



## Supervisor and policy roles in social media use as a new technology in child welfare



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### ABSTRACT

This analysis examines the role of agency policy and supervision in the decision-making of child welfare workers about their work-related social media use. Data were collected using a mixed-methods internet-based survey of 171 child welfare workers and interns about their social media use related to their direct-practice work with child welfare clients. The study finds that supervisor approval and agency policy is correlated with worker's social media use, and that workers find utility in social media use, but have poor clarity about how they should use social media in the child welfare work setting. These results suggest a need for agency policy and practice guidelines. Implications for child welfare agencies include an opportunity to consider the types of policy development necessary to ensure that multiple stakeholders are represented in policy and practice decisions, and that they reflect the possible benefits and risks of social media use.

### 1. Introduction

Three studies demonstrate that child welfare workers use social media to inform their professional practice (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Sage & Sage, 2016a, 2016b), although the limited research in this area does not address how agency policy and practice informs workers' use of social media. Government agencies are encouraged to have social media policies (Bertot, Jaeger, & Hansen, 2012), but these social media policy recommendations typically do not address the unique role of child welfare workers who might use the information to make assessments about, or communicate with, families at risk (Sage & Sage, 2016a). Whereas the typical use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in government agencies originates with policy-driven agency directives that are reinforced in training and supervision, social media has crept into the child welfare workplace through employee use (Breyette & Hill, 2015). Therefore, the ways in which workers seek guidance about the use of social media may differ from the ways they engage in other kinds of agency practice. We investigated the role of agency policy and supervision in the decision-making of child welfare workers about their work-related social media use.

### 2. Review of the literature

#### 2.1. Social media and its interest to child welfare workers

Social media sites allow users to share personal information and interact with other online social media users, who may be family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. Commonly-shared information includes content such as age, occupation, location, interests, personal photos, and daily activities. Users are encouraged to identify others who use the social media site with whom they have a preexisting relationship to make an online connection (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media sites are used for various purposes, such as business networking, communicating with friends, to manage presentation of self, or to reshare information from news sites (Kimball & Kim, 2013). Social media sites, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn, each have different formats and norms regarding self-presentation and communication (Meshi, Tamir, & Heekeren, 2015).

Sixty-five percent of adults use social media across all races and ethnic groups, and use is similar across income levels (Perrin, 2015). Mobile phones with social media access are accessible across a wide population, including in runaway and homeless youth (Harpin, Davis, Low, & Gilroy, 2016; Rice, Ray, & Kurzban, 2012) and other hard-to-reach child welfare clients (Masson, Balfé, Hackett, & Phillips, 2011). Therefore, it is likely that child welfare workers have clients who are on

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social media sites.

Child welfare workers' roles include making assessments of families as part of risk assessment and intervention decision-making, as well as frequent communication with families (Schreiber, Fuller, & Paceley, 2013). Social media may provide avenues for child welfare workers to carry out these roles. For instance, child welfare workers may gain insight by searching the public profiles of clients, or reach out to them through the social media messaging tool.

## 2.2. Use of social media in child welfare agencies

The new era of smartphone and internet technology has permeated social services agencies in ways that allow new kinds of access to, and communication with, clients through social media. Because social media tools are provided by third parties and not directly by the agency, workers bring them to the agency environment, often with limited agency guidance. In this way, social media use emerges directly from perceived utility, and creates some complication for agencies as they attempt to adapt policy to meet practice. Yet the utility-driven use of social media also offers the opportunity for practice-driven innovation, instead of the top-down agency-driven technology mandates which workers often find as disruptive to their practice (Baker, Warburton, Hodgkin, & Pascal, 2014). When workers are using social media tools in their agencies, their use must eventually become either institutionally-sanctioned or prohibited, or else it may cause agency liability.

### 2.2.1. Adoption of social media

The utility-driven model of social media innovation in public services is described in research by Mergel and Bretschneider (2013). They propose that government agencies who adopt social media do so in three stages, which they label “experimentation, constructive chaos, and institutionalization” of the new tools. In the experimentation phase, individual innovators who have some experience with technology from other work or non-work settings begin using it in the workplace, and the use spreads from worker to worker and thus may be used in a variety of informal ways. In the constructive chaos stage, users begin to recognize both benefits and risks of the technology use, which may create tensions within the organization, and organizations respond with attempts to standardize the technology use through practice or policy standards. Often in this stage organizations seek answers that other similar organizations use, or draw upon their past policies related to ICT use to drive current standards. Sometimes reactionary standards are developed in response to misuse, or concerning use, of technology. Finally, in the institutionalization stage, the agency has developed a set of standards, processes, and enforcement measures to control the use of the technology. Child welfare agencies who know about their workers' use of social media are grappling with how to move from the first two categories to the later given the perceived benefits of social media use, while also grappling with the risks and challenges related to social media use.

