of data as originally coded. Multiple drafts of the case report were submitted to reviews for “quality and viability” by the peer reviewer (Rodwell, 1998, p. 183), and were made available to the auditor for review.

The auditing process provides a last measure of quality assurance or judgment on the overall rigor of the constructivist study. The rigor of constructivist inquiry is based on two essential qualities: trustworthiness and authenticity. These dimensions of rigor might be compared to notions of internal and external validity from a positivistic frame of reference. In essence they are the characteristics that help the reader of the case report to know if what they are reading is credible and based in truth.
RESPONDING TO THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE CRISIS HERE AND NOW: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SUPERVISION

Summary with Animated Graphics for Grand Member Check

Answering the Research Questions:

1. What about supervision do local stakeholders value? and subsequently,

2. How do local stakeholders experience quality supervision?
Client Outcomes: 
The Mirror of Accountability

- Even with varying degrees of proximity to the supervisory process, stakeholders agree that outcomes for clients involved in the Central VA child welfare system should serve as the essential criteria for evaluating the quality of supervision.
- In part because supervision is based on a relationship between supervisor and supervisee, and because the work of child welfare is relational at its core, stakeholders agree that the two processes, supervision and child welfare work, have a tremendous capacity to mirror each other.
- And so, stakeholders view the current level of quality of supervision in a way that parallels, or mirrors, the way they view the current level of quality of child welfare services in Central VA.

State of 
Supervision and Service Delivery
in Central VA

- For both supervision and service delivery, stakeholders view the current level of quality as consisting of a few cases of success, a greater number of cases of failure, but with the vast majority of cases reaching only minimum standards.
Aspirations vs. Feasible Expectations

- Stakeholders hold common expectations for both quality of services provided and the quality of supervision that can be labeled aspirational, because achieving these expectations is not seen as realistically feasible.
- For example, the service delivery goal of helping children truly heal from their traumatic experience in a way that they can be free of the support of a formal system is seen as ideal, whereas keeping children safe from further harm is seen as essential, laudable and doable.
- Similarly, the supervisory example would be the way in which the goal of helping workers achieve personal and professional growth is seen as a best practice, whereas the goal of simply being accessible to workers in a crisis is seen as a significant supervisory strength within the context of our local system.

Coping with Inadequacy

- When it comes to inadequacies in supervision, stakeholders suggest that workers have developed a variety of coping mechanisms that run the gambit from turn over or turning over, to seeking out alternative forms of support and guidance, to self-advocacy, to compartmentalization.
- Yet, stakeholders collectively seem to hold ambivalence toward whether some of these forms of coping, like turnover, actually exacerbate or alleviate deficits in supervision, or simply maintain the status quo.
That which divides us...

- Stakeholders agree that one of the greatest obstacles to achieving aspirational characteristics of supervision and service delivery is the “us vs. them” culture, or intense divisions and power dynamics that obstruct critical relationships within the system.

They who hold the resources hold the power

Other significant obstacles are associated with a lack of sufficient resources, or inappropriate distribution of resources deemed as “too little, too late,” or the susceptibility of resources distribution to trends in government policy or funding streams.
That which connects us...

On the other hand, stakeholders seem to agree that the best hopes for surmounting these obstacles may be:

- strengthening community-based prevention or societal safety net that does not involve government;
- better training and education of workers and supervisors;
- a broader system of accountability based in open, empathetic, reciprocal relationships built among and between diverse stake-holding groups;
- and empowerment-based administrative management practices.

The Quality Kaleidoscope
Relationship Reflection

The supervisory relationship

The service delivery relationship

Levels of the Supervisory Experience Reflecting Levels of the Client Experience

Aspirational Supervision

Inadequate Supervision with Coping

Poor Supervision

Failing our Children

Solutions with Limited Resources & Power

Aspirations for our clients
Lessons Learned by the Researcher

And so, while there are no easy answers being generated from this project, I do believe there is some guidance on next steps.

- The greatest lesson that I take away from engagement in this process, is about the need to enhance the process of assessing performance, in a way that systematizes the input from foster parents and clients.
- Cultural divides and power dynamics are real barriers, in that they are experienced by more than one person, from different standpoints. And so, while I do not have the answer necessarily to addressing those divides at the moment, we can not ignore this issue in research or in practice.
- Transformation is a potential strategy for easing some of those divides. By engaging in a process that is taking some of the power that is currently in the hands of the government and handing it back to families and communities may be one way of loosening some of these boundaries.
- Kids need advocates! And advocacy efforts need to include breaking down cultural barriers on the behalf of the child.
- Similar kinds of team approaches at all points along the continuum of care, prevention, investigation, legal proceedings, service planning, and discharge...
The auditor for this study was Monica Leisey, Ph.D. Dr. Leisey graduated with her Ph.D. in Social Work from VCU in 2008 after completing a constructivist dissertation. After serving as adjunct faculty at VCU, Dr. Leisey is now an Assistant Professor at Salem State University. The contract between myself and Dr. Leisey was an agreement for her to conduct an audit of trustworthiness, but also to review for two dimensions of authenticity in order to test the last working hypothesis, that critical reflection is associated with consciousness-raising.

Dr. Leisey looked at several aspects of trustworthiness including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. During her review of the materials, she used several tools to conduct her audit including the audit trail provided in the case report; as well as all of the journals, field, reflective, peer reviewer, and methods; and any other forms of raw data. In this assessment, she checked behind me to ensure that I continually took steps to bound my own knowledge and to incorporate all stakeholder voices throughout the process.

The three dimensions of authenticity that she audited for were fairness, ontological authenticity, and educative authenticity. For these, she evaluated my performance as an effective facilitator/referee of the process, so that all stakeholders’ voices were equally valued. She will also look specifically to comments offered by participant stakeholders that communicate that they have an increased awareness of the complexity of supervision since participating in the inquiry. She also validated the findings with the audit trail for indications that participant stakeholders experienced an increased appreciation for the positions of other stakeholders in child welfare supervision during the inquiry process.

The fruits of Phase III’s labors, Product and Rigor are incorporated into the following chapters and in the Auditor’s Report (Appendix E). At this point, it is the readers themselves
who are responsible for determining the value and relevance of these products to their experience. It is the readers who will determine to what extent they will incorporate the findings into their future practice.
Chapter 4: The Case Report

Introduction to the Case Report

What, where and when?

The following case report centers on the question, “Who is responsible for the death of Tasha Hall?” The case of Tasha Hall takes place in Central Virginia and is reported on and discussed by the public during a time which is contemporary with the occurrence of this dissertation project. In other words, it is a “here and now” accounting of the murder of a young adult female by her boyfriend and the community’s response to it. 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. Tasha too entered care upon discovery of her abuse and neglect, spent several tumultuous years in care, and exited care only to experience continued violence and instability.

With just the snapshot of details provided in the fictional news article, Victim’s Grandmother says there is more to this story, after judge hands down murderer’s sentence, 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 on the child welfare system that was involved in Tasha’s life in an online discussion board, moderated by Nina, a character who closely mirrors the role of the real-life researcher, myself, in this dissertation project. The other four characters represent composite perspectives of the four primary stakeholding groups who were interviewed in this project as well. So while the entire case report is invented, it is inspired by
true stories and grounded in the actual data collected in this research project. This approach to the telling of the case report is supported by the suggestions of Guba and Lincoln, case report writing “resembles creative writing” that is more “novelesque than technical” (1989, p. 224).

Who?

In this case, the novel’s author and narrator played a significant role in the plot of the story as well. That is why I felt it was important for the sake of rigor to provide a preface of sorts to the story. Generally, prefaces provide awareness for the reader of the author’s intentions for writing the story. Here much of that awareness is provided in the Letter to the Editor by Nina Moderator.

In addition, because this is also a story that is fundamentally grounded in the experience of 21 individual stakeholders who participated in interviews for my research, it also became important to develop a manageable number of characters to represent their multiple perspectives. The choice to use four characters was obviously connected to the four-way classification of the actual stakeholders into four subgroups based on their perceived primary relationship to the child welfare system.

In this story, the character “Delores Worker” includes the supervisees whose primary job function involves direct and regular contact with child welfare clients. “Casey Supervisor” represents stakeholders that supervise one or more individual direct service workers, a unit of direct service workers, multiple units or those that are program/mid-level managers. “Sam Powerplayer” is aptly named, because he represents stakeholders that hold positions of formal authority or have a significant level of control over the funding and resources available to child
welfare professionals to do their work. Power players symbolized in this scenario include but are not limited to, directors of public departments of social services, executive directors and board members of nonprofit agencies, as well as elected officials. Finally, “Olive Collaborator” is a character who illustrates human services professionals that had or have relationships with child welfare clients, in which the connection is not based on abuse and neglect as the presenting problem. In other words, they play roles auxiliary to the system that of mentor, teacher or private therapist. Foster and adoptive parents (paid and volunteer) who have taken care of children who were victims of abuse and neglect, after custody had been removed from their parents, are also included in the community collaborator characterization of Olive.

However, it was important in such a constructivist re-telling to not simply reduce the stakeholder sample to its lowest common denominators. Instead, I aimed to develop enough complexity in each of the four character profiles that all the voices encompassed in a subgroup could be heard. Further as Sam, Olive, Delores and Casey reveal details of their experiences in their online commentary, the reader can see that the boundaries of what defines a subgroup cross and come mingle throughout. This choice helps to acknowledge the phenomenon of “multiple stakeholder-ship” as discussed in Chapter Three’s treatment of the sample size and characteristics. It is important that the reader consider the notion of multiple stakeholder-ship when judging the legitimacy of the assertions the fours characters make during the discussion.

There are three additional character illustrations which the reader will likely identify in this case report. 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.

Ms. Lee, Tasha Hall’s biological grandmother who is quoted as a part of the news article. While no biological grandparents participated in this study, other stakeholders who represented important, yet undervalued, natural relationships to children before and after they entered foster care did. It was data collected from these stakeholders that informed the Ms. Lee’s fictional perspective in her grand-daughter’s case. Like them, not only did Ms. Lee have a personal connection to Tasha, it is her grief at the loss of her grand-daughter that prompts her to ask questions of accountability and quality.

Similarly, the “anonymous alumnus” who supplies the final Letter to the Editor, was also derived from the perspective held by the one former child welfare client who participated in this study. While he is now an adult who holds other roles in the child welfare system, and though his case was brief and took place elsewhere in Virginia, he could speak intimately of the negative an unintended harm that can occur when a child becomes a ward of the State.

Probably the most important characterization in the following report is that which represents the standpoint of the client is that of Tasha Hall. In essence this article was written to communicate the collective idea set forth by stakeholders as what it means to “fail our children.” Not only does Tasha’s death demonstrate the ultimate example of failure, it also provides commentary on the greatest limitation of the online discussion, in that Tasha herself could not participate and make assertions as to her perspective on child welfare supervision.

*Why and how?*
The method of presentation of this case report, or the choice to use a news article, letters to the editor and an online discussion board was selected with attention to readability, but also to rigor. According to Rodwell, a key characteristic of a case report that can help the peer reviewer assess its quality is the level to which the researcher’s voice is “distinguishable from those of the participants” (1998, p. 184). Among the versions submitted to the peer reviewer for feedback, this version which utilizes popular information media and technology was determined to present the clearest boundaries between my voice and that of the local stakeholders. This discussion format was also chosen because it helps to mimic the interactive and constructed nature of the “hermeneutic dialectic.” Like in the game of double-dutch analogy in Chapter Three, the characters or players, jump in and out of the discussion adding insight that impacts the flow and rhythm of the collective group knowledge as they go.

