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# The Importance of Including Supervisors When Evaluating Child Welfare Workers' Training

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*Sharon Gerber Hassein, MSW contributed to an earlier version of this manuscript.*

## Introduction

*Martha, a child welfare worker, attends a training seminar on the impact of cultural diversity on family values and child rearing. At the conclusion of the four- hour training session, Martha agrees to supply the name of her supervisor, and both she and the supervisor are contacted as part of a three-month follow-up survey. Martha and the supervisor are asked independently to rate the effect of the training on Martha's work with clients and her interactions with colleagues. Martha is convinced that her training has been useful and that this is apparent to other workers both within and outside the agency. She believes that her clients have benefited from her newly learned skills but has no evidence upon which to base this assumption. Her supervisor does not see any change in Martha's work that can be attributed to the training. Both agree that additional training sessions should take place.*

This scenario describes the design and outcome of a project where the views of child welfare workers and their supervisors were compared on the effects of an in-service training program. It alludes to the often noted but rarely reported disparity between workers' and supervisors' views on training effectiveness in child welfare agencies. Finally it illustrates the usual call for further training even when there is no evidence to support its value to clients.

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to the need for obtaining and considering agency supervisors' views on the value of training projects for child welfare workers. These views are necessary if training programs are to bring about real and positive changes in day-to-day agency work. To illustrate this need, data are presented from a training project initiated by a consortium of social work educators and the New York City Administration for Children's Services (ACS) where the goal was to increase effectiveness in work with clients. To this end, child welfare workers and a limited number of supervisors attended seminars created and taught by social work educators on varying subjects related to child welfare. The seminars exposed participants to master's degree level social work instruction with the dual goals of improving client services and encouraging some workers to pursue additional education. The Administration for Children's Services (ACS) has, as part of its mission, the aim of professionalizing its workforce through education.

In this study, the benefits that clients accrue from staff training are addressed by comparing participants' and their supervisors' assessments of direct service gains. Emphasis is placed on the importance of consensus as a way of ensuring the continuation of positive work performance changes.

## Background

Child welfare staff often have little training beyond the bachelor's degree and typically, there is inadequate professional development at their work sites (Rycraft, 1994). Pre-service education is available to fewer than one quarter of all workers nationally, according to one study (Breitenstein, Rycus, Sites & Kelley, 1997). Title IVE funds from

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the 1993 Social Security Act have encouraged states such as California, New York, Pennsylvania and others to fund education and training in partnerships with schools of social work resulting in reports of limited successes in improving worker competence and agency retention (Hopkins, Mudrick & Rudolph, 1999; Jones & Okamura, 2000). Some states offer special child welfare training and certification for all workers regardless of degree (Birmingham, Berry & Bussey, 1996), but this policy is not pervasive nor is the training uniform. With no national standards and no nationally recognized certificates, states are on their own in constructing and implementing training programs for their child welfare workforce.

**Evaluating Child Welfare Training**

In an effort to evaluate child welfare training projects, research designs have been categorized into four levels (Dietz, 1998; Kirkpatrick, 1959; Rooney, 1988). Levels one and two measure satisfaction and knowledge gained immediately following training. Level two can include a simulated evaluation of the participant's ability to use the knowledge and skills learned in the training. Audio and video taped role-play of worker-client interviews immediately following the training are described as an example of level two evaluations. The third level is the follow-up study design that assesses if participants use what they have learned in their work with clients. Level three evaluations may include action plans developed during the initial training to help the participant outline newly learned skills and relate these skills to the goals and objectives of their work with clients. Level four is the measure of how the training has affected client outcomes.

Several studies have incorporated the level three model into their evaluations (Bilbus & Rooney, 1995; Fleck-Henderson & Krug, 1998; Gregoire, 1994). Bibus and Rooney (1995) used this format for a training project involving child welfare workers whose clients were mandated. Forty-five social workers attending 40 hours of training created action plans where they committed to making at least three changes in their practice. After two to three months researchers using telephone interviews focused on the extent that the action plans were put into effect. The results showed that 75% of the social workers' goals were accomplished. In addition, three clients were interviewed and they provided positive data in support of the training. The opinions of supervisors were not included in the design.

