SOCIAL WORKERS' EXPERIENCES AS CLIENTS

SOCIAL WORKERS AS CLIENTS:
NAVIGATING AND SITUATING OUR EXPERIENCES
AS INSIDERS AND OUTSIDERS

Written by

AMY CHRISTINE OBENDORFER, B.S.W.

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Amy Christine Obendorfer

School of Social Work
McMaster University

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AUTHOR: Amy Christine Obendorfer, B.S.W.
                    (Ryerson Polytechnic University)

SUPERVISOR: Professor S. Sammon

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Amy Christine Obendorfer

School of Social Work
McMaster University

ABSTRACT

There are times during a person's adult life that one may require the services of a social worker. The journey through the social services system is often arduous and tedious for clients trying to navigate their way. This experience gets complicated when it is a social worker who requires social work services.

What do we do when we, as professionals, find ourselves requiring those very services that we support or within which we work? How supportive is our system for social workers who require social work services? How does the experience of being a client influence and shape our own practise?

This study endeavours to untangle the positions of social workers as clients within the social services system. In broadening our understanding of how these social workers have chosen to situate themselves in the discourse, we explore how they engaged with these various systems as clients and then journeyed back into the professional realm as social workers. This work includes data collected via online anonymous questionnaires as well as confidential personal interviews exploring social workers own accounts of their experiences when navigating the social services system.

I examine how this experience impacts social workers on a personal and professional level. Expectations and typical ways of practising are deconstructed when social workers tell their stories of being on the other side of the desk, including look at how our profession supports colleagues or classmates who require services within the social services system.

Encouraging our own clients to seek out services or to be comfortable with the process is often part of our professional discourse. However, when the tables are turned and it is a social worker who requires services, the experience and support they receive as a *professionally informed client* leaves much room for further study, and has implications for social work education.

Amy Christine Obendorfer   School of Social Work
                                                    McMaster University

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

There are times throughout a person's adult life when one may require the services of a social worker. The journey through the social services system is often arduous and tedious for clients to navigate. This experience becomes further complicated when it is a social worker who requires social work services.

This study aims to explore this conflict and untangle the positions of social workers as clients within the social services system. Unlike private counselling services and Employee Assistance Programs, the public nature of social services adds additional pressure on the service user. In broadening our understanding of how this dual role unravels in how social workers who are also clients have chosen to situate themselves in the discourse, I explore how they engaged with these various systems and then journeyed back into the professional realm. Expectations and typical ways of practising are examined when social workers tell their stories of being on the other side of the desk. This study also includes a look at how our profession supports colleagues or classmates who require services within the social services system.

Typically, being a social worker is something to be proud of and a topic of conversation when meeting new people. When you are a social worker receiving services as a client, however, the decision to disclose that information is not taken lightly, as there are both rewards and consequences for doing so.

This research is comprised of data collected via 15 online anonymous questionnaires from professionals in social work roles in Southern Ontario as well as eight confidential personal interviews from participants exploring their own accounts of

their experiences as social workers navigating the social services system as clients. In the interest of keeping this paper clear and concise, I will refer to these social workers who are also clients as "Professionally Informed Clients" as they are effectively clients with highly specialized knowledge of the inner workings of the social work field and its systems. I have recorded and reviewed the narratives shared with me by these individuals and offer my analysis in the following pages.

In considering a feminist theoretical framework I examine how this experience impacts the whole person on a personal and professional level, what implications this experience has on their practise, and what our educational institutions can offer to best prepare our upcoming social workers for the realities of life beyond education. This document begins with a Literature Review which looks at how this topic has been addressed by others. This includes the strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the theoretical and empirical knowledge base. A Methodology section follows discussing epistemology, theoretical frameworks and theories used in this research. The Methods section describes in detail what was actually done in this study. The design and sample is explored including data collection and analysis. Emergences of themes, making sense of the data and what it tells us about the topic under investigation will be laid out in the Findings section. Key findings, limitations to the study, implications for our profession and further research possibilities will round out the Discussion chapter presenting the context of *professionally informed client* experiences within the social services system.

This research then poses questions to our profession about our expectations of our clients in being comfortable with the social service process; yet when the tables are

turned and it is a social worker who requires services, the experience and support they

receive as a client leaves much room for increased understanding and further discussion

for professional social workers.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

"Knowledge is not something people possess somewhere in their heads, but rather, something people do together (Gergen, 1985, p. 270)."

Where did it all begin?

Social work developed as a 20th century profession out of its voluntary philanthropy and social reform roots. These roots are deeply linked to ancient values and concepts of charity, equality and compassion toward others in times of need. The profession's contemporary roots are particularly connected to social welfare developments in the 19th century, which included "reform movements to change negative societal attitudes toward people in need; charity organization societies to help individuals and families; settlement houses to improve living conditions at the neighbourhood level; and rising feminist advocacy for human rights, social justice and gender equality (Healy, 2008, p.736)." The profession of social work is uniquely founded on altruistic values respecting the inherent dignity of every individual and the obligation of societal systems to provide equitable structural resources for all their members.

