EXPLORING MOMENTS OF TENSION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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Written by

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ABSTRACT

Social workers interact with clients, colleagues, policies and organizational structures regularly in their practice. There are times throughout a social worker's field experience that she or he may encounter a difficult or challenging practice moment. Although there is an existing literature about 'critical incidents' in practice, there is minimal exploration of how social workers describe, experience, reflect upon and understand these difficult practice moments. What happens when we encounter difficult moments? Do we feel prepared and confident in our abilities? Do we experience it as a learning opportunity? How do these moments impact our practice moving forward? This study is based on six one-to-one, narrative-based interviews with social workers from various fields of practice and seeks to better understand how social workers experience difficult practice moments. I explore the personal ways in which the social workers chose to share their stories to demonstrate the significance of the moment to them individually. I also explore themes identified by the social workers including: emotional journeys, working through the moment, discomfort with uncertainty and theoretical versus practice wisdom. The themes identified by this particular group of social workers reveal the complexities and impacts of experiences with difficult practice moments. Furthermore, the social workers' narratives revealed that a shift in language from 'critical incident' to 'moment of tension' would better conceptualize the fluidity of these experiences. Because social workers will continue to experience challenging moments in practice, it is essential that we enhance our understanding of these experiences. We must also appreciate the significance of these moments to social workers and promote the inclusion of their voices in further exploration of moments of tension in practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Social workers interact with clients, colleagues, policies and organizational structures on a regular basis in their daily practice. Throughout these interactions, there are times when a social worker may experience a difficult or challenging moment within their professional practice. Despite existing knowledge about 'critical incidents' and the complexity of these moments in which social workers often find themselves, there is minimal inclusion of social workers' voices. In particular, in-depth exploration of how social workers describe, experience, reflect upon and understand these difficult practice moments is absent from the literature.

Informed by an integration of interpretive social science and postmodern perspectives, this study strives to deepen our understanding of how social work practitioners experience difficult practice moments. This theoretical vantage point allows me to highlight social workers' unique journeys of experiencing, understanding and making meaning of the difficult moments experienced regularly in their practice. I had the opportunity to engage in one-to-one interviews with six social work practitioners and hear personal stories exploring their encounters with difficult practice moments. The interviews were largely unstructured and narrative based, as the inclusion and promotion of social workers' individual voices and perspectives was most significant to the study. From the social workers' stories, several themes significant to their difficult practice moment experiences emerged.

To open the dialogue, I explore the personal and unique ways in which the social workers introduced and shared their stories with me, highlighting the meaning of the

difficult practice moment experience to them as individuals. Following, I explore the associated emotional journeys, the process of working through these experiences, social workers' discomfort with uncertainty, and theoretical versus practice wisdom. These areas of exploration provide a rich context to social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments.

The themes emerging from the social workers' stories highlight the need for a shift in the language used to conceptualize these experiences. I explore the significance of moving the language from that of 'critical incident' to 'moment of tension' based on the fluid and dynamic stories and experiences shared by the social workers. In addition to language changes, I also make implications for social work education and the translation of practice wisdom to the classroom. It is my hope that these implications, inspired by the social workers' candid storytelling, will contribute to a deeper understanding of and increased preparation for moments of tension in social work practice.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

There are times throughout a social worker's experience when he or she may experience a difficult or challenging moment within professional practice. When faced with these moments in my own practice, I often seek to better understand why I experience them as challenging. I reflect upon these moments, wonder what I might have done differently and how the experience is integrated into my professional development. These experiences and reflections prompted my research interests. This research seeks to better understand how social workers experience and understand difficult practice moments, how they reflect upon and integrate these reflections into their practice and how these moments contribute to professional development.

Defining Critical Incident

A difficult practice moment can be defined differently depending upon the individual practitioner, and might involve an interaction with a client, colleague or organizational policy. The literature exploring social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments is limited to critical incidents, where the term 'critical incident' refers to an incident significant to a social worker's professional practice (Fook & Askeland, 2007; Garcia & Van Soest, 1999; Stepney, 2006; Weyers & van den Berg, 2006; Fook, 2002; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000). 'Critical incident' is defined as "an observable human activity, complete enough to permit conclusions and predictions to be made about the person performing the act" (Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000, p. 226). Fook et al. (2000) suggest that what makes a critical incident 'critical' is that it contributes to a person's learning by his or her own definition and represents a "major shift or breakthrough" (p.

226). Stepney (2006) indicates that a critical incident encourages the social worker to "stop and think" (p. 1302). This supports Fook et al.'s (2000) assertion that critical incidents prompt reflection in practice and mark a turning point in a practitioner's thinking.

Use of Critical Incident Methodology

Critical incident methodology was introduced by Flanagan (1954) as a research tool to investigate the relationship between behavioural events and outcomes. A qualitative research method for exploring the specific work of various professionals, it has been used across a number of professions (Butterfield, Borgen, Amundson, & Maglio, 2005). Weyers and van den Berg (2006) suggest that since the early 1980s, critical incident methodology has been used in psychology, nursing and education research, but only to a limited extent in social work.

Critical incident methodology is rooted in psychology, "having been developed during World War II as an outgrowth of the Aviation Psychology Program of the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) for selecting and classifying aircrews" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 477). Flanagan's development of the technique was continued at the American Institute for Research to determine the job requirements "critical for success in a variety of jobs across a number of industries" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 477). Flanagan (1954) describes the methodology as a procedure for gathering important information about behaviour in defined situations and notes that it "does not consist of a rigid set of rules governing such data collection" (p. 335). Instead, he suggests it should be understood as a set of flexible principles to be modified and adapted according to the specific situation

being explored (Flanagan, 1954). Butterfield et al. (2005) assert that critical incident

methodology acts as a guideline for the exploration of effective and ineffective ways of

doing something, looking at helping and hindering factors, examining successes and

failures, or determining characteristics that are critical to important aspects of an activity

or event. Critical incident methodology outlines five principles, including: "(1)

ascertaining the general aims of the activity being studied; (2) making plans and setting

specifications; (3) collecting the data; (4) analyzing the data; and (5) interpreting the data

and reporting the results" (Butterfield et al., 2005, p. 477). Because the technique is

rooted in psychology and offers this pattern to be followed, I question its applicability to

social workers' experiences of difficult practice moments, which may be less apparent

and measurable than the technique requires.

        Weyers and van den Berg (2006) use critical incident methodology in their

research which sought to identify critical success factors in community social work

services in South Africa. The researchers note that incidents were considered critical if

they contributed to "the success of specific community work projects" (2006, p. 178).

Data collected through semi-structured interviews identified eight critical success factors

including: adequate financial resources, adequate external support, motivated project

members, social planning and administration, adequate support from the employer

organization, that nature of the needs and needs assessment, the social worker

him/herself, and the inputs of volunteers (Weyers & van den Berg, 2006). The

researchers state that the use of critical incident methodology focused on specific

incidents and "prevented respondents from falling into the trap of providing only the

clichés and unsubstantiated feelings that are sometimes typical of qualitative research"

(2006, p. 186). This statement illuminates the dominant discourse surrounding evidence

and implies that without the use of critical incident methodology, the research may have

contributed findings of lesser value. It further indicates that the use of critical incident

methodology facilitated the identification of factors "that played a critical role in the

success of community work services" (Weyers & van den Berg, 2006, p. 186). Perhaps

most interesting in this research is the use of critical incident methodology to explore

incidents experienced as positive, or contributing to success, as it is typically used to

explore challenging or problematic experiences.

Use of Critical Incident as a Practice Tool

Flanagan's critical incident technique has been adapted and used more recently in

social work literature. It has become useful for understanding the specific work of social

work practitioners and professors (Fook, 2002; Fook et al., 2000; Garcia & Van Soest,

1999). Fook (2002) uses the critical incident technique to analyze social work practice

and reconstruct "personal practice along more critically empowering lines" (p. 98). She

reiterates the previously discussed definition of critical incident and adds that the incident

may be experienced as critical by the individual because it was traumatic or because "it

was so mundane that it encapsulated something crucial about the nature of their work"

(Fook, 2002, p. 98-99).

Fook (2002) states that a critical incident must involve, "a description of

something concrete which actually happened, rather than a description of a more abstract

issue or situation" (p. 99). She suggests that focusing on concrete situations enables

connections with concrete practice (Fook, 2002). While the identification of a concrete

incident may facilitate measurement and interpretation of the occurrence, I suggest that

difficult moments in social work practice are rarely concrete and may require reflection

and exploration on the part of the practitioner to identify the discomfort he or she is

experiencing. Aligning with the postmodern critique of totalizing theories and

acknowledging multiple realities (Pease & Fook, 1999), I believe social workers'

experiences are unique, fluid and unpredictable. Therefore, it is important to understand

how our personal experiences and values shape our experiences with difficult practice

moments (Pease & Fook, 1999). "We must reconsider the notion that social work is a

unitary activity based on a coherent body of knowledge and expertise" (Smith & White in

Pease & Fook, 1999, p. 11). The postmodern lens encourages me to embrace the fluidity

of difficult practice moments and seek to better understand them, rather than attempting

to identify and focus on a concrete incident. Furthermore, within the profession, social

workers adopt a variety of practice approaches, theories and interventions, making it

problematic to draw universal connections between 'concrete' critical incidents and

'concrete practice.' The fluidity of social workers' experiences must be heard,

acknowledged and validated as significant to their learning and practice development.

Fook et al. (2000) suggest that learning from a critical incident can improve social work

practice, develop personal practice theories and facilitate the resolution of dilemmas or

problems in practice. Based on this statement, it is essential that social workers have the

opportunity to share their experiences with these incidents.

Critical Reflection and Reflexivity

Fook (2002) indicates that using the critical incident technique can facilitate a process of critical reflection where the individual narrative becomes an avenue for deconstruction. She outlines that this process includes a description and analysis of the critical incident, including identification of themes and patterns, and exploration of alternate interpretations, assumptions and emerging biases (2002, p. 100). While this process may be beneficial, I suggest that when experiencing difficult moments or critical incidents, it may need to be altered or modified to accommodate the individual practitioner's experiences or reflection process. Brookfield (2009) states: "critical reflection focuses not on how to work more effectively or productively within an existing system, but on calling the foundations and imperatives of the system itself into question, assessing their morality and considering alternatives" (p. 297). Furthermore, he explains that when we understand we are practicing "at the intersection of systemic imperatives and personal commitments then social workers are less likely to blame themselves when situations go awry, as is bound to happen" (p. 294). When social workers embark on reflective journeys, they may experience empowerment through the identification of alternate action and the "meaning of professional discretion in promoting good creative and proactive social work" (Karvinen-Niinikoski, 2009, p. 345). I believe that reflecting upon practice, specifically a difficult moment, helps deconstruct professional knowledge and authority and attends to the power woven throughout social work practice. "Through critical reflection, the practitioner is able to unpack dominant discourses and the assumptions that sustain them to ensure that, through participation in a discourse,

oppressive relationships are resisted rather than inadvertently reproduced" (Stepney, 2006, p. 1298).

Moreover, a critically reflective journey allows social workers to explore that which is not apparent on the surface. Saleebey and Scanlon (2005) draw on the work of Rossiter (2001) and suggest that "students and practitioners ought to be able to live with uncertainty, doubt, ambiguity and hesitancy without having to reach for a blanket assurance, a platitude, a one-sided exploitation of knowledge" (p. 8). These discussions of critical reflection in practice led to my understanding that social workers experience difficult practice moments which prompt them to stop and think or even question the decisions made. This can be an uncomfortable place. Because I am aware that social workers often experience these moments, it is important that they also have opportunities to engage in critical reflection.

Fook and Askeland (2007) outline their research with small peer groups of participants who assisted each other in reflecting upon a critical incident from professional practice. The participants were encouraged to assume the role of peer reflector and use a set of guidelines and questions when reflecting upon critical incidents "to help unearth more deeply held assumptions" (Fook & Askeland, 2007, p. 522). Although this included the participants' voices throughout the process, the goal of the research was to identify assumptions held by the social worker and integrate critical reflection, rather than explore and value the social worker's experience. While this may contribute to a greater understanding of why a critical incident was experienced as a critical incident, Fook and Askeland's (2007) research is more useful in discussion of

critical reflection and does not offer comprehensive discussion of social workers'

descriptions of critical incidents in practice. I believe a critical incident or difficult

moment involves the experience itself, whereas the reflection process would follow that

moment with the goal of developing a deeper understanding of what transpired.

