Social Media Use in Child Welfare Practice

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Abstract: The scholarly child welfare literature offers little information about the use of social media by child welfare workers. We conducted a study of 171 child welfare workers across several states using an online survey. The resulting data offer insights from workers about current practices related to social media use in a child welfare work setting. Most respondents see social media as an acceptable tool for conducting child welfare assessments. Respondents describe strains and benefits of social media use. It is recommended that agencies provide guidance on ethical decision-making for using social media as a work-related tool. Agencies should also provide policy clearly defining social media use and misuse.

Keywords: Administration; supervision; child welfare policy; child welfare workforce; social media

There exist untapped opportunities for technology in child welfare settings, including improving and increasing interaction between families and workers (Tregeagle & Darcy, 2008). Social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, and Snapchat, are used by 74% of online adults (Pew Research Center, 2013). Little is known about how caseworkers use social media in the field of child welfare; however, literature about professionals who use social media in other work settings suggest that tensions can arise about the boundaries between one's public and private presentation on social media. Clients, co-workers, and supervisors can easily search out social media profiles, and off-duty or work-related behavior on these sites may impact the perceptions of those who conduct searches (McDonald & Thompson, 2016). Although tension is a risk, child welfare workers can also use social media to carry out their roles, such as family finding and assessment (Sage & Sage, 2016).

Two empirical studies contribute to what is known about the use of social media in child welfare (Breyette & Hill, 2015; McRoy, 2010). They suggest that child welfare workers use social media for both personal and professional reasons. A 2010 study of 746 child welfare workers reported that a third of respondents used social media for professional and personal purposes and would like to make more use of it to assist in adoptions and permanency planning for children in foster care (McRoy, 2010). Additionally, a recent survey of 136 child welfare workers in Minnesota found that 12% used social media directly with clients, 44% used social media indirectly with clients, and 22% believed that child welfare workers should monitor their clients' social media activities (Breyette & Hill, 2015). More than half of child welfare workers involved in this study reported seeing a client's personal social media page, and a similar number reported that a client had requested to friend them on social media.

The current study surveyed child welfare workers about their beliefs, values, activities, and training related to social media. We attempt to expand knowledge about how child welfare workers use social media in the workplace, uncover tensions about social media use in child welfare work, and learn which educational or organizational practices might impact child welfare workers' professional use of social media.

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Defining Social Media Sites and Understanding Privacy Settings

Social media sites allow users to build personal profiles that typically share user-provided content such as age, occupation, location, and interests, and users can then make portions of their profiles accessible to select people or the public. Users are then 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). There are hundreds of social media sites with various user-base sizes, some catering to niche audiences, and used for various purposes, such as business networking, communicating with friends, or re-sharing information from news sites (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media sites, such as Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, and LinkedIn, each have different formats and norms regarding self-presentation and communication.

Social media users considerably underestimate the reach of their online posts (Bernstein, Bakshy, Burke, & Karrer, 2013) and misunderstand who can see the information they share. Some social media sites have complex privacy settings, and default settings commonly allow public profile view (Watson, Lipford, & Besmer, 2015). Additionally, some users may have reduced capacity to understand the way their information is shared due to their age, mental health, or cognitive abilities (Batchelor, Bobrowicz, Mackenzie, & Milne, 2012). Thus, a user, whether child welfare worker or client, may assume their information is more private than it is or not understand who might access it. This is a complicating factor when one makes a decision about what information was shared publicly and therefore meant for others to discover.

Social Media in the Workplace

McDonald and Thompson (2016) cite three sources of strain related to social media use in the workplace: a) troublesome use of social media by employers to profile job candidates or employees, which threatens employees' rights to privacy and may lead the searcher to false assumptions; b) social media posts made by employees related to work, especially derogatory posts about the workplace; and c) private use of social media in the workplace, which may be seen as wasting time. These three issues are all potentially amplified in a child welfare setting: a) profiling extends to the profiling of clients by child welfare workers and vice versa; b) social media posts related to work may not only reflect poorly on an agency, but may also reveal confidential information about clients; and c) private use of social media on agency equipment may be difficult to delineate from agency-sanctioned use. Breyette and Hill (2015) examined the extent to which these strains are present in the child welfare workplace, and note that child welfare workers see themselves as uninvited recipients of client searches and also admit to searching out clients on social media.

