



**Power to the People: Allowing DHR Workers to Define Aspects of Effective Supervision**

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# Power to the People: Allowing DHR Workers to Define Aspects of Effective supervision

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## Introduction

Alabama and Mississippi are states with a lengthy history of undesirable and somewhat depressing statistics in the area of child welfare. Children living in poverty comprise 20 to 25 percent of the population of each state. Alabama and Mississippi rank 47th and 50th, respectively, with respect to low birth weight births, and both states produce infant mortality rates well above the national average (Kids Count, 2003). Given these bleak statistics, it is evident that some improvements need to be made to the child welfare system, with specific attention needed in child protective services.

This project is a joint effort between Alabama and Mississippi, which proposes to strengthen the quality of supervision of child protective service caseworkers. "The goal of this project is to determine if the proposed model of structured casework supervision will have impact on worker practice, contribute to preventing worker turnover, have impact on client outcomes, and become the norm for the organization and be valued. The model is proposed upon the theory that the quality and structure of the interaction between the supervisor and worker parallels that of the worker to the client family." (Payne & Pryce, 2002; Shulman, 1993) Additionally, this project also seeks to transform the organizational culture which governs the interactions of these supervisors and workers into one that facilitates an atmosphere of continual learning, support, clinical supervision and consultation are the rule rather than the exception (Payne & Pryce, 2002). This article will provide a brief literature review of supervision and the cultural consensus model, as well as address the initial phase of this project. Specifically, it will discuss the use of graduate-level social work students on academic leave from Alabama's Department of Human Resources to identify topic areas that are relevant to supervision and supervisory practices.

## Supervision

A review of the literature demonstrates that supervision and supervisory practices effect worker performance, client outcomes, and organizational culture. Himle,

James, and Thyness (1989) conducted a study that linked supervision to lower levels of stress in workers. Rycraft (1994) identified low quality supervision as the most frequent reason workers vacate their positions. Banach (1999) determined that child welfare workers managed boundaries with their clients and worked through feelings they experienced with their clients through supervision. Bond (1997) reported that consistent supervisory practices were associated with increased motivation of child welfare workers. Harkness and Hendley (1991) discussed the impact of supervision on clients. Their study demonstrated an association between good supervision and greater client satisfaction. Finally, Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) examined the effect of supervision on organizational culture. Results demonstrated that the supervisor has a key role in establishing the organizational culture, and, in turn, the organizational culture was significantly associated with promoting child psychosocial functioning. Though the empirically based literature focusing on supervision is somewhat sparse, studies that have been conducted demonstrate the substantial effect that good supervision and supervisory practices can have on workers, client outcomes, and the organization (As cited in, Southern Regional Quality Improvement Center for Child Protection, 2002).

## Cultural Consensus Model

The cultural consensus model will be used to facilitate the transformation of the organizational culture of child welfare supervision. The cultural consensus model is a systematic ethnographic technique that cognitively maps organizational culture and provides a method to measure change in the organization. This model has three underlying propositions:

1. Individuals will have shared values and behaviors to the extent that they share agreement regarding the culture.
2. Cultural competence is reflected in the individual's knowledge of the culture, its domains, and the degree to which an individual behaves and thinks accordingly.

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3. There is a culturally correct response that is derived from the shared culture.

This model allows for the evaluation of the degree to which there is consensus regarding the culture. It also estimates the content that is shared, as well as, each individual's cultural competence (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986).

Cultural consensus methodology allows for pre-testing individuals within an organization to establish the normative culture and needs within the organization. Following an intervention that is designed to bring about change in the organizational culture, a post-test can be conducted to determine any shift in organizational culture. These pre-tests include freelisting exercises, sorting and ranking tasks, and focus group sessions (Romney, Weller, & Batchelder, 1986; Romney & Weller, 1988). The freelisting exercises and focus group sessions are of particular importance to the current article. The freelisting task is one of the most useful exercises for defining a cultural domain and establishing its boundaries (Weller & Romney, 1988). Specifically, the freelisting exercise will provide a list of terms or topics that will help to define the cultural domain of the topic of interest. The decision of which items to include in the final list of terms can be decided by the type of study and the type and number of items collected from the freelisting task. Items with the greatest frequency should be included in the master list of terms; however, items with lower frequencies can sometimes be included to ensure variety. For example, it is often thought that because a cultural domain is shared by members of the organization, it is prudent to delete any responses mentioned by only one participant. Two to three dozen terms is considered a sufficient list; however, larger sample sizes may require a larger number of terms to identify the boundaries of a domain (Schensul, Lecompte, Nastasi, & Borgatti, 1999; Weller & Romney, 1988).

