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# Burnout Among Child Protection Workers: The Role of Supervision

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Burnout Among Child Protection Workers:  
The Role of Supervision

By

Katelyn M. Davies, BA, BSW

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
Saint Catherine University and the University of Saint Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at Saint Catherine University/University of Saint Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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**Abstract**

This paper explores supervision as it relates to a prevalent theme among child protection workers: burnout. Prominent research in the study of burnout identifies three components: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal efficacy (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). These three components are integrated and addressed in a qualitative exploratory study. The sample, consisting of eight child protection workers, participated in a 30-45 minute semi-structured interview. The interview was guided by an instrument developed by the researcher specifically to address supervision as it relates to the three dimensions of burnout. Grounded theory was used to code and identify themes in the data. Themes are identified and discussed as they relate to the research questions. Additionally, unanticipated themes – administration, length of tenure in job, and individual styles – that emerged are discussed. Finally, implications for future research are presented.

*Keywords:* burnout, child protection, social support, supervision

### Literature Review

In exploring the literature regarding burnout, specifically as it relates to workers in the field of child welfare, several themes emerged. Many components have been explored and found to be related to burnout. For the purpose of this research, the discussion of the three components of burnout will be in favor of expanding the focus to one topic that emerged and will be the focus of this study: supervision in child welfare and its connection to burnout.

### Burnout

**Terms.** Burnout, specifically as it relates to child protection, is a well-researched topic. As a result of the sheer volume of literature that exists, there are many terms that are used indiscriminately. Therefore, to guide this literature review, Table 1 below provides definitions for terms used throughout the review of literature and the remainder of the paper.

Table 1  
*Key Terms*

Term	Definition
Burnout	<p>“we can use the term “Burn-out” to refer to a progressive loss of idealism, energy, and purpose experienced by people in the helping professions as a result of the conditions of their work” (Edelwich &amp; Brodsky, 1980, p. 14)</p> <p>“A psychological syndrome in response to chronic interpersonal stressors on the job. The three key dimensions of this response are an overwhelming exhaustion, feelings of cynicism and detachment from the job, and a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment” (Maslach, Schaufeli, &amp; Leiter, 2001, p. 399)</p>
Depersonalization	<p>“a negative, callous, or excessively detached response to various aspects of the job” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 399)</p> <p>“an attempt to put distance between oneself and service recipients by actively ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging people” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 403)</p>
Emotional Exhaustion	<p>“the basic individual stress dimension of burnout ... feelings of being overextended and depleted of one’s emotional and physical resources” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 399)</p>

As burnout incorporates many components, it is often used to refer to a range of terms and contributors. In some studies, terms such as emotional exhaustion are used synonymously with burnout. Other studies use job stress as the measurement, but incorporate other terms that, together, can be more accurately described as burnout. For continuity, whenever multiple studies are being considered with differing terminology to refer to various components of the overall idea, a single term – burnout – will be used to standardize this review of literature.

A prominent researcher in the field of research about professional burnout, Christina Maslach (with Susan E. Jackson) developed the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI), a tool used to measure burnout among professionals (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1980). The tool's usage has become widespread due to its strong psychometric properties and consistent results among varying samples (Kim & Ji, 2009). Since its inception, the MBI has expanded beyond human services work to include many other professions. The MBI measures burnout based on three contributors: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduction in personal accomplishment or efficacy (Maslach, Jackson & Leiter, 1996; Maslach et al., 2001).

**Emotional Exhaustion.** Emotional exhaustion has been associated with many correlates of burnout, including leaving employment, role conflict, and concerns with social support (Cathalane & Sites, 2008; Drake & Yadama, 1996; Lee, Rehner & Forster, 2010; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; Um & Harrison, 1998). In some cases, emotional exhaustion and burnout have been used interchangeably (Moon & Hur, 2011; Um & Harrison, 1998). This is likely because, as Maslach et al. (2001) relate, “exhaustion is the central quality of burnout and the most obvious manifestation of this complex syndrome”



(p. 402). Studies have identified a correlation between emotional exhaustion and job leaving in both samples of primarily bachelors-level (Drake & Yadama, 1996) and masters-level educated workers (Cathalane & Sites, 2008; Dickinson & Perry, 2002). Um and Harrison (1998) found that role conflict, but not role ambiguity, was associated with high emotional exhaustion and low job satisfaction.

Additionally, emotional exhaustion has been found to be negatively correlated with organizational commitment and tenure or length of stay (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lee et al., 2010; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). That is to say, increased emotional exhaustion is most commonly associated with shorter work tenure and reduced organizational commitment. Feeling supported by and support for the organization is correlated both with lower emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, key components of burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010). It is important to acknowledge that the relationship between length of stay and emotional exhaustion goes two ways: while people who have greater work tenure are more likely to have developed coping strategies and are less likely to burn out (Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012), it is also likely that workers who experience burnout with high emotional exhaustion will not continue in their job (Dickinson & Perry, 2002).

**Depersonalization.** Although emotional exhaustion is most often reported in connection with burnout, depersonalization, also identified as cynicism, is also considered one of the three key dimensions of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). According to the creator of the MBI, exhaustion leads to emotional and cognitive distancing, and “depersonalization is an attempt to put distance between oneself and one’s service recipients by actively ignoring the qualities that make them unique and engaging people”

(Maslach et al., 2001, p. 403). Depersonalization has consistently been found to be related to diminished organizational commitment (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012). Boyas and Wind (2010) found depersonalization to have a significant negative relationship with three measures of what they termed “employment-based social capital,” including organizational commitment, level of influence, and fairness. Lizano and Mor Barak (2012) found statistically significant relationships between depersonalization and increased work-family conflict and decreased organizational support. Additionally, age appears to be a significant factor: younger workers are more susceptible to depersonalization (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012). This reinforces the strength of the relationship to organizational commitment; Boyas and Wind (2010) advocate for implementation of concerted efforts to provide increased support for younger child protection workers.

**Personal efficacy.** Emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, both elements of burnout, contribute to a third: erosion of “one’s sense of effectiveness” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 403). Alternatively, some have found that the diminished sense of efficacy is a result of lacking resources as opposed to work overload and social stressors, which precipitate exhaustion and depersonalization (Leiter, 1993). As stated by Lee and Ashforth (1996), “personal accomplishment develops largely independently of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization” (p. 128). One’s diminished sense of personal accomplishment is not as causally linked as the other two elements, however it does appear to contribute to burnout in varying ways throughout the development of burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993). Lee and Ashforth (1996) found strong correlation between

personal accomplishment and two factors: work friends and participation. This finding points to the importance social support plays in mitigating burnout.

### **Social Support and Protective Factors**

“From the beginning, burnout was studied not so much as an individual stress response, but in terms of an individual’s relational transactions in the workplace” (Maslach et al., 2001, p. 400). While the terminology may have changed, research has continued to discover relationships between burnout and relational or social factors in the workplace. There are many factors, often organized in varying ways; however, for the purposes of this literature review, these factors will be understood in terms of relationships between colleagues and the worker-supervisor relationship. Although the nature of the relationships differ, because both collegial and supervisory relationships include social components and are interactional, both are considered social support for the purpose of this review.

**Collegial Support.** Several studies have focused on the connection between workplace relationships and burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Smith & Clark, 2011). Miley, O’Melia and DuBois (2011) assert, “when social workers experience burnout, their personal and professional sense of power dwindles along with their practice competence” (p. 357). Further, Lait and Wallace (2002) found support of coworkers to be a mediating factor in job stress. This reinforces Smith and Clark’s (2011) finding of an association between loss of a cohort member and leaving the job.

