

Child Welfare Professionals' Orientation toward Child Saving versus Family Focus

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Background

- Child welfare professionals routinely interact with families and other stakeholders, influencing whether, how, and when families stay connected and permanently together.
- Recently, the U.S. Children's Bureau issued memorandums that placed great emphasis on youth and parent voice and prioritizing family relationships and connections (e.g., Children's Bureau, 2019).
- Despite these efforts, few studies have examined whether professionals' values on child safety, well-being, and family permanency are widely in the field.
- Building upon prior research on decision-making in child welfare (Fluke et al., 2016; Nikolova et al., 2017), this study investigated child welfare professionals' values orienting them toward child safety versus family preservation. Specifically, **we asked whether tenure in child welfare, level of position within child welfare, and/or type of agency (private versus public) influence professional values about the focus of child welfare work?**

Methods

- Data were collected in 2019 via statewide online survey of child welfare professionals (N=241) in a Midwestern state.
- We used Dalglish Scale to measure professionals' values orientation, which comprises 8 items on which participants must choose between an orientation toward child safety versus family preservation.
- Using ANOVA, we tested the association between tenure in child welfare, position level (e.g., frontline practitioner versus supervisor/administrators), type of agency (private vs public), and professionals' values regarding the focus of child welfare work. Analyses accounted for professionals' race and region of state.

Results

- >40% of professionals had ≤3 years' experience in child welfare.
- After accounting for demographic characteristics, analyses showed that tenure in child welfare and position level were significantly related to professional values. Staff with ≥10 years' experience reported values significantly more aligned with family than staff with ≤3 years' experience, as did supervisory/admin position as compared to frontline position. Work focus scores were not significantly different based on public vs. private agency.

An orientation toward **family-centeredness** (versus child-saving) was **significantly greater among supervisors/managers and those with more years' experience in child welfare**

Discussion

As the field moves toward reimagining child welfare as a child and family well-being system that promotes family engagement and prioritizes family connections (Children's Bureau, 2019), this study's findings point to areas that may require training and ongoing supports. It may be important to **focus efforts among early career professionals**. Moreover, recent implementation literature also suggests that organizational change and innovation must be supported by a robust infrastructure that extends well beyond one-time trainings. Future research is needed to understand the transmission of system and organization values to child welfare professionals.

Acknowledgements

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Figure 1. Work Focus Mean Scores by Level of Position

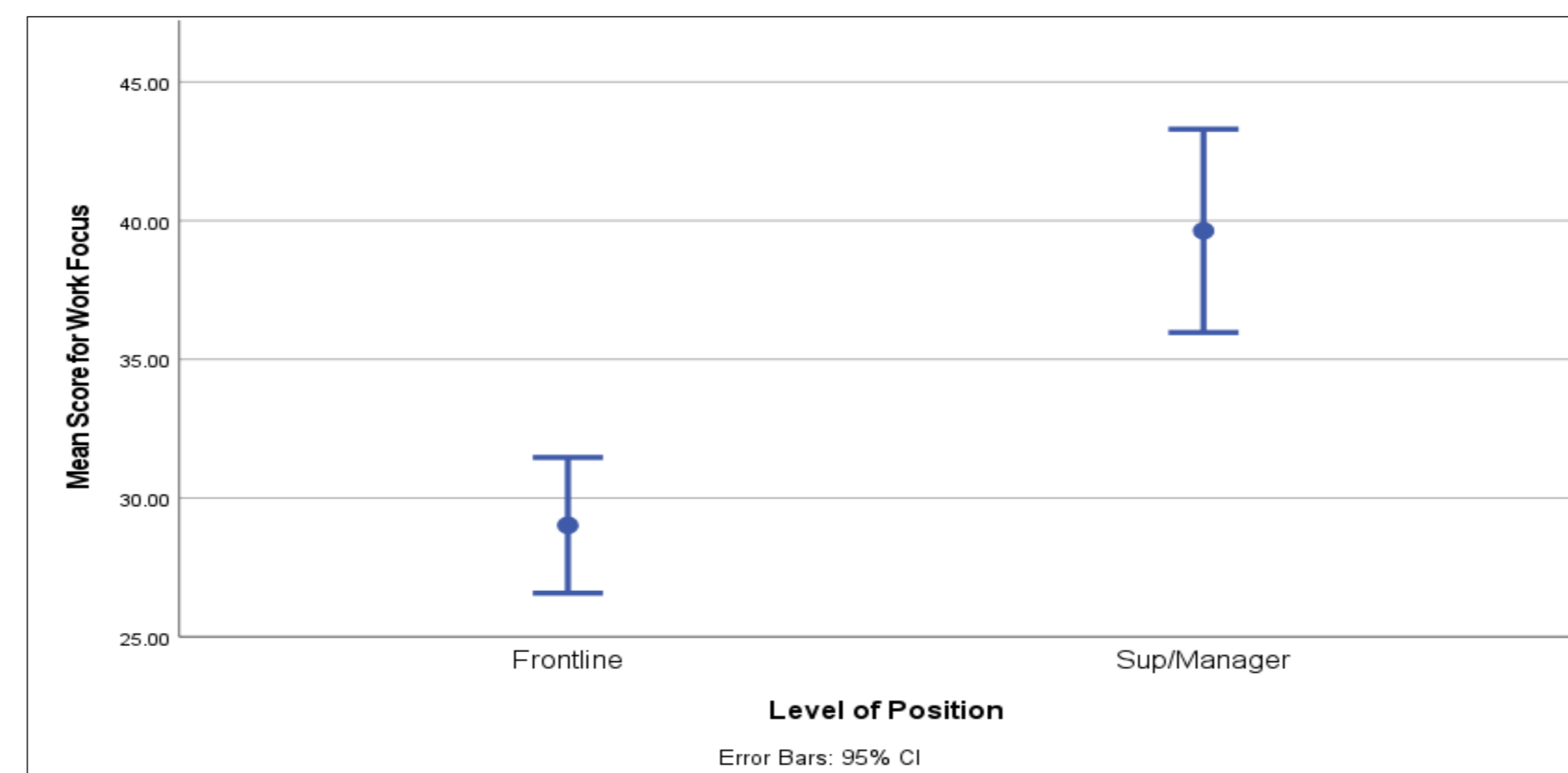


Figure 2. Work Focus Mean Scores by Tenure