Social work's primary concern is the social well-being of all people equally valued with the importance of their physical, mental and spiritual well-being. Social work pioneers were among the first to address the significance of deeply connected relationships that constitute the social context of people's lives. Out of this rich heritage Social work is recognized for its familiar person-in-environment (Weiss & Gal, 2008; Kondrat, 2002; Silverstone, 2005), perspective, which characterizes the unique relationship-centred focus of the profession. Social workers worldwide acknowledge the person-in-environment as a core concept of our profession (Hare, 2004). Some even

claim that this concept, which characterizes social work as a profession that seeks to change and improve the lives of individuals and society and the relationship between them, is what distinguishes social work from other helping professions (Gibelman, 1999; Johnson, 1999; Stuart, 1999). Thus, it is little wonder that many scholars view the person-in-environment approach as a central concept in social work (Buchbinder, Eisikovits, & Karnieli-Miller, 2004; Johnson, 1999). Parallel advances in other fields now provide significant support for the on-going advancement of social work as a relationship-centred profession with a repertoire of person- and environment-oriented methods of practise.

McMaster University asserts that, as social workers,

"We operate in a society characterized by power imbalances which affect us all...We see personal troubles as inextricably linked to oppressive structures. We believe that social workers must be actively involved in the understanding and transformation of injustices in social institutions and in the struggles of people to maximize control over their own lives" (Retrieved from McMaster School of Social work website, June 5, 2010).

Social work has always been troubled by the interweaving of private difficulties and public issues and committed to the augmentation of social justice. "We aim to prepare students for practise in a wide variety of social and community services as well as encouraging critical reflection on their activities as both professionals and citizens (McMaster, 2010)." The education provided by the School of Social Work is thought to be comprehensive and thorough preparing people for practise but does not consider preparing people for being clients. Throughout our education it is stressed to be self aware and reflective in our practise yet there is not a forum, article or venue to share this self-reflection when it involves being a *professionally informed client*.

The words above from McMaster seem so clear and concise; neat and tidy. This study will show that the experience of a social worker who is also a client is not so easily categorized and not so simply resolved. Social workers may be reluctant to admit vulnerabilities or difficulties to a member of her/his group for fear of "loss of face" (Padgett, 1998, p. 66) or because they want to put forth "the best face" possible (Laslett & Rapport, 1975, p. 973). Our private troubles can become public, and at times, the inequality experienced is within our own system, with our own peers and colleagues.

Situating Myself

My curiosity about social work has dated back as long as I can remember. I was always the supportive friend who looked out for others; the one who rallied around the underdog or made a special effort to help someone in need. Growing up in a family with a mother, father and younger brother living together seemed quite typical in those days - the perfect middle class family, many have observed. I felt like the outsider to acquaintances and friends who were struggling socially or emotionally, but my empathy, listening ear and caring heart crossed those boundaries. My strength was drawn from assisting those in need and my "experiential affinity" (Mama, 1995 in Boushel, 2000, p.76) to those I supported provided the motivation to support particular issues and aided in communication and understanding where it existed.

In the tumultuous teen years, my world started shifting. Family issues were on the rise, which lead to personal struggles and tragedies. I became a consumer of the very services I was hoping to one day provide. Yet, to those who were looking, I was the picture perfect young woman and the struggles and strife I truly experienced behind

closed doors remained hidden. This "experiential interdependence" (Boushel, 2000, p. 77) contributed to my epistemology of emotion which, in turn, contributed towards my understanding and knowledge of struggles and tensions for people, essentially placing me in the dichotomy of being both an insider and outsider. This unnerving situation was packed away in my backpack of privilege and experience as I moved through life and into post secondary education, all the while creating conflict within. Could I be in a room with social work students discussing 'those clients' when I was in fact one of 'those clients' myself? I felt I had no sense of agency: no voice within the discourse. There were occasions in more recent years when my background gave me a feeling of power or a place of privilege because I could communicate on another level with social workers. Other times, I felt their view was that, as a social worker, I should have known better than to end up in an abusive marriage requiring their services. My experience and first hand knowledge was not legitimated. It was like being on a teeter-totter. The amount of information I disclosed would determine which end went up and which went down.   I struggled with knowing the system from the inside. I was informed and knew what to say and how to say it, while at the same time wanting to be seen as an outsider who was fighting for her life and that of her child. Why was this not a safe space to discuss these tensions? Why did I feel I had to live outside of my experience in order to meet the expectations of an emotionally sound and capable social worker?