**Supervision.** Supervision is another type of social support that has been found to have varying impacts on topics related to job stress and burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lait & Wallace, 2002). While recognizing coworker support as important, Lait and

Wallace (2002) found supervisory support to be influential in reducing job stress to a greater extent. Boyas and Wind (2010) reinforced this finding, but surprisingly also found a positive relationship between supervisory support and emotional exhaustion. This leads to the recommendation that to be optimally supportive, the supervisor should be cautious to avoid intrusive and overbearing practices (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Essentially, while supervision can ameliorate job stress, supervisors must be cautious to maintain a balance of intervention so as not to overwhelm supervisees and increase emotional exhaustion. Such practices lead to decreased autonomy and feelings of inefficacy among workers.

One of the most common themes in supervision literature, particularly as it pertains to child welfare, is the need for increased time spent in direct supervision (Hornby & Zeller, 2009; Dickinson & Comstock, 2009; Ferguson, 2009). In a study of Minnesota child welfare workload, Hornby and Zeller (2009) reported communication as one of the key needs that both supervisors and workers identify. Specifically, they identify that counties, “through their supervisors, need to promote active listening techniques, regular provision of feedback, encouragement of worker input, improved dissemination of information and acknowledgement of workers’ concerns and questions” (Hornby & Zeller, 2009, p. vi). Further, Hornby and Zeller (2009) clarify their statement asserting that for increased communication to be possible, “it will almost certainly be necessary for supervisors to have more time to devote to supervision” (Hornby & Zeller, 2009, p. vi). Ferguson (2009) emphasizes the importance of consistency and having a plan with a specific one-hour time each week in which the supervisor and worker meet – not to the exclusion of other supervisory experiences, but that consistent one hour is

expressed as the minimum for success in clinical supervision with child welfare workers. Others contend that two hours of supervision per week is a more optimal minimum, based on a study of job satisfaction in which “workers receiving at least 2 hours of supervision per week were more satisfied than their peers who received less supervision” (Dickinson & Comstock, 2009, p. 241; Salus, 2004).

The supervisor’s role is important because the supervisor is the link between the worker and the organization. The supervisor serves as a mediator between the system and the workers (Shulman, 2010). This is most important because, although some elements of burnout can be mediated by personal interventions, organizational change is frequently cited as an integral part in both mitigating and preventing burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Shulman, 2010). As long as the “clinical and organizational stressors” Urdang (2002) identifies, as well as others mentioned above continue to etiologically contribute, burnout will continue to remain a concern for child welfare agencies.

### **Gaps in the Literature**

Although the fields of burnout have been extensively studied, some gaps remain. Research in the field of burnout began with qualitative exploration to identify themes (Maslach et al., 2001). Following this exploration, qualitative data, characterized by studies with large sample sizes, have established trends in data. The lack in current research is exploration of *how* factors that have been identified as protective are able to alleviate or prevent burnout. A return to qualitative or narrative data could begin to explain the foundation of trends that have been found in the research. This study will do

just that, returning to a qualitative approach to explore *why* supervision as social support has emerged as a vital contributing factor to burnout.

### **Research Question**

The primary research question of this study is:

*What aspects of supervision do child protection workers identify as factors in alleviating or exacerbating burnout?*

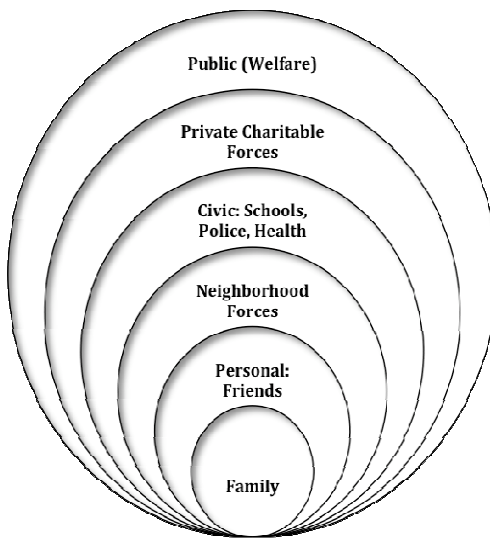
Other questions or sub-topics this research seeks to address include: In what ways does supervision impact burnout? What characteristics of the supervisory relationship are most helpful for preventing burnout?

### **Conceptual Framework**

In the interest of developing perspective and placing this research in context, a conceptual framework is given. Understanding the researcher's theoretical lens provides the frame of reference for the research. The conceptual framework impacts the formulation of the research question and design of the research as well as the interpretation and application of findings that arise from this research. For this particular research, an emphasis is placed on the person-in-environment perspective. This perspective arises from ecosystems theory, which arose from the marriage of systems theory and ecological theory.

The expanded ecological framework, or ecosystems theory, is helpful to understand the work environment and impact of various factors on all parts of said environment. A significant premise of the ecological model is that "social, political, economic, and environmental issues are interrelated and fundamentally associated with humanity's core understanding of its relationship with nature and the practices that stem

from it” (van Wormer & Besthorn, 2011, p. 305). The ecosystems model borrows from systems theory and ecological theory to place a dual emphasis on both the person and the environment (Morales, Sheafor & Scott, 2007; van Wormer & Besthorn, 2011). Morales et al. (2007) explain the ecosystems framework as consisting of three levels: individual, family, and cultural. This concept is not new, as pictured by Figure 1 below which illustrates Mary Richmond’s (1930) conceptualization of social environment.



*Figure 1.* Environment of Interacting Systems. Adapted from “Diagram Forces with Which the Charity Worker May Co-operate,” (Richmond, 1930, p. 188)

### **Systems Theory**

Systems theory focuses on “reciprocal interactions of persons operating within organized and integrated social systems” (Hutchison, 1999, p. 40). This interdisciplinary approach developed around the middle of the twentieth century, including disciplines from mathematics to economics and cultural anthropology, when various disciplines “began looking at phenomena as the outcome of interactions within and among systems” (Hutchison, 1999, p. 40). One of the most prominent figures in systems theory is Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who was a biologist (van Wormer & Besthorn, 2011). Systems theory includes the conceptualization of two types of systems, open and closed systems (van

Wormer & Besthorn, 2011). These designations refer to their interaction with the environment. Ecosystems theory focuses more on open systems, which interact with other systems. Closed systems, by contrast, “are nonliving and, lacking the steady state of exchange, move naturally toward randomness or entropy” (van Wormer & Besthorn, 2011, p. 18).

### **Ecological theory**

Ecological theory, sometimes referred to as human ecology, includes “an appreciation of *place* ... based on the proposition that behavior and development arise out of a mutual adaptation of person and environment within an ‘ecological niche’” (Garbarino, 1981, p. 229). It was termed the *life model* by Germain and Gitterman (1980), who first introduced ecology as a metaphor for person-in-environment practice (van Wormer & Besthorn, 2011; Urdang, 2002). Like systems theory, ecological theory is interdisciplinary, favoring “methodological eclecticism” (Aiello, Thompson & Baum, 1981, p. 425). However, because they have been so intertwined over the past decades in which ecosystems theory was developed, ecological theory is sometimes difficult to extricate from the more holistic ecosystems framework.