While Nina’s initial letter to the editor introduces my motivation for exploring questions of the quality aspects of child welfare, the summaries and prompts she supplies during the discussion, help to illuminate how my understanding of quality child supervision changed over the course of the discussion. Each subsequent topic Nina selects for discussion emerges from the previous topic, and as the plot thickens, as the conversation builds on itself, in a similar fashion by which I conducted informal and formal analysis. In fact, the list of topics as follows: failing our children; child welfare supervision; the usual supervision; coping; context; obstacles and overview; outline most of primary data categories derived from the constant comparison process.

Also provided in the case report are references to the audit trail (Appendix D), which provides the pathway for connecting assertions in the case to actual data collected from actual
stakeholders in categorical structure. Most references are noted as Roman Numerals that label the section of the audit trail outline and are offset by brackets. Other references are highlighted to indicate that email entries are exact reproductions of emails sent by actual stakeholders.
Victim’s Grandmother says there is more to this story, after judge hands down murderer’s sentence

Upon exiting the John Marshall Court Building Friday, Reida Lee declares, “The case has been tried, and there is no question TJ is guilty of killing my grand-daughter, but I want make sure that the public doesn’t forget that there are many more people who are responsible for what happened to Tasha.”

The body of Tasha Hall, was found in an East Henrico apartment April 7, 2010. According to authorities, Ms. Hall died from an apparent gunshot wound to the head. During the murder trial, with details uncovered by a police investigation, prosecutors were able to describe to jurors the pattern of domestic violence between the victim and her boyfriend, TJ Harris, in the year leading up to her death. After hearing testimony from many witnesses the jury seemed to have little doubt that TJ shot Tasha after another one of their drunken altercations.

However, Ms. Lee sees a more complicated picture, when she thinks about her grand-daughter’s life and death. She describes what she thinks are too many “loop-holes” and “irresponsibility” in the system that had been supposedly protecting her grand-daughter. According to Ms. Lee, Tasha was “taken away from her mother by CPS” when she was 4 years old. Ms. Lee admits her own daughter was harsh on Tasha, doing things like using, “hot sauce in her mouth as a punishment,” but that things got much worse for Tasha after she was placed in foster care. “She was sexually abused in her first foster home, and then she bounced around so much, we could hardly keep up with where she was. Her mother didn’t make much of an attempt to stay in touch with Tasha, but I would call and call. People, the social workers, wouldn’t call me back, or they would be so rude when they did. They didn’t seem to know who I was, let alone ever ask me if I’d be willing to take Tasha in. I finally got to visit her once after she’d been placed at the home. When I saw her there, it broke my heart, she had gotten so hard. And she was just 14 years old!”

Ms. Lee says that that is why at first she didn’t report it to authorities when her granddaughter ran away from the home and showed up on her door step. She thought she and Tasha could “get along ok.” But then Ms. Lee says, it seemed like it was too late. She couldn’t do anything to control Tasha, and she started “running the streets.” Ms. Lee says Tasha eventually got pregnant and took up an on again off again relationship with TJ.

Ms. Lee’s audible sobs during the trial of TJ Harris made her raw grief obvious to observers. However, during the interview for this article, she displayed an even stronger emotion, anger, when she talked about the local child welfare system. “I want to know how this can happen,” she tries to shout but loses her voice to tears. “How could those social workers have let her be sexually abused? How could they not have seen how troubled she was and gotten her some help? How could they have let her run away and not come to look for her? They tried to say that my daughter was not a good mother to Tasha, but look how they raised her! They claimed to know what was best for her, but did they really even know her? They go around watching and judging everybody else’s parenting, but who is watching and judging them?”

When reached for comment on Ms. Lee’s complaints, a representative of Richmond Department of Social Services said, “Child welfare cases in the City are kept confidential to protect the privacy of children and families involved.”
Dear Editor:

Tasha Hall’s death is a tragedy on so many levels, and I applaud your reporter for allowing the complexity of Tasha’s life to be a significant theme in the story of her death. Having worked in child welfare and domestic violence, I’ve seen how the trap of simplicity leads to one or more of the following in response to notorious incidents like this one: 1. Complete inaction; 2. Maintenance of the status quo; OR 3. Ineffective policy strategies for change that result in future, unintended and harmful consequences.

I hope that readers will be moved on behalf of Ms. Lee to question the quality of our local child welfare system. Though I urge them to not be tempted to place blame, but to analyze the multiple perspectives of those involved in the care of our community’s children. One thing that makes this case tragic at a higher level is that our Federal Government and other experts have been declaring our national child welfare workforce in crisis at least since the 80s. We’ve known that problems with recruitment, training, and retention among workers have run rampant and have negatively affected the clients of the system. We’ve also known that child welfare supervisors, or those who might be considered responsible for the “watching and judging” of direct service workers in Ms. Lee’s words, hold a key to reform. Yet this knowledge has not been translated into better practice. There continue to be way too many stories like Tasha’s, where they system seems to have failed.

In the words of author Toni Morrison, “It doesn’t matter to me what your position is. You’ve got to keep asserting the complexity and the originality of life, and the multiplicity of it, and the facets of it. This is about being a complex human being in the world, not about finding a villain. This is no time for anything else than the best that you’ve got.”

I would like to urge readers to visit join the discussion group at http://groups.google.com/group/a-stake-in-central-va-child-welfare where they can offer their own input on Tasha’s case and others like hers. The goal of the discussion group is provide a place where those who have an interest or stake in the local child welfare system can come to conclusions about its quality based on information from multiple perspectives.

Nina Moderator

Richmond
Digest for a-stake-in-central-va-child-welfare@googlegroups.com

Today's Topic Summary

Group: http://groups.google.com/group/a-stake-in-central-va-child-welfare/topics

TOPIC: Failing Our Children?

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:30AM -0700

Please read the following attached article and respond to the question, “How is the case of Tasha Hall a failure of the child welfare system as Ms. Lee suggests?”

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:32AM -0700

Before we go blaming evil social workers who go around taking babies from people, I think it is important that we understand that there are so many levels to this thing [Vc]. By the time a child comes to my attention, like in Tasha’s case, there are a lot of people who are responsible for making sure that child stayed safe, who’ve somehow fallen down on the job [VI]. Then, by chance I get assigned to the case, I know what I am doing by this point in my career, but there are still a lot of people, policies and procedures that I have to contend with. They often get in the way of doing what I think is right, of doing what I call “real social work.” So think about how it might work if someone who has less experience than me gets the case. Who knows what can happen then [VIIcii]? In fact I’d love to tell you the story about my first job in child welfare. I was new, I had never done the work before, and my first day on the job, my supervisor handed me a case and said, “Don’t make me look bad.” Can you imagine? I know a lot of that still goes on today [IV].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:33AM -0700

I agree with a lot of what Delores says. First, about the idea that we can’t just think of this failure as starting with the social worker. I have seen many cases in which parents do awful things to their children, and they are not held accountable [Vc]. In fact, I have been in court with my foster children and seen judges let parents get off scot-free. They don’t pass down any consequences, even when everyone else can see what they did was awful and harmful, and all the folks who are supposed to be representing the best interest of the child agree that the parent is in the wrong [Va].

Next, I think Delores’ idea about what happens to new social workers when
they start working in child welfare is probably pretty accurate, according to my experience. I know that the people that do these jobs must have their heart in it, because who would do that job, in which they are so overworked and underpaid, if they didn’t believe in it [III].

But man, I want to know “who kills all the hope?” Because I have worked with a lot of experienced social workers who are mean and cynical, how do they get like that? Does that, as Delores suggests, have something to do with the supervisors [IV]? 

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:34AM -0700

I’ve had many supervisors, and most of them have been nice people—so no, I am not saying it is all their fault. But isn’t it their job to evaluate my performance and the performance of my coworkers? How can they do that when some don’t even know the names of the clients? They basically sit in front of me each week and look at my case files. What can you really tell from a case file? They are just making sure I am following policy, dotting all of my I’s and crossing all of my t’s [III].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:36AM -0700

I have to admit that I don’t think any of us supervisors are doing what we believe to be the best supervision. The easiest way I can describe how I feel about the state of supervision is that it is well, “Warehouse-y.” Meaning everybody just gets funneled through in the same way, using the same standard process, without any regard to their individual strengths or weaknesses. To me, that is a bigger problem than it may sound like it is, because if we can’t treat our employees like individuals, how can we expect them to treat their clients that way [III]?

But here’s the other thing, social workers also have to be accountable for their own actions. As a supervisor, I have worked with all different levels of social workers, with different sets of ethics, motivations, skill-levels and experiences [Vb]. And there are some who do just fine with the level of supervision I am providing now, some who would respond well to the kind of individualized supervision I aspire to, and those who are just not a good fit for the job [Va]. And in those cases, I’ve had little support from my administrators and human resources folks in trying to do something about it. I mean I had a worker who was going places during the day she shouldn’t have been, telling me she was one place and being in another. I mean, when was she doing any work? And, can you believe I had a hard time moving the system along to fire her. I had very little support and
direction from the higher ups to get it done and get it done right. Firing is a scary thing to do the first time you do it [VI].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:37AM -0700

Well one thing that would help to individualize the supervision is to get input from foster parents like me. I do know the kids, in fact, who knows the kids better? Why don’t I get input into the performance evaluation of workers? I mean I would love to talk about all the times I didn’t get a call back. You think that social workers get a bad name, what about how foster parents are treated? I rarely get asked my input and recommendations [VIlci3] and when I am given the opportunity to speak up, I am treated as if I am just trying to milk the system. I mean I try to get counseling for my foster children, and get grilled and demeaned, by those above the social workers and the supervisors [IX]. I feel like asking those people, “are you trying to save a buck or save a kid [VIlcii]?”

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:39AM -0700

It is not like child welfare can be run like a business. It is not the same scenario as when you are on hold with the cable company or something, and you are completely frustrated with the service, so you ask to speak with the supervisor. In that case the supervisor has been given the power to take $10 off your next bill or somehow make everything better. Supervisors in child welfare are subject to the system that surrounds them and dictates to them, and everyone is forced to deal with the reality of there being so few resources available to help families. Everybody is fighting for a piece of the pie. You can see that fight play out in public policy making, And once the budget is set, supervisors and social workers are forced to “mind the store [VIlcii].” I think it is a shame what Casey talks about, not getting the support he needed to fire someone who wasn’t doing their job, but that is exactly the kind of things I am talking about. He couldn’t just outright fire that worker, without six different approvals and plenty of documentation to prove that every procedure was followed. If I would have been involved in that case, I would have done everything I could to help, because when we let things like that go on, it not only wastes resources but workers like that are the ones who give the whole profession of social work a bad name. I mean trust me, there is a lot of talk out there, and I have seen it myself, that social workers only have that 9am to 5pm work ethic [IV].
And one of the problem of not having enough resources to go around is that it forces us into a system of doing evaluation using outcomes-based measurement. We’ve come to that trend because those who have the power to fund our programs—public or private want to see results for their money. My problem is “How can you really quantify a clients’ success in child welfare?” We face the same challenges as teachers with these standards of learning. Can SOLs really be the measure of a teacher’s performance? And in a system where I can barely get to know my workers and their clients, using these kinds of performance standards only furthers the warehouse-y nature of it, and further gets in the way of doing the work. I would like to have a mechanism for getting feedback from the clients and foster parents, but on the other hand [Vb], you can’t go to the extreme and have a system of accountability that is so taxing on the worker that it negatively impacts the quality. I’ve know people who have left their jobs because the accountability piece was so overwhelming, to the level that it was detrimental to their health [Va].