Supervisors participated in seminars on domestic violence in a level three model where the follow-up research tested for the application of the skills and knowledge provided by the training (Fleck-Henderson & Krug 1998). Supervisors described how the training affected their work with their supervisees and clients, providing taped interviews as evidence of their progress. They reported on a number of positive changes in their practice resulting from the training, most frequently mentioning the use of domestic violence community resources.

Gregoire's (1994) study of a seven hour training program for child welfare workers on the impact of addiction on work with clients was evaluated first with a pre-and post-evaluation of attitude change. Thirty-seven of the 40 participants consented to a follow-up study where workers were asked to develop goals for their practice. Telephone interviews with 32 participants measured the extent to which these goals were realized. Almost half of the goals were described as met and workers described the benefits that clients received as a result. Obstacles to not meeting goals were reported to be limited resources and obstructive agency practices.

Practitioners and supervisors agree that the greatest incentive for attending training sessions in child welfare is to improve job performance and professional skills (Vinokur-Kaplan, 1986). In a national survey in the U.S., incentives rated highest for training participation included time away from the job, keeping current job status, and getting benefits related to salary, licenses and college credits.

**Cooperation between Supervisors and Workers**

Only one study could be found that compared

the views of child welfare workers and their supervisors on the values of an educational experience, in this case participation in an MSW program (Hopkins, et al., 1999). Workers and supervisors attended separate focus group sessions where they were asked to comment on the effects of the educational experience on agency work. Increased confidence, greater sensitivity to clients, enhanced skills and feeling empowered were the identified personal behavioral changes. Workers found more areas in their work where these changes took place than supervisors but both agreed on the general categories. Structural changes, defined as changes of the organizational culture, were also noted by both groups of participants. Increased communication between workers and supervisors resulted from the higher level of schooling for the workers. In describing this change one supervisor said that the workers now "have permission to come up with new ideas" (Hopkins et al, 1999, p. 762).

Cooperative workforce climates in child welfare agencies have been shown to provide better services to clients (Glisson & Hemmelgarn, 1998) but there are few published evaluations of programs that aim to promote good working relations. Organizational restructuring programs in the form of teams that encourage better communication between supervisors and workers have been implemented but there is currently no data available to the public in support of its efficacy (Cohen & Austin, 1994). Bednar's (20003) review of the literature on the effects of climate in social welfare organizations reports that supervisor satisfaction is tied to high levels of trust among the staff and good coworker relationships (Norvell, Walden, Gettelman & Murrin, 1993; Silver, Poulin & Manning, 1997). Workers' satisfaction has been linked to flexibility in job assignments, a sense of commitment, personal accomplishment, open communication, and good relationships with colleagues and supervisors (Chiu, Lai & Snape, 1997; Lewandowski & GlenMaye, 2002; Reagh, 1994; Rycraft, 1994; Samantrai, 1992). It has been noted that achieving good working relations between workers and supervisors requires that supervisors have the power to make decisions and workers become involved in implementation processes (Cohen & Austin, 1994; Tracy & Pine, 2000), but progress toward that goal has not been sufficiently studied.

## Method

### Study Design

A series of training seminars for child welfare professionals took place in the New York City area in 1998-1999. Local schools of social work members of a Child Welfare Training Consortium joined with New York City's Administration of Children's Services (ACS) to provide professional development seminars to ACS employees. As part of a state funded training program, social work professors planned and conducted seminars on a variety of topics approved by ACS officials as relevant to agency practice. There were 42 seminars and 743 trainee participants, all of whom were surveyed for satisfaction with the training. The evaluation design included a follow-up component where three months after the seminars, surveys with questions asking about the effects of the training were mailed to participants and their supervisors.