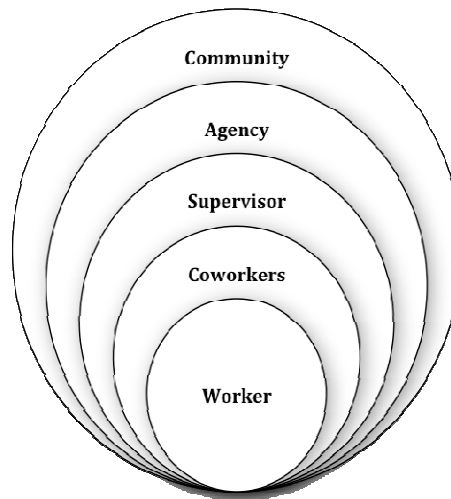
### **Integration: The Ecosystems Model**

Systems and ecological theory are a natural fit to be understood together because they both place an emphasis on interactions. Two questions remain: what are the differences between the two theories and how do they each contribute to the ecosystems model? And, how can this research be better understood within the ecosystems framework?



Systems theory explains “*processes* of systemic interactions,” and identifies “systemic *issues* and how they affect people” (Urdang, 2002, p. 22). It expands the viewpoint to include external systems and people who may appear to be outside the present concern or situation, but are inextricably linked because of the interaction between systems. Ecological theory contributes an understanding of adaptation and coping mechanisms employed by people in their reaction to and shaping of their environment (Urdang, 2002). Examples of adaptation and coping mechanisms that are part of the environment include social supports and matching people with situations that uniquely utilize their skill set (“goodness-of-fit”; Urdang, 2002). In this way, systems and ecological theories work well together; knowing the issues systems theory identifies is irrelevant without a way to address it, and the solutions ecological theory identifies seem out of place without an issue to apply them to.

In the context of the work environment of the child protection agency, these levels are perhaps better understood as worker, team, and agency culture. Figure 1 above illustrates the overall ecosystems framework, contemporarily understood as micro, mezzo, and macro levels, with micro visually represented in the inside circle. These levels are diagrammed in Figure 2 below to understand the child protection work environment.



*Figure 2.* Model of Child Protection Work Environment. Adapted from “Diagram Forces with Which the Charity Worker May Co-operate,” (Richmond, 1930, p. 188)

The ecosystems model can be understood as an interactional perspective.

Recognizing the way many systems are involved and how they each impact one another is central to the ecological framework. Similarly, as established above, many components of burnout impact other components to exacerbate or alleviate burnout and turnover among child protection workers. This research purposes to identify some of the components of the supervisory relationship that interact in such a way that they prevent and/or ameliorate burnout.

### **Lens for Research**

The ecosystems model is applied to this research for two reasons. First, it informs child protection workers’ practice, which includes taking into account many aspects of the child’s life (Potter, 2009). Secondly, as established in the review of literature, there are many contributing factors to burnout among child protection workers. Accordingly, using an ecosystems framework as the lens for research takes into account these various impacting factors. Furthermore, Miley et al. (2011) specifically address the implications of ecosystems theory in change, such as organizational change. They assert, “a

fundamental principle of ecosystems theory states that a change in one part of the system creates a change in another part of the system, which, in turn, changes the functioning of the entire system” (Miley et al., 2011, p. 33). It is the hope that, by identifying the role of an influential contributor to burnout, this research will impact other areas of practice.

## **Methods**

### **Research Design**

The design of this research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. To collect data, this researcher conducted eight semi-structured interviews with child protection workers to explore their views on the impact of the supervisory relationship on burnout in their work. The interviews were guided by a pre-established group of questions (see Appendix A).

### **Sample**

**Population.** To answer this research question, it is ideal to gather information from the source. In this case, interviews with child protection workers were ideally suited to answer the research question.

The interviewees were selected from child protection workers in county social services agencies in Minnesota. The intended profile of respondents was to include workers with less than two years work experience, workers with between two and five years work experience, and workers with more than five years work experience. This is based on the writing of Dickinson and Comstock (2009), who suggest these time frames as associated with key developmental stages established by Sheahan et al. (1987): beginning, critical, and consolidation.

**Sampling method.** The researcher's committee members maintain contacts in child protection and verified they would be willing to assist the researcher in establishing contact with workers to participate in this study. Utilizing their assistance, this researcher identified child protection workers and, using snowball sampling, recruited the sample of child protection workers with varying lengths of work tenure in three counties in a Midwestern metropolitan area: two primarily urban, and one primarily suburban county.

**Description of sample.** The sample consisted of eight child protection workers from three counties – two from an urban county, two from a suburban county, and four from another urban county. The sample was racially diverse, including participants of Asian, Black, and White ethnic backgrounds. For purposes of confidentiality, a detailed descriptive analysis of the sample is not provided due to the small size and specificity of this sample. There were seven female participants and one male participant. Due to the limitations of a convenience sample, the intended profile of workers in beginning, critical and consolidation stages of development (Dickinson & Comstock, 2009; Sheahan et al., 1987) was not achieved.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Potential participants identified were then invited to participate on a voluntary basis. Due to the definition of the sample, participants are at a diminished risk through participation in this study. The population, as professionals in a social service field, would not be considered vulnerable. Nevertheless, several measures were taken to ensure protection of human subjects. First, respondents were kept confidential and any data reported is presented anonymously. By recruiting participants from current child protection workers and through professional contacts as opposed to through the

Minnesota Department of Human Services or administration of county agencies, respondents were not identified to their superiors, which maintained the integrity of the research by encouraging honesty while protecting participants from any penalty from their employer. Furthermore, participants were made aware verbally and by written informed consent of their right to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty. Finally, this research methodology was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Saint Catherine (see Appendix B).

### **Data Collection**

**Process.** Participants were asked to participate via an informational letter that stated the purpose of the research and their role. Prior to conducting the interview, participants also agreed to participate by signing the consent form (see Appendix C). Then, data was collected in the format of a semi-structured interview, prompted by a pre-developed guide of interview questions (see Appendix A). The benefits of the semi-structured interview include the systematic structure to standardize interviews and the freedom to digress, which allow the interviewer to “follow the data,” based on where the respondent’s narrative leads (Berg & Lune, 2012). These questions were developed so as to maintain neutrality whenever possible. The questions are open-ended in nature, which maintains the integrity of the research and fosters honest responses, unhindered by the researcher. Furthermore, in this manner, participants directed the interview inasmuch as their narrative prompted clarifying questions.

An audio recording of the interviews was collected, as authorized in the informed consent form, in order to ensure data was not lost. After the interviews, the researcher identified codes by listening to the recordings following the analysis technique described

below. Due to lack of time for this research, the researcher did not transcribe the interview recordings, which may be a weakness in the data analysis because this did not allow the researcher to review transcripts for themes in the text.

**Instrument.** The instrument used to guide the interview process was established based on the research questions and the review of literature that informed them. The progression of questions was based on the guidelines set forth by Berg and Lune (2012) in regard to question sequencing. They suggest the interview begin with simple demographic-type questions. This serves two key purposes: first, to put the respondent at ease, and second, to gather information that may organize the data between interviews. Next, Berg and Lune (2012) recommend asking questions pertaining most directly to the research questions. Accordingly, the next several questions (numbers 2 through 5) inquired directly about the supervision relationship. Berg and Lune (2012) advocate for saving the more sensitive questions relating to the initiated topic for later in the interview, which is why these questions can be found as numbers 6 and 7 on the interview guide (see Appendix A). Finally, questions “end by returning to any key concepts” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 119), specifically ones that were bypassed or only briefly mentioned earlier in the interview. In the actual interview, this involved less structured questions, developed at the time based on the progression of the interview; nevertheless, question 8 provides a starting point for such questions.