Social Media as an Assessment Tool

In child welfare settings, caseworkers use several professional and investigative assessment tools to make decisions about whether children are safe at home, including information about personal backgrounds of family members. For many of these tools, such as psychosocial assessments and forensic interviewing, child welfare workers receive both

initial and ongoing training. The issue of social media as an agency-sanctioned assessment tool in child welfare setting has not been addressed in the scholarly literature; however, government agencies sometimes have specific policies or practices that condone or disallow its use as an investigative tool. For instance, Erie County, NY, implemented a Child Protective Services Policy that allows designated staff to search for child safety information on social media; this information is then evaluated with specific criteria (Erie County, 2014). Presumably, Erie County provides worker training for designated staff about these criteria.

Although no guidance exists on the use of social media in child welfare assessments, forensic mental health investigators perform a similar role, in that they are employed by governments and courts to conduct an unbiased assessment of risks related to safety. Pirellli, Otto, and Estoup (2016) suggest that forensic mental health evaluators who have an investigative role in assessing a patient's danger to self or others should: a) conceptualize this data as collateral information like that drawn from outside interviews, rather than as self-report; b) weigh the utility versus the prejudicial effects of use in each case, especially when no standards exist for the assessment of such data; c) inform clients about the intent to search for this information; d) allow clients to see and respond to the information found, just as they would other collateral information such as police reports; and (e) be explicit in documentation and testimony about their reliance upon this type of information in decision-making. These principles could similarly apply to the use of client information found via social media in child welfare assessments.

On the other hand, law enforcement authorities have investigative roles somewhat different in that the focus of child welfare workers is on assessment of child safety and risk, and the role of police is to assess evidence of a crime. A growing body of literature reports on appropriate ways to gather and use social media evidence during police investigations. Private social media posts can be accessed by law enforcement agencies through subpoenas and search warrants, whereas many police agencies access public information on social media without informed consent, including the use of deception such as creating fake profiles to connect with a suspect and gain access to their friends-only postings (Murphy & Fontecilla, 2013). However, several court challenges have centered on the admissibility of this type of data and issues related to a person's right to privacy and freedom of speech (Taylor, 2014). Whereas standard police officer training requires 48 hours of education on criminal and constitutional law and 40 hours of investigations training (Stanislas, 2013), which should inform the appropriate use of social media evidence, child welfare workers have little training related to legal standards of evidence and may not be comfortable with court processes (Faller, Grabarek, & Vandervort, 2009; Vandervort, Pott Gonzalez, & Coulborn Faller, 2008). It is unknown whether child welfare workers currently present social media evidence in court or know how to formally document findings related to social media evidence.

Tensions of Social Media Use in Child Welfare: Safety versus Well-being

Child welfare workers are faced with constant tension between child safety and child well-being: that is, a worker must do all that is possible to assess risks to a child but also make decisions from a family-centered approach that promotes holistic family well-being

(Spratt, 2001). Given a risk-focused orientation, child welfare workers should be thorough in their family assessments, exploring any resource available, including social media. Client privacy and confidentiality is seen as secondary to child safety from this lens.

However, in a child-well-being-centered model (Fargion, 2014), family strengths, parent support, trust and relationship building, and engagement are central. If a client finds out about a social media search it may be seen as a boundary violation (Lannin & Scott, 2013) and disrupt goals related to family engagement. This lens suggests that child welfare workers might avoid social media searches in cases where social media does not have a clear role in child safety.

On the other hand, several opportunities exist for the family-centered use of social media by child welfare workers, including enhanced communication with foster youth (Breyette & Hill, 2015), peer support for foster parents or direct communication with foster parents (Dodsworth et al., 2013), maintaining relationships for foster youth and supporting access to resources (Denby Brinson, Gomez, & Alford, 2015), and promoting positive foster youth development (Gustavsson & MacEachron, 2015). Child welfare organizations also have opportunities to use social media to promote agency transparency, recruit workers and foster parents, and promote child adoption (Sage & Sage, 2016). Given the practice tensions and potential benefits of social media use, from a safety and well-being perspective, it may be difficult for a worker to know when and how to use social media to meet work-related goals.

Social Media Training, Agency Policy, and Supervision

Given the ubiquity of social media use that seems to span personal and professional settings, it would be helpful to understand what training child welfare workers receive and need and how the training is enforced. There is no published evidence that describes child welfare workers' access to training about social media use in practice.