Furthermore, while the method used in this research process placed value on peer

reflection and voice, participants' voices are not included in the discussion, which

decenters their experiences and silences the social work perspective. While I

acknowledge that both Fook and Askeland are social work professors, their research

findings are discussed from their positions and do not include participants' voices.

Teaching and Learning about Critical Incidents

Exploring critical incidents has been used in teaching social work practice at

advanced levels (Fook et al., 2000). Having acknowledged this, Lewis and Bolzan (2007)

assert that: "Social work education is not training. We should not be telling people what

to do or see ourselves as 'socializing' students […]" (p. 145). This introduces a

discrepancy in the literature surrounding the teaching of critical incidents in practice in

the social work classroom. Garcia and Van Soest (1999) outline a study of critical

incidents emerging in the teaching of diversity and oppression in a social work classroom.

Participants were social work faculty members who were asked to complete a Critical

Event Survey and discuss: "(1) classroom events that were perceived as significantly

stressful, (2) faculty responses to those incidents, (3) the sequence of the faculty

responses, and (4) faculty perceptions of the consequences" (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999,

p. 152). Based on the survey completed by participants four themes were identified,

including: use of the teachable moment, process oriented teaching, use of self in teaching, and use of life experiences to promote teaching (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999). The researchers offer implications for social work education, suggesting that critical incident debriefing may be helpful for faculty to "better prepare themselves for the challenges in teaching and learning about diversity" (Garcia & Van Soest, 1999, p. 161). This research is beneficial in that it explores social work professors' experiences with integrating critical incidents into their teaching. Data was collected using a survey, rather than qualitative interviews, which is interesting because of the limitations associated with capturing and exploring experiences through this method. The researchers used participants' descriptions of the critical incidents experienced however, these descriptions were told from the researcher perspective, rather than using direct quotations from the completed survey. Furthermore, the voices of the students' experiences with these critical incidents were not included, which illustrates an absence of literature concerning learning about critical incidents in the classroom.

Lewis and Bolzan (2007) recommend that social work professors structure classroom teaching in an integrated way so that students can bring practice examples from placement for discussion. This emphasizes inclusivity as social work students attempt to learn about the difficult moments they will experience in their practice, post-graduation. Garcia and Van Soest (1999) indicate that exploring critical incidents can facilitate a better understanding of the learning process and discerning relationships between professor behaviours and consequences. I acknowledge that social work professors experience critical incidents in the classroom that contribute to their

professional development, however I also believe the context in which we experience

difficult moments can shape that experience. As such, I wonder if Garcia and Van

Soest's (1999) implications for social work professors are transferrable to frontline social

workers' experiences and practice. This research may have been more beneficial if

students were included in the discussion of critical incidents occurring in the classroom.

Fook et al. (2000) use the findings from four inter-related studies in their

discussion of social work education and critical incidents. They note that the research

projects were all qualitative, relied on the use of responses to practice vignettes as well as

a description of critical incidents from practice, and data was analyzed both inductively

and deductively. One of the projects involved a five year longitudinal study of 39 social

work students in their two years of education and first three years of practice (Fook et al.,

2000). Participants identified field education and direct skills practice as the most

beneficial components of their education experience (Fook et al., 2000). When asked

what had been most significant to their learning over the five year period, approximately

half of the participants identified "'on the job experience'" (Fook et al., 2000, p. 96). By

including the voices of social work students and following them from the classroom to the

field, this research explores the applicability of classroom learning to practice experience

and illustrates the value of practice experience. Lewis and Bolzan (2007) imply that

strategies must be developed for including students in the construction of formal theory

about social work which may address the disempowerment experienced by new social

workers who reported feeling underprepared for difficult practice moments. There are

several details of Fook et al.'s (2000) study that are not outlined, likely due to the fact that

findings emerged from the analysis of four inter-related studies. Despite this, Fook et

al.'s (2000) research clearly demonstrates the value of practice experience as most

beneficial to social workers' learning. This observation supports the need for further

exploration of critical incidents and how social work practitioners integrate these

experiences into their learning and professional development. It also encourages further

implications for the integration of teaching and learning in the social work classroom.

Preparation for Critical Incidents

Lewis and Bolzan (2007) assert that the realities of social work practice rarely

align with students' expectations, noting that social work practice involves working with

"complex and often entrenched client presentations and critical incidents" (p. 136). Their

research sought to uncover the experiences, challenges and dilemmas experienced by

students in the application of their university learning to contemporary social work

practice. Using academic reports as qualitative records of student responses to open-

ended questions, the researchers were particularly interested in learning about the

connection between course learning and practice experiences (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007).

Findings indicated that social work students felt underprepared to deal with the realities

of conflict and workplace stress in social work practice (Lewis & Bolzan, 2007). This

exposes the challenge associated with preparing social workers for difficult practice

moments.

Similar to Fook et al.'s (2000) conclusion that "on the job experience" (p. 96) is

most valuable to the learning of new social workers, Lewis and Bolzan (2007) suggest

that social work roles, responsibilities, skills and practice models are often constructed by

the policies of their agency and employer. This observation highlights the nuances

existing among social workers' practice experience and indicates a lack of preparedness

for difficult moments in the field. Lewis and Bolzan's research (2007) emphasizes the

importance of listening to students' experiences of the translation of classroom education

into field placement practice and therefore, including students' voices was central.

What is missing from the literature?

I have reviewed Flanagan's (1954) critical incident methodology as the foundation

for present understanding of the critical incident technique in social work. Research

completed by Fook et al. (2000), Lewis and Bolzan (2007), and Garcia and Van Soest

(1999) indicates that social work students feel underprepared for the difficult moments

experienced in practice. This literature also illustrates that the inclusion of participant

voices in exploring preparedness and early field experiences is beneficial to knowledge

production. Despite the existing literature concerning teaching about and preparedness

for experiencing critical incidents in social work practice, there is an absence of literature

exploring social workers' descriptions of their experiences with difficult moments in

practice. When the minimal literature about social workers and critical incidents was

found, it was largely based on ethical dilemmas and discussed from the perspective of the

authors rather than social workers. This illustrates that knowledge production concerning

difficult practice moments seems to be limited to academic researchers and the

perspective of frontline social workers is often excluded.

When the individual voices of social workers are not included or are silenced by

the research process, there are implications for the discourse surrounding difficult practice

moments, particularly the suggestion that these moments are uniform, concrete and

expected. Including social workers' descriptions of difficult moments creates space for

dialogue about how these moments are experienced, reflected upon and integrated into

professional development, with a goal of embracing the nuances and subjectivities that

emerge. Camilleri (1999) candidly discusses his personal experiences with uncertainty

and social work, noting that "there is a sense of everyone knowing what is going on

except them [social workers]" (p. 26). He states "It is perhaps inevitable that a 'space'

needs to be created to take the reader from the certainties embedded in modernity to a

new discourse in which uncertainty, fragmentation and local and contingent knowledge

are central" (1999, p. 27).

Despite literature exploring the value of social workers' practice wisdom, there is

an absence of literature discussing any relationship between an individual practitioner's

career duration and field of practice with experiences of critical incidents. Camilleri

(1999) suggests:

> The practice of social work has been transformed: where social workers
> practise [*sic*] and the sort of work they do are both extremely varied.
> For many critics, social work is straining to hold those activities
> together in one discourse, (p. 33).

Furthermore, the literature does not include discussion about the relationship between

social positioning and experience of critical incidents in practice. Lastly, much of the

literature consulted for this review is dated, particularly the development of Flanagan's

critical incident methodology (1954). The present social work context is permeated with

organizational restructuring, neoliberalism, sparse resources and a narrowing of what

constitutes evidence, all of which are capable of contributing to difficult practice

moments. There is a need for current exploration of social workers' experiences of

difficult practice moments, how they understand these moments and integrate their

reflections into professional development at present.

Connection to Current Research Project

It is not my intent to critique or use Flanagan's critical incident technique in the

current research project. While the notion of critical incident and the critical incident

technique has been explored in present literature, there is an absence of research outlining

social workers' descriptions of their experiences with these difficult practice moments

and how they reflect on and integrate these experiences into their learning. Because the

technique was developed to explore the relationship between events and outcomes

(Flanagan, 1954), and social workers experience challenging moments in their practice

regularly, I question the absence of further research about these experiences and the

subsequent learning. The current research project explores social workers' descriptions

of difficult practice moments and emphasizes the value of understanding these moments

by hearing from social workers.

Deconstructing Critical Incident

Although I identify with the literature's definition of critical incident, the term

itself is problematic. Previously, I understood a critical incident as a crisis requiring the

completion of a critical incident report for documentation purposes. Webster's dictionary

defines 'critical situation' as "being in or approaching a state of crisis" (www.merriam-webster.com). The same source offers one definition of 'incident' as "an action likely to

lead to grave consequences" (www.merriam-webster.com). These definitions, as well as

the negative connotation of the words 'critical' and 'incident' offer an explanation for my

discomfort with the term critical incident.   The prevalence of this language in the

literature is capable of impacting social workers' experiences and understanding of

difficult practice moments and subsequent learning opportunities. Furthermore, the

literature reveals that this language is used to teach social work students about difficult

practice moments.

The term critical incident is both highly powerful and rigid. Because of the

negative connotation attached to the language, it can become a tool for silencing social

workers' discussions of difficult practice moments. If social workers feel silenced or

reluctant to share their experiences, a barrier to reflection and integrating these

experiences into professional development emerges. Because the current research project

seeks to explore new meanings and understandings about the difficult moments

experienced by social workers in their daily practice, it is essential that the descriptive

language used facilitates practitioners' comfort with sharing these experiences. Hence,

this research will also explore the value of shifting the language away from critical

incident.

Because there is minimal research that specifically explores social workers'

experiences with difficult practice moments, I have explored surrounding concepts and

themes to situate my research. I traced the roots of the critical incident methodology and

technique, which is prevalent in the existing literature. I also reviewed research exploring

social work faculty members' experiences of critical incidents and social work students'

descriptions of the integration of classroom learning and practice experiences. The

literature suggests that teaching about critical incidents in the social work classroom is

less helpful to practitioners than exploring these events in practice. The current research

project will explore new meanings and understandings about the difficult moments social

workers experience in their everyday practice by placing social workers' perspectives as

central to the discussion. This will contribute to a deeper understanding of social

workers' experiences and how these experiences are reflected upon and integrated into

professional development.

CHAPTER THREE: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The purpose of the research is to explore social workers' experiences with

difficult moments in their practice. I was particularly interested in exploring how they

experience, reflect upon and integrate these moments into their professional development.

Because I have encountered challenging moments in my own practice, there is a personal

connection to the research topic and situating this in a theoretical framework was equally

important. As discussed in the literature review, there is minimal inclusion of social

workers' voices when exploring difficult practice moments. It was not my intention to

develop a prescriptive practice approach from the research. Instead, I wanted to offer a

space for social workers to share experiences as they make meaning of difficult practice

moments. As such, the research is informed by an integration of interpretive social

science and postmodern perspectives.

Interpretive Social Science

Interpretive Social Science (ISS) approaches to research espouse that meaning is

rarely obvious on the surface and thus requires an exploration of text, conversation,

written words or pictures (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). This approach explores how

people "manage their practical affairs in everyday life or how they get things done"

(Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 78). It seeks to understand and describe meaningful social

action and holds a belief that individuals create meaning and make sense of their own

worlds (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006; Garrick, 1999). Unlike the positivistic approach to

research which seeks "rigorous, exact measures" (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 73), ISS

research "focuses on the particular, seeking to expand the understanding of a

phenomenon through the individual case" (Spector-Mersel, 2010, p. 209). As such, it

involves doing research with, rather than on, participants (Garrick, 1999).

Research grounded in an ISS theoretical framework does not seek to uncover a

pre-existing theory or solution (Prasad & Prasad, 2002). Instead, it asks "'what is it like

to have a certain experience?' and what makes a *learning* experience, or conversely, turns

experience into learning?" (Garrick, 1999, p. 147; emphasis in original). As previously

indicated, the aim of the current project is not to discover a model of practice, but to

explore social workers' individual experiences with difficult practice moments and how

they make meaning from these experiences with hopes of contributing to a deeper

understanding of this phenomenon. Sandberg (2005) asserts that the ISS approach to

research assumes that "it is not possible to produce an objective description of reality" (p.