Immediately following the educational seminar, participants were asked to volunteer the name of their supervisor and understood that he/she would be contacted to assess the observable effect of the training on agency work. Participants also agreed to provide their own independent assessment. Both groups would appraise the value of the benefits of the training on clients.

All survey forms called for anonymity so that the supervisor did not receive the name of the workshop attendee and the evaluation team received no names from any respondent. The supervisors were informed that their supervisees attended one or more workshop and had submitted their name for the follow-up evaluation. Supervisors were then asked to respond to questions about changes in the workers' on-the-job performances.

Since supervisors had more than one seminar participant worker, their responses were focused on their small "group" of workers rather than on any one individual. The aim of this design was to remove the threat that workers might feel when agreeing to have their supervisors assess their work as an outcome of their training.

### The Instruments

The participant and supervisor questionnaires consisted of a combination of multiple-choice, scaled, and open-ended questions. The instruments were written for this evaluation project and reviewed for content validity by administrators at ACS. Questions on both surveys were matched as closely as possible so that the scores might be reasonably compared. The first six scaled questions for both surveys focused on the attendees' and supervisor's perception about attendees' ability to apply what they learned to various aspects of their practice. A reliability analysis of these six questions on both questionnaires, the participants and the supervisors, yielded a reliability coefficient (Chronbach's Alpha) of .94 and .95, respectively, well above the acceptable range of .8. In addition, a two-item scale referred to the perceived changes in attendee's work three months after participating in the workshop. Both groups were asked if changes in the attendees' work were noticeable to the supervisor and to colleagues. The items in this scale were highly correlated to one another, with a Spearman's rho of .88 for participants and .91 for supervisors, an extremely strong correlation.

***The Supervisor Questionnaire:*** The follow-up survey sent to supervisors did not specify the name of the workshop attendee but did specify the title of the workshop. As part of the instructions there was the statement, "Our assumption is that if the workshop was effective, ACS supervisors would be able to observe how it affected the staff who attended it." Supervisors were then asked not to place their names on the form to ensure anonymity.

The questionnaire consisted of 18 items, the first four focusing on the supervisors' awareness on having staff members at the training and what, if anything, they had discussed about the training with their staff. Supervisors who did *not* know that a staff member attended training were branched to three questions asking if they had noticed any professional improvement related to the topic of the workshop and if they thought a workshop on this topic was needed for their staff. If they *were* aware that their staff had attended the training sessions they were guided to respond to 11 multiple-choice and scale rating questions about the ability to apply what was learned at the workshop to agency work. A total of 80 supervisors responded to questions in this section. Supervisors were also asked if they thought clients benefited from the staff training and were encouraged to offer comments on what they viewed as the value of the seminars.

***The Participant Questionnaire:*** Participants were asked to denote the workshop attended and to respond to 11 scaled and multiple-choice items and 1 open-ended opportunity for comments. Both groups of respondents were asked if they thought clients benefited and if the seminars were useful and should be repeated.

### Findings

***The Sample:*** Approximately 25% of the participants did not provide the name of a supervisor, so the number of questionnaires sent to attendees was higher than the number sent out to supervisors. There were 349 surveys mailed to workshop participants and 248 surveys mailed out to supervisors. It should be noted that most of the respondents indicated that they participated in multiple trainings, in some cases, as many as five or more. Respondents who received more than one survey, because either they or the person they supervised attended more that one workshop, were asked to complete and send back only one. There were 285 surveys returned from the attendees, with a response rate of 81.7%, which is high for a mailed questionnaire with no second mailing. There were a total of 115 surveys returned from the supervisors, representing a response rate of 46.4%. This response rate is still

quite respectable for a mailed survey especially when some supervisors received more than one questionnaire.