That’s right, and at some level we have to be accountable to ourselves and our own ethics [Vb].

But I think some social workers think safety is the bottom line for helping a kid. It seems like once they drop them off at my house, and know they are no longer being hurt their job is over. I think that is the minimum standard [Vb], and that is well below what I think the minimum standard should be. If we leave workers to their own devices, I think we may have safe kids, but not kids who are truly healing from the trauma they’ve experienced [VIII].

Right, and so if the supervisors don’t have the time to know their supervisees well or their cases; and if they don’t have the support to do something when there is an obvious problem; and if they are left to judge how resources should be best spent; then, how can they be ensuring that anything beyond safety is happening for the child [Vb]? I mean how much can we expect [VIIcii]? What really is the definition of success for these cases? Can we
be expected to ensure that when a child leaves the foster care system they
don’t get into a dangerous relationship, like Tasha [VIII]?

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:45AM -0700

Yes, but isn’t there so much more we can do to keep them from coming into
the system in the first place [Va]? And once they are in, don’t we want to get
them to the place where they don’t need us anymore[VIII]? I mean in my work, I
find its best to stop ‘fighting” the kid on what they want, because it
seems what they want most of all is to stay connected somehow to the family
from which they came. I mean look at Tasha’s case, she may not have wanted
to be with her mother who hurt her, but she wanted to be with her
grandmother. I mean Ms. Lee is right, once they are in the system we often
disconnect them from their natural support system [VIIci1], and I don’t think it is
right that for me as the social worker, to be the only permanent
relationship in a child’s life [VIII]. It is no wonder they come out desperately
seeking some kind of loving relationship, but having no understanding of
trust. In that way, I do feel that the system has some responsibility in a
case like Tasha’s [VI].

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:46AM -0700

It sounds to me like you are so many points of accountability in the
system, that we can not simply pinpoint one place in the system to lay the
blame for cases like Tasha’s. But it does seems as though you all see
Supervisors and supervision playing an critical role. In fact, you seem to
be making a strong connection between the quality of supervision and
quality of services provided to clients.

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:47AM -0700

Yes, I would even say that there is a sort of mirroring that happens. I
mean if a supervisor doesn’t treat their workers with respect, my guess is
their workers are not going to treat their clients with respect either. Or
vice versa, when a supervisor can model respectful interactions and how to
build relationships with the worker, then it helps to give the worker tools
to use with clients [V].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:48AM -0700

I think there is some truth to that. Just like it is not cool to have the
same treatment plan for the last 9 families, we need to respect the unique
gifts and abilities of the workers [V].
TOPIC: Child Welfare Supervision

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:55AM -0700

What is the profile of child welfare supervision that ends up reflecting cases like Tasha’s? What kind of supervision is needed in order to help clients achieve the kind of empowerment and success that we hope for them?

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:56AM -0700

Well, if cases like Tasha’s come out of situations like Delores described where new workers have little or no training from their supervisor [IIc], then what we need to have is supervisors who are willing to get down and really “show ‘em how it’s done.” I mean they are going to have to sit next to workers the first few times they met with a client, so that later they could say, “Now tell me why you asked that question in that way [IIb].”

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:57AM -0700

If they are going to be able to do that, they are going to have to know what they are doing themselves. I mean it is hard to trust a supervisor, who doesn’t really know what social work is, because they haven’t had that kind of training. I think if you are going to be a supervisor you need to have an MSW. It was important that supervisors have significant knowledge in child welfare [IIc].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:59AM -0700

I agree, trust is critical [IIa]. And Delores and Casey are right in that supervisors not only have to have the knowledge, but they have to be willing which they “openly share” with their workers, so that supervision be used as a conduit for sharing “the best that we know.” But workers need to not only trust that their supervisors have adequate knowledge and
skills, they also have to trust that supervisors are going to be clear with their workers about their expectations. They need to be honest and timely with their evaluation of workers performance, and be transparent about the bigger picture of management goals and motivations [lic].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 10:59AM -0700

Yes, trust and knowledge are both of great importance [IIa]. But I also would add that child welfare workers must hear a lot of awful stuff, so the ideal supervisors should be able to counsel their employees through all of that tough stuff. I imagine a lot of workers probably take their work home with them, so it can bleed over into their own well-being if they don’t have a place to vent and get support [IIb].

The other thing that I think is extremely important for supervisors to be able to do, is fill in and do the job for workers in a crunch. I mean workers are just like you and I, they get sick. I remember how impressed I was with the supervisor who was handling one of my cases, because the direct service worker position was vacant, and somebody had to work with this child and me [IIc].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:00AM -0700

Yes, on both of your points Olive. I think one of the primary roles of the supervisor is to give workers a place to rant and rave with the door shut, or to say “I am really worried, do you have any ideas [IIb]?“

But also, workers and supervisors both have to be flexible and share responsibilities. So that means, the trust has to go both ways [IIc]. I mean I want my supervisor to be able to allow me to make important decisions without a lot of oversight [IIa]. One of the best supervisors I had was so good because she alone was responsible for “accelerating my knowledge in Virginia policies,” but then when the time came, because I was able to take what she has taught me and act as supervisor in her place [IIb].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:02AM -0700

And like I said earlier, it is different for each worker. I mean older more experienced workers need more of that “sounding board” kind of supervision, and they definitely need the supervisor to help them focus on their own wellness and well-being [IIb]. For newer workers it may be more of that modeling that I described that is need or more policy training like Delores talked about. But, a good supervisor also has to acknowledge the basic need of their staff to grow and learn at any stage. We need to
“encourage ongoing training” for our workers, and monitor the workers’ progress toward meeting their own career goals and learning needs. In fact, for some workers, what they need is an advocate in their supervisor. I mean there was a time when I had to have a talk with a judge who frequently made my workers cry in court. I mean I went to that Judge directly and said, “How can we keep this from happening again?” [Ilc]

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:03AM -0700

That is right. I need a supervisor who has my back [Ilia].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:04AM -0700

That’s right, especially because many of the direct service roles involve tasks that may pose risks to workers’ personal safety. I also think that there are two dimensions of the ideal supervision that we haven’t touched on yet, that are related to everything we’ve talked about here so far. That is 1. The kind of clinical supervisory time that can be used as a place to process cases at the “etiological level” so workers can understand “root causes” of their clients’ problems [Ilb]. And that requires the supervisor to have that very specific knowledge. But also, it’s important that supervisors not only acknowledge their workers’ differences in terms of their learning and professional goals, but also in their day to day motivation. I think it is a key skill for a supervisor to be able to respect those differences and to employ motivational techniques suited to a variety of workers. Supervisors have to know themselves too, and be willing to try and learn new things. It is part of that leading by example. Supervisor are creative problem-solvers with that “can-do philosophy” naturally encourage their workers out of the “mire” of the day-to-day work. By helping people see the big picture, supervisors can help workers understand the “why this is helpful for you” perspective. Well and of course, the ideal supervisor gives positive reinforcement and takes the time to give “credit where credit is due [Ilc].”

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:05AM -0700

It sounds as though we think we know what we want from supervisors, but I am still not sure I am hearing what it actually is, right here and now, this thing we call supervision in Central Virginia.

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:06AM -0700

Well, and I am sure in this climate of limited resources like we said, it can’t be easy to get a hold of those training dollars. Supervisors
probably have to be advocates for their staff just to get them an opportunity to get training, let alone find the time to get training for themselves on what the best practices are, how to effectively manage staff, and the knowledge to do that kind of clinical supervision [IIIb].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:07AM -0700

Yes, I would agree that we kind of have to be realistic with our expectations and keep in mind the context in which supervisors work [IIIb].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:07AM -0700

Yes, I think most of us are doing the best we can with what we have [IIIb].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:08AM -0700

Yes, we are all under a lot of pressure, it just seems like that is “the nature of the beast [IIIb].”

TOPIC: The Usual Supervision

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:09AM -0700

Describe the usual supervision in Central Virginia.

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:32AM -0700

I would say the very first thing that comes to mind to describe how supervision typically is, is “crisis-oriented.” It’s like supervisors get involved to help with “immediate problem-solving,” or putting out “fires.” Especially in rural public agencies where supervisors are wearing so many different hats. They are having to “handle a walk-in,” or fill in for a sick worker, or unexpectedly make decisions in a case where “a residential suddenly want to move a kid.” Who has time to get into the deep stuff on cases? [IIIa]

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:33AM -0700

That’s right, most of the time I had very little dealings with the supervisors. I would talk mostly with the direct worker and that is how they liked it. But usually they were fine, when the social worker was out, for me to call the supervisor, especially when I was like at the Emergency Room or the Police Station [IIIa].
Well, and I might say that is an improvement on what it has been in the past. I mean I think it just became policy that all public social services departments always had to have a supervisor on call 24 hours [IIIa].

And some supervisors have more of an open-door kind of policy than others. I have seen how supervision can be very crisis-oriented much of the time, but it is also back to that idea of making sure we are following proper policy and procedure. I mean, I am lucky because I can go to my supervisor with a lot of things, and he is a nice guy who really cares about kids. I know some people don’t get regular time with their supervisors like I do, or they have supervisors who are unavailable to them. However, I am not sure how important that weekly time is when we are just kind of going through each case and just kind of doing a status update [IIIa].

I agree I think that “Time management excuse” is sometimes legitimate, but many times it is a sort of knee-jerk justification that everyone seems to buy without looking at the situation more closely [IIIb].

And if we are talking reality here, I think it’s important to talk about bureaucracy and hierarchy. I mean supervisors have manuals too thick to know inside and out, and they can’t just go out and act on their own. They have people they need to report to. I mean I know when I was in college all the academics in management were all talking about empowerment management styles, and giving workers voice. But out here in the real world it is not happening. Sometimes it is not even being talked about, but most of the time supervisors and managers know that is what they should be doing, so they act like they are listening to workers, but it is all just really lip service. And it’s not that opinions don’t really matter it’s just that there is a chain that needs to be followed” and “structures of command [IIIb].”