One may assume that social media training is not necessary given its widespread use amongst adults. However, professional use of social media differs from personal use (Hrdinová, Helbig, & Peters, 2010) and may require different boundaries and self-representation (Kimball & Kim, 2013). Human service professionals generally have limited exposure to training and education about effective agency use of technology, and especially about its best practices (Berzin, Singer, & Chan, 2015). Few studies have attempted to explore the best pedagogical ways to teach about social media use for professionals (Pander, Pinnilla, Dimitriadis, & Fischer, 2014). However, several studies that describe ways to teach digital professionalism focus on didactic sessions and then assess professional beliefs (e.g., George, 2011; Kung, Eisenberg, & Slanetz, 2012), rather than assessing the effects of post-training behavior.

While carrying out child welfare assessments, workers are guided by local, state, and federal policies. However, workers may experience ethical conflicts when their personal values collide with an agency's policy (Lee, Sobeck, Djelaj, & Agius, 2013), and this may be especially true when there is no agency policy to guide decision-making. Although there

is no national data about how many child welfare agencies have formal policies to guide decisions about social media use in child welfare settings, Young (2012) found that although many organizations were using social media, few had a policy that governed their use of social media.

A wealth of research exists, however, that suggests supervisors in child welfare settings reinforce the agency's practice model and play a vital role in ensuring workers utilize learned skills (Frey et al., 2012). Curry, McCarragher, and Dellman-Jenkins (2005) document the lack of evidence that training alone directly enforces practice behavior in child welfare and report that both co-worker and supervisor support can enhance the transfer of learning to practice. Thusly, any direct delivery of training to child welfare workers about the use of social media will likely be best reinforced when shared with supervisors, who may have generational differences in their expectations about social media use (Watson, 2013).

Professional Ethics, Agency Expectations, and Social Media Use

Child welfare workers are not members of a distinct profession. Although very recent national workforce statistics are unknown, a 1988 study reported that about a quarter of child welfare workers held a social work degree (Lieberman, Hornby, & Russell, 1988). In some states, a social work license is required to hold certain child welfare positions. Child welfare workers who also hold social work degrees and are members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), a professional association, are asked to adhere to a set of ethical principles. These principles provide guidance for social media use by addressing issues such as informed consent, boundaries and dual relationships, documentation, practitioner competence, privacy, and confidentiality (Reamer, 2013). NASW also published a 2005 pamphlet on ethical technology standards for social workers, but it has not kept pace with new technologies such as social media (Lopez, 2014). Regardless, a minority of child welfare workers are held by these standards due to the lack of a requirement in most states to hold a social work license to work in child welfare practice.

Organizations, even when they do not have explicit policies for social media use, often have broad technology and professional behavior polices that may inform practice. They also have expectations about technological competency. Quinn and Fitch (2014), for instance, found that employers expect new social work graduates to be proficient in the use of technology to access or produce information related to work. The expectations about technology competencies of child welfare workers are unknown; however, child welfare workers frequently work with complex databases, computer software, and technology communication tools related to searching for and documenting information, conducting assessments, facilitating visitation, and creating case notes (Dellor, Lovato-Hermann, Wolf, Curry, & Freisthler, 2015; Quinn, Sage, & Tunseth, 2015; White, Hall, & Peckover, 2009) . In fact, technology and data issues are so prevalent in child welfare that Naccarato (2010) argues for a Child Welfare Informatics subspeciality in social work education that would help address the complex needs related to workers' use of agency technology, as well as address data-related needs in child welfare agencies. Despite their frequent exposure to technology, child welfare workers are often frustrated by their lack of

involvement in decision-making about agency technology adoption (Gillingham, 2015).

Methods

Based on the review of literature, a semi-structured questionnaire was developed by the authors to answer questions about child welfare workers' experience with social media. This survey aimed to address several gaps in the literature review, including:

- What beliefs about social media inform child welfare worker's practices?
- Do workers use social media as an assessment tool?
- Where do workers receive training about social media?
- What agency guidance do workers receive about social media?
- Do workers experience strain related to use of social media at work, as described by McDonald and Thompson (2016)?

Instrument

In addition to demographics, participants were asked about their social media activity as it relates to social media platforms. Social media platforms are constantly changing and may bring differences in privacy features and norms about social media activity. For instance, personal familial information is infrequently posted on the LinkedIn networking platform, and the Snapchat platform is mostly person-to-person limited-duration communication, whereas Facebook is mostly message board style communication. Participants were asked to report on whether they access social media from work computers or personal devices, as access may have different implications related to privacy, oversight, and agency liability. By knowing which platforms child welfare workers commonly use, educators or administrators can adjust training or policy. We also asked participants to share the frequency of their search activities to understand the prevalence of social media use among child welfare workers.