45), noting that reality is socially constructed between the individual and his or her

surroundings. Similarly, I believe that social workers' understanding of and experiences

with difficult practice moments are subjective and fluid. Echoing Garrick (1999), I

approach my research with the view that the lived experiences of participants are central.

Hence, adopting an ISS approach to this project facilitates the in depth exploration of

social workers' descriptions and stories related to their experiences with these moments.

Critical Social Science

While ISS approaches to research seek to deepen our understanding of a particular

phenomenon, Critical Social Science (CSS) approaches offer further critique of that

phenomenon, seeking to help "people see the way to a better world" (Kreuger & Neuman,

2006, p. 93). CSS research strives to "uncover and demystify ordinary events" and

provides the recommendations needed to change a perspective or practice (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 83). While CSS researchers critique positivistic research for similar reasons as ISS researchers, CSS introduces several critiques of ISS research. Primarily, CSS researchers suggest that the ISS approach is "too subjective and relativist" (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006, p. 83), viewing all perspectives as equal which makes it passive. The goal of a CSS researcher is to expose underlying power imbalances and challenge the dominant discourse that privileges some individuals and groups while stigmatizing others (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). While an ISS approach to research explores a social phenomenon on the micro level, a CSS approach calls structures and systems into question, seeking social action and change (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). Annells (1996) suggests that a critical paradigm of inquiry is predominantly aligned with postmodern methods. A postmodern perspective, situated within critical social science, offers an attractive approach to strengthen the current research study for reasons to be explored following.

Postmodern Theory

A postmodern perspective encourages the exploration and expression of multiple voices and realities with the goal of exposing underlying assumptions, rather than seeking to "improve and perfect" theory (Gorman, 1993, p. 193). It posits that there are no ". . . linear arguments, solid foundations and neat resolutions . . ." (Wakefield, in Irving, 1994, p. 19). A postmodern approach to understanding how knowledge is constructed emphasizes the importance of all individuals' values and context in constructing meaning (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006; Stepney, 2006; Campbell & Ungar, 2003), as well as the

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belief that people "construct and are constructed by changing social structures and relations" (Fook, 2002, p. 18). Fook (2002) asserts that a postmodern perspective critiques totalizing theories and the "structures, boundaries and hierarchies which maintain and enact them" (p. 12). Hence, a postmodern approach is concerned with deconstructing the notion of expert or professional knowledge (Campbell & Ungar, 2003). "Postmodernist thought favours heterogeneity and difference, fragmentation and indeterminacy and holds universal or 'totalizing' discourses in utter contempt" (Irving, 1994, p. 27).

A postmodern perspective values personal and local knowledge, appreciating that there are infinite interpretations of a certain phenomenon where one interpretation is not privileged over others (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006; Gorman, 1993). In this sense, the postmodern approach encourages me to value the nuances that emerge between the social workers' descriptions of difficult practice moments. Furthermore, Irving's assertion supports my discomfort with and refusal to offer a prescriptive approach to experiencing difficult practice moments. If I were to develop a practice model from the research, I would be contributing to a discourse suggesting that a uniform method to experiencing difficult moments in practice exists and is waiting to be discovered. This does not align with my epistemological positioning or goal of the research project. It is my hope that creating space for and valuing social workers' descriptions of difficult practice moments will contribute to knowledge production surrounding these moments.

Situating Myself within These Approaches

I identify with the postmodern rejection of a linear solution (Chambon & Irving, 1994), particularly in relation to social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments. As such, I appreciate the importance of integrating an ISS approach to the research in order to further explore social workers' experiences and narratives. Because the postmodern perspective is invested in deconstructing dominant discourses, it has facilitated my deconstruction of the term 'critical incident' which is used precariously throughout the literature concerning social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments.

Theoretical Tensions and Challenges

Adopting an ISS and postmodern approach places participants' voices central to the research and promotes an in depth exploration of social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments from their own perspectives. Despite this, it is important to acknowledge a tension emerging as a result of a postmodern critique of ISS approaches to research. While the ISS approach favours a profound exploration of individual experiences and meaning-making, the postmodern perspective questions the validity of a personal narrative or story due to the underlying influence of power structures and dominant discourse on that narrative. Using the personal narrative as a foundation for knowledge production is problematic for postmodern researchers who assert that:

> . . . the individual's subjective experiences are immersed in and shaped
> by discourses of market economics, organizational imperatives and
> industrial issues and so on. The individual's "own" story is situated – it
> is historically and contextually framed – making any interpretation of
> lived experience less a matter of individual authenticity and more a

matter for deconstruction of the text of the story-teller (Garrick, 1999, p. 148).

While I acknowledge external influences on our personal experiences, I also identify a need to explore social workers' stories in order to strengthen our understanding of their experiences with difficult practice moments. Similarly, the postmodern perspective critiques ISS approaches for not delving deep enough into the ". . . complex historical, structural, social, economic and environmental influences upon individual experience" (Garrick, 1999, p. 151). Because my intention was to explore how social workers experience and make meaning of difficult practice moments, rather than focusing on the influential factors, I chose to attend to these contexts when they were addressed or discussed by participants.

Postmodern assertions have allowed me to uncover and discuss the external factors influencing social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments which were highlighted by those who participated in this research. The postmodern view ". . . does not place human subjectivity at the centre of meaning construction" (Garrick, 1999, p. 151). For example, Fook (2002) notes that while the postmodern perspective's inclusion of multiple voices is attractive, there "still needs to be a privileging of a single perspective, in order to make decisions about how (and why) to act" (p. 15). These differing perspectives are not problematic for the current research project. I assert that I can start with social workers' individual narratives and remain attentive to the influential or external factors they identify throughout their stories. As such, I have privileged the participants' perspectives about difficult practice moment experiences.

An additional tension emerges in that the ISS approach seeks to explore individual experiences on a profound level with hopes of sharing these stories with a larger audience to strengthen the understanding of the phenomenon. Conversely, the postmodern perspective asserts that the researcher can ". . . inadvertently marginalize the voices they are supposedly highlighting […] by telling someone's story back with additional perspectives, additional 'authority'" (Garrick, 1999, p. 152). Garrick (1999) suggests that the interpretive researcher colonizes participants by re-claiming and re-telling personal narratives. While I acknowledge this possibility, I wondered how social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments could ever be better understood if their stories were not shared? The postmodern perspective encourages me to understand my positioning as a researcher by maintaining a reflexive position throughout the project. I agree with Fook's (2002) statement that a postmodern approach favours "the recognition of interactive and reflective ways of knowing" (p. 17). To avoid further silencing social workers' voices in this exploration of difficult practice moments, I remained transparent about the purpose of the research and how the information will be used. I have also included participant pseudonyms and extensive quotations directly from the social workers in hopes of minimizing my voice and promoting theirs throughout the discussion. Furthermore, I clearly identify that my own perspective and interpretation of the stories shared by social workers is only one. Thus, I cannot and have refrained from, offering a universal practice model from the experiences shared by participants.

Combining these approaches may be problematic for some, due to the differences and sometimes conflicting perspectives that emerge. However, the integration of ISS and

postmodern approaches has facilitated my ability to explore social workers' personal

narratives regarding experiences with difficult moments in practice while at the same time

attend to the dominant discourses emerging throughout their stories. This theoretical

framework has allowed me to explore social workers' experiences with these moments

from their own perspectives, create space for the sharing of these narratives and promote

the voices of frontline practitioners.

Situating myself within an ISS and postmodern framework reflects my belief that

social workers' experiences with difficult moments in practice are fluid and

unpredictable. The ISS approach allowed me to explore social workers' unique

experiences on a profound level while the postmodern perspective encouraged me to

attend to the nuances or differences that emerged among the participants while connecting

their stories to dominant discourses. As Fook (2002) states, "The recognition of multiple

discourses adds a complexity of understanding to the multifaceted situations in which

social workers find themselves" (p. 14). This positioning values various forms of

knowledge production, including social workers' descriptions of their experiences.

Hence, aligning with the postmodern critique of totalizing theories (Fook, 2002), I have

chosen to integrate these perspectives to best situate the current research project, rather

than viewing ISS and postmodern approaches as oppositional or mutually exclusive.

Finally, it is not my intent to provide a structured series of recommendations or

prescriptions for social workers experiencing difficult practice moments. However, I do

hope to use participants' stories and references to dominant discourses to contribute to

knowledge production and meaning construction about these experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGY

A thorough exploration of the Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan, 1954) used both as a methodological and practice approach informs my current understanding of critical incidents, or difficult moments in social work practice. Despite these underpinnings, there is minimal exploration of social workers' experiences with these moments. This study, informed by ISS and postmodern perspectives, uses a qualitative approach to explore new understandings and meanings of the challenging moments social workers experience in practice. Placing their stories as central to the research contributes to a deeper understanding of social workers' experiences and how these experiences are reflected upon and integrated into professional development.

Recruitment

I contacted social service organizations that employ social workers with both BSW and MSW designations in the Hamilton community. I introduced myself and the research project to managers and directors and provided copies of my recruitment poster [see Appendix A] and letter of information [see Appendix B]. Directors, managers and supervisors agreed to circulate and post the recruitment poster and letter of information among the respective social work teams. These individuals acted as a support and initial liaison between myself and the social workers in the recruitment process. The contact persons for each organization did not have any additional involvement in the research and did not receive information pertaining to individuals who chose to participate. After reading the recruitment poster and letter of information, interested social workers were invited to contact me via telephone or email and interviews were arranged according to

their availability and preferred location. Before beginning each interview, I revisited

confidentiality with participants and reviewed a consent form [see Appendix C] before

asking for their signatures.

Participants

Six interviews were conducted with social workers between April and May 2011.

Social workers with both BSW and MSW designations from various fields of practice

were invited to participate. All interviews took place at each participant's preferred

location, including place of employment and participants' homes. Of the six social

workers who participated, five identified as female and one as male. Employed with

large organizations and agencies, participants offered a broad range of field experience

including medical social work, child protection, mental health, and crisis oriented work

which provided both richness and depth to the data collected. Sharing stories about

experiences and interactions with service users, organizational policy and colleagues,

participants recalled difficult practice moments from their practice and reflected upon the

events occurring within these experiences. Three participants held the MSW designation

and three held the BSW designation. Two of those three participants were working

toward their MSW at the time of their participation in this project. Among the

participants, experience in the field ranged from approximately one to 33 years of

practice.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative approaches allow the researcher to focus on interactive processes in

their natural settings and intend to make sense of these processes and the meanings people

attach to them (Kreuger & Newman, 2006; Hallberg, 2006). Hallberg (2006) suggests

that qualitative research provides meaningful results and deepened understandings of a

social phenomenon. Furthermore, Mason (2002) asserts that qualitative research aims to

produce "rounded and contextual understandings on the basis of rich, nuanced and

detailed data" (p. 3). I chose a qualitative approach to the research project to develop a

deeper understanding of social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments and

explore both common themes and differences that emerged among and between

participants.

Narrative Research

Larsson and Sjöblom (2010) suggest that narrative based interviews are useful

when trying to understand social workers' interactions and their talk about these

interactions with other professionals. They further state that this methodology "allows

the researcher to make systematic studies of personal experiences and to analyse how

important events have been constructed by the subject" (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010, p.

276). Narrative research helps social workers move beyond a "strict problem focus to

more generally explore social phenomena" (Fraser, 2004, p. 181) which aligns with the

ISS approach informing the research project. This methodology highly values participant

voice and thus focuses on individual stories, using the perspective of the storyteller to

explore the research topic (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010; Thomas, Reeve, Bingley, Brown,

Payne & Lynch, 2009). Throughout narrative interviews, the participant takes the

researcher "to past times, recapitulating what happened then, and there is always the

making of a moral point in the telling of the story" (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010, p. 274).