### 2.2.2. Benefits

Work-related social media is commonly seen as a useful tool to child welfare workers (Breyette & Hill, 2015; Sage & Sage, 2016b). Child welfare may see a range for utilities of social media use, including the ability to find out information about their clients through a search, to connect with difficulty-to reach clients through a messaging utility or social media connection, or to develop relationships with others in the workplace including foster parents, attorneys, and co-workers (Sage & Sage, 2016b).

While few attempts have been made to use social media as part of an intervention in child welfare settings, some efforts are documented in the literature. For instance, one intervention attempted to link foster parents and their social workers over a secure social network, and found it was generally acceptable to foster parents (Dodsworth et al.,

2013); another study of the acceptability of videoconferencing via Skype for visits between children in foster care and their siblings or parents found that child welfare workers generally thought it was an acceptable practice, and some were already using it (Quinn, Sage, & Tunseth, 2015). These types of practices are not widely documented, and insufficient data exists about how child welfare agencies and workers make decisions about embarking on the use of these types of social media use, but it appears their utility is promising and workers are helping their agencies innovate by bringing these technologies to the work setting.

### 2.2.3. Risks

Risks for social media use in the workplace are many, and the agency ability to monitor the use is limited. Because third-party tools can also be used on personal devices, child welfare agencies may not be able to monitor and control them in the same ways that they do other internal system technologies which require agency log-ins, and agencies may not have considered implications of the use of these third-party tools.

Another concern relates to safety and privacy issues. Dolinsky and Helbig (2015, p. 64) address the issue of communicating with clients over social media in a study that explored how public agencies used Facebook to locate and engage former foster youth. These authors point to the ethical considerations guided by the NASW Code of Ethics and ASWB Technology Standards, and offer a summary of practices used by agencies to uphold these standards on Facebook. Factors for consideration include informed consent, confidentiality, verifying identity, and avoiding disclosure of confidential client identification.

Although the afore-mentioned examples explore potential concerns of ICTs to communicate with clients, they do not address the use of social media as a tool to investigate clients. Child welfare workers report that they access social media to aid in risk assessment, and sometimes generally to learn about clients (Sage & Sage, 2016b); however, unlike public record database searches that report government-generated information about a client, social media representations are created by social media users, and self-disclosures on social media may be strategic or accidental (Bazarova & Choi, 2014), and therefore present an untrue, incomplete, or misleading picture. Ethical issues also arise related to a client's right to privacy (Groshong & Phillips, 2015) and potential relationship harm caused by this type of information use (Lannin & Scott, 2013). Therefore, clarity about when to use and not use social media for the purpose of client assessment is not always evident, and decision-making will likely not be consistent between workers if left to their own values and judgments about the appropriateness of such use.

## 2.3. Role of child welfare agencies

Child welfare agencies can condone, support, or exclude social media use through their policy and practice directives. Social media policy in government agencies supports accountability, communication with stakeholders, and transparency (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2010; Bertot et al., 2012; Jaeger, Bertot, & Shilton, 2012; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). Although agencies often do have general technology policies, few agency social media policies address the unique role of the child welfare workers' social media use in the context of their roles that include assessments of clients, relative searches, and communicating with vulnerable youth and adults (Sage & Sage, 2016a), and instead focus on areas such as how to present the agency and represent oneself, how to present quality content, and what to not post, such as offensive content (Vaast & Kaganer, 2013). The National Association of Social Work published technology standards in 2005 which have not kept pace with emerging communication technologies (Lopez, 2014), so there is little professional guidance for child welfare practitioners about how and whether clients' social media can be considered within a child welfare context. Therefore, it is important to understand what informa-

tion workers draw upon when making decisions about their social media use.

## 2.4. Current study

The purpose of this analysis is to consider factors that may be associated with child welfare workers' social media use in agency settings. The analysis examines descriptive characteristics of workers; their social media use in agency settings, and the type of agency policies in their places of employment. Specific research questions assess (1) associations between child welfare agency policies and worker perceptions related to social media use and (2) agency policies and child welfare workers' behaviors in terms of social media usage. Additionally, qualitative comments are examined to provide a context for these findings.

## 3. Methods

The study presented here is based on analyses of mixed-methods survey responses from child welfare workers in eight states. The survey was posted on the Qualtrics online survey platform. The survey, during pilot testing, took about 10 minutes to complete. The use of human subjects for this research was approved by the first authors' university Institutional Review Boards (IRB). Informed consent was provided through a detailed explanation on Qualtrics, and participants could opt out of all or portions of the survey they did not wish to answer. No compensation was offered or provided to survey participants.