Participants were asked about the education or guidance they received in college, at their agencies, from policy, or from their supervisors. Additionally, participants were asked whether social media has caused an ethical concern in their agencies. We expected these questions to highlight whether more education or guidance is necessary within agencies.

Finally, participants were asked about their beliefs, activities, and exposure to specific social media practices as they relate to their personal-professional lives. The practices listed were drawn from specific social-media-related activities that the authors heard about while conducting training about social media use, including searching and becoming friends with clients or others that they know from their work environments.

The survey was posted on the Qualtrics online survey platform. During pilot testing, the survey took about ten minutes to complete. The use of human subjects for this research was approved by the university Institutional Review Board (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. Data was exported from Qualtrics to IBM SPSS Statistics version 23.

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, or county child welfare agencies, contracted agencies that 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 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.

Participants

The online survey was started by 269 respondents. Of those, 98 were removed from analysis due to reporting that they do not work in child welfare (*n=21*), did not have social media accounts (*n=14*), because they did not answer any questions before submitting (*n=3*), or because they did not finish the survey (*n=60*). This left 171 cases for analysis. Eight states were represented in the final analysis with the majority of 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 141-171.

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. Participants' characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. *Demographics*

Agency Type (*n=171*)	n (%)
Employed as a child welfare worker in state/county government.	161 (94%)
Private agency that delivers child welfare services.	2 (1%)
Child welfare field placement supervised by a university.	8 (5%)

Age (*n=170*)

19 to 24 years	16 (9%)
25 to 29 years	28 (16%)
30 to 34 years	33 (19%)
35 to 39 years	28 (16%)
40 to 44 years	18 (11%)
45 to 49 years	16 (9%)
50 to 54 years	17 (10%)
55 to 59 years	8 (5%)
60 to 64 years	5 (3%)
65 to 69 years	1 (1%)

Job Tasks Related to (*n=168*) [Check all that apply]

assessment, protective services, investigative, or front-end services addressing allegations	97 (58%)
reunification services for families with children in foster care	99 (59%)
foster care case management services to youth in long-term placement	75 (45%)
providing therapeutic in-home or mental health services	54 (32%)
supervision of child welfare workers	46 (27%)
Other/specialized services	67 (40%)
Foster parent licensing, recruitment, or other administrative services	46 (27%)

Degree (*n=148*) [Check all that apply]

Bachelors of Social Work degree completed	99 (67%)
Masters in Social Work degree completed	30 (20%)
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	8 (5%)

Years Child Welfare Experience (*n=151*)

None	5 (3%)
Less than one	14 (9%)
1-2	23 (15%)
3-5	20 (13%)
5-10	38 (25%)
10 or more	71 (47%)

Results

Social Media Use

Respondents were asked to complete the survey only if they had at least one social media account. Nearly all respondents (98%, *n=167*) had a Facebook account; the next most frequently used social media account was SnapChat (32%, *n=55*). A third of respondents checked their social media accounts from their work computers at least once a week. About half (48%, *n=82*) of respondents reported they do not check their social media accounts from work, whereas 7% (*n=12*) checked their accounts from work computers multiple times a day versus 23% (*n=39*) check their social media from their smart phones multiple times a day at work. Over half (54%, *n=93*) of respondents checked

their social media accounts from their smartphones at least daily. Eighty percent (*n*=136) of respondents reported that they search for client information on social media sites. Table 2 reports detailed information about reported social media use.