Reissman (2001) describes storytelling as a collaborative process where participants and

the researcher interact in particular contexts. Narrative interviews are co-constructed and

involve a dialogue (Thomas et al., 2009) whereby, "The researcher and the person

participating in the research can be seen as doing a narrative co-production, i.e. they are

involved in a dialogic exchange producing a story that evolves throughout the interaction

process" (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010, p. 274). Aligning with the postmodern assertion that

"there is no one universal truth or reality, but instead 'reality' is constructed out of a

multiplicity of diverse and fragmented stories" (Fook, 2002, p. 12), it seemed most

appropriate to use a narrative approach to collect these stories and favour the inclusion of

participant voice. Thomas et al. (2009) assert that the data collected in narrative

interviews "cannot be used to generate answers to research questions that demand large

samples, numerical data, and statistical techniques for data analysis and generalization"

(p. 795). This also aligns with the theoretical framework informing the project as I was

most interested in exploring social workers' unique experiences, rather than drawing

universal conclusions or offering a prescriptive practice formula to be followed.

Data Collection

Larsson and Sjöblom (2010) suggest that the richness of data collected using a

narrative approach may introduce "difficulties as to how to make sense of it all" (p. 278).

While I acknowledge this assertion, I posit that sharing stories is essential to hearing from

and understanding social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments and thus it

is fundamental to hear participants' perspectives. As such, I focused on these narratives

and valued their 'richness'. Unlike semi-structured or structured interviews, narrative

methodology does not follow a series of questions to be answered (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010). Designing the 'right' questions is less important than focusing on ". . . narrator's self-evaluative comments, meta-statements, and the overall logic of the narrative" (Berger, Gluck & Patai in Fraser, 2004, p. 185). Due to the fluidity and conversational nature of these interviews, they are "time consuming and case focused" (Thomas et al., 2009, p. 795). Similarly, Reissman (2001) explains that narratives unfold "in particular interactions with particular listeners, and these contexts shape what is said, and what cannot be spoken" (p. 81). At the end of a narrative research project, the researcher creates a "meta-story, editing and reshaping what was told, and the reader of the text will further be making an individual interpretation" (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010, p. 277). To avoid making vast generalizations and using my own voice to silence that of participants, I remained aware and clearly stated that I can offer only one interpretation of the data collected and that other researchers with the same participants and data will interpret it differently. Likewise, those reading the research discussion may offer their own interpretation of the same data, which is both appreciated and welcomed from a postmodern perspective.

Acknowledging potential variations in interpretation, narrative research requires sound self-awareness and self-reflection on the part of the researcher, with particular emphasis on how "assumptions of the self" guide the interview process (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2010, p. 275; Gorman, 1993). Aligning with the theoretical and epistemological frameworks informing this research, the use of narrative based interviews encouraged me to continuously reflect upon my own positioning and to value participant and researcher

subjectivity throughout the interview and research process. Adopting a reflexive position

supports my intention to refrain from drawing universal conclusions while conveying

social workers' experiences and appreciating that the discussion informed by participants'

stories will represent my personal interpretation.

Data Analysis

i.   *Grounded Theory*

In my approach to data analysis, I integrated narrative analysis and grounded

theory. Grounded theory aims to develop explanatory theory concerning common social

life patterns and requires "continual interplay between data collection and analysis to

produce a theory during the research process" (Bowen, 2006, p. 13; Annells, 1996).

Adopting an inductive approach to data analysis, a grounded theory perspective posits

that patterns and themes emerge from the data, rather than being imposed or identified

prior to data collection (Bowen, 2006). This aligns with the frameworks informing my

research which seeks to explore new meanings of difficult moments in social work

practice. A grounded theory approach aims to develop a theory or perspective that is

faithful to the evidence (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). Mason (2002) suggests that when

using grounded theory, theoretical propositions or explanations are developed from the

data "in a process which is commonly seen as moving from the particular to the general"

(p. 180). This supports my use of narrative based interviews for data collection and

narrative analysis, in that themes were identified from stories shared by participants for

the purpose of reconstructing knowledge about difficult practice moments (Kreuger &

Newman, 2006). Although a grounded theory approach adopts an inductive position

identifying themes from the data, I acknowledge that the MSW thesis research process

required me to interact with existing literature prior to engaging in interviews with

participants and that may have influenced my understanding of the data collected. To

align with the goals of my research, themes emerging from social workers' narratives are

central and emphasized.

A grounded theory approach implements the constant comparative method,

whereby emerging themes in the data are compared with other parts of the data to explore

variations, similarities and differences (Hallberg, 2006). Furthermore, grounded theory

supports the use of "intensive interviewing" where the participant is encouraged to

describe and reflect upon his or her experiences which seldom occurs in everyday life

(Hallberg, 2006, p. 143). Hallberg (2006) states, "The participant should be active

whereas the interviewer should listen actively and encourage the participant to talk and to

clarify details (Hallberg, 2006, p. 143). This highlights the use of both narrative and

grounded theory approaches in my research, where social workers' stories were explored

to contribute to an understanding of their experiences with difficult moments and based

on emerging themes, offer explanations of how these are reflected upon and integrated

into professional development. Furthermore, a grounded theory perspective suggests that

reality cannot be fully known but can always be interpreted (Strauss & Corbin, in

Hallberg, 2006). From the integrated ISS and postmodern frameworks informing the

research, I was not seeking to create a practice model or theory for social workers to

follow in future experiences with difficult practice moments, nor was I intending to

suggest that the participants' experiences were applicable to all social workers. Instead,

Strauss and Corbin, in Hallberg (2006) encouraged me to align with the grounded theory position suggesting participants' experiences with difficult practice moments are subjective and personalized, rather than concrete.

Annells (1996) asserts that the exploration of a research question is informed by the researcher's epistemological perspective. Because I believe that experiences with difficult moments in social work practice are fluid, unpredictable and shaped by the individual's values and beliefs, I also assert that there are no standard or rigid processes to follow during these experiences. Grounded theory encourages me to set aside preconceptions and move beyond existing concepts in the literature (Bowen, 2006). While this seems essential, I acknowledge that it was challenging because my personal understanding of and experience with difficult practice moments influenced my research interest. I believe that objectivity is unattainable in research, given the values, opinions and beliefs that inform my positioning.

ii.   Narrative Analysis

Aligning with the nature of narrative interviews, "narrative analysis is not meant to be governed by formulas or recipes" (Fraser, 2004, p. 186). Thomas et al. (2009) describe a river metaphor when engaging in narrative analysis whereby the researcher "endeavors to make sense of the storylines or narrative threads that run longitudinally though the text" (p. 791), noting that these become the "currents" conveying meaning in the data. Fraser (2004) suggests that the initial phase of narrative analysis involves the interview itself, hearing the participants' stories and feeling the associated emotions. I personally transcribed each interview with the intention of analyzing the data line by line.

Fraser (2004) encourages social work researchers engaging in narrative analysis to transcribe their own interviews to foster familiarity with the data. I also chose to indicate pauses, silence, laughter and tears throughout the transcriptions as I believed they were meaningful in the data analysis.

After transcribing the interviews, I closely read through each transcription and began coding based on emerging themes. Floersch, Longhofer, Kranke, and Townsend (2010) note that when engaging in narrative analysis, researchers often refrain from discussing coding strategies and instead discuss "the temporality and sequencing of storied experiences of the linguistic structure and use of language" (p. 411). Because I integrated narrative analysis and grounded theory, it is important to discuss the strategies I used to arrive at the themes identified. I used coloured markers among the transcripts to group themes or trends as well as nuances emerging from the participants' stories (Fraser, 2004). Throughout this process, I attended to silences and pauses as well as the language used by social workers to share their stories. Narrative analysis encourages the researcher to engage in exploration of dominant discourses and social constructions that may appear in participants' stories (Fraser, 2004). Fraser (2004) states that "narrative analysis offers us a way to understand the role personal stories play in the making of socio-political worlds" (p. 197). It was important to explore these discourses to deepen my understanding of social workers' difficult practice moment experiences (Floersch et al., 2010).

Ethical Considerations

The research project was reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Because the interviews were narrative based, interested participants were asked to recall a difficult practice moment to be explored throughout the interview. All social workers who chose to participate expressed that the subject matter was difficult to discuss and that they were thankful to have space to process and reflect on these moments– even if they had long since passed – noting there is minimal space and time for reflection in everyday practice. I ensured that participants had access to someone with whom they could connect and also offered contact information for local social service organizations in the event that participants felt they would like to debrief or receive support following the interviews.

Consent/ Confidentiality

The letter of information provided to interested participants outlined both consent and confidentiality. I reviewed this with participants who signed a consent form prior to beginning each interview to ensure informed consent. Some participants checked in with me throughout the interviews to verify the consent process. Participants chose a pseudonym at the beginning of the interview to protect their confidentiality. It is important to note that the stories shared by participants were kept confidential. Often the nature of their discussions could reveal their field of practice or agency, so quotations have been carefully selected to protect confidentiality. In addition, participants were reminded that they could choose the depth of information shared and that they could also choose to refrain from answering any questions with which they were uncomfortable. As

a social worker myself, it is possible that I may interact with participants by way of

consultation or referral in future practice. Each participant's role and contribution to the

research project will remain confidential in these circumstances.

Reflectivity

i.   Journaling

The nature of the research encouraged me to adopt transparency about my

positioning and a reflective approach throughout the process. Journaling my experiences

facilitated a balance of my own positioning and attention to the various themes that

emerged (Thomas et al., 2009; Reissman, 2001; Hallberg, 2006; Gorman, 1994; Larsson

& Sjöblom, 2010; Fraser, 2004). As part of my reflective journey, I wrote initial

thoughts, feelings and reactions following each interview in a journal which became an

integral part of my data analysis. The process of journaling aligned with my theoretical

positioning, encouraging me to reflect upon how I situated myself and my own

interpretations throughout the research process. It also facilitated the attention I paid to

the power relationships that emerged in the research setting and appreciation of how I fit

into this. As I revisited my journal entries throughout the data analysis, I learned that

they were significant to my personal journey of processing and understanding my own

thoughts and emotions that became attached to the stories I heard. Adopting a reflective

position was an ongoing process and through this process, I developed a strong

understanding of my own positioning, presence, role, emotional journey and

interpretation of the stories shared by the social workers.

My own reflections emerging through the journaling of my experiences revealed a

profound sense of privilege throughout the research process, particularly in the interviews

with social workers. I felt deeply privileged to engage in dialogue, mostly as an active

listener, with the social workers who invited me into their personal and often emotional

experiences. There were many instances where I was so amazed by their stories and

candour that it felt as though I was listening to a presentation rather than engaging in a

research interview. I was and remain inspired by the practitioners who lent their insight,

reflections and experiences to this project. They encouraged me to think deeply about my

own practice and begin to articulate my own experiences with the difficult practice

moments that prompted this research project. While participants thanked me for

providing space for the sharing and exploration of these experiences, I feel grateful for

their roles in my journey.

ii.   Insider Positioning

When discussing ethical considerations, it was important to me to consider my

positioning as a social worker or "insider" researcher. While I do not identify as a

complete insider solely because I share career choice with participants, I acknowledge a

personal connection to the research topic due to the difficult moments experienced in my

own practice. Drake (2010) notes that researchers often choose their project due to prior

experience with the issues to be explored which can lead to assumptions about expected

findings. As I began to articulate and understand my attraction to engaging in research of

social workers' experiences with difficult practice moments, I also wondered whether my

research interest could be perceived as biased or self-serving because of its roots in

personal experiences. Allowing biases to influence my interpretation of participants'

experiences would not be true to my research question, yet I recognize that attempting to

keep my biases in check was a delicate balance. Transparency and reflectivity were

crucial throughout the project to find this balance.