### 3.1. Recruitment

Participants were recruited via non-probability snowball sampling: the authors sent links to their child welfare contacts and asked participants to pass the web link on to other workers who would be eligible to complete the survey. The study participants were self-identified child welfare direct practice social workers. Participants were invited to complete the survey if they worked at state, tribal, county child welfare agencies, or contracted agencies who worked in a child welfare capacity, or if they identified as students completing a university-approved field placement at a child welfare agency.

The survey link was also made available through postings on several social media sites frequented by child welfare direct practice workers, through emails to students in field placements at one university, and distributed through contacts at child welfare training centers in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Oregon. The screening question asked workers if they are a current child welfare worker or in a child welfare field placement in a social work program. Those who answered no were taken to the thank you page of the survey, ending their participation. Participants who met inclusion criteria were asked if they had a current active social media accounts on sites such as Facebook, Google +, Twitter, LinkedIn, or Snapchat. If the participant did not have a current active social media account, they were excluded from analysis. The link was public from June 1, 2014, through November 1, 2015.

### 3.2. Participants

The online survey was started by 269 respondents. Of those, 98 were removed from analysis for the following reasons: reporting that they do not work in child welfare ( $n = 21$ ), they did not have social media accounts ( $n = 14$ ), because they did not answer any questions before submitting ( $n = 3$ ), or because they did not submit the survey ( $n = 60$ ). This left 171 cases for analysis. Eight states were represented in the final analysis with most respondents (95.6%) coming from three states. The three states were Minnesota ( $n = 74$ , 43.3%), North Dakota ( $n = 68$ , 39.9%), and Oregon ( $n = 20$ , 12.4%). Not all respondents answered all questions; the number of responses per question varied from 141 to 171.

**Table 1**  
Demographics.

Agency Type ( $n = 171$ )	$n$ (%)
Employed as a child welfare worker in state/country government.	94%(161)
Private agency that delivers child welfare services.	1% (2)
Child welfare field placement supervised by a university.	5%(8)
Age ( $n = 170$ )	
19 to 24 years	9%(16)
25 to 29 years	15%(28)
30 to 34 years	19% (33)
35 to 39 years	16% (28)
40 to 44 years	11% (18)
45 to 49 years	9% (16)
50 to 54 years	10% (17)
55 to 59 years	5% (8)
60 to 64 years	3%(5)
65 to 69 years	1 (1%)
Job ( $n = 168$ ) <sup>a</sup> [Check all that apply]	
Tasks related to assessment, protective services, investigative, or front-end services addressing allegations	58% (97)
Tasks related to reunification services for families with children in foster care	59% (99)
Tasks related to foster care case management services to youth in long-term placement	45% (75)
Tasks related to providing therapeutic in-home or mental health services	32% (54)
Tasks related to supervision of child welfare workers	27% (46)
Other/specialized services	40% (67)
Foster parent licensing, recruitment, or other administrative services	27% (46)
Degree ( $n = 148$ ) <sup>a</sup> [Check all that apply]	
Bachelors of Social Work degree completed	67% (99)
Masters in Social Work degree completed	20%(30)
Currently Bachelors in Social Work student	4 (3%)
Currently Masters in Social Work student	11 (7%)
I do not have a degree in social work and am not a current social work student	4 (3%)
Bachelor's degree in another field	35 (24%)
Master's degree in another field	5% (8)
Years CW Experience ( $n = 151$ )	
None	4% (5)
Less than one	9%(14)
1–2	15%(23)
3–5	13%(20)
5–10	25%(38)
10 or more	47%(71)
Any supervisory responsibilities	
Yes	27% (46)
No	73% (125)

<sup>a</sup> Check all that apply, so responses total more than 100%.