Table 2. *Social Media Use (n≈171)*

	n (%)
Type of SMS use: Active account on a social media site (Facebook, Google +, Twitter, Linkedin, Snapchat). [Check all that apply]	
Facebook	167 (98%)
Google +	28 (16%)
Twitter	48 (28%)
Livejournal	1 (0%)
Personal blog	4 (2%)
Snapchat	55 (32%)
LinkedIn	34 (20%)
Other	4 (2%)
Instagram	59 (34%)
Check your social media page at work/field placement from the agency	
Multiple times a day	12 (7%)
Daily	27 (16%)
Weekly	18 (11%)
Less than weekly	31 (18%)
Never	82 (48%)
Check your social media page at work/field placement from your smartphone	
Multiple times a day	39 (23%)
Daily	54 (32%)
Weekly	26 (15%)
Less than weekly	29 (17%)
Never	23 (13%)
Post to your social media page	
Multiple times a day	10 (6%)
Daily	19 (11%)
Weekly	45 (26%)
Less than weekly	78 (46%)
Never	18 (11%)
Search for client information via social media	
Multiple times a day	8 (5%)
Daily	14 (8%)
Weekly	43 (25%)
Less than weekly	71 (42%)
Never	34 (20%)

Social Media Training and Policy Experiences

Twenty-two percent of respondents reported that they received at least some training on social media use in college, and 32% received some training from their agency. In both

of these cases, the training received usually totaled less than an hour. Forty-three percent of respondents reported training on social media through continuing education. Most respondents were either not sure their agency had a social media policy (27%) or reported no policy (30%). Only 11% (*n*=18) of respondents reported that the agency completely restricts social media use. Over half (56%, *n*=96) of respondents reported that their supervisors approve of work-related social media use, although 23% (*n*=40) reported that they did not know how to document social media information in case files, and 31% (*n*=53) reported that social media has caused an ethical concern in their agency. Several respondents (16%, *n*=28) reported that a colleague has been reprimanded for social media use in the workplace. Table 3 illustrates additional data about social media agency practices.

Table 3. *Social Media Agency Practices (n=171)*

	n (%)	*n* (%)	*n* (%)
		Yes, less	**Yes, more**
Training Received	**No**	**than an hour**	**than an hour**
In college	132 (77%)	28 (16%)	11 (6%)
Continuing education	98 (57%)	34 (20%)	39 (23%)
From Agency	115 (67%)	40 (23%)	16 (9%)
Agency guidance	**No**	**Yes**	**Not Sure**
Agency has policy	52 (30%)	73 (43%)	46 (27%)
Agency trains workers	109 (64%)	21 (12%)	41 (24%)
Agency restricts SM use	135 (79%)	18 (11%)	18 (11%)
SM experiences	**No**	**Yes**	**Not Sure**
SMS has caused ethical concerns in agency	72 (42%)	53 (31%)	46 (27%)
I know how to document SM info	40 (23%)	91 (53%)	40 (23%)
Supervisor approves of SM use	9 (5%)	96 (56%)	66 (39%)
Colleague has been reprimanded for SMS use	52 (30%)	28 (16%)	91 (53%)

Social Media Beliefs and Practices

More than half of respondents (55%, *n*=94) reported that, at least in some situations, they felt it was acceptable to search for clients via social media just out of curiosity. Nearly half (43%, *n*=73) of respondents reported that they have searched for clients via social media out of curiosity, and half (*n*=86) reported that their colleagues have done this. Respondents reported greater acceptability and frequency of client searches when the search was for work-related reasons, such as locating a missing parent or contacting a relative. Few (7%, *n*=12) reported that their colleagues have accepted or initiated an online friend request from a client. About half (49%, *n*=84) of respondents reported that they felt it was acceptable to have a social media relationship with foster parents. Several respondents (18%, *n*=30) reported that their colleagues have created fake profiles to gain access to client information, and 14% (*n*=24) of respondents reported that they have used social media to vent about their workdays.