In order to assure anonymity demographic data was not asked for on the follow-up surveys, but for the initial seminars, participants supplied the number of years worked in the agency and their highest degree. There were 290 supervisors participating in the seminars but it should be noted that they too were asked for their supervisors' name for the follow-up study. Of this group, 88.7% ($n$ = 252) worked in their agency for more than five years. The percent of case workers in their agencies for more than five years was 43.6 ($n$ = 169). Social work degrees were held by a minority of both groups. The social work degrees for supervisors were: BSW, 3.5% (n = 10); MSW, 28.2% ($n$ = 81), and for caseworkers, BSW, 4.9% ($n$ = 19); MSW, 4.1% ($n$ = 16).

***The Survey Responses: Applications, Change and Benefits:*** Responses between the participants and the supervisors were compared on the six scaled questions on participants' ability to apply what they learned in the seminars to their work at ACS and on two scaled questions addressing noticeable changes in attendees' work. Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for each of the six questions on application and the two questions on change. It also gives composite scores for the two scales converted into two new variables, APPLY and CHANGE.

The scaled questions allowed for choices from 1 to 10 with 1 denoting "no effect" and 10 as "great effect." When the six questions on application of learning are analyzed, the two items receiving the highest ratings by both participants and supervisors were: 1) applying skills learned in the seminars; and 2) applying theory learned in the seminars. The two lowest scores were given by both groups to: 1) applying content in supervision; and 2) applying content with workers from other agencies or court workers.

For the two questions on noticed change in the attendees' work there is disagreement between the two respondent groups. Participants thought that supervisors noticed changes in their work more

**Table 1. Comparison of Participant and Supervisor Mean Ratings**

| | Group | N | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Able to apply content with clients | Participants | 274 | 6.04 | 2.59 |
| | Supervisors | 75 | 4.92 | 2.03 |
| Able to apply content in supervision | Participants | 247 | 5.48 | 2.76 |
| | Supervisors | 76 | 4.70 | 2.42 |
| Able to apply content in work with fellow workers | Participants | 274 | 6.20 | 2.47 |
| | Supervisors | 69 | 4.74 | 2.39 |
| Able to apply content with workers from other agencies or court workers | Participants | 257 | 5.37 | 2.64 |
| | Supervisors | 64 | 4.48 | 2.33 |
| Able to apply theory in work at ACS | Participants | 277 | 6.38 | 2.50 |
| | Supervisors | 70 | 5.30 | 2.22 |
| Able to apply skills learned in work at ACS | Participants | 281 | 6.49 | 2.47 |
| | Supervisors | 76 | 5.37 | 2.29 |
| Coworkers have noticed changes in my work | Participants | 226 | 5.28 | 2.72 |
| | Supervisors | 56 | 3.89 | 2.22 |
| Supervisor has noticed changes in my work | Participants | 226 | 5.28 | 2.72 |
| | Supervisors | 56 | 3.89 | 2.22 |
| Clients have benefitted from my attending workshop | Participants | 264 | 6.36 | 2.76 |
| | Supervisors | 73 | 5.26 | 2.37 |
| APPLY | Participants | 283 | 6.02 | 2.27 |
| | Supervisors | 79 | 4.90 | 1.97 |
| CHANGE | Participants | 237 | 5.22 | 2.61 |
| | Supervisors | 65 | 3.98 | 2.24 |

*Items were rated using a 10 point scale. 1=No effect; 10=Great effect*

**Table 2. Independent Samples t-tests for Differences in Perceptions of Participants and Supervisors about Application, Change and Benefits**

| | t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) | Mean Difference |
| Able to apply content with clients | 3.97 | 147.11 | .00 | 1.12 |
| Able to apply content in supervision | 2.39 | 140.37 | .02 | .78 |
| Able to apply content in work with fellow workers | 4.44 | 341.00 | .00 | 1.47 |
| Able to apply content with workers from other agencies or court workers | 2.46 | 319.00 | .01 | .89 |
| Able to apply theory in work at ACS | 3.53 | 117.62 | .00 | 1.08 |
| Able to apply skills learned in work at ACS | 3.59 | 355.00 | .00 | 1.13 |
| Coworkers have noticed changes in my work | 2.69 | 277.00 | .01 | 1.05 |
| Supervisor has noticed changes in my work | 3.99 | 100.00 | .00 | 1.39 |
| Clients have benefitted from my attending workshop | 3.38 | 131.24 | .00 | 1.10 |
| APPLY | 4.32 | 141.05 | .00 | 1.12 |
| CHANGE | 3.49 | 300.00 | .00 | 1.24 |