Most respondents were employed in state or county government, and over half were under 40 years old. Over half worked in roles related to investigating allegations of child abuse or neglect. Many workers performed multiple job roles. Almost half of respondents had over ten years of child welfare experience. About a quarter (27%) had some sort of supervisory responsibilities, with the percentage of time devoted to supervisory responsibilities averaging 12% of respondents' time. Participants' characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

### 3.3. Measures

#### 3.3.1. Social media in child welfare practice

Child welfare workers were asked about ways that they might have used social media in their practice. These measures asked whether child welfare workers had searched for a client on a site like Facebook (1) out of curiosity (abbreviated to "curiosity"), (2) to locate a client, such as a missing parent ("locate client"), (3) to get information that might provide insight into the clients' risk factors ("risk factors"), and (4) when conducting an assessment, such as a child welfare investigation ("assessment"). These questions were initially coded so that respondents selected from categories of "never acceptable," "acceptable in

**Table 2**  
Social media use characteristics (N = 171 unless noted).

Characteristics	n	%
Search for client on Facebook out of curiosity (n = 143)		
Never acceptable	49	34%
Acceptable in some situations	83	58%
Always acceptable	11	8%
I have searched for a client on a site like FB out of curiosity		
I have done this	73	43%
I have not done this	98	57%
Search on FB to locate client (n = 140)		
Never acceptable	4	3%
Acceptable in some situations	74	53%
Always acceptable	62	44%
I have searched on FB to locate client		
I have done this	94	49%
I have not done this	87	51%
Search for a client on Facebook for risk factors? (n = 147)		
Never acceptable	19	13%
Acceptable in some situations	90	61%
Always acceptable	38	26%
I have searched for a client on Facebook for risk factors?		
I have done this	79	46%
I have not done this	92	54%
Search for a client on Facebook for assessment (n = 146)		
Never acceptable	20	14%
Acceptable in some situations	95	65%
Always acceptable	31	21%
I have searched for a client on Facebook for assessment		
I have done this	57	33.33%
I have not done this	114	67%

some situations,” and “always acceptable.” The original frequencies appear in Table 2 and these items were recoded into dichotomies of “always acceptable” versus “never or sometimes acceptable” for bivariate analyses. Respondents were also asked whether they had personally searched for a client on a site like Facebook for the four situations noted here.

3.3.2. Agency policy and supervision characteristics

Child welfare workers were asked about agency policies and supervisory approaches within their places of employment. These questions were (1) whether the agency has a policy about the appropriate use of social media, (2) whether the setting offers any training to employees or interns on the use of social media, (3) whether the setting completely restricts the use of social media at work, and (4) whether supervisor approves of workers searching for clients using social media for work-related purposes. The questions were limited to yes/no/unsure responses, and did not clarify what was covered in the policy or training.

3.4. Data analysis

SPSS Software Version 23 was used to conduct descriptive analyses of key items, as well as bivariate comparisons of workers' social media use and agency policy items and case outcomes (Norusis & SPSS, 2011). The qualitative analysis had three phases. First, two of the authors independently conducted a thematic content analysis of the qualitative comments to identify themes (Krippendorff, 2004) related to social media use among child welfare workers. Second, these themes were compared within technology use categories to assess overlap in responses. The authors reviewed coding results and found agreement on identified themes. Discrepancies in the coding of the qualitative comments were discussed to find consensus.

3.5. Findings

These findings present the descriptive results of the child welfare worker characteristics; social media use, and agency policies around social media. Additionally, the results address the research questions

related to the relationship between agency policies (with an emphasis on supervision), child welfare worker perceptions of social media use, and child welfare worker behaviors related to social media. Lastly, the results examine qualitative findings related to child welfare worker perceptions of social media use.

3.6. Social media use characteristics

Child welfare workers reported their perceptions related to use of social media in agency settings (Table 2). Over half of the workers (58%) reported that searching for a client on Facebook out of curiosity was acceptable in some situations and 43% reported that they had done this. Over half of workers (53%) stated that it was acceptable in some situations to search for a client on Facebook that the agency would like to locate, such as a missing parent and about half (49%) had done this. Likewise, 61% of the child welfare workers stated that it was acceptable in some situations to search for a client on a site like Facebook when the information might give insight into client risk factors and close to half (46%) had done this. About 65% of the child welfare workers reported that it was acceptable in some situations to search for a client on a site like Facebook when conducting a child welfare investigation or assessment and about a third had done this.

3.7. Child welfare agency policies

When asked if their child welfare agency has a policy on appropriate use of social media, 43% reported affirmatively. About 12% of the agencies offered training to employees or interns on the use of social media. Ten percent of the agencies completely restricted the use of social media at work. About half (56%) of child welfare workers reported that their supervisors approved of searching for clients using social media for work-related purposes (Table 3).

3.8. Supervisor approval and use of Facebook

Results included here focus on associations between supervisor approval of searching for clients on social media and various uses of Facebook. While there were some statistically significant associations between searching for clients on a site like Facebook and agencies policies, training, and restrictions, supervisory approval of searching for clients on social media was significantly related to several of the identified search types (curiosity, locate client, risk factors, and assessment). Therefore, the analyses here focus on these associations (Table 4).