Table 4. *Social Media Beliefs and Practices*

Social Media in the workplace (*n=140-171*)	How Acceptable?			I have done this	CW workers at my agency have done this
	Never Acceptable	**Acceptable in some situations**	**Always Acceptable**	**I have done this**	**my agency have done this**
Search for a client on a site like Facebook out of curiosity? (*n=143*)	49 (34%)	83 (58%)	11 (8%)	73 (51%)	86 (60%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook who your agency would like to locate, such as a missing parent? (*n=140*)	4 (3%)	74 (53%)	62 (44%)	83 (59%)	94 (67%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook when you think the information might give you insight in to the client's risk factors? (*n=147*)	19 (13%)	90 (61%)	38 (26%)	79 (54%)	87 (59%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook when you think the information might give you insight in to the client's lifestyle, hobbies, or interests? (*n=148*)	48 (32%)	75 (51%)	25 (17%)	57 (39%)	65 (44%)
Search for a client on a site like Facebook when conducting an assessment, for instance, a child welfare investigation? (*n=146*)	20 (14%)	95 (65%)	31 (21%)	47 (32%)	76 (52%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a current client? (*n=171*)	161 (94%)	8 (5%)	2 (1%)	1(1%)	12 (7%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a former client? (*n=169*)	130 (77%)	38 (22%)	1 (1%)	9 (5%)	15 (9%)
Interact with clients through a Facebook page you created just for this purpose (which contains none of your personal information)? (*n=163*)	71 (44%)	80 (49%)	12 (7%)	10 (6%)	33 (20%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a family member of a current client? (*n=171*)	144 (84%)	26 (15%)	1 (1%)	2 (1%)	14 (8%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a family member of a former client? (*n=171*)	120 (70%)	50 (29%)	1 (1%)	7 (4%)	15 (9%)
Provide child welfare services to a person that you have an existing relationship with on social media site? (*n=168*)	128 (76%)	38 (23%)	2 (1%)	8 (5%)	12 (7%)
Accept/initiate a "friend" invite from a foster parent you work with professionally? (*n=157*)	73 (46%)	81 (52%)	3 (2%)	16 (10%)	47 (30%)
Accept/Initiate a friend invite with a foster youth on your caseload? (*n=168*)	135 (80%)	32 (19%)	1 (1%)	4 (2%)	21 (13%)
Attach printouts of client social media records to a court proceeding as evidence? (*n=156*)	40 (26%)	98 (63%)	18 (12%)	23 (15%)	55 (35%)
Find and use evidence from a social media site to confirm allegations of child risk? (*n=157*)	23 (15%)	106 (68%)	28 (18%)	25 (16%)	48 (31%)
Use a fake name/fake profile to make a friend request in order to view private client profiles? (*n=163*)	129 (79%)	33 (20%)	1 (1%)	4 (2%)	30 (18%)
"Vent" about your workday on social media (without disclosing client details)? (*n=158*)	104 (66%)	47 (30%)	8 (5%)	24 (15%)	43 (27%)
Be friends with coworkers via social media? (*n=151*)	12 (8%)	70 (46%)	69 (46%)	99 (66%)	78 (52%)
Be friends with attorneys, judges, or law enforcement agents who you work with professionally via social media? (*n=151*)	22 (15%)	107 (71%)	22 (15%)	55 (36%)	71 (47%)

Illustrative Narrative Responses

Respondents were given opportunities several times throughout the survey to input open-ended responses. These responses were guided by the prompt, *"Please share context that might help us understand your answers."* The responses illustrate some of the tensions associated with social media use. Workers often do not feel prepared to make a decision about their social media use given competing values and personal beliefs.

o   My major issue is friending foster parents. It leads to too many boundary issues and makes it impossible to address concerns that may arise about them as foster parents.

o   I had a 17 year old adopted. She wanted to be my friend on Facebook after the adoption. She initiated all contact. I feel this is okay as she had no other connection to her past and requested it.

o   I am never really sure that "Facebook stalking" is appropriate. However, Facebook is an open media. If an individual does not put privacy parameters in their own account then is the information fair game.

o   I have searched for clients on social media, especially when a client runs. I feel this is unethical, but continue to do so, and I believe many child welfare workers feel the same.

o   I believe social media is a very gray area but can be very helpful when trying to locate families that have children at risk. I do believe you have to keep professional and ethical boundaries. I'm not sure how I feel about using social media as "evidence." I know law enforcement uses it but for child welfare stuff I'm not sure.

o   We live in a small community, and it often happens that our workers are friends with the family of current and former clients such as prior classmates, neighbors, kids go to school together, etc. I do believe that looking at Facebook profiles is acceptable in most all situations for child welfare purposes.

o   It's complex. Using social media to assess risk is sometimes really helpful! Taking an occasional break at my desk to use social media on my personal phone helps keep me sane and reconnects me to the rest of the world when I'm feeling really overwhelmed or helpless.

o   I believe that training centered around the ethical use of social media as it relates to the social welfare settings is important. Social media can be helpful in fact checking the information we are receiving from clients as well as locating clients that we have previously been unable to find.

Discussion

This article set out to describe the use of social media by child welfare workers in a small sample of workers. It confirms previous findings by Breyette and Hill (2015) and McRoy (2010) that child welfare workers regularly use social media for work-related purposes, and beyond that, experience several tensions related to the professional use of social media.

What beliefs about social media inform child welfare workers' practices?