*Every Independent Samples t test revealed a statistically significant result at the .05 level.*

than their co-workers noticed changes. Supervisors took the opposite view.

Participants were more convinced than were supervisors that clients benefited from their having attended the seminars. Even so, both groups gave this item the third highest rating out of the nine questions listed, indicating an agreement that the seminars were potentially important in this regard.

By comparing means on the effectiveness questions between the workshop participants and the supervisors at the three-month follow-up it is clear that supervisors were less favorably inclined towards the seminars. The total mean score for the six items referring to ability to apply what was learned in the workshop (APPLY) for attendees was 6.02 and for supervisors it is 4.90, with a mean difference of 1.12 points. This difference was statistically significant at the .05 level ($t$=4.323; $p$=.000). T-tests were also conducted for each of the six items related to ability to apply what was learned, and the differences between attendee and supervisor ratings were statistically significant for all of the questions. The area with the greatest difference between the two groups was the attendees' ability to apply content of seminars with fellow workers. Here the mean difference was 1.47 ($t$=4.439; $p$=.000). Table 2 shows these differences.

An independent means t-test was conducted using the combined mean score for whether colleagues and supervisors noticed a difference in the attendees work performance following their participation in the workshop. The total mean score for the two items referring to change (CHANGE) for attendees was 5.22 and for supervisors it was 3.98. This difference was statistically significant ($t$=3.489; $p$=.001). Separate t-tests were computed for the two questions on change, and although they were both statistically significant, there was a larger mean difference for the question regarding the supervisor noticing a change (*mean difference* = 1.30) than for colleagues noticing change (*mean difference* = 1.05).

Differences in scores for the item worded, "clients have benefited as a result of participation in the workshop" were analyzed using a t-test. The mean score for attendees was 6.36, compared to a

**Table 3. Participants and Supervisors Perceptions of Usefulness of Workshops**

| | | Group | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Participants | | Supervisors | |
| | | N | % | N | % |
| *Was workshop useful in work at ACS* | Don't know | 3 | 1.1 | 5 | 6.3 |
| | Not at all useful | 17 | 6.0 | 6 | 7.5 |
| | A little useful | 45 | 16.0 | 19 | 23.8 |
| | Somewhat useful | 106 | 37.9 | 38 | 47.5 |
| | Very useful | 111 | 39.4 | 12 | 15.0 |

rating of 5.26 from the supervisors, and the difference was statistically significant ($t$=3.381; $p$=.001).

For the supervisors who did not know that their staff attended a workshop (n = 29) only 4 (13.8%) stated that they noticed some professional improvement, but 15 (51.7%) thought the seminars should be repeated. This can be compared to the supervisors who were aware of workshop attendance ($n$ = 86), where 27 (31.4%) thought it should be repeated. As for the participants, 47.0% ($n$ = 134) thought it should be repeated with no changes.

***Usefulness:*** Participants and supervisors were asked if they thought the training was useful. Participants were more positive about its usefulness with 39.4% ($n$ = 111) reporting it to be "very useful" compared with 15.0% ($n$ = 12) reported from supervisors. Table 3 illustrates the full range of responses on usefulness, one that is statistically significant, Pearson $X^2$ (4, $N$ = 362) = 22.36, $p$ = .000.