Twelve percent of workers who reported that their supervisors approved of searching for clients on social media thought that it was acceptable to search for clients out of curiosity, as compared to 3% of

**Table 3**  
Agency policy characteristics.

Characteristics	n	%
Child welfare agency has a policy on appropriate use of social media?		
No/not sure	98	57
Yes	73	43
Does your setting offer any training to employees or interns on the use of social media? (N = 171)		
No/not sure	150	88
Yes	21	12
Does your setting completely restrict the use of social media at work? (N = 171)		
No/not sure	153	90
Yes	18	10
Does your supervisor approve searching clients using social media for work-related purposes? (N = 171)		
No/not sure	75	44
Yes	96	56

**Table 4**  
Supervisor approval of searching for clients on social media and types of searches.

Facebook searches	Does your supervisor approve of searching for clients on SM for work-related purpose YES	Does your supervisor approve of searching for clients on SM for work-related purpose No/not sure	X <sup>2</sup>
It is acceptable to search for a client out of curiosity			4.414* (p = 0.036)
Always	12% (9)	3% (2)	
Never or sometimes	88% (64)	97% (67)	
I have searched for client out of curiosity			6.24* (p = 0.012)
Always	51% (49)	32% (24)	
Never or sometimes	49% (47)	68% (51)	
It is appropriate to search to locate client			10.85*** (= 0.001)
Always	58% (42)	30% (20)	
Never or sometimes	42% (31)	70% (47)	
I have searched to locate client			2.28
Always	54% (52)	43% (32)	
Never or sometimes	46% (44)	57% (43)	
It is appropriate to search for risk factors			9.26** (p = 0.002)
Always	36% (27)	14% (10)	
Never or sometimes	64% (48)	86% (61)	
I have searched for risk factors			7.15** (p = 0.008)
Always	55% (22)	35% (26)	
Never or sometimes	45% (43)	65% (49)	
It is appropriate to search for assessment			8.76** (p = 0.003)
Always	30% (22)	10% (7)	
Never or sometimes	70% (52)	90% (63)	
I have searched for assessment			8.84** (p = 0.003)
Always	37% (35)	16% (12)	
Never or sometimes	63% (61)	84% (63)	

\* indicates statistical significance at the 0.05 level.

those workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 4.414$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.036$ ). Similarly, 51% of workers whose supervisors approved of searching for clients on social media had personally searched for clients out of curiosity as compared to 32% of workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 6.240$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). Over half (58%) of workers who reported that their supervisors approved of searching for clients on social media thought that it was acceptable to search for missing parents or other clients an agency is trying to locate, as compared to 30% of those workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 10.851$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ). There were statistically significant associations between supervisor approval and both thinking that it was acceptable to search for clients on a site like Facebook when workers thought that the information might provide insights into clients' risk factors, and also doing such searches. More than a third (36%) of workers who reported that their supervisors approved of searching for clients on social media thought that it was acceptable to search for clients if it might provide insight into risk factors as compared to 14% of those workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 9.259$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). In terms of whether they had searched for clients to assess risk factors, 55% of workers had personally done such searches as compared to 35% of workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 7.148$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.008$ ).

There were statistically significant associations between supervisor approval and both thinking that it was acceptable to search for clients on a site like Facebook when conducting an assessment and actually doing such searches. Thirty percent of workers reporting that their supervisors approved of searching for clients on social media thought that it was acceptable to search for clients as a part of an assessment in a child welfare investigation as compared to 10% of those workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 8.706$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ). In terms of whether or not they had searched for clients themselves as a part of an assessment in a child welfare investigation, 37% of workers had personally done such searches as compared to 16% of workers without supervisor approval ( $X^2 = 8.842$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ).

### 3.9. Context for searches on sites like Facebook in child welfare investigations

Qualitative comments included in survey responses were reviewed to identify themes related to the purposes that child welfare workers search for client information on social media. For each of the social media use domains (searching out of curiosity, searching for a person the agency is trying to locate, searching for insight into risk factors, and searching for a client while conducting an assessment) the authors reviewed qualitative comments and identified two major themes. These domains are grouped under the headers that appear below. In each of these domains, respondents commented on the use of social media to make decisions related to promoting safety or improving communication, and pointed out that there was generally a lack of clarity related to making decisions about the use of social media.

#### 3.9.1. Searching for a client on Facebook out of curiosity

Respondents generally did not share qualitative examples of ways that they searched for clients out of curiosity, although one responded noted, "sometimes it almost feels like spying on peoples' lives." One child welfare worker volunteered an example of a situation where a client used social media to share images of the child welfare worker, and to talk about perceived problems with the client's own case. Although it is not clear whether the worker found this while searching Facebook out of curiosity, this example demonstrates the type of information that may appear on a client's personal Facebook page and cause some concern for the worker.