### **Analysis**

The nature of the semi-structured interview lends itself to rich qualitative data, since data was collected in narrative form. This type of qualitative data necessitates a careful process for content analysis. During this content analysis process, “patterns,

themes, biases and meanings” are identified (Berg & Lune, 2012). It is not until these salient themes and meanings have been established that data is appropriate for interpretation.

Data analysis for this study was based on a grounded theory methodology perspective, so named because it is “grounded” in the raw data so as to ensure that the data analyzed is as close to the respondent’s message as possible (Berg & Lune, 2012). Accordingly, data was drawn from the interviews after review of the recordings by the researcher. This method is an open method, in contrast with other coding methods based on a priori themes, as in a directed content analytical method (Berg & Lune, 2012).

Concepts that emerged from the recordings were noted, or coded, in association to the text. Recurring codes were grouped into themes and the transcript was reviewed again to ensure that codes corresponding to the research question were addressed by the themes that have been established.

### **Strengths and Limitations of Research Method**

The primary strength of utilization of an interview process is that it lends itself to complete answers from respondents. The semi-structured interview format allows the researcher to ask clarifying questions. The semi-structured format is also helpful because the questions need not dictate everything that comes out. Everyone has a bit different experience, and the flexibility accounts for that. However, limitations also exist, both in the semi-structured interview format and this study in general. First, a threat to external validity termed “reactive effects,” may develop in which asking the respondents directly and in person may increase the potential risk for dishonesty or limited disclosure (Grinnell, Williams & Unrau, 2009). Finally, limitations of resources, especially time,

limited the possible scope of research and necessitated the forsaking of some elements, connected or related concepts such as specifically addressing collegial social supports.

The snowball sampling method is a convenience sampling method. While it is easier to identify research participants, it also introduces a couple of limitations. First, identifying people through established contacts combines relationships complicated by vested, or at least perceived, interest. Although extensive measures have been put in place to protect against it, this sampling method may nevertheless come across as coercive. Secondly, the snowball method limits sampling to one's contacts and is likely not to be inclusive of the whole population. Furthermore, people tend to associate with people with whom they share ideals, which could result in excluding a sample with more diversity.

The nature of child protection work as government work also introduces some limitations. First, child protection workers come from a variety of disciplines – not all are social workers. This also leads to the fact that licensure is not required for these workers. As a result, if workers choose not to pursue licensure, their supervisory relationship is different from how it would otherwise be. This may introduce complications in the sample due to a division according to the need for clinical supervision or task supervision. Differences may include relationship dynamics, the introduction of another power differential, and even the format of supervision (ie. formal/informal, structure and frequency).

### **Results**

Through the course of the coding process, the researcher identified various themes relating to supervision and burnout among child protection workers. However, the data



did not reveal patterns in themes according to length of experience in child protection or question items on the interview instrument (see Appendix A). As a result, findings are considered according to themes established in the research questions, identified above.

These themes are graphically described in Table 2, displayed below.

Table 2

*Identified Research Themes*

Research Question	Themes
1: What aspects of supervision do child protection workers identify as factors in alleviating or exacerbating burnout?	Alleviating <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility Promoting Self-care</li> <li>• Personal Recognition</li> </ul> Exacerbating
2: In what ways does supervision impact burnout?	Degree Work Environment Stress
3: What characteristics of the supervisory relationship are most helpful for preventing burnout?	Support Availability Trust and Respect
Additional Themes (Not Associated with a Research Question)	Administration Years of Experience Individual Style

**Research Question 1: Alleviating and Exacerbating Factors of Supervision**

The first research question for this study was: What aspects of supervision do child protection workers identify as factors in alleviating or exacerbating burnout?

**Alleviating.** The emerging themes that addressed how workers perceive supervision as alleviating burnout include flexibility, which supports self-care and personal recognition, as highlighted in these quotes:

*Flexibility promoting self-care.* Respondents identified flexibility and self-care as factors that alleviate stress and burnout. These two factors were intertwined and flexibility was expressed as helpful inasmuch as it allows for self-care. This is evidenced in the following responses from participants:

*“He’s the most laid-back supervisor. He does not pay attention to when people walk into the office for the day, leave for the day. If you’re going to take a four-hour lunch, that’s fine, you’re accountable to your time. I mean, you’re accountable to what you report. So in terms of that, I’m a runner, I do yoga, things like that. If I want to go to a noon yoga class, it’s not a big deal. Make sure that we’re checked out appropriately for lunch or flex time, but it’s never a problem. So he’s very laid-back in that. So in terms of stress management, it’s huge. I mean, having little kids at home, just the flexibility you can have, that’s huge.”*

*“County’s very good about taking care of yourself. So if there is something in the way, if there is something that’s going on and you just need to go and do it, um this atmosphere is one that you can do that. No matter what time of day or night, because we’re on ROWE [“Results Oriented Work Environment”], and so you could be working at midnight if you really wanted to. If that’s your preference, to do your case notes at*

*midnight, no one cares as long as they get done. They don't care when they get done. And so I appreciate that about this environment ... she is good about letting us do what we need to do, so if I do need to take a half-day off to deal with something, or if I just need to take a day off to decompress and take a mental health day, she's all for it."*

**Personal recognition.** Another factor respondents identified as alleviating stress was when their supervisors recognized them. The following quotes from participants exemplify this sentiment:

*"She used to give us stickers, when we did everything right. You know, the county has been in the past – and that was a joke, but she did give us stickers and it was kind of funny but we all collected our stickers and would brag about getting stickers. But she really is, I mean, we have timelines, we have to do them, and if you met your timelines she would give you stickers when we would go over cases."*

*"It's more of the kind words that she will say ... she has implemented in unit meetings positive things that have happened, so she will normally, like every week say, "this person did something good, so can you talk about the outcome and how well it was." So we started doing that, and I think she takes great pride in – number one, she has a unit that is well-run, so I think that reflects kind of on her supervision and just the positive feelings she has about the work that everybody is doing on the unit."*

*"Even little things like you have these reports that a supervisor runs every month to look at, you know, have you met all your clients and done this, this and this? It sounds stupid, but little things; she used to put little stickers or little notes on there: "great job," that kind of thing. And that makes you kind of want to strive the next month to get those little stickers – I mean, they're little things, they're little cheesy things, but for some*

*people that's a lot because that's all you get. You don't get a lot of pats on the back in this job."*

**Exacerbating.** Respondents individually identified various factors they connected with frustration, feelings of being overwhelmed, and stress. However, there was little in data in terms of patterns connecting these exacerbating factors to supervision directly. Other exacerbating factors were outside the scope of the prescribed research questions. These patterns identified in the data are discussed in the section entitled "Additional Themes," below. Nevertheless, the emerging themes that addressed exacerbation of burnout included caseload assignments, which is related to supervision directly, as highlighted in these quotes:

*"There are more cases that drag you down. There can be a really challenging case that takes up 80% of your time, every day, and I just want to be done with that case."*

*"That's a quarter of my caseload. You're taking away a quarter. That would make it manageable! I'm not manageable right now."*

*"This is always the worker I've been. The reason you think I've come a long way is because when you had me in the beginning, I was overloaded ... give me a manageable caseload, I will have everything you need done."*

*"The way we're assigned cases is that they rotate through every unit and there's seven units on the floor. But my supervisor, despite how high our caseloads are – which, we're at the highest caseload overall, across the board. For our unit, we're running between 13 and 14, which everybody else is at least 5 below that. But she won't look at*