In this sample workers have disparate beliefs about the acceptability of social media use with their clients. The majority of respondents report that social media searches for clients are acceptable when it can help meet case goals, such as finding a missing family member, conducting an investigation, or assessing risk. However, most respondents also thought it was acceptable to search for clients out of simple curiosity and report that they and their colleagues engage in these types of searches. This may suggest that workers do not see social media searches as a factor that may impact goals of engagement, as suggested by Lannin and Scott (2013), or do not see a client privacy concern related to this behavior.

On the other hand, respondents have more congruence in their responses about friend relationships on social media that may raise boundary issues related to child welfare work. They are most clear that initiating a friendship with a current client is not acceptable, but most also would not engage in social media friendships with former clients or their family members. Likewise, most would not conduct a child welfare assessment on someone they are friends with on social media. However, respondents have more permeable relationship boundaries when it comes to colleagues and foster parents; most respondents think it is acceptable to engage in social media friendships with foster parents, and more than half of respondents report existing social media relationships with co-workers. The narrative comments demonstrate some of the tensions surrounding dual roles: workers expect dual relationships, especially in small communities, but realize the difficult impact of these dual roles on their child welfare practice, and sometimes are clear that their work-related social media activity is inappropriate.

One question in the survey asked workers their experiences with using a fake name or profile to access private client information. Although 75% ($n=129$) said that this was not an acceptable practice, others thought it was acceptable in some situations, and 18% of respondents ($n=30$) reported that their colleagues have engaged in this practice. This use of deception is likely inconsistent with most agency policies and raises legal questions about accurate self-representation.

Do workers use social media as an assessment tool?

Survey respondents report the use of social media to aid in their assessments of child risk. Sixteen percent of respondents ($n=25$) reported they have used social media to confirm allegations, and a similar number (15%, $n=23$) reported that they have presented social media evidence to court. Most of the respondents affirmed that this type of use of social media is acceptable. Although we did not ask whether respondents have a structured assessment tool for the use of social media in evidence, as reportedly used in Erie County, NY's 2014 policy, only 43% ($n=73$) of respondents reported that their agency has a social media policy. This likely means that workers are using social media as an assessment tool without clear guidance from their agencies.

Although respondents widely condone the use of social media in the assessment of clients, 46% ($n=80$) report that they do not know how to document information discovered

on social media. This suggests a training opportunity in which the guidelines offered by Pirelli and colleagues (2016) can be beneficial: social media findings can be used on a case-by-case basis, and when used, categorized as collateral information; the client can be given the opportunity to review and respond; and agency documentation can clearly outline the extent to which the social media evidence is used in decision-making. A delineationcan be drawn in policy between the use of social media searches for assessment and social media searches for the sake of curiousity.

Where do workers receive training about social media?

Respondents have had little training in social media, which probably means that they apply what they know from personal use of social media to their professional settings, and this likely also contributes to the very disparate perspectives of respondents as it relates to the appropriateness of certain kinds of social media use. Respondents reported they were most likely to receive social media education through continuing education (43%, *n=73*), followed by their agencies (32%, *n=56*), and lastly in college (22%, *n=39*). Given that most respondents report work-related social media use, and many report use of social media as an assessment tool, these data raise concern about where workers derive their information about the appropriate use of social media.

What agency guidance do workers receive about social media?

Less than half of respondents report that their agencies have social media policies (43%, *n=73*), but only a small number of those with policies report that they are trained in the policy (12%, *n=21*). Few respondents (11%, *n=18*) report that their agencies completely restrict social media use. The content of the social media policies was not explored in this survey; it is unclear how many respondents work in agencies with social media policies that address issues such as client searches or contact. Given the previous findings that workers use social media as an assessment tool, this finding about policy likely identifies an agency need.

Do workers experience strain related to use of social media at work, as described by McDonald and Thompson (2016)?

McDonald and Thompson (2016) describe three types of strains presented by social media in the workplace: a) profiling via social media, b) posts related to work, and c) private use of social media at work. Regarding profiling, about half of respondents endorsed viewing the profiles of clients for some reason, assumely to draw conclusions about the clients. McDonald and Thompson point to this as problematic when it creates a privacy issue or is intrusive. In the case of child welfare workers searching out of curiosity or without a work-related need, or especially in the case of using a fake profile to misrepresent one's self, this use of social media likely falls under the category of intrusive use.