A more common theme was that workers lacked clarity in terms of whether to search for clients or to friend clients on Facebook or other social media sites. Some of the situations where workers were unsure about whether or not online "friendships" were appropriate included Facebook friendships with foster parents, youth who aged out of care or were a former youth in care, or youth who were adopted out of the system. For workers involved with foster parents, there were clear examples of uncertainty regarding professional boundaries.

*"I have accepted a friend request from a foster parent. It was a dilemma*

*for me and still is because I have a good working relationship with them. At this time, I feel comfortable with them as a friend on my Facebook, but I could see how that could possibly cross a boundary line, whether that is now, or in the future."*

Another area of uncertainty related to Facebook friendships was when the friendship began prior to child welfare involvement, such as a worker who was friends on Facebook with individuals who later became foster parents. One respondent felt that it was ok if the relationship came before they were foster parents, but, *"If you are 'friending' them just to maintain contact...It's not acceptable."*

Several comments noted that more training was needed to help manage the ambiguity, particularly for those workers and agencies with longer-term relationships with clients. Statements include, *"I think that there needs to be additional ethics training related to social media; especially in terms of friending people who may be former clientele, kids in care, kids who have aged out, etc."*

Other participants also reported about ambiguity related to social media relationships between workers and foster parents, workers, and youth aging out of care, and former clientele. Some felt that social media policies were insufficient, and more guidance was needed, such as policies *"regarding what the foster parent can post about kids in care."*

### 3.9.2. Searching for clients your agency would like to locate

On this specific item, qualitative comments illustrate when workers decide to use social media to gain additional information to guide decision-making. Child welfare workers shared that they did search for clients on social media *"when a client runs," "when trying to locate families that have children at risk,"* and to *"help find biological parents if child/adoptive parents request it,"* to find absent parents, and if the agency is searching for *"relatives or kin for permanency."*

Qualitative responses from these child welfare workers suggest that some, but not all agencies have policies or directives to guide decisions in terms of when to use social media to find people, and that administrators may have limited or emerging awareness about the use of social media as a tool. One worker noted administrative support for client searches, *"our director now will ask if we looked a client up on FB, especially when we can't find them,"* while another respondent stated that the director of that agency *"had never thought to use social media for work-related issues, such as searching for people."* Another noted that in some areas, finding non-resident or absent parents can be challenging and that *"we are told to be creative, and the use of social media is one way of being creative."* While two respondents shared that these searches for people were done on work only Facebook account, it is not clear if that is always the case. Comments suggest that not all child welfare agencies have a work sponsored Facebook page: *"This opens up questions about having a social service Facebook page, and that is not something we have discussed."* One worker shared her feelings about her own use of social media to search for clients, *"I feel this is unethical, but continue to do so, and I believe that many child welfare workers feel the same."*

### 3.9.3. Search for a client on Facebook for insight into risk factors

Child welfare workers shared examples of some situations where they had used social media to assess risk factors. These included searching for evidence to use in court, or to assess the appropriateness of relatives to care for children. *"I am aware of some situations where a social media page has given info about the true nature of an injury, revealed a threat against another person, or given context to continued substance abuse or relationships with unsafe people."*

Policies guiding this specific form of social media use may not exist within agencies. One respondent stated *"I believe policies need to be developed. There are some counties that have Facebook pages to try to seek information about clients, but I never think that it is ethical for a county worker to check on clients that way."* Similarly, another respondent stated, *"I think that creates a lot of gray areas and could put the agency you work for at risk for lawsuits, etc. I do believe there needs to be much more*

*training on the use of social media in the child welfare realm."* One other respondent shared *"Our agency has a very general social media policy that does not address the use of social media re: clients. It does not seem to be viewed as a high priority, yet we know there needs to be something more specifically developed with an ongoing training plan."*

### 3.9.4. Search for a client on Facebook when conducting an assessment

During the assessment process, some workers felt that social media could be used *"when it pertains to cases with serious concerns about malicious or harmful injury or death to a child."* The examples shared included copies of text messages from a phone, or other situations where *"an allegation comes in based on a post on Facebook or other Social media."* Others mentioned that clients could occasionally *"incriminate themselves by posting pictures"* on Facebook of drug use, potential threats against the agency, or that workers use social media for *"fact checking the information we are receiving from clients."*

Several respondents specifically noted the expectation that workers contact the County Attorney prior to using Facebook in casework. Responses also included comments suggesting that these were thoughtful searches to assess specific factors and not *"just a random fishing expedition."* One respondent reports, *"We can ask for permission through our county attorney to check on clients, or sometimes family members will send us postings. These have been used in court reports and to confront concerning behavior."*