*that kind of stuff and she'll just assign as they come through because she thinks that's her obligation, to do it that way."*

*"It's a high burnout field, period. But yeah, right now it's really bad ... distribution of work, that's been a struggle in our area for a long, long time. Certain units are always impacted during the school year where the numbers are higher ... a lot of us get burnt out real easily or quickly during the month of October. October through June is like hell on wheels. And that is an understatement, seriously. It's really, really busy, it's like you can't see the end of the tunnel and the cases just keep coming in."*

*"Because I was just a supervisor, I'm deemed as being really competent in the unit. Sometimes I get the hard cases, the extra cases, the clean-up-the-mess cases. And then she's a new supervisor, so actually she just at one point handed me three cases and said, "look at these," and kind of deal with them. Probably because she was overwhelmed with learning her job, then the overwhelmed-ness kind of came to me ... she was overwhelmed and then she passed it on to me."*

## **Research Question 2: Impact of Supervision on Burnout**

The second research question for this study was: In what ways does supervision impact burnout? The answers to this question emerged primarily from three specific items on the interview instrument. The first item was operationalized by the question, "How do you see supervision relating to how well you do the tasks at your work?" (Item 4; See Appendix A). The next item was operationalized by the question, "How do you see supervision relating to how you feel about your work?" (Item 5; See Appendix A). The final item that contributed most significantly was operationalized by the question, "What aspects of your current supervisory relationship help you to manage stress

associated with your work?” (Item 7; See Appendix A). The responses that pertained most to this research question addressed this theme in three distinct components: the degree to which supervision impacts burnout, the impact of the supervisor on the work environment, and how supervision impacts stress.

**Degree.** The level of importance of supervision on the extent to which a worker experiences burnout emerged as a sub-theme related to this research question. Respondents identified varying degrees of importance, sometimes within the same interview. The following quotes from respondents illustrate the various responses around this theme:

*“I see it [supervision] as - I don’t know that I could do without it ... It’s a good thing to have good supervision. Because it really sets the tone.”*

*“Working in government or for the county, supervisors come and go. But I still have a responsibility as a CP worker to provide services for my client. So I think it’s an important role and it does play some part in the work that I do, but it’s not huge.”*

*“It’s important to have that position in place for support.”*

*“I think personally it’s a pretty important part of the work ... The risks are so much higher I think in this job that a mistake could end up literally in death ... I think initially it’s really important, but even as I’m going on, you know, my eighth year in the field, there’s still some situations where I don’t know what the clear answer is ... so you need that supervision to say, ugh, maybe you need to go this way, maybe there’s a different way, maybe you should just address it like this.”*

*“I think I’ve really relied on not having that be one of my pieces that made me feel good about how I do this job ... I have had to just have that internal conversation with myself.”*

*“It can make it or break it at times ... I think it can make it or break it, I really do. I think if you have a supervisor you can trust and who has your back – which I have had here ... – it can make a world of difference.”*

*“I don’t think it does [impact feelings about work]. Only because I think I’ve had very good supervisors who is [sic] very supportive of me.”*

*“I think having a good supervisor is very important. Not just to prevent burnout, but to even help workers find a balance.”*

**Work Environment.** One specific area in which supervision was identified to impact burnout was the work environment. Respondents explained this element both in general terms and specifically as it related to co-workers, as highlighted in these quotes:

*“I think that, I’ll talk in generalities about supervision. There are other units in the county where the supervisors aren’t very good, and it’s reflected in people’s attitude [sic]. And I think that, with my supervisor, I don’t feel like that’s there. So I feel like the people that have weak supervisors, their staff complain all the time, and you hear about it ... there’s another child protection unit in my building and they complain all the time and I think that it really speaks to just how the supervisor feels, how they allow their staff to – how supported they feel, how accountable they’re held.”*

*“She is all about taking care of yourself. So if there are things that are going on that you just have to do, that get in the way of the job, so-to-speak ... if there is something*

*in the way, if there is something that's going on and you just need to go and do it, um this atmosphere is one that you can do that. No matter what time of day or night."*

*"Here, it's so much expected that we put a band-aid on, send them out the door, and hope that you're not on rotation the next time they come back."*

*"Where he's not available. So the whole environment has kind of made – sometimes it's difficult to do your job too because of those differences. Not that I don't like it, I like the flexibility but sometimes it is different."*

**Stress.** Another theme that emerged from the data analysis was the impact of the supervisor on stress levels. Of note, as evidenced by the following quote, respondents equate stress directly with burnout: *"I think stress leads to burnout. So the more stress you have, the more apt you are to be burnt out with your job ... we use this term loosely, the parallel process. I think the stress and burnout are – maybe not parallel process, but it leads to burnout. The less stress, the less burnout you're apt to have."* The following quotes from respondents highlight some findings uncovered that relate to this theme:

*"I appreciate that about this environment ... she is good about letting us do what we need to do. So, you know, if I do need to take a half-day off to deal with something, or I just need to decompress and take a mental health day, she's all for it."*

*"Just the ability to go in and talk with him about what's going on. You know, and him being able to relate or give you feedback or constructive criticism or whatever ... things come up all the time that you can't wait for a scheduled supervisory session to go in and talk with someone ... being able to talk with your supervisor about these things takes the burden off."*



*“Reminding me that I have family, I have kids. I’ve got other things than this job. So they do pretty good, trying to maintain that balance with me.”*

*“If you have consistent supervision with your supervisor, that person, your supervisor, takes on some of the liability and you can talk to them about the case ... I think that’s why supervision is so important. You can bounce these things off of people, or your supervisor. You know, you get feedback. Again, some of the burden is taken off you so you just don’t feel alone out in the island. You know, we get some tough cases. We go to a trial where you’re terminating parental rights, you want to make sure that you’re doing what you’re supposed to do. You’re not alone, so you hope you’ve had supervision with your supervisor and they’ve told you – you know, given you direction.”*

### **Research Question 3: Supervisory Relationship Toward Prevention of Burnout**

The third and final research question for this study was: What characteristics of the supervisory relationship are most helpful for preventing burnout? The most prevalent themes related to this question revolved around support, availability, and trust and respect in the relationship. The following quotes illustrate these themes:

**Support.** One frequent response referred to the supportive role of the supervisor. In particular, participants expressed the importance of feeling supported in terms of receiving reinforcement and advocacy when challenged, whether by administrators or dissatisfied clients. Some responses, quoted here, pertain to this theme:

*“Her philosophy is that if she knows what’s going on, if you’re going to make a major move, moving a child or doing something, if she knows about it, she’ll back you. So I feel like I don’t make any big decisions without consulting with her.”*

*“Having a supportive supervisor who understands the work completely ... anybody who is very supportive, very flexible. Time, as far as how they communicate. And then someone who is a good listener. Because I could sit with you all day, that doesn't mean I'm listening. Someone who really knows the work, who you can reflect off of ... you need someone with a strong background in the work. Someone who is supportive, that can help you feel supported in the work that you do. Because it's not always a safe job either, so you've got to know you've got someone you can depend on.”*

*“I would have to say that they've supported me a lot. And they tell me that, they give me feedback about my work. So I like that, and that makes me feel good. It does make me feel, even though this job is stressful, it does make me feel good about what I'm able to do and what I can do with my families.”*