Regarding the strain of social media posts related to work, these types of posts about child welfare work may be especially problematic because of the sensitive nature of the work and the risks of revealing private client information. Negative posts may affect not

only the reputation of families, but also that of the profession. In this survey, 61% (n=104) of respondents reported that it was never appropriate to vent about work on social media, but 14% (n=24) of respondents said that they had engaged in this behavior, and 25% (n=43) said that their colleagues have engaged in this behavior. This is one of the most public forms of social media misbehavior and has led to employee termination and discipline across fields, including teachers, flight attendants, and medical students (Sánchez Abril, Levin, & Del Riego, 2012).

Finally, regarding the strain of social media in the child welfare workplace as it relates to time spent on social media sites, our findings indicate that workers are probably engaged in social media use of clients not related to assessment (but instead out of curiosity), and that almost a quarter of respondents (23%, n=39) check their social media at work from their smartphones multiple times per day. Although this is insufficient information to know whether this workplace use of social media is wasteful or causing strain, it raises some concerns about personal/professional boundaries.

Implications for Practice

This report offers a first look at work-related social media use in a sample of child welfare workers. The data reveal that child welfare workers frequently utilize social media as a tool for their work, although they are often not guided by agency policy or training. Given the rates at which child welfare workers report social media use related to work, education should be offered to prepare child welfare workers for appropriate use of social media.

Although technology policies often exist in government agencies, they may not address the unique roles of child welfare workers related to assessment, client contact, and family finding. Child-welfare-specific policies should respond to these unique types of settings and also keep in mind relevant legal and privacy issues (Sage & Sage, 2016). Our literature review suggests that any education and policy should be accompanied by a plan for the transfer of learning to the practice setting and should include the supervisor as a key connecter between policy and practice. Because most child welfare workers who completed this survey currently receive their social media training via continuing education instead of directly in their agencies, and given that there may be generational differences in expectations between supervisors and child welfare workers, it is unlikely that most workers currently receive supervisor support that reinforces their training about practice using social media.

Narrative responses indicated polarized views about the appropriate use of social media in child welfare practice and illustrate the ethical dilemmas that arise for workers. For instance, workers are encouraged to be supports to clients and foster parents, and social media relationships may be seen as a way to offer support, but they also create dual relationships. Similarly, social media searches may feel like a boundary violation to the worker conducting them but may also provide useful information about clients. The reported incidence of ethical problems caused by social media use in the child welfare workplace raise red flags about unmet needs of child welfare workers who face dilemmas in the field. Social work educators and child welfare trainers can use practice scenarios that

involve dilemmas like those presented in this article to help future child welfare workers think critically about potential benefits and risks of social media use.

This study indicates that social media has both problematic and beneficial outcomes in the child welfare workplace. Given the beneficial uses, it behooves agencies to carefully consider avoiding complete restriction of social media use by workers. Social media may replace age-old tools such as the phonebook for important family-finding work. However, given that the respondents in this study report that social media has caused concerns in their agencies, guidance about ethical decision-making is justified.

Conclusion

This survey reports the responses of a small sample of child welfare workers, most of whom live within a three-state region. Because policies and experiences with social media may be geographically bound or related to the shared agencies in which respondents work, the sample provides only a snapshot of child welfare worker experiences.

This data has not yet been statistically analyzed to report relationships between variables. Future analysis will explore relationships between training, supervision, policy, education, and beliefs and behaviors about social media use. We also did not explore the differences in beliefs between people who report supervisory roles. Future research is also needed to explore the content of social media policy and trainings. Given that this research has helped to establish the use of social media in child welfare settings, further research may be beneficial to understand more about the actual utility of client searches, the perceived impact on child safety of conducting a social media search, and on the actual risks and benefits to vulnerable families related to child welfare agency social media use.

Finally, we did not explore the breadth of issues related to social media in the child welfare workplace. A number of unexplored issues exist, especially around youth in foster care and their relationships. Social media may provide an invaluable resource for helping youth maintain vital links, and child welfare workers may be able to facilitate this beneficial use, but only if they have the requisite skills.

As new technologies emerge, so will new questions regarding the best use. Given that social media is unique in that it presents a worker-driven technological innovation in practice, as opposed to the typical top-down technological mandates in child welfare, social media offers a unique opportunity to explore workers' perceptions about how to best utilize technology for the benefit of families. Agencies must join workers in shaping standards for the most beneficial uses of social media tools.

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