That is the way I feel too. And it seems to be true no matter where you are. Even when I worked in a nonprofit, it was like that. I mean we were
a national nonprofit, and so there were levels of offices, and I remember thinking it was so odd when people would refer to the headquarters office as “corporate.” I mean it didn’t seem to make sense that a nonprofit would refer to itself as corporate, but after I’d been there a while, I began to understand. It did seem like we were all just cogs in a big corporation wheel [IIIb].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:38AM -0700

Although I do think there is some of that everywhere, I definitely think that the larger public agencies seem to be more rigid and “procedure-based” than some of their smaller counterparts [VII]. I mean back to the whole idea of time management not being a good excuse...I work at a larger agency and with some recent policy changes, we are taking fewer kids into foster care, which means my case load is smaller. But I will tell you what, my supervision time is still simple case processing, just of fewer cases [VIIci1]. Like I said, I get along with my supervisor, and he listens to me and respects my opinions on cases, its just that he doesn’t challenge me to grow [IIIa].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:39AM -0700

That is what I feel like I have seen. Maybe its because I am not a social worker, and social workers see things differently than I do, but it just seems like there is too much of that nurturing, and relationship building and “having your back” like Delores said. That is nice and all, and trust me I love working with social workers, its just that it seems like that style of supervision can sometimes encourage an overall low performance standard. It can end up that workers are able to walk over the manager to the point that they are not able to manage really well [IIIa].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:40AM -0700

That does happen sometimes, but I think the biggest reason my supervision doesn’t challenge me, is that my supervisor doesn’t have the knowledge or the training to take me or my cases to the next level. He may not have the time or the willingness to help me with my own self-awareness and personal growth, but it’s a bigger problem that he doesn’t have the expertise to help me debate the causes of my clients’ problems or help me design interventions tailored to the individual clients situation [IIIa].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:45AM -0700

I agree with Delores, I think even some of the ones that have good training and education at one point in time, but once they are out in the field and
acting in the role of supervisor, they can be so isolated and insulated that they aren’t able to keep up with the best practices [IIib].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:46AM -0700

Like I said for the most part the supervisors I have come across have good intentions, and all these obstacles and problems we’ve talked about leave them in a situation where their performance is...well, just mediocre. [Illa+b]

But I also have come across a few supervisors in my time that were just awful. I mean some I wonder about why they even became social workers, because it seems like they don’t even know how to treat people [IV].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:47AM -0700

The really bad supervisors I’ve had were bad because they were just so self-interested. They were just trying to make decisions that would make them look good or get them promoted. Some of them are really just political animals [IV].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:48AM -0700

Yes, and the ones like that will do things like blame mistakes on the worker, use them like scape-goats. So the worker goes around walking on egg-shells hoping they won’t make a mistake [IV].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:49AM -0700

Haha...that sounds like a supervisor I once had. You could never tell which way was up. I think she must have had a mood disorder or something, because we just never knew how she was going to be from one day to the next [IV].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:49AM -0700

That is why I try always to be very open and up front with my staff. I don’t think it is fair to surprise them at evaluation time with all the things they’ve done wrong. Instead, we should have that open and honest conversation all along. I guess that in a way relates to trust [IIa]. Walking on eggshells may make it seem like the unit is running in an orderly fashion from the outside, but on the inside means there is no trust [IV].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:50AM -0700
Well and then you have the opposite extreme, when the supervisor is always in chaos, so their unit is always in chaos. I have seen that in some units too [IV].

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:51AM -0700

I hear you all saying that with just a few exceptions, most cases of supervision that we experience do not fall to the level absolutely poor supervision. It sounds as though we know what we would like and need out of supervision, and most of what we experience does not measure up to our ideal. However, because we understand and recognize the how the obstacles make the ideal infeasible, we simply accept mediocre supervision.

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:52AM -0700

I would say that is a good summary, but I want to point out that not everyone accepts the mediocre all of the time. In fact, when mediocre is combined with other factors that make the position dis-satisfying, then there are those of us who take steps to change our situation [IIIb].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:53AM -0700

I agree. While like Delores, I wouldn’t necessarily say it is simple acceptance of mediocrity of individuals across the board, and would say what results in our industry is an overall acceptance of adequate, or inadequate, depending on how you want to look at it, supervision [IIIb].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:53AM -0700

As someone who generally sits on the outside and observes the system, I would certainly agree that I think that is how I would characterize what I know about supervision on the inside [IIIb].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 11:54AM -0700

As someone who has been in an administrative role, that summary seems real but also frustrating [IIIb].

TOPIC: Coping

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:55PM -0700

How have we coped with the usual supervision?
Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:56-0700

That may be one of the most frustrating things about the industry, or the field of child welfare just accepting mediocre supervision as the norm, that the individual social workers’ best strategy for dealing with it is job hopping from one agency to the next [IIIci].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:57PM -0700

Which kind of exacerbates the problem, because those who stay end up getting promoted just because they have tenure, not necessarily because they have any special knowledge or skill [IIIci + ii].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:57 PM -0700

And the kids and the families are always having to get to know a new worker [IIIci].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:58PM -0700

And the agencies are always having to train new folks...over time there is a net loss in institutional or program knowledge. And when we look at the statistics, the smaller rural departments are the ones that suffer the most from a “revolving door of staff [IIIci].”

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:59-0700

Yes, but I have to admit, sometimes it has been a very good thing for me, and for the worker when they decide to leave. Sometimes it really just isn’t a good fit in personality or styles, or agency politics somehow get in the way [IIIci].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 2:30 PM -0700

I have done both. I have left an agency for another job, because I was just so unhappy where I was. And again, that decision to leave wasn’t solely based on my direct supervision. But, I have also stayed even when the supervision is poor, or average. There are other reasons to stay. Like in my case, I have topped out at the salary range...if I leave and go somewhere else, I will not get paid the same amount. And so in those situations I have learned other ways to cope. For example, I have a few colleagues who don’t work in the public sector like me, who I completely respect and seem to have more freedom to be creative
and flexible in their problem-solving approaches. So when I am faced with a situation that is really tough, that I don’t find my supervisor really helpful with, then I go to those folks, and we bounce ideas around. And I have a strong support system of friends and family that help me in that personal and professional growth piece, or just offer their emotional support when the job is really hard [llcii].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:01PM -0700

And that would be great if all, or even most workers, were that self-aware and empowered, that they could go out and seek the support that they need. But I think sometimes those that stay, and don’t get appropriate support from other channels, deal with the problems of the job by compartmentalizing. I mean I have met social workers who might as well have been accountants, because they don’t seem like they care at all. They can be talking about and dealing with the most horrific cases, and they are just, well...flat, no emotion [llcii].

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:02PM -0700

To me it sounds like you are saying there are two primary ways of coping with the usual supervision, either leaving the job or staying on the job. If you leave, there can be either positive or negative consequences, or some combination of the two. Then the same is true when folks choose to stay. Would you all say that it is impossible to determine whether the net result of coping with the usual supervision, in terms of impact on work is positive or negative?

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:03PM -0700

Yes, and mostly because it really depends on each individual situation, which has an almost indeterminable number of factors [llc].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:04PM -0700

I definitely think that is true, it really depends on each person [llc].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:04PM -0700

Yes, except that I would say that I think we all agreed earlier, that when we are talking impact on clients, the current situation isn’t good, right [V + VI]?

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:05PM -0700
Yes, I think we are saying that in the smaller picture, it is hard to tell, but in the larger picture, it is not good enough [Va].

I also think that we have to emphasize Delores’ point in this conversation, that rarely is it the case that supervision is the only reason an individual worker decides to stay or leave their job. While turnover may very well be a solution to a situation of inadequate supervision, inadequate supervision may not be the cause of the turnover. One of those indeterminable factors seems to be related to not just the individuals involved, but the context in which the situation occurs [IIIc].

TOPIC: Context

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:06:30 PM

Describe the context in which child welfare work is conducted in our area.

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:07:11 PM

Having worked with a number of agencies, I would say it is nearly impossible to characterize one big contextual environment. I mean there is such variability. I mean if you are working with a large agency with a lot of resources, the chances are you will get a good worker, who is committed to the kids they work with, and they get them the services they need. Now, in those large agencies the supervisory process is almost in-detectable from the outside. Supervisors don’t have to get involved as much, because there are enough folks to go around. Whereas, in small rural agencies, as a foster parent you might get to know the supervisor really well, because they are the ones having to transport the child to your house when no one else is available. I think in those smaller agencies, the social workers seem tighter with each other, and the supervisors are more likely to have their backs…but how much does that matter when there is not enough money to get the kids in foster care the services that they really need [VIIa]?

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:07:59 PM

When you talk about those services, I would say that really depends though too. The big city agency might have a greater number of options for services, but as a worker, we go with the agencies that we know. * As long as I have been working, there have been so many little pop-up agencies, like in the 90s when Medicaid was funding kids to stay in group homes, there were all these fly by night group homes.
I mean sometimes I wouldn’t have even heard the name of an agency until we got notice from CSA that one of them had their license revoked. And over time, some agencies have sustained over time, and built relationships with social workers, and so they continue to get the referrals. And I will be the first to say, that doesn’t mean that those kids are getting the best quality services, or definitely not the services most likely to meet their individual needs [VIIci1+XIIcii].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com>, March 17, 2012 3:08:31 PM

Like Olive and Delores say, there is such great variability out there in the environment. You’ve got public departments of social services with varying levels of success with kids, and then you have both for profit and non-profit service providers, large and small, local, state and/or national in size. And having worked in different sectors, I can’t come to a conclusion about whether any of the sectors is better than all of the others when it comes to achieving the aims at child welfare. Each has their strengths and each has their weaknesses [VIIa].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:09:32 PM

I also think Delores’ comment about the Medicaid funding is interesting. The funding streams for each of those sectors and localities is so dependent on policy decisions, and so from year to year, or administration to administration, things change, which make it even harder to characterize the current environment [IXc]. Well, and funding is not the only thing that gets changed in a democratic political system. Things like licensing standards, or other attempts by the government to control the quality among service providers, are written by or at least approved, by politicians. That may depend on what is popular at the time, or the ideology of the candidate [VIIcii].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:10:40 PM

And in a state where we have a state supervised locally administered department of social services, that oversight is impossible [IXc]. I mean we have policy that the state puts out, but the localities don’t really have to do what is in there, especially with their local dollars. Gosh lately they have even started calling that “guidance” instead of policy [VIIcii].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com>March 17, 2012 3:11:24 PM

Yes, enforcement is a problem [VIIcii].
Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com>, March 17, 2012 3:12:25 PM

And so the only constant in the Central VA child welfare is variability?

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:13:00 PM

Yes, and doesn’t that speak volumes as to why it is so hard to improve the system [VIIcii]?

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:13:42 PM

Even for those that have the heart for it [VIII].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:14:32 PM

That reminds of a documentary I watched about people with disabilities in a European community. It seemed so different there, like those people were valued in terms of their strengths, instead of their drain on society. I mean the whole community rallied around them, and so their quality of life was really pretty good, despite their disabilities. I feel like we need that here for kids, who through no fault of their own are suffering from abuse and neglect, and poverty [IXc].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> March 17, 2012 3:09:32 PM UTC-4, Sammie Playir wrote:

It’s a quandary, that is for sure. My hope is that someday we might have at least a minimum cadre of services for all families and children in every community, a stronger safety net than what we have now [VIIci1 + VIII].

I do think that that is what the state department of social services is currently trying to achieve with the current reform efforts that have been collectively referred to as “transformation”, but that like everything else is getting caught up in politics [IXc].

TOPIC: Transformation

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 3:16PM -0700

Transformation: What is it and how is it impacting the quality of child welfare work?

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> March 17 3:17:25PM -0700
Isn’t transformation the code word for moving kids out of residential facilities? If that is what transformation is, I am not all for that. I have known some kids who did really well in a residential setting, but when they were moved out into a foster family things really started to fall apart. I mean just like we talked about, there are residential treatment facilities that are really on top of things, and are open and honest with the foster parents, and others where really bad things happen. And every kid is different, so if transformation is saying that in all circumstances kids should not be staying in residential facilities, then that is not the kind of safety net I am talking about [VIIcii].

Sammie Playir <sammieplayir@gmail.com> March 17 3:18:23PM-0700

Transformation is actually a set of principles that make up a new practice model. The idea that kids generally do best in a family setting is just one of them. It’s one that I happen to agree with, but there are a whole set of other steps that need to be taken as a part of reform to make that a feasible reality for the kids who are currently being treated in residential settings [VIIc1].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> March 17 3:19:10PM -0700

Yes, my agency was one of the first in the state to undergo reform, and while pulling kids out of residential is a piece, so is trying to keep kids from coming into care in the first place, minimizing the number of moves they make once they are in the system, trying to get them adopted much more quickly, and generally just trying to do everything we can to stop the problem of kids aging out of care [VIIc1].