In terms of support for decision making, one worker stated that management staff, *"has had a discussion about the ethics surrounding the use of social media as a tool...however, we have had many more pressing issues to deal with, so this issue remains on the back burner."*

## 4. Discussion

This study suggests that supervisor approval of searching for clients on social media for work-related purposes is associated with both perceptions of acceptable social media use and workers' own use of social media in child welfare practice. Supervisors can play a role in transforming how child welfare workers use social media. While supervisory approval of using social media for work-related purposes was associated with perceptions of acceptable use, this approval did not translate into universal adoption of such an approach among child welfare staff. This may suggest that despite some supervisors endorsing social media use, child welfare workers are not certain of best practice or the agency is still in the "chaos" phase of agency ICT practice adoption, leading some workers to act on their own despite advice from their supervisors. The possibility of cohort effects in terms of child welfare workers' comfort with using social media, coupled with legal uncertainties and evolving norms, may all impact these results.

Other factors may also impact this analysis regarding agency policy as it relates to searching for clients. For instance, although 43% of workers endorsed that an agency policy exists, they were not asked whether the policy permits or limits their social media searches. Workers who had agency policies in place were slightly less inclined to use social media to search for clients, which suggests that the agency policies probably limited search behaviors. [Vaast and Kaganer \(2013\)](#) report that social media policies typically cover broad content such as what one should post and not post as a company representative; thus they do not likely address the direct use of social media to search for or communicate with clients, and it is possible that the respondents in this survey who reported that they had policies did not receive enough guidance from these policies to direct their social media activities.

This study offers a unique view of how child welfare workers are using social media in practice, set against a background of policy and administration within these agencies. The qualitative comments support a need for consideration of the ways in which agencies set policy and assess the utility of social media. Further information about how to assess a selected social media policy in a child welfare agency is available in a separate article from these authors ([Sage & Sage, 2016a](#)).

Finally, the qualitative responses of workers regarding their lack of clarity related to acceptable social media use put workers at risk for role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload, which is linked to worker burnout and turnover (Boyas & Wind, 2010). Although the qualitative comments elucidate some of the benefits child welfare workers have discovered for using social media, they also indicate that workers would like to see more policy, practice, and training related to its appropriate use now that workers are widely experimenting with social media in several ways.

#### 4.1. Implications for policy and practice

Since supervisory approval is associated with workers' perceptions of what constitutes an acceptable use of social media, as well as associated with their own use of social media in practice, this suggests a logical point of influence in which to implement and assess best practices related to ICTs. Training about social media use, therefore, should include supervisors and perhaps even be directed at supervisors rather than caseworkers. These findings contribute to previous research emphasizing the role of supervisors in establishing child welfare practices and supporting case decision making that aligns with the agency practice model (Frey et al., 2012), and also provides opportunities to consider the important role that child welfare supervisors hold in influencing the social media use of child welfare workers. McCrae, Scannapieco, and Obermann (2015) report that “doorway supervision” in which workers check in informally for a question is the most common type of supervision provided to child welfare workers due to time pressures of supervisors and workers; however, an emerging practice issue such as social media use may command more intentional consultation between worker and supervisor.

The qualitative comments volunteered by child welfare workers support that workers surveyed fit into the first two stages (experimentation and chaos) of the Mergel and Bretschneider's (2013) model of social media adoption, not yet having reached policy and practice institutionalization. This model suggests that stage one and two outcomes may include tension related to a blurring of personal and professional norms, internal errors, and unintended use of technology, and that the organizational practices and culture will inform how these processes reveal themselves. In the child welfare setting, errors may have profound consequences related to privacy, confidentiality, or safety, and therefore child welfare agencies should consider being proactive rather than reactive in moving toward policy and practice standardization.

Employee-driven innovation, versus employer-driven innovation, often materializes due to a worker's perceived need to complete a task, which can create tension as the worker and agency come to an agreement about the proper use and limitations of a user-initiated technology (Høytrup, 2010). Although the first two stages of the Social Media Adoption Model (Mergel & Bretschneider, 2013) appear high-risk and chaotic, Mergel and Bretschneider clarify that these stages allow for experimentation and adaptations of use of social media that may better meet the goals of workers, and without these stages, restrictive agency policies may limit innovation and creative problem-solving. Workers feel ownership and value their involvement in developing agreements about how the technology will be used given the way that the technology is diffused from their personal experiences with it, and should, therefore, be part of the decision-making and implementation process regarding its sanctioned agency use.