A Spearman rank correlation (nonparametric) was also computed for each item with the perception of usefulness of the workshop. The results indicate that every relationship was both relatively strong and statistically significant. In other words, each item was related to perception of the participants and the supervisors of the overall usefulness of the seminars. The item with the highest correlation ($r_S$ = .689; $p$ = .000) was "able to apply skills learned in work at ACS," followed by "clients have benefited from worker's attendance in workshop" with a correlation of .682; $p$ = .000), and "able to apply theory in work at ACS" ($r_S$ =.678; $p$ =.000). The item with the lowest correlation was the worker's ability to apply the content with workers from other agencies or court workers, ($r_S$ = .491; $p$=.000). Although this is the lowest correlation, it is still a relatively strong relationship.

### Limits of Study

There were several methodological limitations on this study that may have impacted on the results of the data. Among the limits were:

1 Supervisors were also training participants and it is not known how many of the 115 respondents to the follow-up survey fit into this category. The data analyzed for the supervisors comprised of those who knew that their staff member attended a seminar and that reduced the n to 80.
2 In order to preserve anonymity, we were not able to match participant responses to those of their supervisors.
3 Perceptions of participants and supervisors were measured by survey responses and may not accurately reflect behavior.
4 There was no opportunity to get feedback from clients.

## Discussion and Conclusion

With its limitations, this study addresses the perceptual similarities and differences between attendees and their supervisors on the transferability of what is learned from seminars and subsequently is demonstrated in practice three months later. The study does not measure actual behavior changes so objectivity cannot be included in this discussion. The key finding was that the collective perception of supervisors concerning what was learned and applied to practice was significantly different than those of their workers. This difference in perception can have potentially important results. As has been asked proverbially, if a tree falls in the forest and

no one ever sees or hears it, did it really fall? So, too, if child welfare professionals change their practice behavior with clients, and their supervisors do not observe it, what is the effect of these changes on the child welfare organizational system and future staff development?

What was most interesting was that attendees thought that supervisors had noticed changes in their practice behavior due to the training and this was not the case. Did this mean that attendees were overstating the training effect, and/or that supervisors did not have enough access to their staff members' practice to accurately assess any changes due to training? This question is difficult to answer with the data at hand. If we assume that the training had some effects, it is apparent that the attendees did not communicate it enough in supervision sessions. Similarly, supervisors did not perceive that there was much staff member ability to disseminate workshop content to other agency workers. The question of whether the training had helped attendees with their practice with clients was also in dispute with attendees believing it had and supervisors disagreeing. The only area where supervisors recognized improvement in was in the supervisee's abilities to apply newly learned theories and skills to their work at the agency. Overall, both groups generally agreed that clients benefited from the staff participation attendance in the seminars but it was not clear why supervisors held this opinion.

The lack of data on how educational experiences and training sessions affect agency work including work with clients from the perspectives of both workers and supervisors is striking and in need of remedy. No one disputes that it is difficult to measure improvements in worker/client interactions, but agreement between supervisors and workers would be strongly suggestive of good results. The data from this study cannot show if there were positive improvements, but they do indicate poor intra-agency communication. The extent to which this is a reflection of the agencies studied or is a more pervasive problem of culture within child welfare agencies in general, is not known and requires further investigation.

Given the complexities of practice in child welfare settings, we might find out that there are always significant discrepancies between workers' and their supervisor' opinions of workers' practice behavior. However, if the training effects are ultimately based on public changes in client goal attainment efficiency and/or effectiveness, then it might be possible to close perceptual gaps between these two groups. This would require that a measurable and consistent goal attainment record keeping system be in place in a child welfare setting where any long- term effects of training were being assessed. Such system would roughly correspond with a level three evaluation design.

There should also be some empirical interest in why workers and their supervisors in a child welfare setting might have different views of worker practice behavior. Should such discrepancies be borne out by future investigations, the reasons behind these differences might have profound implications on the nature of supervisor-worker relationships.

*NOTE: Questionnaires are available upon request.*

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