Casey Supervisor <casesupervisor@gmail.com> March 17 3:22:03PM-0700

Our agency is doing things like “team decision-making,” or some people call it family engagement, to try and keep kids from coming into care. This is the idea of bringing in all the people that are a part of a child’s natural support system, especially their parents, and trying to develop a plan, actually multiple plans, plans, A, B and C in order to give this child some permanency [VIIc1]. To me, the idea is similar to one I’ve seen work very well in the past, Family Drug Treatment Court. Where all the providers involved in a case sit around a table together, and try and get on the same page about what is best for the child, so we are not competing with each other, and working to defeat ourselves [VIIc2].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:23PM -0700
To a cynic it might sound like all of these things that you are talking about are really just attempts to save the system money. And if I use the one example of my teenage foster daughter, of course she wanted to go home. The reason she was brought into care was because of the very “inappropriate” relationship she had with her father. Since no one ever told her that what he was doing to her was wrong, she wanted to be with him. In fact, I was incensed when I found out the reason the social worker placed her with me, was because we lived in the same community as her father [VIIci1]. The idea was it was best for her to stay in that community? He loved like less than a mile away. That is crazy [VI]! So you know while I agree that communities should have a moral obligation to protect and support their children, when the government writes a policy like that, it doesn’t take into consideration, or make enough provisions for the atypical case[VIIci2]. I think workers themselves need to have more power to make the decisions in a case. They know the cases the best...well, actually let me go back on that a little. It is actually the foster parents who know the cases the best [VIIci3]. And I’ve been part of those kinds of group meetings you talked about, I think they call them like FAPT team or something, and I was completely disrespected for my opinion about what was best for the child. It was like if I didn’t have some letters behind my name, I didn’t know anything [IXb].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:24PM -0700

Isn’t the whole idea here for us to be working to render ourselves obsolete? I think transformation does allow for some flexibility in decision-making when implemented as intended, and gives more power to the families to decide what is best for them. I mean more than the social workers, more than the foster parents, the families themselves, the kids themselves like Delores said, know what is best for them, especially if they are given the tools and support to figure it out [VIII].

Sammie Playir <sammieplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:25PM -0700

In thinking about this I keep coming back to my belief that we live in an ambivalent society – many don’t want government “interference” but some of those same people and a lot of others become incensed when something bad happens to a child and it appears the child welfare system failed that child and family. It is the classic “child rescuer mentality” vs. “children do best when raised in their own family”

Based on my years of experience, I believe we need both – the government’s ability to act when a child is unsafe is important, but the optimum answer is to involve family and friends known to the child (to reduce the trauma)–
we have been supporting family engagement for some time now and we have a ways to go in really imbedding this practice in all communities in Virginia [IX].

I think we have in many areas of the state put the child welfare staff in an untenable situation. They are given the responsibility to protect children and/or help them achieve permanency but they are not provided the resources to achieve these goals. That may be at the root of a lot of the frustration we are hearing.

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:26PM -0700

I have seen and heard about a lot of different kinds of policy or practice reforms that are supposed to make things better in the system, but best they turn out to make little difference. At worst they have unintended consequences, like now that we have title protection, maybe we will have more social workers who actually have social work education OR we will end up just calling those folks who do the work case managers, and no change will really occur. I mean I think MSW education is really important, but to putting that kind of policy in place doesn’t necessarily encourage education [VIIci2 + ii].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:27PM -0700

And couldn’t all that time NASW spent on trying to pass title protection been spent on something more worthwhile? I mean sometimes the unintended consequence is the cost of a missed opportunity [VIIci2 + ii].

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:28PM -0700

It seems as though it is hard to determine on the whole if our policy strategies are working—and that may be because of the all the change and variability we talked about previously. So, is there a common standard of success for a child involved with the foster care system?

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:29PM -0700

Yes, I think like Casey said, it is to render ourselves obsolete. When a family comes to our attention we need to be giving the family the skills to function safely on their own. If a child ends up in care, we need to be giving them the skills to be independent of the system when they are old enough. We need to be building their support system to function without us.
I am not supposed to be the one important relationship a child has with an adult [VIII].

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:29PM -0700

I agree with those ideals, but I also think it is important for us to recognize how broken families are by the time they come to us, how much a child has been traumatized. Sometimes, “skills” and a “support system” does not equal true healing. It may take years and years for a child to recover from the trauma of something like sexual abuse, and if we don’t invest the money to help them truly heal now, we will indeed be paying for it as a society later [VIII].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:30PM -0700

I agree. I think it is fundamental, if we work to have healthy children, then every generation can be better [VIII].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:30PM -0700

That is actually a very hard concept to rally folks around. Prevention is a hard sell, because everybody is trying to protect the resources they have now, and who knows what the future holds [VIIIcii].

TOPIC: Obstacles

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:31PM -0700

What is getting in the way of us achieving these aims, of empowering clients and helping them heal?

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:32PM -0700

I think the biggest obstacle in all of this is probably the “us vs. them” mentality. Like I said, the way I was treated as a foster parent by professionals is appalling. There is the immediate assumption that I have selfish motives for trying to get kids help [IXb].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:33PM -0700

I agree. And it is not just between foster parents and workers, it’s between workers and birth families, it’s between agency and agency [IXa].

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:34PM -0700
Yes, and it’s also between worker and worker, and here in Virginia you could even say it’s between parents’ rights and children’s rights [IXc].

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:34PM -0700

I think that is a very accurate description, the “us vs. them” culture. I think that it is human nature, everyone’s existential crisis, and ultimately, I think that is a key component of good supervision, is helping workers get past that crisis of self-awareness so that they can be more empathetic and therefore more effective in their jobs...which requires a lot of work with people who we see as the “other.” One thing that supervisors have to be able to do, is acknowledge that those kinds of differences exist in people’s minds so that they can deal with them [IXa].

Sammie Playir <sammiepplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:35PM -0700

And for many supervisors, they have a lot of difficulty bringing up such topics for fear of not being politically correct. I mean there are agencies in Central VA where race is a huge factor, not only in things like disproportional representation of black children in the child welfare system, but in staffing decisions. I mean I was told directly by someone that I could run a particular agency because I was white. While that might be putting it a taboo issue on the table, it was not for the purpose of figuring out how to manage differences as Casey recommends [IXc].

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:36PM -0700

Wow, what I am hearing is that child welfare work gets at the very heart of human nature; that we have to be willing to grapple with very divisive issues if we are going to come together and develop a common goal. It also sounds as though most of the time, we are not doing that effectively—which is ultimately what sets up failures like that of Tasha Hill.

TOPIC: Overview

Nina Moderator <ninamdr8r@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:38PM -0700

After much thought and tinkering with ideas, I have come up with this visual depiction of what I believe to be a representation of how all of these topics fit together. How well do you think the attached summary answers the question, “What is Quality Supervision in Central Virginia Child Welfare?” Do you see how your voice plays into these ideas?
Sammie Playir <sammieplayir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:39PM -0700

Brilliant! I like the framework that has emerged. I do see myself. The unexpected translational aspect of reviewing this summary is that I saw my experience with the child welfare system with a new and different view.

Olive Collaborator <olivecollaborator@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:40PM -0700

I think your summary was a quite accurate reflection of the positive and negative experiences of stakeholders in the child welfare system.

Delores Wirkir <deloreswirkir@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:40PM -0700

This looks great and I certainly do see my comments coming through in the explanations you have given.

Casey Supervisor <caseysupervisor@gmail.com> Mar 17 12:41PM -0700

I could definitely hear my voice, and I think it really reflects a collective point of view.
Letter to the Editor  March 22, 2012

Dear Editor:

I want to thank Ms. Moderator for the suggestion to read and participate in the online discussion group A Stake in Child Welfare in her letter to the editor responding to the article on Tasha Hall. As someone who spent some time in foster care, I think much of what the participants on the discussion board say is valid, though it brings me to the realization of two major tragedies.

First, I want to emphasize the point made about how foster care creates an un-natural situation for children. I coordinate a group of foster care alumni, and organize an annual “reunion” of members every year. We alumni, though most of us never knew each other before we became members of the group, feel like kin to each other. In fact, we all call each other brother and sister, because it seems we all seem to mutually agree that the government was our common parent. I find that a deplorable state of affairs. The government is no parent.

Second, the A Stake in Child Welfare discussion group emphasized for me, was not in what was written there, but in what was not written there. None of the participating members in the discussion were actually clients themselves. Though there was a great deal of talk of empowerment, and it seems like the stakeholders hold respect of the input of clients, for some reason, there was no current foster youth or birth parent that felt they had a stake in this discussion. Or there could be the alternative explanation, that these folks are so disenfranchised that the discussion group was not within their feasible access.

Either way, I feel that a discussion of the quality of child welfare, or any of its components, like supervision, is incomplete without this perspective. Therefore my challenge to the community is to find a voice for these most vulnerable members of our society. What we know now more than any other point made is that Tasha’s voice has been silenced forever. She herself will never be able to tell us who or what she blames for that sad fact.

Anonymous Alum

Central Virginia.
Chapter 5: Answers and Implications

Lessons Learned

The above case report provides indications that learning has occurred within and among the participants and the researcher. In addition, the goal of publishing a case report is to set forth answers to questions that have the capacity to spark learning and even consciousness-raising within and among its readers. Besides the case report itself, the constructivist inquirer is able to provide an account of their own learning which may rouse similar reactions in readers (Rodwell, 1998). The primary lesson I learned was one of context and complexity. What I know now is that understanding the quality of supervision is more than just trying to develop a definition and a description. It is more than understanding its form and function. Instead understanding the value and quality of supervision is the same as understanding a highly context dependent phenomenon, and only becomes more intricate in a context like child welfare. Since there is still so much to know about what constitutes success, roles and responsibilities of stakeholders, reasonable expectations and overall societal value of child welfare, there are many key questions that must be answered along with any analysis of the quality of child welfare supervision. This study should compel social work practitioners, administrators, educators and researchers, to seek greater knowledge in 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.
The Welfare of Children in Supervision

Through this research I discovered that knowing how stakeholders value supervision meant knowing how they value the child welfare system itself. In this instance, the context of child welfare supervision is a child welfare system with which they are extremely displeased. In turn, it seemed stakeholders could not parcel out a collective experience of supervision with which they were wholly pleased. Instead, they viewed supervision as largely dysfunctional because it has not in their experience served its highest function of accountability. Though it sounds rhetorical, here the answer to the question, “What about child welfare supervision do stakeholders value?” is “the welfare of children, of course.”

The assumption that stakeholders both implied and stated explicitly during their interviews was that supervision was one layer in a stratum of accountability practices that in the end are failing our children. In the re-telling of specific case examples where they perceived children to have suffered before, during and after their involvement with the local system, stakeholder passion swelled. This was especially true of the community collaborator group. One teacher told the story of a refugee student who seemed caught in a cultural disconnect. The teacher became an advocate and friend of the young man who seemed to keep getting into trouble at school because he didn’t understand American norms and mores. After being removed from his abusive sister’s care by Child Protective Services, the boy bounced around from residential placement to foster home to residential placement. Because the teacher kept in contact with him during much of this time, she could report on several instances during his case in which the boy’s rights were violated. She knew at one point he’d been injured while he was being physically restrained by a residential worker. She also became aware that he was
being over medicated to control his behaviors. Finally, she found out that it was a fight with the staff at his final group home that propelled him to disappear from care without a trace.

A young first time foster mother described the situation of the teenage girl with cognitive impairment who came to live with her and her husband. The foster mother expressed her own feelings of personal failure, but felt that no one recognized the total mismatch of her experience with the level of need for this girl they placed with her. She made repeated attempts to secure sufficient supports to help the girl succeed in school to no avail. She pled for help with supervision and transportation of the girl while she and her husband worked full-time jobs to sustain their home, and got no help. She spent much of the time during the girl’s stay rescuing her from dangerous gang and drug related situations. And this wasn’t her only story of children for whom poor decisions were made. By the time of our interview, this young foster mother had all but given up hope of providing foster care for any child in the future.