*“I think it's taking some of the burden off you. It's all about communication, it's all about the amount of time spent in supervision. For me, anyway. Because the more you're able to unload off on your supervisor and talk about, talk through, the less that you have on your shoulders, I mean, to me. So I mean that's important. I think that's the key for anybody being a supervisor, is to have constant contact with your supervisees. Because just the essence of our job, people get overwhelmed, there's so much to do. Just the cases that you get, the abuse cases, things that you just not in your wildest dreams you can imagine someone else can do to a kid, kind of thing. For that you've got to have a good support system, and I think that starts with your supervisor and trickles down to coworkers and friends.”*

**Availability.** In order to receive support, workers must be able to access their supervisor. Communication availability was a commonly identified theme, as evidenced by these quotes:

*“The work is difficult in itself. I mean, he responds pretty well to things. He might not be available when you need him ... more so than my previous supervisor, I’d go in and want to see him and he wouldn’t be there or something. Previous supervisor: always seemed to be there. So that kind of makes it difficult when you want to see someone and ask a question and you can’t make a decision or, well you can but you want someone else to share that liability in case that decision isn’t the right one or something goes awry, so you then whatever you were doing it gets delayed because he’s not there or something.”*

*“I would say that currently my supervisor is very good, I really like her. Throughout the course of many years, I’ve had good supervisors and not-so-good supervisors. I would say she’s pretty good ... availability, she’s a great problem-solver, she’s a person who’s spot-on with pulling out what needs to be pulled out and giving you advice. And you do need that in child protection, you need sage advice on things.”*

*“I’m required to come to the office at least twice a month and sit down and have a face-to-face, but we email consistently. She’s very responsive – old and new one – and phone calls, answers calls all the time. Being available is very important, especially in CP because we have to bounce a lot of things off of our supervisor to get feedback.”*

*“Being able to contact her whenever I need to [helps to manage stress with work]. I try not to do it after hours; however, a lot of our families have after-hours crises. And I respect that we don’t get paid for that time and we’re supposed to leave*

*work at work, but we work with humans and they don't end at 5pm. So being available and flexible in communication, as far as, I've worked with people who will only accept phone calls, or they weren't very comfortable with the computer or emailing all the time, they would rather see you or call. I like having someone who's flexible because every one of us have different styles in how we communicate. So I think that's very imp – it plays a huge role in our relationship, being flexible.”*

**Trust and Respect.** Participants also reported the need to have a relationship characterized by trust and respect in order to prevent burnout. The following quotes represent participants' responses about trust and respect in their relationships with their supervisors:

*“I think it's a good relationship – healthy relationship, good boundaries. I trust her judgment. I trust her opinion. She has been doing this for a long time. She's been in intake, she's been in program, she's been in family assessment. And I feel like she has a lot of background that is helpful. I respect her opinion. I respect her judgment, and I think she does mine too.”*

*“She's very respectful when people call and complain. Because when they call and complain about not just me – because they do, other workers too – she will have us in the room when she calls that person back. And let them know that I am there, that the worker is there. So I feel like, in child protection especially because it's an intense job an important job and you're making really huge decisions about families and children, that you need someone who you trust their judgment and their experience and that she's telling the right thing. I mean, as far as her experience goes and that she will back you up and challenge your thinking.”*

*“I am a very trusting person. And I also believe the agency that I work for. I believe that – it’s bigger than just children’s services, but – I believe that when supervisors or managers hire you, and you’ve been there for several years or you’ve had the experience elsewhere and you’re there now, I believe trust is a huge issue. It is in our agency, it’s always been since I’ve been there. Having trust, that’s like the foundation for me in a relationship ... I think having a good supervisor is like, very important. Not just to prevent burnout, but to help workers find a balance.”*

*“You’ve got to know you’ve got someone you can depend on. And it starts with a trustful relationship.”*

*“She’s receptive, she’s a good listener. She’s got very receptive energy. She’s safe, I trust her. So she would have my back in a liability issue. All those things are critical.”*

### **Additional Themes**

In addition to the questions this research sought to address from its inception, responses relating to burnout not covered by these questions arose in the data. The most prominent theme of all (including themes directly related to supervision) related to administration. Additionally, respondents identified tenure in child protection as a factor relating to supervision and burnout.

**Administration.** Although it was not one of the original research questions, the role of administration strongly emerged as a theme. In fact, administration was directly identified as a cause of stress, feelings of being overwhelmed, and burnout more frequently than any other item directly related to the supervisor or supervisory

relationship. The following quotes represent respondents' comments regarding the role of administration or management above the supervisor's level:

*“Putting a supervisor in who has no clue of the policies, no clue of the model that we’re using right now – maybe some insight on how we do our work, but maybe have not done the work per se – that can be very stressful. And that causes, that helps with the burnout rate – it’s like you’re fighting everybody. You’re fighting with clients, you’re fighting supervisors, you’re fighting with managers, and it just doesn’t work out.”*

*“There’s always red tape, and there are rules that um or policies that sometimes not even supervisors can ignore. And so sometimes even though my supervisor does support decisions that I make, it kind of goes against policy. Or it goes against whatever their supervisor is saying. And so that, and you know that they support you, but then up above it’s a different story. The opinion may not be the same.”*

*“But there’s not a whole lot they can do. They can’t stop the cases from coming in, they can’t control how many cases we get, they can’t just simply say, “Okay you’re overwhelmed, so I’m not going to give you a case,” although sometimes you know that, depending on other people’s case loads, I mean that sometimes they do take that into consideration. But you know, it’s just, this is just the nature of the job. I mean, unfortunately sometimes there are things that we can’t control. And so supervisors do what they can to try and support us.”*

*“I don’t enjoy my job like I used to. And it has nothing to do with the families. But it has everything to do with what is expected of us, with more demands, less resources. More demands, but less support. In terms of the administrative support ... the demands they put on us, they don’t add resources to help us meet those demands. So*

*that's just very stressful. So when you start to hate your job and you start to feel like, you know, you don't want to come to work any more, that's burnout right there."*

*"I really trust her, and I think she gives me the respect that I get to kind of do my cases the way I need to. If anything, she's just under management's directive to make sure all our paperwork deadlines are on, and so she has to talk about those. But that's not directly from her, she's like the conduit."*

*"All they can really do is be supportive and listen, and try to give the feedback to management about how overwhelming it is. And that's about it, really. Because she'll have so much work to do, she can't really pick up work."*

*"We have had these increasingly crazy demands for paperwork, like due dates and no missing anything, so it's like the paperwork became a huge emphasis and that's going to cause burnout in a lot of people because the fieldwork ends up – it's hard to figure out what to do because you can't do it all. But right now I'm okay, not great. Not fresh in the field, even though I just went back out ... it's child protection wide, a step above her ... just listen and try to represent to management that people are overwhelmed, because I'm not the only one. And I think she does do that, but she's also new in her role so she can't go too far with pushing back. And then I was just in that role and sometimes I would just tell people, I would just do little tiny follow-up stuff that would put them over the edge."*

**Years of experience.** No patterns emerged from this sample in relation to tenure in child protection (see Table 3).

Table 3  
*Tenure and Respondents' Ratings of Burnout and Supervision*

Respondent	Years of Experience in Child Protection	Subjective Level of Burnout	Subjective Strength of Supervisory Relationship
A	3	2	10
B	4	7	6
C	7.5	7-8	5
D	8	3	5
E	10	6.5	5-6
F	10.5	10	9
G	12	5	6
H	15	5-6	8

As seen in Table 3, no distinct patterns emerged in the data related to years of experience in child protection. The respondents' subjective level of burnout was operationalized by the prompt, "Please rate your level of burnout on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being overwhelmingly burnt out" (Item 10; See Appendix A). The respondents' subjective strength of supervisory relationship was operationalized by the prompt, "Please rate your supervisory relationship on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being very supportive" (Item 11; See Appendix A).