        LaSala (2003) suggests that, when working with an insider researcher, participants

might "be reluctant to admit vulnerabilities or difficulties to a member of her/ his group

for fear of 'loss of face'" (p. 231). It was important that I maintain an awareness of this,

particularly as I was asking social workers about experiences with difficult moments in

practice. Chavez (2008) suggests that insider positioning can cause difficulty establishing

patterns in research findings due to the familiarity with the community. She also

highlights that the postmodern perspective views the researcher as a co-participant who

positions him or herself in relationship to the participants (Chavez, 2008). By adopting

ISS and postmodern approaches, I have welcomed experiences which differ from my own

and ensured these are attended to and valued in my data analysis and research

presentation. I have refrained from making assumptions about the social work

perspective or using my voice to silence participants. Instead, I chose to view my own

experiences as part of the study, which facilitated alliance with participants and the

opportunity to share stories with the goal of contributing knowledge about difficult

moments in practice.

iii.   Power

        When discussing my reflective journey, it is important for me to share my

exploration of power relationships inherent in the research process. Whitmore (2001)

states "Issues related to the nature and role of power in the research process have been raised by feminists and participatory action researchers" (p. 93). Although my research is informed by ISS and postmodern approaches, I am also aware of the nature of power inherent in the research process. While myself and participants occupy similar positions of power with respect to career choice and professional identity, there are different power dynamics which surface in the research process. Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) assert that the researcher defines the interview topic and situation and initiates the interview. "The research interview is not a dominance-free dialogue between equal partners; the interviewer's research project and knowledge interest set the agenda and rule the conversation" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 164). They further state that "Unlike a good conversation, the research interview is no longer a goal in itself or a joint search for truth, but a means serving the researcher's ends" (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005, p. 164). How did I attend to this in my research? Primarily, social workers were invited to participate and all participants expressed a desire to contribute. Furthermore, I remained transparent about my researcher positioning by sharing some of my own experiences and maintained a genuine desire to hear about their experiences with difficult practice moments.

Brinkmann and Kvale (2005) state that "the interview becomes a personal confessional" where "an authentic self can be revealed through personal narratives in the warm and empathic context of the interview" (p. 166). I do believe that a safe space was fostered during the interview process, yet the depth of information revealed was controlled by participants who chose what they wanted to share based on their own comfort levels. I chose to view the interviews as a journey on which I embarked with

participants, rather than viewing them as passive recipients of a series of research

questions. Landau (2008) states that "the social work researcher is not necessarily the

'powerful' partner in the relationship with a 'powerless' research participant, and that the

interaction between the two is fluid and dynamic, with the power relationships constantly

changing" (p. 574). I adopted a transparent position and engaged in dialogue with

participants who had questions or comments about the research topic.

A further demonstration of power in the research process is the underlying

question of whose knowledge counts as legitimate (Fook, 2003). The theoretical

frameworks and methodological approaches informing this research demonstrate my

belief that frontline social workers' knowledge about difficult practice moments should

be included, valued and central to knowledge construction. I have included extensive

quotations directly from the practitioners in hopes of minimizing my own voice and

promoting theirs throughout the discussion. Having acknowledged this, I appreciate that

my insider positioning and the power associated with the researcher role affords me the

opportunity to carefully select the quotations used throughout the discussion. Because the

purpose of the research is to hear social workers' experiences with difficult practice

moments, it seemed most appropriate to include as much of these stories as possible

throughout the discussion. I align with Fook's (2003) assertion that "we need to

recognize different forms of knowledge, and different ways of creating that knowledge, if

we are to begin to gain a better representation of our own experiences" (p. 129). A

postmodern perspective often asserts that the researcher is implicated in the production of

knowledge (Munro, Holly, Rainbird, Leisten, 2004). As such, I was encouraged to

remain aware of knowledge production throughout the research process, appreciating that

participants' narratives are influenced by their contexts and relationships with dominant

discourses prior to the interview.

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

The range of field and practice experience offered by the social workers in this study provided a rich context in which they had experienced difficult practice moments. Throughout the personal interviews, the social workers' stories revealed themes related to: (1) a unique introduction and presentation of the moment itself, (2) the range of emotions related to the particular practice moment, (3) the process of working through the moment, (4) feeling uncomfortable with uncertainty and, (5) reflections on theoretical and practice knowledge. Given the range of experiences shared by the social workers and in line with my narrative approach to data analysis, this story is not linear. There is no beginning, middle and end. Rather, the social workers' narratives highlight the nuances that emerged through their storytelling and I will offer my interpretation in a way that respects and honours the stories that were shared with me.

Introducing the Moment – Setting the Context for the Story

At the beginning of each interview, I asked the social workers to recall a difficult moment from their practice and these experiences framed the interviews. The social workers chose to introduce and present their difficult practice moment experiences in ways that were unique and personal. Given the range of responses, it is important to begin by acknowledging and exploring how the social workers presented and shared their stories.

i.   Telling the story

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that isolating one difficult practice

moment can be challenging for social workers who encounter these moments regularly in

their practice. When I asked Joe to share his experience, his initial response was:

> "It's hard to sort of recount and isolate one thing because basically I
> deal with a steady stream of cases."

While this illustrates Joe's desire to convey that he had encountered multiple difficult

moments in his practice, it also became the foundation for how he was choosing to share

his story. He clearly wanted to provide some context before delving into his narrative.

After acknowledging his many experiences with difficult moments, Joe pondered in

silence before saying:

> "Um, if I go back in time and this takes me back about 20 years. A very
> complex problem and the family were really unhappy, not necessarily
> with me, but with a whole lot of things that were going on with the care
> of an elderly woman – matriarch, in fact, of the family."

Although he had expressed challenges with isolating one difficult moment, he then shared

an experience from 20 years prior. This illustrates the significance of this particular

moment in that it remains accessible in his memory much later in his career. Joe went on

to discuss the intricacies of this specific case and how it was handled by the organization.

While sharing this story, he periodically checked in with me to confirm confidentiality of

the information. As he sought this verification, he demonstrated the challenges associated

with sharing his experience with this difficult moment by revealing that he was somewhat

fearful or hesitant to discuss it. Wanting to ensure confidentiality illustrates that he was

sharing something of great significance to him and his practice. Moreover, through the

initial guarding of his story and confidentiality confirmation, he showed that he was

mindful and concerned about the potential consequences or repercussions of sharing it

with me. Perhaps he was thinking about his future practice or reputation within an

organization or maybe he was concerned about his clients' confidentiality. Perhaps these

were considerations he wanted to entertain because he had never before been asked to

share his experience with a difficult practice moment. Through his mindfulness of these

potential consequences, Joe was highlighting their impact on his decision about how to

isolate, present and tell his story.

        In contrast to Joe's hesitations, other participants responded to my query about

their experiences with difficult practice moments in a different way. When I asked

Jennifer the same question she immediately began sharing her story, choosing not to offer

any context:

> "About January 25, 2010 I was suddenly called out to the lobby of my
> agency."

She then provided a detailed recollection about her difficult practice moment with a

family and specifically, a child's mental health concerns. When she used the word

"suddenly", she was demonstrating the sense of urgency surrounding the moment itself,

as well as her decision to introduce the story immediately. As Jennifer chose not to offer

any context to her story before beginning, she conveyed the significance of this moment

and that she was relieved to have the opportunity to share it. When juxtaposed with Joe's

reservations, her decision to share her story without hesitation was much like a flood gate

waiting to be opened. Jennifer continued:

> "I'm just going to say it - the fact that he was head of outreach made it
> very hard."

As she announced "I'm just going to say it...," Jennifer exposed her belief that this part

of the story could not be omitted when expressing the magnitude of this moment for her.

The flood of storytelling presented by Jennifer illustrates that she was invested in sharing

her experience and conveying its meaning. The various ways in which the social workers

chose to introduce and present their stories of difficult practice moment experiences

revealed that the meaning of these experiences can be conveyed in a multitude of ways.

ii.   The importance of telling the story

In addition to the unique introductions of their stories, the social workers

illustrated that the act of telling their stories was significant to them individually. Faye

shared her experience with a powerful, non-social work figure in her setting. She

explored tensions encountered when following organizational policy to best meet a

client's needs, while attempting to maintain a functional working relationship with this

professional. Before beginning, she stated:

> "This story is a little bit complicated but when I think about a difficult
> time in my practice so far, I always think of this case and I think a lot of
> things were going through my mind at that time and a lot of things I
> struggled with and reflected on so I think it's a good example...Are you
> familiar with these acts?"

As Faye repeatedly said "I think..." she was situating herself and emphasizing the

significance of this moment to her. When she asked about my familiarity with the acts

that shaped her experience, she was also exploring my understanding of her context. This

illustrates that while the moment was personal and unique to her, my understanding of the

experience was also important. She was suggesting that experiences with difficult

practice moments will vary according to organizational context and individual

practitioners. Faye went on to discuss her interactions with this high status professional

and thus was communicating the power dynamics she had encountered in the field. She

identified the benefits of sharing her experience by stating:

> "I think that it helps for me just to share, you know with other students
> or whoever is going to be reading this, it's just that sometimes it doesn't
> happen and I think it's just interesting because you think you're going
> to be a certain way and then you deal with a lot of guilt when you set
> yourself up at this bar up here and you haven't quite met it," (Faye).

While she could have chosen any difficult practice moment, she shared a story that

involved both a challenging client and colleague situation. She said it was helpful to

share this story because others may learn from it, suggesting she felt this experience was a

significant story to tell.

Similar to Faye's emphasis on the significance of telling her story Bella, shared

the meaning of the moment to her professional practice before describing the moment

itself:

> "I think I'm going pick a scenario that has probably changed or
> influenced heavily the way I practice…It has ramifications in terms of, I
> think, colleagues and just um, professional relationships in terms of how
> other people practice and tensions that I've bumped up against over my
> years."

Bella went on to describe her difficult practice moment with a client who was refusing

services. While the moment itself was significant, Bella's statement echoes Faye's

experience that the act of telling her story was equally important. As Bella shared that

this moment from ten years prior had influenced her practice, she was also emphasizing

the importance of telling her story. Furthermore, when she acknowledged the

"ramifications" of this experience, it was as though she was preparing me for what I was about to hear, illustrating that she wanted me to know the magnitude of the moment she was about to discuss. Her language emphasizes the significance of the moment and associated events, but also the importance of telling the story itself.

The various ways in which the social workers introduced, presented and told their stories about difficult practice moments reveals that these stories can be difficult to share due to potential consequences. Despite these challenges, the social workers told their stories in ways that demonstrated the significance of the experience to them. The range of responses to my initial query about difficult practice moments highlights the importance of being asked this question for social workers. Their narratives unfolded uniquely yet the common thread revealed that having the opportunity to tell their stories was as significant to them as the moment itself. From asking this seemingly simple question, I learned that social workers do not often have the opportunity to answer it, because they are rarely asked.

Difficult Practice Moments

Emotions: "The horribles and the sads," (Jennifer)

In sharing their stories, it became clear that difficult practice moment experiences were highly emotional for the social workers with whom I spoke. For example, when Joe discussed a difficult moment related to a family's grieving from earlier in his career, he stated:

> "I was still feeling uncomfortable and she said, let's sit down with the
> director and go over this…I thought I did great work on the case but at
> the time I was really scared. Intimidated by the whole set of
> circumstances."

As he reminisced about his feelings of discomfort, fear and intimidation, Joe emphasized

the intensity of the emotions attached to his experience from 20 years prior. He became

tearful and appeared defeated in his slouched body language, embodying the emotions as

he recalled them. This illustrates that feelings associated with difficult moments are

capable of being long-standing and raw, even later in a social worker's career. As Joe

expressed that he thought he did good work but remained scared, he highlighted that

experiences with difficult moments can cause social workers to feel doubtful about their

practice approaches or abilities. Similarly, Jennifer became tearful as she shared:

> "I am afraid it will happen again…I guess it's more that I used to be
> able to validate for myself that I had good decision making skills and
> now I'm needing to rely on someone else to validate that for me."

Jennifer's candid discussion of fear and the subsequent need for validation echoes Joe's

revelation that experiences with difficult practice moments are capable of causing self-

doubt. After 33 years in the field, Jennifer still felt fearful and identified her desire for

external support with client-related decision making journeys. The moment she described

had occurred one and a half years prior to the interview, yet the feelings were still fresh

and difficult for her to share.

As the social workers identified associated emotions, they were also expressing

that these feelings can amplify subsequent difficult moment experiences and intensify the

impact of the moment itself. Jennifer explored the residual emotional impact of the

difficult moment she experienced with a child's mental health struggles and stated:

> "And then you think, 'is this going to be like the so and so's?' And it's
> just that whoosh of all of the horribles and all of the sads."