Maybe the most poignant of the stories told by stakeholders of system failure was that told by the mentor of a boy who spent the majority of his childhood growing up in a boys’ home. This mentor who essentially mothered this man into young adulthood talked about the pain of having to organize and attend his funeral after he was murdered by his “best” friend and roommate. What she seemed to cling to amidst her long-felt grief was that she had been able to be so close to him, that to him, a family-less child, she had been family. And as his family she helped to make his life full, even if cut painfully short.

That is why the case of Tasha Hall and the virtual discussion that ensues starts where it does, with an example of an ultimate failure in which it is extremely difficult to lay blame at the feet of any one specific part of the system. There are many arguments to be made for blaming
everyone involved. 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.

Like in the real life interviews, the online discussion that is prompted by Tasha’s case eventually begs the questions, “what aims is the system trying to achieve?” and “are all of us who consider ourselves stakeholders on the same page about those aims?” Multiple stakeholders pointed to how a lack of consistency among stake-holding groups as to how to define success actually created loop-holes in the layers of accountability. There was a marked distinction for stakeholders between keeping a child physically safe, and supporting them in the process of healing from traumatic experiences. While the group could achieve consensus around a collective desire for children to experience true healing, a swirling of contrasting views came to light around the government’s responsibility toward achieving that end. While there may be a continuing difference between the stakeholders holding opposing ideologies, that point seemed less relevant than the point that the government has been largely ineffective in its current role. And so the group seemed to conclude, that strategies should be pursued to decrease the need and level of government intervention in cases of abuse and neglect.

In the end, it was apparent that we have a situation in which supervision can 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 we have in Central Virginia seems to be a case of “The Usual Supervision.” The descriptor “the usual” is selected here to refer to its wide occurrence,
but is also used to connote its inadequacy. No stakeholder indicated any experiences of outstanding supervision which met their personal or collective notions of excellence.

Alternatively, workers referred to their supervisors as “nice,” “genuine,” or having the best interest of children at heart. And nearly all stakeholders imagined supervisory qualities that would be ideal, but which they’d never or rarely encountered. They hoped for supervisors who had strong leadership and motivational skills, who possessed creativity and an affinity for problem-solving. They desired time with their supervisor that was thought-provoking, and contained many teaching moments. These traits were dimensions of quality supervision that the group saw as the most able to promote their own professional resilience, but also the most capable of surmounting the tremendous odds against having clear success for children.

Stakeholders hold common expectations for both quality of services provided and the quality of supervision that can be labeled aspirational, because achieving these expectations is not seen as realistically feasible. For example, the service delivery goal of helping children truly heal from their traumatic experience in a way that they can be free of the support of a formal system is seen as ideal, whereas keeping children safe from further harm is seen as essential, laudable and doable. Similarly, the supervisory example would be the way in which the goal of helping workers achieve personal and professional growth is seen as a best practice, whereas the goal of simply being accessible to workers in a crisis is seen as a significant supervisory strength within the context of our local system.

**The Vicious Cycle of the Usual Supervision**

Another area of learning from this inquiry with significant implications is that which reinforces supervision’s link to turnover previously established by the literature. However,
what was described by stakeholders in this case was not nearly as simple as cause to effect nor antecedent to phenomenon. Instead it might be said that there exists a sort of boomerang relationship between the two phenomena, of which the resounding reverberation can be felt throughout the child welfare system.

When workers turnover at the rate they currently turnover stakeholders seemed to experience it as leaving an overall competence void in the retained staff at an agency. And it is from this pool of incompetence with tenure-based promotion that rank and file social workers rise to supervisory roles. Supervisors themselves talked of being promoted before they were ready, because they were generally reliable and responsible. Administrators talked about not firing poor supervisors simply because their policy and procedural knowledge would be hard to replace. And so 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**

The third lesson of importance was about the picture of child welfare policy making in Virginia painted by stakeholders. They 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 children involved in the child welfare system, their families and society as a whole. 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?”
Despite differing ideas as to the origins and motivations of child welfare reform in our state, all stakeholders seemed to feel that “Transformation,” and broad policy changes like it have extremely limited capacity to respond to the individualized needs of children. Ironically, the same kind of criticism was leveled at the usual supervision, that it was in fact too “warehouse-y.” This group seemed to say that that the Utopian principle of doing the most good for the most people in any kind of policy making, denigrated the suffering of the few.

**Us Vs. Them**

Very close to the lesson I learned about the majority’s value over the minority or individual, was the one I learned about the overshadowing culture of child welfare in Central Virginia. The very first stakeholder I interviewed was a foster parent, and she was the one that introduced what she called an “us vs. them” culture in the Central VA child welfare system. When probed with, “so the workers are the ‘us’ and the foster parents are the ‘them’?” She clarified, “actually any parents, biological and foster parents...like [we parents] don’t know what [we] are doing. Like [the social workers] are the only ones who know what they are doing.”

Throughout the emergent interview process, this idea that there are those who are seen as system insiders and those who are seen as outsiders continued to be supported. However, additional dividing lines were described by participants that crossed the formal boundaries of the system. Lines were drawn related to race, culture, socio-economic status, education, ability, purposes and power. What was fascinating to note during the discussion of the us vs. them culture, was that while everyone agreed that there was a strong us vs. them culture, only one participant seemed to view themselves as one of the “us,” or the ones holding power. And even this participant claimed extreme limits on her power within the system. In fact, most
participants could claim having felt victimized at one time or another by the divided culture.

What struck me in a profound way was the idea that it is victims who are charged with helping victims of abuse and neglect. In many senses, this study demonstrates that it is those without much power in the system (whether through self-perception or societal definition) who are attempting to empower its most vulnerable stakeholders, the clients.

**Missing Voices, Missing Answers**

Finally, it is exactly those vulnerable stakeholders, who 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.

I believe it is an interesting parallel, that as a researcher I was unable to fully recognize and address the barriers faced by those potential participants in the same way it is suggested we as central VA child welfare stakeholders fail to provide sufficient resources to families, birth and foster, to protect and care for their children.

For me, the most compelling implications of this study for social worker as a profession were linked this emphasis on client-level outcome accountability and on us vs. them. These implications are generally phrased as additional questions that need asking and are outlined in the following section.
Implications

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

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 supervision's 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.

For educators, it was obvious that workers and supervisors alike had expectations for what supervision should be like. One of the likely culprits for setting these expectations is likely
social work education. So my questions for educators are, “Are we teaching social work
students to expect a high level of quality in supervision without exposing them to real world
supervisory contexts? Are we equipping them with strategies to deal with circumstances that
don’t meet their expectations? Have we left them thinking that leaving their job or looking for
friends and coworkers to fulfill their unmet supervisory needs are their only two options?”

Many of the stakeholders here seemed to value what a social work education can bring
to child welfare work. I, too, have worked with many BSWs and MSWs that can better
articulate and act upon their understanding of the human condition in ways that are far
superior to their untrained colleagues, when dealing with incidents of abuse and neglect. It
seems to me they are much less likely to blame the victim, and more likely to build strong
working relationships with their clients. Generally, they seem adept at implementing essential
micro-level interventions, and demonstrate an awareness of the pivotal role that a client’s
environment has played their problematic predicaments.

However, I am less convinced that social work students are competent in applying more
mezzo and macro level interventions to their clients’ service plans. I am also afraid that they
are completely unprepared to apply those same types of interventions when attempting to
understand and alleviate their own circumstances. In so far as the stakeholders in this study
seemed to perceive themselves as victims, they also did not describe ways in which they could
gain power for themselves or ways in which they could advocate for change in the usual
supervision.

I believe it is critical that social work curriculum helps students to see themselves as
agents of change in their work environment. To me what is implied by the findings of this study
is that more classroom time should be spent analyzing organizations, giving students the opportunity to examine concepts like how power is divided in an organization, both formally and informally, or how both written and unwritten policies are implemented in an agency. In addition, it seems that more “lab work” is needed that allows students practice skills like drafting new performance evaluation policies, or building coalitions of coworkers for a cause, or confronting or reporting unfair personnel practices. They should come away from their education not just with raw idealism, but with practical knowledge about how to harness and wield their own power to achieve their ideals.

For researchers, there are two important implications that came out of this study for me and both are related to the role and stature of child welfare clients in research. First, this study seems to show how cause and effect research, experimental design, laboratory isolation of variables might create an artificial separation in the relationship between administration and client-level outcomes. Especially in evaluative research, it seems that theories and methods that capture complexity, pathways, cycles or even shifting kaleidoscopic visions of the interactions among all levels of stake-holding groups might be better suited. Next, since there continues to be a dearth of research that incorporates the voices of clients themselves in the child welfare workforce crisis, researchers must continue to be creative and realistic in recruiting client participation. Clients face real world challenges and concrete forms of oppression that limit their ability and desire to share their perspectives.

While gaining access to underserved and vulnerable groups like foster children is difficult, and the measures taken by researchers to do so are rightfully given great scrutiny by institutional review boards, there is so much that can not be known by science without them.
Therefore, not only are we bound by social work ethics to include their voice in research endeavors about child welfare, there is also an academic imperative that seek their consultation in the same endeavors.

**Conclusion**

In order to bring to light a stronger understanding of what constitutes quality in regard to child welfare supervision, this dissertation attempted to ask locally specific stakeholders what they value about supervision and to evaluate the quality of their experiences with supervision. Ultimately, my personal understanding about the quality of supervision in Central Virginia child welfare has been altered and extended in a way that well-exceeded my expectations. And, in the end, there was evidence that participating in this process also helped to bring greater knowledge to the stakeholders themselves.

Aiding and abetting these successful outcomes was the study’s constructivist design. The subjective ontology and emergent features of this inquiry allowed varying and multifaceted perspectives on questions previously treated by much of the literature as those with one-dimensional answers. Here we’ve come to understand quality supervision not simply as a prescriptive set of characteristics applicable to the average, but instead a moving kaleidoscope of mutually reflective attributes inextricably linked to its context.

Next to the context of a system, like that in Central Virginia, wherein stakeholders do not see the value of healing children being reflected in its outcomes, the image of supervision appears lack-luster for the same reason. The supervisory experiences of stakeholders were evaluated as mediocre in many ways, but intolerable in light of the experiences of vulnerable children who can’t afford to receive mediocre services.
To these stakeholders the clear divisions and conflict between players in the system are evidence that some other values have taken priority over the healing of children. Stakeholders suggested these values ranged from the simplest, instinctual self-preservation to the most calculated goals of maintaining control over and access to money and resources. It is in this analysis of conflicting system of actors where it seems that the findings of the research moved out of Burrell and Morgan’s interpretive paradigm in which its questions could be located (1979), into Guba’s critical paradigm (1990). Similar to my own philosophical perspective at the onset of this project, it does appear that the stakeholders who chose to participate clearly view power and conflict inherent in the nature of our shared reality. However, unlike my own prior feminist theoretical standpoint or those of the authors that informed my perspective like Finn (1990), it does seem that stakeholders do not clearly view patriarchy as a primary structural source of conflict, when it comes to the failings of child welfare and child welfare supervision. Instead, the picture they painted of a pervasive us vs. them culture might be more consistent with theories of the inter-sectionality of oppression, where gender collides with many other group distinctions like race and social class (Ritzer and Goodman, 2004). Wherever the lines are drawn, critical reflection and empowerment-based approaches to supervision, that examine and act on oppressive structures like those presented by Fook (1999), Leitz (2008, 2009, 2010) and Caringi, et al., (2008)’s have valid applications in this paradigm, and may be well suited to bring about change in the child welfare workforce crisis here in Central Virginia, and elsewhere.
REFERENCES


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Appendix A

Interview Guide with Foreshadowed Questions

Describe how you see yourself as a **stakeholder in child welfare/foster care supervision** in this area.