Focus groups are organized group interviews that usually consist of between five and 15 participants. A group leader facilitates the discussion by using a pre-determined set of questions on a specific topic. These sessions should last no longer than 90 minutes. Focus groups are useful in eliciting detailed responses from individuals and discussion among the group in regard

to a pre-determined topic. These sessions are most often audiotaped and transcribed. These transcriptions provide qualitative data and are often coded for content (Schensul, et al., 1999).

This article will focus on establishing the cultural domain of supervision by using master's level social work students on leave from the Department of Human Resources in Alabama. These students will participate in a freelisting task and subsequent focus group to establish a master list of salient topics pertaining to supervision. These topics will be instrumental in the development of curriculum for learning labs for child welfare supervisors in the Department of Human Resources in Alabama and the Department of Human Services in Mississippi.

## **Methods**

### *Sample*

The sample is comprised of master's students from the University of Alabama School of Social Work. These students are on academic leave from the Alabama Department of Human Resources. This convenience sample was used because the researchers believed that using supervisors to define their own culture could, in the case of negative comments, leave them vulnerable to the agency; these students would be knowledgeable about the culture of supervision at the Department of Human Resources in Alabama; and part of the eventual evaluation of the learning labs will focus on the effects of improved supervision on social workers feelings of self-efficacy. In addition, the researchers believed that graduate research assistants talked to all first- and second-year masters' classes about this project. All students on academic leave from the Alabama Department of Human Resources were provided information packets about the project and times and location of the freelisting tasks and focus group sessions. A total of 21 students participated in the freelisting task, and a total of 16 participated in the subsequent focus group sessions.

### *Procedures*

After students were informed about the project, two separate dates were established for the freelisting task.

**Appendix A. The Final 40 Supervisory Topics Developed Based on Focus Group Comments**

Allows for professional growth	Fair	Nepotism
Ambivalent	Flexible	Not client focused
Assessment	Good decision making skills	Open to suggestion
Aware of employee strengths and weaknesses	Have social work experience	Organizational skills
Burn Out	Honesty	Patient
Compassionate	Ignores conflict	Professionalism
Confident	Ignores policy violation	Provide resources
Confidentiality	Instruct	Realistic expectations
Consistency	Interpersonal skills	Regular staff meetings
Constructive criticism	Knowledgeable	Respect
Dependable/Available	Leadership	Supportive
Does not listen	Listens	Team Player
Empathy	Micromanage	Understanding
	Modeling	

Students who signed up for the first date were provided a packet that included one of two possible lists of questions pertaining to either supervision or organizational culture, and a consent form (Appendix A). Students were instructed to read and sign the consent form. Students were then directed to the computer lab where they were instructed to type and print their responses to the questions. After completing the task, students placed their consent form and responses into an envelope and deposited the envelope into a box.

Focus group sessions were planned for the following week to allow for the analysis of the freelisting data. Students were given the choice of two separate dates to participate in these sessions. A graduate research assistant functioned as the focus group leader. Participating students were provided with both lists of freelisting questions and the master list of terms. Discussion was facilitated by asking the students to examine both the lists and the questions and to comment as they saw fit. Focus group sessions were audiotaped and lasted for approximately one hour.

**Data Analysis**

Freelisting data was analyzed using ANTHROPAC software. This software ordered the list of terms based on saliency of response (Borgatti, 1992). After this analysis was completed, all single frequency responses were eliminated and terms with similar meanings were

combined. The audiotaped sessions of the focus group sessions were coded for main themes and concepts.