In her identification of feeling horrible and sad in this particular moment, Jennifer also

expressed apprehension about future difficult moments. This illustrates the significance

of acknowledging, processing and reflecting upon the feelings associated with difficult

practice moments, in hopes of feeling better prepared for similar experiences in the

future.

    i.   *Externalizing and Personalizing*

When exploring the emotions attached to experiences with difficult moments, the

social workers conveyed various ways of understanding and making meaning of these

emotions. Several of the social workers articulated attaching their emotions to external

factors that had impacted their difficult practice moment experiences. For example, Bella

described frustration with a community system that shaped her experience:

> "I had some anger towards the home care services at the time because
> they often did that. They would go into difficult situations and they
> would say, 'do you want some help?' and the person would say 'no' for
> all kinds of reasons but I always think you have to ask 'why do you
> want the help?' as much as you do 'why don't you want the help?'
> because that's about being accountable to your client…Frustration of
> not being able to convince the system around me to have a similar
> approach that I thought ultimately would have helped him."

As she identified frustration with and anger toward a lack of support from the system in

which she worked, she was also demonstrating that externalizing these emotions was

important to her. Rather than feeling personally responsible, she chose to redirect her

frustration to a systemic flaw that had shaped her experience with one particular client.

Similarly, when recalling feelings attached to a difficult moment formulating a care plan

for a terminally ill client, Jaclyn stated:

> "I was a little bit nervous because physicians tend to be the harder ones
> to get on board with the social things and I was nervous that he was
> going to look at me like I didn't know what I was doing. Its
> nerveracking…I'm a human being, I make mistakes, I don't always
> know everything."

Jaclyn's statement echoes Bella's redirection of her anger and frustration at systemic,

rather than personal flaws. As Jaclyn shared these feelings, she was acknowledging that

it was important to her to remember that mistakes happen in practice. Rather than feeling

emotionally immobilized by an absence of the information needed, Jaclyn externalized

her nervousness and attributed it to her status as a newer social worker who could learn

from the experience. She was also raising an issue about power and powerlessness and

how this impacts her positioning as a social worker. In her particular setting, the

physician occupied a position of greater power and Jaclyn's choice to externalize her

emotions may have been a reflection of feeling powerless. She found consolation in

reminding herself that she could not be responsible for "knowing everything".

While some of the social workers described externalizing the emotions attached to

their difficult practice moments, others shared emotional journeys that reflected deeply

personalized experiences. Faye explored the feelings associated with her difficult

moment involving an interaction with a family and a powerful colleague and shared:

> "In that moment, I just felt panicked. I guess I felt worried and upset
> and nervous too. Nervous about what I was supposed to do. Am I
> going to get in trouble? Is my job going to be on the line? I felt guilty
> too because there were concerns about myself in that matter…I was
> terrified of the repercussions of me bringing this up, I was terrified of
> who he was going to tell, I was terrified of how he was going to treat
> me, I was terrified of whether I would be able to work with that team
> anymore."

This part of Faye's story reveals that the panic, worry, upset and nervousness that comprised her emotional journey were very personal. As she repeatedly used the word "terrified" to describe her emotional place, it was apparent that she wanted to emphasize the presence of this feeling. Similar to Jaclyn's experience, Faye's feelings are also reflective of feeling powerless in her role, particularly as she asked herself if her job was "going to be on the line". Moreover, Faye identified feeling guilty that she was concerned about her own practice and future, illustrating that the personalization of emotions associated with difficult moments can be multifaceted. Her emotional journey was intensified by feelings of powerlessness and when she then found herself feeling guilty for considering her own job security.

As the social workers shared their emotional journeys, it became clear that some had externalized these emotions and others held them close and personalized. The range of emotions and how the social workers experienced them were individualized, but most significantly demonstrated the presence of emotions in their difficult practice moment experiences.

Working Through the Moment and "Weepy Saturdays," (Joe)

Another trend that surfaced was the process of working through these difficult moments. Several of the social workers expressed a belief that they had inadequate opportunities or time to process, reflect upon and work through their experiences.

i.   *Barriers to Working through the Moment*

The social workers explored barriers to working through their difficult practice moments and the most substantial was an absence of time during the work day.

Interestingly, "luxury", "privilege", "benefit" and "reality" were words the social workers

used to describe time. For example, when Jennifer discussed her processing journey, she

stated:

> "The reality of the agency doesn't allow for that…When I'm needing to
> talk with somebody about this, I know I'm keeping them from their
> work because there isn't that time for it."

Jennifer's statement demonstrates that social workers recognize the need to process their

experiences yet having the time to do so is a luxury existing beyond the tasks of daily

work. Joe explained that his work days are woven with constant client crises which

prevent him from engaging in reflective processes and stated:

> "I'm just so focused on moving forward with the job that I didn't
> process it. It could be something I did three days earlier and now I'm
> reacting."

The delayed response Joe shared reveals that moving a case forward becomes more

important than giving ourselves space to process what has transpired. This is a clear

indication of the demands and responsibilities social workers encounter. While they

experience difficult moments regularly, there is an absence of organizational support to

work through these moments.

    ii.   *Consequences of Inadequate Opportunities to Work through the Moment*

After identifying time constraints as the largest barrier to working through

difficult practice moments, the social workers also explored the associated consequences.

Joe continued his story in a way that exemplified the impact of inadequate processing

time:

> "Five days a week it's just nose to the grindstone for lack of better
> words and often I find…Saturdays I'm emotionally exhausted. It's not

> the physical work that wears me out, it's the emotional, the caregiver fatigue. So, I'll just find that I start reflecting and I'm not sure why I feel kind of weepy at times, but I notice often on Saturdays I'm sort of within recoil and trying to find myself again…I guess that's the translation of not having the chance to breathe or relax."

As Joe shared his weekly routine he emphasized his workload and time constraints, as well as the emotional exhaustion that accompanies difficult practice moments. While this narrative lends support to the previously discussed theme of emotions, it further denotes the consequence of time-related barriers to reflection and processing time. This was echoed in Jennifer's description of a similar impact of minimal processing time in her role:

> "When I'm starting to reflect on something that hasn't gone well, I'm flooded with everything that hasn't gone well in my practice…I usually fall asleep okay, but when I wake up at three in the morning and there are nights that I don't get back to sleep. When I'm awake, as much as I try and self-talk myself into other things to turn my brain off, but this is always there."

This statement reveals that the minimal opportunities to process difficult practice moments spills into Jennifer's personal time. Moreover, she shared that reflecting on one experience causes a flood of memories from previous difficult moments. When this becomes a circular journey, as indicated in Jennifer's statement and in Joe's story about the week's events compounding on Saturdays, it becomes apparent that social workers need space to work through the difficult moments encountered regularly in practice.

iii.   *Finding Ways to Work through the Moment - Acts of Agency and Resistance*

While acknowledging the impacts of inadequate processing time, the social workers also identified ways in which they create space and opportunities for these

journeys individually. When recalling how she had worked through her moment, Bella

described:

> "It was afterwards that I started to really think about, 'was that the
> appropriate thing to do?' and then I had more time to reflect, think
> about and discuss it…I've consulted the literature and…had discussions
> with colleagues to help guide me."

As Bella mentioned interacting with existing literature and dialogue with colleagues, she

was illustrating that these resources were both helpful and important to her. This was

echoed by Mayra, who expressed that support from colleagues was helpful:

> "Knowing that you're not alone in the situation and just being able to
> talk to somebody about it…going back and processing what's happened
> in instances and just trying to think about what else I could do."

While Bella and Mayra identified these resources when working through difficult

moments, they also observed a need to establish time and space for these opportunities

which were not part of their work days. In addition to the benefit of receiving support

from colleagues, Mayra also described using her commute to process or prepare for the

day's events:

> "Because I have a long drive home, it's my time to wind down…when
> I'm driving home, I start thinking, 'okay, what next? What am I going
> to do now?"

As Mayra identified her travel time as an avenue for processing difficult moments, she

reiterated that opportunities to engage in this journey during her work day were limited.

As such, she exercised agency by processing on her own time, individually. Faye

described a similar need to create space for processing these difficult moments when she

stated:

> "Some days there's time and space to do that, but if there's a lot going
> on, not really…Do our managers give us specific time to debrief? No,
> but it happens. You make time to do that, especially when you're really
> upset."

This illustrates that social workers may sometimes resist the structural impositions and time-related barriers by acknowledging the need to create space for working through these moments. Jaclyn shared a similar act of resistance by identifying her caseload yet needing time to process:

> "I don't always have the time for that kind of thinking. I have 38
> clients…I don't think there's always space but you make some space
> and ways to deal with it."

As evidenced by Mayra, Faye and Jaclyn, debriefing time is not structured or assumed, yet there are opportunities for social workers to resist or exercise agency in order to work through their difficult practice moments. Even in the absence of structural support, the social workers demonstrated a need for and commitment to reflection. While they did not suggest their acts of resistance were ideal, the social workers emphasized that creating opportunities for working through these moments was necessary to their ongoing clinical practice.

Uncertainty and "Muddling through," (Bella)

What happens when social workers are surprised by a difficult practice moment and feel insecure in the following journey? As the social workers recalled these experiences, they explored the impact of the moment on their confidence and future practice.

i.   Uncomfortable with Uncertainty

Throughout the interviews, several social workers expressed discomfort with the uncertainty they experienced. As Jennifer explored the impact of the difficult moment on her confidence and certainty, she shared:

> "There was a time when I would go in and say 'this is my decision and here's why whereas I think now, I'm doing more joint decision making in my supervision… I'd like to be back to where I had the confidence to be doing it on my own and just reviewing my decision and my rationale with my supervisor rather than needing her help to make it."

This statement reveals that Jennifer was uncertain about the action to take in her difficult moment involving a child's mental health struggles. As she identified this uncertainty and her subsequent desire for increased supervision, Jennifer was also sharing the impact of this experience on her confidence as a practitioner. She even reminisced about when she was more confident in her practice. A similar discomfort with uncertainty was echoed in Bella's story:

> "I had a fair degree of uncertainty and I think at the time I was pretty uncomfortable. There was a level of discomfort but you just kind of keep muddling your way through it…I kind of knew what to do at the time, but it was that feeling behind it in terms of 'am I doing the right thing?'…I just had that uncertainty about myself…Maybe this is a little bit scary to say because everybody likes to think we practice knowing exactly what we're doing."

Bella shared feeling uncomfortable with the uncertainty through her use of ambivalent language, including "kind of", and "maybe". This may also suggest that it was uncomfortable for her to expose this uncertainty because, as Jennifer stated: "everybody likes to think we practice knowing exactly what we're doing."

Revealing her thoughts about uncertainty, Faye shared the questions she asked

herself in her difficult practice moment experience:

> "I'm here thinking, oh my goodness, what if this family comes back and
> says, 'we had this meeting and decided to do this and in this meeting,
> present was so and so and Faye, the social worker'…What should I
> have done? Should I have done more?…The best practice would have
> been to stop and say 'we need to review this, it wasn't okay, it wasn't
> right'…Here I am, my first year into practice and I've already had
> situations where I feel like I didn't do the right thing. I think I feel a
> little more confident now, but I'm still not quite there."

As she expressed feeling as though she "didn't do the right thing", Faye was implying

that this place of doubt was uncomfortable for her. She went on to share that her

confidence had increased slightly since that difficult moment approximately eight months

prior, but that she was not quite where she wanted to be in her practice. This illustrates

that while uncertainty may evoke discomfort, social workers may also feel reassured that

there is room to grow and develop.

ii.   *Consoled by Uncertainty*

While some of the social workers expressed discomfort with uncertainty in

difficult moments, others described being reassured by this uncertainty experiencing it as

a learning opportunity for their future practice. As Jaclyn reflected on her uncertainty,

she stated:

> "I know myself and have come to accept that I don't have the answers
> to everything and there's no way that I can have the answers to 38
> patients who are changing all the time...I've seen a lot of people
> undermine themselves because they put so much on the fact that you
> need to know everything."

This illustrates that, while Jaclyn did experience initial discomfort with uncertainty, she

was comforted when she "accepted" that she did not need to be certain about her practice

at all times. As she shared that sometimes we undermine ourselves for feeling under-

informed, she highlighted that uncertainty can be experienced positively when we

appreciate that we cannot always have a formulated practice response immediately

accessible. Jaclyn's sentiments were echoed when Bella stated:

> "I don't always know at that moment of time if I'm doing exactly the
> right thing…It's a little frightening to say that, but I think in some ways
> it influences and facilitates the practice almost retrospectively."