- **Role** or relationship to child welfare system?
  
  o Child Welfare Professionals –
    
    ▪ supervisor/supervisee/administrator?
    
    ▪ level of education?
    
    ▪ public or private agency?
  
  o Former Clients–
    
    ▪ former child/adult client?
      
      o for adult clients – birth parent/foster parent/adoptive parent/kin caregiver?
  
  o Community–
    
    ▪ family member of, or significant relationship with, CW professional or client?

- **Values/Stake In/Feelings** about?
  
  o Child welfare/foster care system?

  o Supervision?

What have your **experiences with the child welfare system** been like?

- **Positive/valued aspects?**
• Positive/valued aspects?
  o empowerment?
  o organizational culture?
  o quality of life?
    o professional – satisfaction, resilience, commitment, tenure?
    o personal – work/life balance?

• Negative aspects?
  o oppression?
  o organizational culture?
  o quality of life?
    o professional – burnout, fatigue, traumatic stress, turnover/intent?
    o personal – work/life imbalance, role stress/confusion

Describe what quality supervision means to you?

• Values?

• Ethics?

• Ideals?
Appendix B

RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

TITLE: Responding to the child welfare workforce crisis here and now: A constructivist approach to understanding supervision.

This consent form is used to solicit your permission to participate in a study on child welfare supervision. Some of the language used in the form may be words that you do not fully understand. If this should occur, please ask the study staff to explain any words that you do not clearly understand. You may take home an unsigned copy of this consent form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision. Your participation is completely voluntary, and your decision to participate will have no consequence for employment, or present or future receipt of child welfare services.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge about what quality supervision means to stakeholders in the Greater Richmond child welfare system. The researcher is a Doctoral Candidate at the VCU’s School of Social Work and is conducting this project as dissertation research.

You are being asked to participate in this study, because you are or have been a stakeholder in the Greater Richmond child welfare system.

The following terms and their definitions are provided to help you understand the purpose of this project:

Greater Richmond Child Welfare System – the numerous public and private agencies which can maintain custody of child victims of abuse or neglect, in the City and its surrounding counties.

Stakeholders – people who have come into contact with the child welfare system in a way that has been meaningful in their lives. There are many situations in which a person may have come into contact with the child welfare system. Some examples of stakeholders could be child welfare workers, a child welfare supervisors, a volunteer with a child welfare agency, a local government official, or a client of a child welfare agency.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT

If you decide to be in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form after you have had all your questions answered and understand what will happen to you.

As a participant, you will be involved in a process that seeks to build understanding among persons, including the researcher, who have a vested interest in a particular topic. Therefore, it is a shared process of gaining knowledge. As a participant you will be asked to share what you know about the topic and how you came to know it. Then, the de-identified information you’ve shared will be checked and analyzed by the researcher as well as other participants in the study. In addition, at various points throughout the
study you will have the opportunity to learn what knowledge the researcher and other participants of the study have gained about the topic and how they gained it. The goal is for all of the participants and the researcher to have a better, deeper understanding of the topic at the end of the process.

In order to achieve this goal, the constructivist data collection portion of this study will begin with a face-to-face, interactive, open-ended interview with one of the participants. After the data from that interview is collected and analyzed by the interviewer/researcher, the interviewer/researcher will then conduct another interview with another participant, building on the information collected from the first interview. This process of subsequent interviewing will continue until little or no new information is being collected. It is likely that after your initial interview has been completed the interviewer/researcher will contact you to ask follow-up questions or to clarify/confirm new data as it is being collected. In addition, at the end of the interview process when the data from all of the interviews has been collected and analyzed the interviewer/researcher will ask you to review the findings. At that time, you will be given the opportunity to give feedback as to your sense of the accuracy and relevance of the findings. While the initial interview will be scheduled with you, the timing of the follow-up and final contacts will be determined during the data collection process.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
It is expected that participating in this study will NOT create significant risk of harm to the participants. Likewise, it is expected that participating in this study will NOT create significant discomfort to you the participants. However, because of the nature of the constructivist process, it is difficult to determine exactly what subjects will come up with during the data collection process. Participants are free to disclose their discomfort to the researcher without penalty and/or to end their participation in the study at any point.

BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS
While this research, like most research is not designed to directly benefit the participants, because of its constructivist design this study is likely to produce the benefit of learning for you and other stakeholders. If you find yourself learning from this process you will be able to take your learning from this process and apply it in any way in which you see fit.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY
The researcher in this study will take steps to protect your identity by taking the following steps:

1. When sharing data from this study with other participants or when disseminating the findings of this study, your name or any identifying information about you will not be disclosed.
2. You will be able to select a location for your interview to take place that will be private and separate from other potential participants of the study.

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3. Any written notes taken at the time of interview will be coded so as not to contain your name or any of your identifying information. Codes and their meanings will only be known the researcher.

It is important for you to recognize that the information that you share with the interviewer/researcher will be shared with other participants in the study. In this study design, that process may be referred to as “member checking” (Rodwell, 1998, p. 165). Throughout the member checking process, the researcher will make every effort to ensure that your data will not be identified as you being the source.

It is also important for you to know that there are a few exceptions to confidentiality by which the researcher must abide: 1). The researcher must report to the appropriate authorities any situation in which she suspects child abuse or neglect is occurring, and 2). The researcher must report it if she becomes aware that you are a danger to yourself or another person.

**Reference**


**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

Your participation in this study may be stopped at any time by the researcher without your consent. The reasons might include:
- the study staff thinks it necessary for your health or safety;
- you have not followed study instructions;
- the sponsor has stopped the study; or
- administrative reasons require your withdrawal.

If you leave the study before the final scheduled visit, the researcher will make every effort to remove the data that you have already submitted from the final findings.

**QUESTIONS**

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

Abigail Kauffman Wyche, MSW
PhD Candidate
VCU School of Social Work
1001 West Franklin Street
P.O. Box 842027
Richmond, Virginia 23284-2027

Jenny L. Jones, PhD
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E-mail: s2aakauf@vcu.edu  804-828-0732/office
                                      804-828-0716/fax
                                      jijones2@vcu.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact:

Office for Research
Virginia Commonwealth University
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 113
P.O. Box 980568
Richmond, VA 23298
Telephone: 804-827-2157

You may also contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach the research team or wish to talk to someone else. Additional information about participation in research studies can be found at http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm.

CONSENT
I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.

Participant name
(Printed)

Participant signature

Date

Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent
(Printed)

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent

Date

Principal Investigator Signature (if different from above)

Date

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Appendix C - Audit Trail Key

I. Multiple Stakeholdership

[I9EDp39#3, I9EDp39#1, I9EDp39#7, I9EDp39#4, I9EDp39#2, I9EDp39#5, I2BDp8#2, I4IRp15#3, I4IRp15#1, I15CPp67#46, I14CPp62#41, I11SWp47#1, I8SPp33#2, I8SPp33#3, I5SWp20#1, I14CPp60#4, I7SWp30#25, I7SWp30#26, I11SWp47#5, I15CPp69#26, I7SWp29#4, I7SWp29#1, I7SWp29#11, I8SPp35#42, I8SPp35#47, I8SPp33#4, I8SPp33#7, I8SPp33#5, I8SPp33#12, I8SPp33#6, I12PMp52#5, I14CPp60#1, I14CPp60#2, I15CPp66#23, I12PMP54#51, I2BDp8#11FPp4#36, I2BDp10#31, I1FPp4#37, I10EDp43#4, I18FPp79#1, I18FPp79#2, I1FPp2#1, I1FPp7#73, I16FPp71#25, I13SPp56#19, I6PMP27#57, I11SWp47#2, I8SPp33#1, I19FPp84#10, I13SPp57#21, I11SWp47#3, I5SWp23#60, I7SWp29#9, I7SWp29#10, I13SPp56#1, I13SPp56#2, I6PMP24#1, I20SPp87#2, I20SPp87#3, I20SPp87#1]

II. Aspirational Supervision

a. The Rules

[I15CPp68#66, I10EDp45#40, I8SPp37#66, I6PMP27#49, I5SWp21#28, I8SPp36#56, I10EDp43#10, I10EDp43#2, I10EDp44#23, I10EDp46#48, I8SPp35#38, I11SWp50#69, I10EDp45#39, I12PMP55#51, I3EDp13#23, I3EDp12#9, I3EDp12#6, I3EDp12#13, I3EDp12#17, I3EDp13#19, I3EDp13#18, I3EDp13#27, I1FPp2#3, I3EDp13#31, I3EDp13#33, I3EDp13#37, I2BDp10#41, I2BDp10#32, I9EDp39#9, I20SPp88#24, I20SPp88#11, ]
b. The Content

c. The Characteristics
III. Inadequate supervision with coping

Characteristics

Justification
a. Coping

i. Turnover [I13Sp56#18, I13Sp56#17, I15Cp66#20, I13Sp56#11, I13Sp56#16, I13Sp56#20, I9Edp41#51, I2Bdp8#4, I9Edp41#64, I14Cp62#31, I16Fp71#27, I2Bdp10#39, I2Bdp10#37, I15Cp65#14, I8Sp37#74, I13Sp56#6, I6Mmp25#19, I8Sp35#44, I8Sp38#75, I10Edp44#27, I3Edp13#20, I4Ir16#26, I16Fp71#42, I12Pm52#8, I5Sw22#39, I11Sw47#16, I9Edp42#68, I5Sw22#41, I14Cp62#48, I14Cp62$49, I12Pm55#60I14Cp62#50, I8Sp33#11, I8Sp33#8, I12Pm55#60, I11Sw47#7, I11Sw50#70, I11Sw49#53, I5Sw20#13, I4Ir19#91, I4Ir16#27, I13Sp57#25, I16Fp72#47, I7Sw31#40, I8Sp35#37, I12Pm55#54, I16Fp72#46, I9Edp41#44, I9Edp41#45, I12Pm55#54, I18Fp79#13, I9Edp41#48, I9Edp41#46, I9Edp41#50, I9Edp42#66, I8Sp37#79, I7Sw31#41]