**Results**

**Freelisting**

The freelisting task yielded a list of 95 words and phrases that could be used as topics for learning lab curricula. Researchers eliminated duplicate responses and responses that had been mentioned by only one student. Elimination of these one-frequency responses will assist in protecting subject anonymity. This process resulted in a list of 63 words. The next section will address how the list was further narrowed using the focus group sessions.

**Focus Groups**

The focus groups were used for the purpose of allowing the participants to examine the list of 63 words and phrases. Participants were asked to comment on the list, suggest additions to the list, and expound on terms they considered vague. The audiotapes of the focus group sessions were transcribed and coded using Nudist 6 software. The coding process yielded a multitude of themes. Three of these themes were dominant throughout both focus group sessions

1. Many participants commented that it is important for supervisors to be supportive of their workers,

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**Appendix B. Both sets of freelisting questions**

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**List One**

- Imagine a well supervised organization – what is it like?  
Imagine a poorly supervised organization – what is it like?  
Imagine a good supervisor – what are they like? (personal characteristics – do not identify individuals)  
Imagine a poor supervisor – what are they like? (personal characteristics – do not identify individuals).

**List Two**

- What are the important elements of supervision?  
Imagine a good supervisor, what do they do?  
Imagine a poor supervisor, what do they do?
- 

and that there are many different ways of being supportive.

*"I want a supervisor who is going to back me up and stand for me and the decisions that we've made together."*

*"... she has an open door policy. You can come in and talk to her anytime, you know, we have conference time, but, even if there is a problem, or it could be personal, you can discuss it. You can go to her with any problem anytime."*

2. Many participants commented that it is important for supervisors to utilize modeling techniques when training workers.

*"I think a characteristic of a good supervisor would be that type of supervisor who would take their workers out into the field and model and not forget what it is like to work day in and day out in the field."*

*"I think it is so important for new employees to have somebody who is there, who will model. I mean just those first three months, it is so important."*

3. Many participant commented that it is important for supervisors to have both social work experience and social work knowledge.

*"... those that don't have a social work background that are supervisors have no ethical background as far as social work ethics."*

*"... I think they (supervisors) need the social work part in learning how to be a supervisor. I'd rather have someone who knows what I am doing, out there in the field, than somebody who doesn't."*

The thematic coding of the focus group transcripts yielded information which allowed the researchers to

narrow the list of words and phrases to forty (Appendix B). This narrowing was accomplished by incorporating some terms under the meaning of other terms. For example, we incorporated the terms *available*, *acknowledges good work*, and *maintains morale* into the term *supportive* because so many of the participants mentioned these terms when discussing the term *supportive*.

**Discussion**

This phase of this project has established a master list of terms that define both positive and negative aspects of supervision and supervisory techniques from the perspective of a child welfare worker. This list of terms will next be used with DHS and DHR child welfare supervisors in Mississippi and Alabama. They will be asked to complete pile sorting and ranking tasks with these terms to establish the saliency of each term, as well as which terms are related to one another. This information will be used to create curriculum for learning labs in which these same supervisors will participate. The curriculum will focus on increasing desired supervisory techniques (e.g. modeling and being supportive), and decreasing less desirable supervisory techniques (e.g. ambivalence and nepotism).

Although the use of freelisting tasks and focus groups has been established as a viable method for establishing cultural domains, some limitations exist. There is no established method for checking the statistical reliability of the freelisting task. Also, the freelisting questions were written by the researchers; therefore, the terms and phrases are based on those biased questions rather than on original thoughts from the participants (Romney & Weller, 1988). The information collected in focus groups is often hampered by the personalities

therein; moreover, the conductor of the focus groups was male, and the participants were predominately female. These gender differences could have influenced the length and content of response (Schensul, et al., 1999). Finally, the use of convenience sampling limits the generalizability of the results; however, no attempt will be made to generalize these results outside of the two participating states (Grinnell, 1997).

As was previously mentioned, the data from this

project will be used to create curriculum for supervisory learning labs. The implications for the use of this data are far reaching. It is the hope of the researchers that by directly involving child welfare workers and supervisors in defining supervision and supervisory techniques, they will feel ownership in the learning lab curriculum, and that the effects of the training will be far reaching and long lasting.

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