Role clarity, or expectations related to the roles one is expected to perform as part of their work, and autonomy, or the degree to which workers are allowed independent decision making that matches their skill levels, are both important components of worker retention in child welfare (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008). This further supports that notion that practices and policies in child welfare social media should be mission-driven, involve workers in creating boundaries around the policy and practice, and help clarify roles without arbitrarily limiting

the worker's ability to make appropriate independent decisions in cases where the situation warrants.

This study adds to the literature by illuminating the association between supervisor approval of social media use and worker's actual attitudes about and use of social media. Cohort differences between workers and supervisors may impact differential expectations about professional social media use, so it is important that supervisors are also offered guidance on the risks and benefits of social media in a child welfare setting, and understand the possible utility of social media as a tool, as well as the role conflicts that may occur for workers in their everyday social media use. This study also provides information about the reasons that child welfare workers engage in social media use, including their conflicted viewpoints about whether they should engage in social media searches of their clients, which suggests that workers would benefit from greater guidance. Given the proportion of workers in this study who state that they use social media to search for clients in disagreement with their supervisor's guidance, it may be important that the agency helps workers develop insight into the real risks and benefits of social media use.

This study offers consideration for areas where child welfare agency administrators might develop targeted interventions to help workers make beneficial decisions about their work-related social media use. These can include worker training, supervisor training, agency policies, and work groups that support implementation and practice. To implement these strategies in a way that maximizes confidentiality and supports ethical practice, agencies can consider the viewpoints of all potential stakeholders, including community members, foster parents, foster youth, biological parents and relatives, child welfare workers, supervisors, and administrators, and whether the proper resources are available to support and monitor policy and practice initiatives. In addition, child welfare administrators may wish to designate social media liaisons within agencies who receive more specific training about how to conduct social media searches within a specific set of agency criteria and who can consult with other workers when the need arises.

Child welfare managers can support staff in making modifications and adjustments to policies and case-level feedback through an evaluation process which assesses how well the new policy and practice standards are implemented, and why any divergence may occur. Candid and open communication about the use of social media may reduce staff temptations to take actions that might have ethical implications (i.e., searching for clients out of curiosity). Fast-moving technological innovation, policy and practice standards will likely necessitate adjustments in policy and practice as technology changes.

#### 4.2. Study limitations

One of the primary limitations of this research is response bias, in that the survey topic may have generated a greater response from those who use social media in their work settings since only respondents who used social media were included in the survey. The snowball sampling also led to a greater response from a few geographical regions, and similarities between regional policies or practices may have skewed the findings. Another limitation is the lack of an existing, standardized tool to collect information on this topic. Another limitation of this research is that while the respondents were asked about supervisory approval of the use of social media and the existence of agency policy, the nature of the approval or policy is unclear. It may be that workers had been informally told that they could use social media for work-related activities, or it may be that there were formal conversations about appropriate social media use at a supervisory level. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of these data does not allow for an analysis of the impact of longitudinal factors.

#### 4.3. Implications for future research

Additional research is needed to assess the actual prevalence and

frequency of use of social media within child welfare settings, and what worker or agency attributes impact its use. Research could inform innovative ways to work within settings to develop policies and practices that reinforce ethical practice guidelines. Research is needed about the implications of social media use in child welfare, and especially to assess whether the use of social media is helpful or harmful in meeting agency goals of child and family well-being.

Although we expected to find that policy and supervision were associated with how child welfare workers use social media, those features do not completely explain workers' actions related to social media. More research is needed to understand what other worker or agency characteristics most inform child welfare worker behavior related to social media use.

Future studies assessing workers' use of social media may support the implementation of best practices or model policies. Although information about social media policies in child welfare settings is sparse, Erie County in Buffalo, NY, offered a press release to make the public aware of their policy which allows a designated worker to search for information relevant to assessing child welfare risk (George, 2014). It would be helpful to know whether policies like these are helpful in protecting children, assessing risk, and supporting role clarity for workers, or whether they may also have negative impacts such as negatively affecting public trust and relationship development between child welfare workers and families involved in child welfare.

A number of emerging issues convene at the intersection of social media and child welfare which will warrant future exploration, such as responding to evidence that appears on social media of child abuse or neglect (via photos, statements, live feeds, or videos), issues related to the use and storage of social media in legal cases, the responsibilities of the child welfare agency as guardians of children in foster care and the youth's behavior on social media, social media use as a reasonable or active effort in supporting reunification, the use of social media as part of case planning to support visitation or maintenance of family connections and even perhaps expectations of monitoring of the social media lives of clients.

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