While she discussed feeling uncomfortable with uncertainty, Bella also acknowledged

that this encouraged her to reflect upon her practice and integrate the learning into her

future experiences. Bella further stated:

> "I'm not sure still to this day that I have a clear sense that it was worth
> the risk...I just knew at the time that I felt uncertain."

Although she had moved forward, she expressed still feeling uncertain about the decision

she had made ten years prior. This illustrates Bella's perspective that social workers may

never arrive at a place of complete certainty or confidence when experiencing difficult

moments, but that we can use these moments and experiences as learning opportunities

for future practice.

Theoretical Knowledge versus Practice Wisdom

Another trend emerging from the social workers' stories was their exploration of

formal training and development of practice wisdom. They shared how these different

types of learning contributed to their preparedness for difficult moments. It became clear

that social workers draw upon existing skills or practice knowledge for guidance. For

example, Bella stated:

> "I didn't feel prepared…In fact I think you don't just sort of look in a
> book and find your answer. It's something that you often have to
> wrestle with around your values, around the values of what's going on
> in the system at the time and what's going on with the client."

As Bella shared that she felt unprepared for this particular moment, she emphasized how

her practice experience had guided her. She clearly stated her belief that an action plan

could not be found in the existing literature as dealing with this moment required

"wrestling" with a variety of factors. Bella went on to say:

> "But I knew from my practice experience that when you've got
> someone in that scenario and you've got services in the community
> going 'we're not going to support it, he doesn't want our service', I
> know darn well that there's just enough pressure exerted that the person
> gives up…even though it's not what they want and that happens all the
> time."

This illustrates the significance Bella attaches to practice wisdom and using it to help her

work through difficult practice moments. Bella used definitive language, "I know darn

well… ", when discussing the benefit of practice experience as opposed to ambivalent

language, "I think you don't just sort of look in a book… ", when exploring formal

training. This demonstrates that she views her practice experience as a greater resource

when encountering difficult moments. This was echoed by Jaclyn when she said:

> "I really value my social work education...but I think it was more my
> experiences that prepared me for this moment…The best way for me to
> learn is by doing it myself and working it out."

Jaclyn emphasized that she valued her formal training before implying that contextual

practice experiences best prepare her for difficult moments in her specific role.

As a new social worker, Faye described feeling that she did not have a wealth of practice experience from which to draw when she encountered her particular difficult moment:

> "I was 23 years old, brand new in my practice…I look at one of my colleagues and she is so strong and empowered and she's been doing this job for a long, long, time…she doesn't have a lot of those fears I do."

As Faye compared herself to a more experienced colleague, she was anticipating her own development of practice wisdom. Seemingly, she believed this would facilitate her ability to manage difficult moments with greater ease and comfort. Interestingly, as Joe recalled his 30 years of experience, he considered what he might say to social work students:

> "If I were to sit down with a classroom, I'd say, 'this is great. Hang on to your idealism, get educated and continue to get certified and train'. What I might not be so inclined to say is, 'you're going to have moments, really challenging moments, where you deeply reflect and have a lot of self-doubt and moments where you're like 'I screwed up' or you actually do make mistakes and you have to sort it out, come to terms with it and move on, because…you deal with some incredibly horrific situations which will challenge you to your core'."

In this statement, Joe highlighted that it would be difficult to candidly share with social work students the challenges they will face in their practice. Hence, just as Faye yearned for a deeper level of practice knowledge, Joe discussed the value of this knowledge to him by sharing what he might say and not say to social work students. As he considered using discretion with new social workers, Joe revealed his scepticism about teaching or learning about difficult moments in the classroom. This demonstrates that social workers appreciate theoretical learning, but believe that practice knowledge can best prepare them for the difficult moments they will experience.

i.   Integrating Practice Knowledge and Moving Forward

The social workers also discussed using their experiences with these particular

difficult moments to inform their practice moving forward. Bella stated:

> "In terms of thinking about scenarios and cases after you've kind of
> done them to inform your future cases…Yea, I would say probably
> that's how it influences my wisdom or the stuff that I learn that
> influences my practice."

This statement demonstrates that Bella's experience with difficult moments is paramount

to her professional development and subsequent difficult moments. Echoing Bella's

perspective, Jaclyn shared how her experience had been integrated into her professional

development:

> "I've had this experience…Rather than 'in this situation, do this and in
> this situation, do this', because that wasn't the case in this
> scenario…There will be some tweaking here and there but you're
> developing a set of skills."

Jaclyn emphasized the importance of flexibility when using this practice knowledge in a

variety of situations moving forward. This tells me that social workers appreciate the

range of experiences they encounter in practice, but also that these moments become

resources for professional development and facilitate preparedness for future difficult

moments.

The themes and stories explored by the social workers in this study reveal the

complexity, uniqueness and personal nature of experiences with difficult practice

moments. As they shared their journeys, they were also revealing the significance of

exploring these moments in greater depth in an effort to make sense of their difficult

practice moment experiences.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

This study sought to explore social workers' experiences with difficult moments in their practice. While I believe it will enhance our understanding of these experiences, I appreciate it is not without limitations. I acknowledge that the interviews with social workers provided an individualized account of their experiences and thus may have shifted the focus from the contexts or structures which shaped them as individuals and practitioners. Moreover, the six social workers who participated in this study may not represent the experiences of social workers on a larger scale. I also acknowledge that in my discussion of social workers' discomfort with uncertainty, I have not further explored the discourse suggesting we need to always be certain about our practice. Is this pressure personal? Organizational? Academic? I have initiated dialogue about our discomfort with uncertainty which presents an area where further exploration may be warranted. Lastly, I have not offered a gender analysis when considering the nuances emerging between the male and female social workers who participated in this study. Through the integration of ISS and postmodern perspectives I pursued an in-depth exploration of the social workers' stories and remained attentive to their variations. I believe that the data collected in this study could be analyzed from a feminist or anti-oppressive perspective to explore the social workers' contexts and how these shaped their experiences with difficult practice moments.

Throughout this study I remained aware that my understanding of difficult practice moments was informed by personal experiences as well as the existing literature surrounding critical incidents. As explored in the literature review, the term 'critical

incident' represents an event significant to a social worker's professional practice (Fook

& Askeland, 2007; Garcia & Van Soest, 1999; Stepney, 2006; Weyers & van den Berg,

2006; Fook, 2002; Fook, Ryan & Hawkins, 2000). Despite the presence of critical

incident literature, there is minimal inclusion of social workers' individual stories about

these experiences. I questioned the applicability of the term 'critical incident' to the

difficult practice moments social workers experience and from the findings, I discovered

that it is time to consider a movement away from this language.

Difficult Practice Moment Layers and the Significance of Sharing

To encourage inclusion of social workers' voices and exploration of their journeys

with difficult practice moments, I explored the unique and personal ways in which they

introduced and presented their stories. Some expressed hesitation and reservations about

sharing their stories, illustrating a mindfulness of potential consequences that could result

from their candour. These reservations exposed the power relationships which were

subtly present in the interview setting. Despite my efforts to facilitate a context where

social workers' voices were most significant, the fact that I would be writing about and

sharing their experiences publicly caused some of them to feel initially reserved or

cautious about the details they shared.

Other social workers chose to delve into their narratives without providing a

context, demonstrating both the significance of the moment, as well as the act of telling

the story. These social workers were not as cautious, which revealed feelings of

empowerment in having an opportunity to tell their stories. Although the social workers'

introduction and telling of their experiences were varied, the common theme was that

being asked to share experiences with difficult practice moments was meaningful. It became apparent that social workers are rarely asked about these moments and thus, the space to share stories is limited. This supports my identification of the minimal presence of social workers' voices in the existing literature about critical incidents.

The significance of sharing their experiences emerged most compellingly when the social workers displayed both verbal and non-verbal emotional responses. The breadth and depth of the emotions associated with these moments was shared openly by the social workers as they explored their journeys toward making sense and meaning of these feelings. Some of the social workers identified externalizing their emotions by linking them to structural or systemic flaws that prompted their difficult moment. At times, this externalization reflected feelings of powerlessness in their respective roles or organizational contexts. Attaching emotional journeys to broader structural issues became a way for the social workers to depersonalize or evade feelings of powerlessness. These social workers explored the benefits of not assuming personal responsibility for structural limitations yet maintained that emotions such as frustration, intimidation, fear, nervousness, sadness and guilt were ever present. Others identified that the emotions attached to their experiences were deeply personal and had amplified the impact of the moment itself. These social workers described the emotions as fresh and raw, even when the particular moment they chose to discuss had transpired several years earlier.

Throughout their explorations of emotional journeys, the social workers recognized time limitations as the main barrier to processing experiences with difficult practice moments. They acknowledged the consequences of inadequate opportunities for

reflection and working through these experiences which were apparent in the forms of
"weepy Saturdays" (Joe) or sleepless nights. While all social workers expressed the
significance of and need for opportunities to work through these moments, such
opportunities were only afforded through acts of agency and resistance. The social
workers discussed the need to create space – even if it meant prolonging the day's tasks
or using their travel time between home and work – to work through these moments or
debrief with colleagues. This was another area where the social workers were able to
evade feelings of powerlessness in their roles; they acknowledged that reflection was
necessary and created opportunities for it. However, when these reflective journeys spill
into social workers' personal time, there is risk for blurred boundaries between personal
and professional lives or even burnout. Furthermore, limited opportunities for processing
and debriefing during the work day contribute to a discourse that social workers do not
need this time because they are experts. Sellick, Delaney and Brownlee (2002) promote
the deconstruction of professional authority and suggest that our roles are often informed
by institutional protocols that inform our practice. When organizational structures do not
include opportunities to process and reflect upon challenging moments, we are not
supported in the journeys significant to our practice moving forward. The absence of
processing can intensify social workers' experiences with difficult moments by
contributing to the discourse that we should always know what to do and how to deal with
these moments. Based on the social workers' stories, this level of expertise and
confidence is rarely present during experiences with difficult practice moments.

Instead, several of the social workers expressed uncertainty in their experiences. For some, this was an uncomfortable place given their understanding that social workers are believed to know what to do in every situation encountered. Some of the social workers found consolation in this uncertainty, choosing to view it as an opportunity from which to learn and integrate into their professional development and future practice. This illustrates an interest in dismantling the discourse suggesting that social workers are experts with easily accessible knowledge and action plans when experiencing difficult moments. Among the social workers, range and duration of field experience did not seem to ease uncertainty. Whether they had been practicing for 33 years or one year, when a social worker finds her or himself in a difficult practice moment, it is often an uncomfortable place. The social workers' individual explorations of uncertainty whether experienced as uncomfortable or consoling, revealed it was significant to their difficult practice moment experiences. It became apparent that the social workers felt pressure to be certain in their practice however it was rare that they expressed feeling this way.

The final area of exploration was that of theoretical and practice wisdom, particularly in relation to a sense of preparedness for difficult practice moments. The social workers shared that they valued their formal training yet often felt unprepared for difficult moments. Several of the social workers expressed the significance of practice wisdom and identified this is the main resource accessed when encountering difficult moments. Newer social workers anticipated a time when they will have established a wealth of practice knowledge from which to draw, while more experienced social workers considered what they might say to prepare social work students for the field. All

of the social workers expressed that their experiences had been integrated into their

professional development, deepening their practice knowledge moving forward.

The themes that emerged from the social workers' narratives demonstrate how

social workers experience, understand and make meaning from their experiences with

difficult moments in practice. This process appears to have become individualized as we

rarely have the space or opportunity to openly discuss and share our experiences.

Although it is important to recognize that our understanding of and meaning made from

these moments is often a personal journey, it is also significant to engage in dialogue

about the process.

Powerlessness

As I explored the emerging themes, it became clear that the social workers were

also touching upon issues of power and powerlessness in their stories. It seems as though

feelings of powerlessness, particularly within a role or organization, can greatly impact a

social worker's experience with a difficult practice moment. For some of the social

workers in this study, difficult practice moments were amplified when interacting with a

professional in a position of greater power. This was predominant for social workers in

medical settings, where Social Work occupies a relatively powerless position. These

social workers' experiences were further complicated when they were attempting to

navigate relationships with colleagues or organizational structures that rendered them

feeling powerless. They implied that these feelings of powerlessness can intensify the

already complex emotions attached to difficult practice moment experiences, causing

social workers to feel further defeated.