Regardless of the aggregated data, individually respondents identified the need for supervision as tied to length of experience, as reflected in the quotes below:

*"When I started, I was stressed all the time."*

*"You work from the county system and you get a new job and you find out there's not a lot of training they do. It's a lot of on-the-job training. You just kind of get thrust into things."*

*"Especially when you're first beginning in this job, you need a lot of direction and supervision. There's so much at stake in child protection."*



*“I’ve been doing this for 12 years, like I said. I’ve learned what to take home, what boundaries to set, how to take care of yourself. I think you do this for a while knowing that you came into this job knowing it would be stressful and just having to manage it ... I’d be kidding myself and anyone if I said I have zero burnout. Everybody has it ... I think everybody has a little semblance of burnout, just because of the nature of the job.”*

*“I think the newer workers probably have a little bit, maybe more stress ... I think when I was younger, I was probably burnt out more because I didn’t know how to manage it ... you learn that as you go.”*

**Individual Style.** Finally, one theme that emerged was the individual nature of the relationship between supervision and burnout according to the worker. This was demonstrated in various examples, above, in which respondents answers were in direct opposition to one another. This quote from a respondent identifies this theme more clearly:

*“It depends on your work style too. Some people thrive on the organization and the micromanaging-type thing and some thrive from hands-off, leave me alone, I know what I’m doing. And I’m not sure if I would be as good a worker today if I would have come in with a hands-off approach as opposed to the hands-on approach ... if I would have come in without having that, I don’t know if I would be the worker I am now. With the hands-off approach kind of thing. But you know, like I said, I was with her for so long it just became second nature to do things the way she wanted you to do them. You know if you did things the way you were supposed to do them, she kind of left you alone, and that’s kind of what you strove for. If you do what she wants you to do, you don’t*

*have to worry about it.”*

## **Discussion**

### **Interpretation of Findings**

A complex organizational process was required for the researcher to establish themes from the participant interviews. Analysis was marked by a multi-faceted process in which coded responses were compared to each interview item, length of experience in the field, and within each interview. This attempt to establish specific and distinct themes from participant responses was largely unsuccessful. Ultimately, data was analyzed according to how codes addressed the proposed research questions. In this organization, a few overarching themes emerged.

Coding within each question from the interview (See Appendix A) did not reveal significant themes. This may be attributed to a few potential etiologies. Ex post facto analysis indicated the manner in which questions were worded in the instrument was vague. This was intentional in the design in order to solicit the most open answers without introducing researcher bias; however, the questions appear to have been too vague, to the point that respondents did not understand what the question was intended to address. Even with clarifying questions, introducing the subject vaguely at first made it such that respondents' thought process was turned away from the intention of the study.

Another possible reason the emergence of so few themes is that opposing experiences may produce the same result. For example, when asked if supervision affects how respondents feel about their work, either worse or better, one respondent stated,

*“Right now, for me, it’s neither ... I don’t think it affects anything dramatically or anything significantly. I think that, like I said, I think I’ve been very fortunate to have very good supervisors, very supportive supervisors, I should say. And so I don’t feel like it’s impacted my work.”*

In contrast, another respondent reported, *“I think I’ve really relied on not having that be one of my pieces that made me feel good about how I do this job.”* In both cases, respondents expressed supervision did not impact their work significantly. However, their experiences were quite different; one respondent reported she felt supported and the other reported she did not feel supported. Both circumstances resulted in workers who did not feel their supervisor impacted their work significantly enough to reach out.

Likewise, similar experiences may produce divergent results in various people. For example, one respondent directly stated she would not feel as good about her work if she *“had a supervisor who micromanages.”* In contrast, another respondent stated she wished her supervisor would challenge her more and that it would benefit her work: *“My current supervisor is mainly – he trusts the work that I do, so it’s mainly to check in. It’s not what I would consider supervision in terms of benefitting or challenging decisions that I’ve made.”* In this example, both respondents have supervisors with more of a laissez-faire approach, but their responses are diametrically opposed to each other.

A final reason that findings did not reflect patterns regarding supervision is that supervision is not as impactful in day-to-day practice as is reflected in previous research. This reasoning is reinforced by the most prevalent finding in which all respondents reported in agreement with one another: supervisors can only do so much; the real responsibility for overwhelming stress and burnout lies with the upper management and

administration. Respondents who reported having a supportive supervisor expressed that they appreciated attempts to advocate for workers to upper management; however, even the workers who felt most supported reported the advocacy only goes so far before it is out of the supervisor's hands.

### **Findings and the Literature**

**Dimensions of Burnout.** In the literature, respondents closely identified burnout with stress, often using these terms interchangeably (Moon & Hur, 2011; Um & Harrison, 1998). In previous research, the most obvious feeling of burnout is termed emotional exhaustion (Maslach et al., 2001). However, previous research identified a negative correlation between emotional exhaustion and tenure or length of stay in the job (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lee et al., 2010; Lizano & Mor Barak, 2012; O'Donnell & Kirkner, 2009). That finding was not reflected in the present research. Although many respondents reported high levels of stress and being overwhelmed as characteristic of the job of a child protection worker, all respondents have been in child protection at least three years, and one as many as 15 years. Although some respondents reported they have considered other lines of work, none reported a direct intention to leave child protection in the near foreseeable future.

Previous research has identified depersonalization as one of the three characteristic dimensions of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). The findings of this study do not reflect this theme. Even the respondent who reported being "overwhelmingly burnt out" (10 on a Likert scale; see Table 2) responded to the prompt, "I'm wondering if that's ever the case for you and if your supervisor helps you to see your clients more as people or not," with the following:

*“I don’t have that situation. So that’s never been a conversation I’ve had with my supervisors. No, I’ve never, no, not me. (laughs) More so I think I’m, overly involved – too much – you know, where I think that becomes stressful. When you’re too involved and you feel too much empathy. You feel their pain, you feel their stress, and that is an issue. But you know, what you just asked me there, no. I’ve never had an issue with that, detaching myself from my clients.”*

This response is directly opposed to the concept of depersonalization, which is described as an emotional distancing from clients (Maslach et al., 2001).

**Social Support.** The primary focus of this research was to address previous research findings that identified supervision as a factor impacting burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lait & Wallace, 2002). While colleagues were also identified as a source of social support, the supervisor’s role as a mediator between the worker and the organization has caused supervision to emerge as a more influential source of social support in literature related to burnout (Lait & Wallace, 2002; Shulman, 2010). In the present study, co-worker support was described in varying degrees of importance, most frequently in a negative relationship to supervisory support. That is to say, when workers reported a supervisor as less supportive, they were more likely to rely on support from their co-workers. However, this finding conflicts somewhat with the result that supervisors have an impact on the work environment because on the other hand, a good supervisor can create positive social support among co-workers. In one respondent’s words:

*“She feels more relaxed and I think it shows in the unit. It feels like we’re more relaxed and it feels like a team again. There’s not a lot of dissention and there’s*

*not a lot of talking about other people. It feels like pretty much a healthy group of ... strong group of independent women who have a voice. I think that comes from her a lot because that's who she is."*

In the review of literature, the supervisor's role in the organization was identified as important as a mediator because organizational change has been found to play a role in ameliorating burnout (Cordes & Dougherty, 1993; Maslach et al., 2001; Shulman, 2010). In the present study, organizational factors were identified to a greater extent than in the literature (expressed as "Administration" in the Results section). However, contrary to the hypothesis that supervision would play a role in mediating between workers and the organization, respondents consistently reported that even at the supervisory level, they did not have sufficient power to implement organizational change or make a significant impact in a way that would alleviate burnout.