IV. Poor Supervision

V. The Mirror of Accountability

a. Need for Greater

b. Types of Standards/Methods of Measurement

c. Levels of Opportunity for Accountability
VI. Failing Our Children

VII. Feasible Solutions in Context
a. Agency Differences

\[i4IRp18\#80, i4IRp18\#72, i4IRp18\#74, i4IRp18\#94, i4IRp18\#75, i4IRp17\#62, i4IRp17\#63, i4IRp17\#61, i4IRp15\#51, i4IRp15\#43, i4IRp16\#32, i4IRp15\#35, i4IRp16\#24, i14CPp63\#59, i4IRp15\#22, i4IRp16\#23, i4IRp16\#25, i14CPp63\#53, i6PMp24\#7, i14CPp62\#29, i14CPp60\#51, i6PMp26\#35, i6PMp27\#55, i6PMp24\#8, i19FPp86\#24, i19FPp86\#25, i19FPp84\#12, i19FPp84\#7, i13SPp58\#47, i13SPp58\#45, i13SPp58\#43, i13SPp56\#13, i13SPp56\#12, i13SPp56\#10, i13SPp56\#8, i16FPp70\#11, i18FPp80\#31, i13SPp56\#7, i16FPp70\#8, i12PMp54\#59, i12PMp54\#46, i12PMp54\#57, i12PMp54\#58, i12PMp54\#47, i18FPp80334, i18FPp79\#6, i3EDp12\#4, i14CPp61\#27, i9EDp39\#6, i2BDp8\#5, i11SWp48\#26, i10EDp44\#15, i10EDp44\#21, i10EDp44\#26, i8SPp33\#15, i8SPp33\#17, i8SPp33\#18, i8SPp34\#20, i8SPp34\#21, i8SPp34\#27, i8SPp34\#28, i12PMp53\#22, i12PMp53\#24, i12PMp52\#26, i12PMp54\#46, i12PMp54\#58, i12PMp52\#11, i12PMp53\#23, i12PMp52\#15, i12PMp54\#57, i12PMp52\#29, i2BDp10\#30, i15CPp68\#67, i7SWp29\#8, i7SWp29\#2, i7SWp29\#7, i7SWp29\#5, i55Sp23\#54, i7SWp29\#3, i17FPp76\#6, i11SWp48\#22, i4IRp18\#82, i4IRp18\#83, i20SPp88\#17, i20SPp87\#4, i9EDp40\#26\]

b. Variance and Trends in Private Service Delivery [i11SWp48\#36, i12PMp53\#31, i11SWp48\#35, i11SWp48\#37, i8SP35\#35, i8SP35\#32, i8SP35\#36, i11SWp48\#33, i14CPp64\#79, i11SWp47\#42, i11SWp47\#40, i11SWp47\#41, i11SWp47\#39, i8SP37\#68, i8SP37\#71, i8SP37\#69, i8SP35\#34, i12PMp53\#10, i12PMp54\#47, i2BDp8\#3, i15CPp67\#48, i15CPp67\#47, i9EDp41\#61, i9EDp41\#60, i9EDp41\#59, i7SWp29\#18, i55WP21\#24, i55WP21\#18, i55WP21\#25, i55WP21\#27, i55WP21\#19, i55WP21\#21, i4IRp19\#92, i4IRp17\#66, i4IRp15\#48, i4IRp15\#46, i4IRp15\#44, i4IRp15\#45, i4IRp15\#47, i4IRp15\#21, i14CPp64\#80, i14CPp61\#23, i14CPp64\#81, i14CPp64\#77, i14CPp60\#20, i1FPp2\#8, i8SP34\#31, i13SPp58\#52, i13SPp58\#44, i13SPp58\#46, i13SPp56\#48, i13SPp57\#24, i13SPp57\#27, i13SPp56\#9, i6FPp71\#30, i16FPp71\#29, i3EDp13\#22, i8SP34\#29, i8SP34\#30, i8SP37\#67,
c. Ideas for Change in the Public Sector
   
   i. Strategies

   1. Transformation

   
   2. Changes to Current Direct Service & Supervision Model

   3. Involving and Supporting Foster Parents and other important child relationships
i. Limitations

ii. Limitations

VIII. Aspirations for Our Clients
IX. *Us vs Them*

a. Prevalent types of Social Distance [I18FPp81#50, I16FPp70#17, I6PNp28#72, I6PMPp28#74, I1FPp6#69, I1FPp6#67, I4IRp15#42, I15CPp65#3, I18FPp79#3, I1FPp5-6#59, I4IRp16#34, I15CPp66#22, I16FPp72#52, I16FPp71#26, I13SPp56#63, I13SPp59#62, I9EDp41#58, I18FPp82#56, I16FPp70#16, I16FPp70#20, I16FPp70#21, I16FPp71#31, I16FPp71#33, I16FPp71#35, I16FPp71#39, I16FPp71#32, I16FPp71#41, I16FPp72#55, I13SPp57#29, I13SPp58#51, I13SPp56#53, I13SPp59#56, I13SPp56#66I19FPp84#2, I19FPp84#4, I17FPp77#26, I1FPp6#68]

b. Means of Separation [I4IR15#6, I4IRp193100, I4IRp15#7I, I4IRp19#88, I4IRp19103, I9EDp41#41, I15CPp66#28, I5SWp21#30, I15CPp66#19, I9EDp40#37, I9EDp41#62, I10EDp44#22, I4IRp15#29, I4IRp19#97, I1FPp6#66, I15CPp68#55, I9EDp40#40, I9EDp40#36, I18FPp81#40, I18FPp79#7, I18FPp80#18, I18FPp82#51, I18FPp82#53, I16FPp70#2, I16FPp70#15, I13SPp57#30, I13SPp59#57, I13SPp58#54, I4IRp18#79, I9EDp39#21, I17FPp77#15, I17FPp77#13, I14CPp63#60, I14CPp63#61, I1FPp6#64, I7SWp32#51, I16FPp72#51, I18FPp79#9I6PMPp26#33, I1FPp2#9, I1FPp3#13, I4IRp15#20, I5SWp22#37, I15CPp68#54, I5SWp22#36, I9EDp40#38, I15CPp67#42, I15CPp67#43, I17FPp76#1, I4IRp18#84, I4IRp19#93, I2BDp10#40]

c. Virginia Politics [I7SWp29#34, I7SWp30#35, I7SWp31#38, I8SPp33#14, I9EDp41#54, I9EDp41#56, I15CPp65#7, I15CPp65#8, I15CPp67#53, I15CPp66#29, I7SWp31#48, I5SWp21#33, I5SWp21#32, I10EDp43#8, I4IRp19#99, I14CPp63#70, I14CPp63#71, I14CPp64#78, I14CPp63#62, I14CPp63#64, I14CPp63#63, I14CPp60#7, I7SWp29#32, I7SWp31#44, I7SWp31#46, I7SWp31#43, I15CPp68#63, I6PMPp24#13, I6PMPp26#34, I6PMPp27#62, I19FPp86#33, I19FPp86#37, I19FPp86#26, I19FPp84#16,
Entries that are highlighted indicate that they include direct quotes from grand member check.
Appendix D

Auditor’s Report

RESPONDING TO THE CHILD WELFARE WORKFORCE CRISIS HERE AND NOW: A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING SUPERVISION

Abigail Wyche
Audit Conducted by Monica Leisy
March, 2012

Purpose of the Audit

The purpose of this audit is to assess the rigor of Abigail Wyche’s final report for her dissertation entitled: Responding to the Child Welfare Workforce Crisis Here and Now: A Constructivist Approach to Understanding Supervision. Assessing the rigor of a constructivist inquiry requires examining the trustworthiness and authenticity of the final report. The dimensions of trustworthiness assessed by this audit include: confirmability, credibility, dependability, and transferability. Authenticity dimensions assessed included: fairness, ontological, and educative authenticity. The guidelines for performing this audit were constructed from Naturalistic Inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), Linking Auditing and Metaevaluation (Schwandt & Halpern, 1988) and Social Work Constructivist Research (Rodwell, 1996).

Preparing for the Audit

Prior to the beginning of Abigail’s dissertation process, she and I had the opportunity to talk about her choice of methodology and what that would mean in terms of the types of questions she could ask and what she would learn. At that time, she was uncertain of which methodology would be the best match for the questions she was interested in asking. When she asked me via email to be her auditor for a constructivist inquiry, I was interested in seeing what direction her project took her. When her documents were prepared for the audit process, she sent me electronic copies as well as hard copies to use for the audit process.

Process:

The audit process included reading Abigail’s reflexive journal, methodological journal (which included her peer reviewer’s journal), grand member check, and final report. While reading the reflexive journal and methodological journal, memos were written identifying demonstrations of constructivist inquiry rigor. The levels of reflexivity and self-awareness exhibited are striking. Her openness to suggestions and questions of the process by the peer reviewer throughout her project are also worth mentioning as this
lack of defensiveness in her own process greatly enhanced her ability to hear and capture the emic perspectives provided by the participants. It also enabled her to ask probing questions that the participants had not considered previously. It is clear that Abigail was able to enact the role of a constructivist inquirer – she was a conduit through which multiple perspectives were voiced and integrated.

Statement of Findings

Trustworthiness

Confirmability of a constructivist inquiry is whether or not the final report is grounded in data and that inferences were logical. After reading the final report, 10 codes were randomly selected. These codes were tracked backwards to the expanded field notes provided by Abigail. From these findings, I can assert that the final report is grounded in the data. Additionally, based on my reading of the reflexive and methodological journal I can assert that the category structure is logical and explanatory.

Credibility of a constructivist inquiry is the ability of the inquirer to accurately capture the participants’ perspectives in the final report and the ability of the inquirer to provide an emic, or insider’s viewpoint in a way that is believable. Triangulation is a strategy often used to cross-check the findings within the final report to the multiple data sources included. Through my extensive readings of the final report, reflective journals, and grand member check data, I am confident that the inquirer was able to provide an emic viewpoint that reflects the multiple perspectives of the participants. The final report is written in a way that explicates the visceral experiences of the participants and this is solidified in the comments provided by those who participated in the member checking process.

Dependability is the assertion that shifts occurring throughout the inquiry process were appropriate to the constructivist inquiry process. I was able to identify a number of methodological shifts that occurred during the inquiry process. Based on the data provided in the methodological journal (often noted by the peer reviewer), and the reflexive journal these shifts were completely in line with the intent and purpose of this inquiry. Furthermore, the changes described emerged from the organic process of the inquiry and were prompted by the experience of the inquirer with the participants or from the participants themselves. There is no evidence of the inquirer making ungrounded changes.

Transferability is the assertion that the information and lessons learned provided in the final report may be useful in other similar contexts. This is often evidenced by the thick description and emic perspective used in the writing of the final report. Based on the member check feedback provided, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives firmly
grounded in the data gathered, I believe that the tentative lessons learned may be appropriate and informative to others interested in understanding supervision within the child welfare workforce. Concurrently, her ability to share this enhanced understanding from an emic perspective that is accessible to all readers enriches the data currently available regarding supervision in this context.

Authenticity

Fairness within a constructivist inquiry refers to the balancing of all viewpoints within the final report, demonstrating the inquirer’s ability to incorporate different perspectives, experiences, and understandings. Essentially, each participant in the process has a voice that is heard. Based on the multiple perspectives incorporated into the final report, which are firmly grounded in the data, and the member checking feedback, I am confident that the inquirer provided opportunities for all perspectives and experiences to be heard.

Educatively and ontological authenticity include a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomena being explored, was evidenced in the reflexive journal provided for the audit. A number of entries focused on new levels of awareness that the inquirer had regarding her past work experiences and the realization that perhaps she had not had as sophisticated an understanding of supervision as she was gaining through the process. It is clear that the inquirer gained a better understanding of the multiplicity and complexity involved in the supervision process of the child welfare workforce. It is important to note that this dimension of rigor is apparent throughout Abigail’s process, not just during the formal data analysis stage. I believe that her appreciation for the inherent complexity of the many possible meanings of the phenomena of supervision grew exponentially.

Based on the thorough examination of the audit trail provided to me, I can warrant the confirmability, credibility, dependability, transferability, fairness, ontological and educative authenticity of this constructivist inquiry.

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Monica Leisey, PhD, MSW

Salem State University School of Social Work
Abigail Kauffman Wyche was born on October 9, 1976 in Danville, Pennsylvania. She graduated from Coudersport Area Junior/Senior High School in Coudersport, PA in 1995. She received her Bachelor and Master of Social Work Degrees from Virginia Commonwealth University in 1999 and 2002 respectively. She held multiple positions with Greater Richmond SCAN (Stop Child Abuse Now) from 2000 to 2006, worked for the Richmond Department of Social Services from 2008 to 2009, and served as the Executive Director for Volunteer Families in Richmond from 2009 to 2012.