Conversely, some social workers described externalizing the emotions attached to their difficult practice moment which also became an attempt to negotiate or diffuse feelings of powerlessness. Some of the social workers expressed a belief that they are perceived to always have the answers in difficult practice situations. In this regard, the social workers were expressing discomfort with the uncertainty experienced in these moments. Moreover, they were revealing discomfort with the assumption of expert knowledge and power attached to the decision making components of their roles, particularly when the action to take was unclear.

The social workers also explored the impact of feeling powerless in their roles. Some of them described questioning their job security and future practice as a result of feeling uncertain with the action they had taken following their difficult practice moment. Furthermore, when social workers experience this uncertainty they may also feel that they are not fulfilling an expertise expectation in their practice. The discourse suggesting that social workers are experts who do not need time for processing causes them to compromise personal time in an effort to engage in the reflective journey which is essential to their practice moving forward.

While the social workers addressed issues of powerlessness throughout their stories, they also demonstrated feeling empowered by the opportunity to share their experiences with difficult practice moments. This illustrates the significance of creating space for this dialogue and promoting social workers' voices throughout the process.

My exploration of social workers' encounters with difficult practice moments revealed the intricacy and fluidity of these experiences. I learned that these moments

permeate our practice on a regular basis, yet the forum to share and learn from such

experiences is often overlooked. The social workers' insights illustrated the significance

of profound exploration of and opening the dialogue about the difficult moments

experienced in practice.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS/ IMPLICATIONS

This research began from a personal and lonely place. I had encountered one particular difficult moment in my own practice and found myself revisiting it continuously as I tried to make sense of the experience. Consulting the literature did not satisfy, so I sought opportunities to discuss and work through this experience with someone who may understand. Beginning this journey, I believed I was not the only social worker who had felt this way. The social workers who shared their stories throughout this study validated the significance of exploring difficult practice moments further. They also taught me that these experiences can be difficult to share. I appreciate that any hesitation expressed by the social workers may have been related to my identification as a MSW student. Perhaps they were anticipating my reaction or hoping to prepare me and themselves for the magnitude of the moment and journey they were about to share. And perhaps they were looking for the words as I asked questions that previously, they had not had an opportunity to answer.

This study has explored social workers' experiences with difficult moments in practice. I wanted to open dialogue about these moments encountered regularly by creating space for sharing stories. From this research, I have learned that social workers appreciate being asked about, and value the opportunity to discuss their difficult practice moment experiences. This presents an implication for future research. It is my hope that this study will become a stepping stone to further exploration of difficult practice moments. In particular, further research may seek to explore the relationship between

social positioning, organizational restructuring and political climates and social workers'
experiences with difficult moments in practice.

Throughout this research journey, it also became apparent that the exploration of
these difficult moments contributes to knowledge production that can be incorporated into
social work education. It is significant to consider engaging in open discussion about
future difficult practice moments with social workers at the training level. This dialogue
might emphasize the individual and personal nature of these experiences, as well as the
inevitability that they will transpire. Emphasizing with future social workers that a
uniform practice approach to these moments cannot be offered and that context-specific
field experience will become a valuable resource may ease their later experiences with
these moments. Just as we learn the importance of exploring client context and ensuring
voices are heard, we must also emphasize the nuances and subjectivity of social workers'
experiences with difficult practice moments. Similarly, we must promote the inclusion of
social workers' voices in knowledge production about these experiences. It is imperative
that social work students are introduced to this at the training level.

In addition to dialogue about difficult practice moments in the social work
classroom, another implication emerging from this research is the promotion of practice
wisdom. The social workers in this study agreed that their practice experiences had best
prepared them for the difficult moments encountered. As such, there is benefit in
including this practice knowledge in the classroom setting. Linking practice wisdom and
theoretical learning might involve inviting frontline social work practitioners to the
classroom to share their experiences with difficult practice moments. This process can

offer twofold positive implications; future social workers can learn from those already in the field through exploration of their encounters with realistic and challenging practice moments. And, social workers in the field would have greater access to opportunities to share their stories. I do not wish to create a dichotomy between theoretical and practice knowledge. Rather I am suggesting that a stronger link between, or integration of these forms of learning would benefit social workers both new and experienced.

Revisiting the Value of Shifting Language

As I shared earlier, my understanding of difficult practice moments was informed by personal experiences as well as the 'critical incident' literature. I am not comfortable with this language and learned from the findings that social workers experience difficult moments in unique and personal ways. I believe 'critical incident' is capable of labelling these moments in a way that is restrictive and concrete, thus failing to embrace the fluidity and complexities of these experiences. The term 'critical incident' does not emphasize the reflectivity, emotional journeys and professional development that social workers experience subsequently.

As per the experiences shared by the social workers in this study, I believe there is value in shifting the language away from that of 'critical incident'. From the social workers' stories, it was apparent that difficult practice moments are fluid, intricate and ongoing. Hence, the term 'critical incident' does not seem applicable. To facilitate our understanding of these experiences, it is important to identify a new term to better describe them. Evolving the language to 'moment of tension' promotes a more profound and contextual exploration. 'Moment of tension' allows for the acknowledgement and

appreciation of both the challenging and positive impacts of these experiences, including

reflectivity, professional development, practice wisdom and embracing uncertainty. This

shift in language encourages exploration of the contextual, multifaceted and intricate

journey attached to moments of tension in social work practice; a process than cannot be

appreciated through the use of the language of 'critical incident'.

    After identifying the value of moving the existing language from 'critical

incident' to 'moment of tension', it is apparent that this study has implications for the

language and discourse surrounding these moments in social work. Because 'moment of

tension' is more fluid and dynamic, it can facilitate and contribute to our deeper

understanding of these moments and experiences. Using language that is more appealing

and best describes our experiences can promote the dialogue and story sharing that is so

significant to social workers.

    For lending insight, thoughtfully exploring their experiences and allowing me to

participate in their personal journeys, I am grateful to the social workers who participated

in this study. From their stories, I have identified implications related to further research,

education and language. I am hopeful that these implications will be embraced as we

continue the journey of developing our understanding of moments of tension in social

work practice.

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APPENDICES

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH ABOUT MOMENTS OF TENSION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

I am looking for volunteers to take part in a study that aims to explore the ways in which social work practitioners understand, reflect on and integrate challenging moments in their practice.

You would be asked to take part in a one hour face-to-face interview that will involve sharing your experiences and reflections on the challenges you have experienced in your work, and how this has impacted your current practice.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:
Heather Boyle
School of Social Work
905-512-4432 or
Email: boyleht@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance
through, McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Heather Theresa Boyle   McMaster University
                                                         School of Social Work

DATE:

LETTER OF INFORMATION

A Study of: Moments of Tension in Social Work Practice

Principal Investigator: Name: Heather Boyle
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Purpose of the Study:

There are times throughout a social worker's practice experience when he or she may experience a moment of tension or challenge within professional practice. However, there is little written about how social workers describe and reflect on their own experiences, particularly those that are described as difficult or challenging. This study seeks to better understand how social work practitioners experience and understand these difficult practice moments, how they reflect on and integrate these reflections into their practice and how these moments contribute to their professional development.

What will happen during the study?

I would like to invite you to join me in a one hour, in-depth interview. With your permission, the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed by myself. Within the interview, you will be asked to describe your understanding of and experiences with a particular moment of tension in your practice. There will not be a series of structured questions to answer as I am most interested in hearing your description of your experiences. I will ask some questions throughout the interview that will help me better understand your story, such as: "Can you tell me more about that?" and/ or "Can you describe that further?" I will also be asking you about basic demographic information

such as your gender, age range, experience in the field and type of social work experience (such as: child protection, hospital, community development, etc.)

The interview will take place at a mutually agreeable location in the community at a time that is both comfortable and convenient for you. For example, we could meet at a coffee shop, or any other mutually agreed upon location.

Are there any risks to doing study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable with describing your experiences or you may find it stressful to remember an unpleasant event or experience. You will be able to determine the breadth and depth of the experiences you share. You do not need to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You are welcomed to take breaks throughout the interview process. You can withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Below I will describe the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

The research may not benefit you directly. However, I hope to learn more about social workers' experiences with moments of tension in their practice. The study findings will contribute to the social work community's knowledge about how social workers understand and experience moments of tension in practice. It is hoped that the research findings can be used to contribute to social work education and offer suggestions to better prepare students for moments of tension in their practice experience. It is also hoped that learning about social workers' experiences of moments of tension can improve social work practice by increasing the value placed on these experiences and facilitating the resolution of dilemmas or problems in practice.

Who will know what I said or did in the study?

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. No one but me will know whether you participated unless you choose to tell them. Both your identity and the identity of your agency will remain anonymous. Any identifiable information will be changed using a pseudonym of your choice. The demographic information you provide will always be generalized and not specific. However, we are often identifiable through the stories we tell. Please keep this in mind while participating. My Thesis Supervisor will have access only to de-identified data.

The information you provide me with will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in my office and only I have access to the key for this filing cabinet. The computer that I will be using is my personal computer which is password protected. Upon one year after the study has been completed, the data will be destroyed.

What if I change my mind about being in the study?

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose to withdraw at any time even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. If you decide to withdraw after or part-way through the interview process, you will have the opportunity to determine what will happen to the data that has already been provided. If you do not want to answer some of the questions within the interview you do not have to, but you can still be in the study.

How do I find out what was learned in this study?

I expect to have this study completed by approximately September 2011. If you would like to receive a brief summary of the results sent to you personally, please let me know how you would like me to send it to you on the consent form.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or would like more information about the study itself, please contact me at boyleht@mcmaster.ca.

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

> McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
> Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
> c/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support
> E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Heather Boyle, a MSW student at McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I request. I understand that if I choose to participate in this study, I may withdraw at any time and I do not have to answer questions that make me feel uncomfortable. I understand that the interview will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the researcher. I understand that the data will be stored by the researcher in a locked filing cabinet and on a password protected computer. I understand that the data collected will be kept by the researcher prior to submitting the thesis in September 2011 and that after thesis completion the data will be destroyed. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Name of Participant (Printed): _____

Pseudonym: _____

Date: _____

_____ Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results. Please send them:

to this email address _____

or to this mailing address _____

_____ No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

Interview Guide

MOMENTS OF TENSION IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE
Heather Boyle, Master of Social Work student
Department of Social Work – McMaster University

Information about these interview questions: This gives you an idea of what I would like to learn about how you understand, reflect on and integrate challenging moments in your practice. Sometimes I will use other short questions to make sure I understand what you told me, such as "*Am I understanding that you're saying …?* I might also use short questions when I would like to get more information, such as: "*Can you please tell me more about that?*" or to learn what you think or feel about something "*Why do you think that is…?*"

1) How long have you been practicing social work?

2) What social work field do you work in at this time? (For example: child protection, hospital, community development…).

3) I'm wondering if you could please share your experience with a challenging moment in your practice?

This might be challenging professionally, politically or involve an interaction with a client.

4) How did you work through or manage this difficult moment?

How did that feel to you?
Were you surprised by your reaction?
Did you feel prepared to manage this moment?

5) Was there a particular moment within that experience that was significant to your professional development?

How did that feel to you?
What was meaningful about this to you?
Can you please share more about that?

6) How, if at all, has this experience been integrated into your current practice?

7) Is there something important we have not discussed? Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of moments of tension in practice?

END

McMaster University Inspiring Innovation and Discovery	**McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)** c/o Office of Research Services, MREB Secretariat, GH-305, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca **CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH**

Application Status: New ☐ **Addendum** ☑ **Project Number:** 2011 035

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:

Exploring Moments of Tension in Social Work Practice

Faculty Investigator (s)/ Supervisor(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
S. Greene	Social Work	23782	greenes@mcmaster.ca

Student Investigator(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
H. Boyle	Social Work	905-512-4432	boyleht@mcmaster.ca

The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:

☐ The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification.

☐ The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification.

☐ The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:

COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing approval is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and approved before any alterations are made to the research.

Addendum#1, cleared May 10, 2011

Reporting Frequency:	Annual: Mar-25-2012	Other:

Date: Mar-25-2011 **Chair, Dr. D. Maurer/ Vice-Chairs, Dr. Tina Moffat & Dr. Bruce Milliken:**