### **Limitations**

The scope of this research is limited in its application due to several factors. First, the sample is limiting in both diversity and magnitude. The small sample size (n=8) cannot reasonably be assumed to be representative of the perspectives of child protection workers overall. Furthermore, the sample was taken from workers in urban and suburban counties in a Midwestern metropolitan area. Although the sample was racially diverse, the extent to which this is representative of child protection workers and other measures of diversity, such as gender, was not explored. Nevertheless, new patterns and questions of previous research that have been called into question through this research bear further exploration in future research.

Perhaps most importantly, the instrument was not validated on a test group prior to the research study, due to limitations of resources and time. As a result, the interviews in this study did not directly address the research questions as they might have in an empirically validated instrument. Further, the single-researcher design and coding process does not provide additional measures of validity and may introduce researcher bias (Grinnell et al., 2012). However, this research could be considered a step towards creation and validation of an instrument that more closely approximates the true experiences of workers in relation to the research questions.

### **Implications**

This research has resulted in an exploration of qualitative data around the intersection of supervision and burnout. The findings from this study would most appropriately be applied in the development of further research. This research suggests further exploration should be done around factors that affect how workers feel about their supervisors and the supervisory relationship. Additionally, this research lends itself to further exploration of organizational interventions toward ameliorating burnout and the relationship of the supervisor to the organization.

In direct practice, this research can be applied on all levels – micro, mezzo, and macro. On the micro level, both workers and supervisors can apply the findings of this study. Workers can identify their preferred supervision style so as to better communicate their needs to their supervisor. Worker and supervisor can collaborate to enhance communication and positive social supports in the work environment. On the mezzo level, managers and directors (the administration above supervisors) can take note from the findings of this present study to ameliorate anxieties such as specific demands of

paperwork. Finally, interventions on the macro level include advocacy and policy change to provide more resources for the increasing demands of high caseloads.

The data will be disseminated in three ways. First, this report will be posted on the Internet with academic and clinical research papers. Second, the data will be presented in a presentation open to the public. Finally, the report will be shared with research participants for their review. Due to confidentiality and the design of this research, participants' supervisors were not identified. Therefore, dissemination of the information within the counties will be dependent on the participants themselves.

### **Conclusion**

Previous research has identified supervision as an influential contributing factor in the prevention and amelioration of burnout (Boyas & Wind, 2010; Lait & Wallace, 2002). However, the specific ways in which supervision is helpful has not previously been explored. This research sought to address this relationship through semi-structured interviews with eight child protection workers to identify the ways in which supervision affects burnout and specific factors of supervision that are most helpful in preventing and alleviating burnout.

Although themes did not emerge as strongly as anticipated, some themes were identified around the research questions. Other, more pre-dominant themes emerged throughout the interviews that were not related to the research questions: the role of administration, years of experience, and individual style. Ultimately, while previous research has identified the importance of supervision in its role as a source of social support for child protection workers, it appears the nature of the relationship is more



nuanced than is within the scope of a single exploratory study to uncover. Further research is needed to understand the intricacies of the supportive supervisory relationship.

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**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

1. How long have you been working in child protection?
2. Describe the nature of your current supervisory relationship(s).
3. How does your current supervision experience compare to other supervision experiences you have had?
4. How do you see supervision relating to how well you do the tasks at your work?
5. How do you see supervision relating to how you feel about your work?
6. What connections exist between your supervisory relationship and your work with families?
7. What aspects of your current supervisory relationship help you to manage stress associated with your work?
8. What aspects of your current supervisory relationship make your work more difficult?
9. Can you speak to how your supervisory relationship impacts:
  - a. Feelings of being overwhelmed?
  - b. Feelings of empathy toward clients?
  - c. Your sense of accomplishment or effectiveness?
10. Please rate your level of burnout on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being overwhelmingly burnt out.
11. Please rate your supervisory relationship(s) on a scale from 1 to 10, with 10 being very supportive.

**Appendix B. Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval**

January 23, 2013

Katelyn Davies  
959 Dayton Avenue  
St Paul MN, 55104

Re: IRB#12-EXP-76 Burnout Among Child Protection Workers: The Role of Supervision

Dear Ms. Davies:

Thank you for your reply to the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB) letter of 1-21-13 outlining the stipulations required for approval of the research project listed above. You have addressed all concerns and clarifications as requested. As a result, your project is approved.

Please note that all research projects are subject to continuing review and approval. You must notify the IRB of any research changes that will affect the risk to your subjects. You should not initiate these changes until you receive written IRB approval. Also, you should report any adverse events to the IRB. Please use the reference number listed above in any contact with the IRB.

This approval is effective for one year from this date. If the research will continue beyond one year, you must submit a request for IRB renewal. At the end of the project, please complete a project completion form. These forms are available on the St. Catherine University IRB website.

If you have questions or concerns about these stipulations, please feel free to contact me by phone (X 7739) or email ([jschmitt@stkate.edu](mailto:jschmitt@stkate.edu)). We appreciate your work to ensure appropriate treatment of your research subjects. Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John Schmitt".

John Schmitt, PT, PhD  
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Cc: Pa Der Vang

**Appendix C. Letter of Informed Consent****Burnout Among Child Protection Workers: The Role of Supervision  
INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a research study investigating the role of supervision as a factor in burnout. This study is being conducted by Kate Davies, graduate student at Saint Catherine University and the University of Saint Thomas under the supervision of Pa Der Vang, Ph.D., a faculty member in the School of Social Work. You were selected as a possible participant in this research because (state how and why the subject was selected). Please read this form and ask questions before you agree to be in the study.

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of supervision in burnout. Approximately 9 people are expected to participate in this research.

**Procedure:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with the researcher for an interview. The interview will consist of reviewing and signing this informed consent form, followed by a conversation guided by a series of pre-established questions. The interview is expected to last approximately 45 minutes. The total time of this study will take approximately 45 minutes, in one interview session.

**Risks and Benefits:**

The study has minimal risks. However, due to the nature of the subject matter, you may be at risk for psychological stress following the interview.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

In the event that this research activity results in an injury such as psychological stress, I will assist you with linkage to a therapist in the community to help you process the stress associated with this study. Any medical care for research-related injuries should be paid by you or your insurance company. If you think you have suffered a research-related injury, please let me know right away.

**Confidentiality:**

Any information obtained in connection with this research study that can be identified with you will be disclosed only with your permission; your results will be kept confidential. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

I will keep the research results secured in a password protected computer in (state where) and only I and my advisor will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 25, 2013. I will then destroy all original reports and identifiable information that can be linked back to you. The audio recording of our interview will be stored on my password protected phone and computer, and deleted on or before May 25, 2013.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with Saint Catherine University or the University of Saint Thomas in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Kate Davies, at (816) 914-0365 or [davi7954@stthomas.edu](mailto:davi7954@stthomas.edu). You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Pa Der Vang, at (651) 690-8647 or [pdvang@stkate.edu](mailto:pdvang@stkate.edu), will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact the chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, Dr. John Schmitt, at (651) 690-7739.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have read this information and your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, please know that you may withdraw from the study at any time.

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I consent to participate in the study and have my responses audio recorded.

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Signature of Participant

Date

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Signature of Researcher

Date