This duality of focus ignited a flame within me to use my knowledge and learning as a *professionally informed client* to inform my position and movements within the social services system. In these situations there is clearly the potential for a difficult dual

relationship, where a social worker engages…as a client and where (their) judgment and (decisions) may be shaped and influenced by his or her access to specialized knowledge (Reamer, 2003). This praxis was challenging; and often came back to the uncomfortable place where my world view could not be as black and white as 'us and them' but closer to 'we.' I carried this internal debate within me as I began the journey into my Master's degree and did not divulge my struggles in admission documentation or throughout the bulk of my learning. However, as I neared the end of my time in the program I became increasingly agitated by the lack of space to discuss this issue. There seemed an absence of agency students felt to speak on a personal level about struggles – not just successes, a shortage of literature where I could see myself and read about other's journeys that were similar to my own, and a lack of recognition that a professional social worker could in fact require the support of our social services system. I wondered if there were any other social workers out there feeling that they didn't have a voice in their own journey. My struggle to engage the two beings within me led me to feel I was keeping a secret. I felt ashamed that I could not solve my own problems and concerned that if I divulged my history, I would be judged as unworthy or unsuitable to be a social worker. I was a student and client, consumer and social worker, and insider and outsider. This resulted in feelings of privilege: to be privy to the conversations and learning of other social workers, and yet shame to be involved in social services.

Olson and Royce (2006) examined published studies showing that social work students report comparatively high incidences of negative early-life experiences and family dysfunction. Yet in my literature gathering to date I have found a dearth of

information related to the current experiences of social workers who have become clients

by accessing services on their own or having services imposed upon them. Nor was there

literature on how being a client affects social workers as they practise in the field.

Further, social work students have been found to be several times more likely to view

their previous adverse experiences as influencing their occupational choice than non-

social work peers (Rompf & Royse, 1994). However, we rarely consider social workers

as current clients within the system.

We concern ourselves with vicarious trauma (Bell, Kulkarni & Dalton, 2003;

Dane, 2002) from the stories we encounter in the line of duty but do not discuss social

workers who are clients at the same time.

> "Working with clients who have experienced traumatic events challenges
> many of the beliefs held in the dominant culture about justice and human
> cruelty. Being personally exposed to these realities can take a toll on social
> workers' emotional resources and may effect their perceptions and world
> views in fundamental ways. Personal knowledge of oppression, abuse,
> violence, and injustice can be a difficult and isolating aspect of work for
> many Social workers. As a result, some may become overwhelmed,
> cynical, and emotionally numb. Some may even leave the profession (Bell,
> Kulkarni & Dalton, 2003, p. 469)."

To this end I interpret the literature to mean that social workers have a choice to

have our past experiences inform our position and social location instead of hindering it.

If we look at representation of social workers within the field, not all have experienced

the challenges of those they work with but they are still found to be sound and capable

workers. One might wonder why then there had been little written about the position of

social workers who also identify as *professionally informed clients* in the social services

system and how they have situate their experiences.

Finding Our Voice

What do we do when we, as professionals, find ourselves requiring those very services that we support or within which we work? Do we situate our experience as a dual-role? My own encounters over the years within various social services systems perplexed me as I was continually wrestling with when to stay silent about my professional role as a social worker and when to disclose. In some instances I felt it strategic to keep my profession as a social worker to myself and in others I felt it was used as a means of connecting with professionals who held important decisions or a great deal of power over me in a given situation. These conflicted ways of knowing contested the social processes I was used to. I wanted the same reassurance and options of a non-social worker instead of hearing, "well, you know what I'm going to say since you are a social worker" or "with your professional background I think you can read between the lines in what I am not allowed to say." The internal battle of wanting privilege, yet being uncomfortable with that privilege at the same time, was waged at every encounter.

Though I would be pleased to say my venture into the murky waters of my Thesis would be strictly altruistic in nature, I do acknowledge that this is part of my own journey as well as many others who need to be given agency and a voice: much like the participants in the study Processes and Politics of Representation (Sinding, Barnoff, Grassau, Odette & McGillicuddy, 2009, p. 130). "(We) need to make the lesbian voice louder!" In this case, it is to make the voice of the 'others' in the room louder; those who see themselves as insider and outsider within the same discourse. We need to make OUR voice louder!

Socialization of a Social worker

Social workers who have had experiences as clients have the benefit of emotions contributing to their theory of knowledge; which sees emotions as sometimes playing a positive epistemic role rather than, as they have traditionally been seen, as impairing cognition and as opposed to reason. The intellectual and emotional knowledge of being a client informs a social worker's practise but their socialization as a social worker prevents them from overtly sharing their knowledge. This emotional knowledge, compounded with understanding and knowledge of struggles and tensions for people, essentially places the social worker in the dichotomy of being both an insider and outsider. Within the professional circles or educational establishments, this reality may impart a lack of agency for these individuals; no voice within the discourse. Why are there so many forums that are not safe spaces to discuss these tensions? Where are our voices in the literature and in the dominant discourse of our practise? Do social workers feel they have to live outside of their experience in order to meet the expectations of an emotionally sound and capable social worker?

This duality of focus as social workers and *professionally informed clients* informs their position and movements within the system. "In these situations there is clearly the potential for a difficult [dual-role], where a social worker engages as a client and where [their] judgment and [decisions] may be shaped and influenced by his or her access to specialized knowledge (Reamer, 2003, p.124; Minahan & Pincus, 1977; Olson, 2002).

Self-Disclosure

Self-disclosure plays an important role in the development and maintenance of relationships (Collins & Miller, 1994 in Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008, p.193). For example, to increase the possibility of self-disclosure by the other, self-disclosure by one person is thought to increase trust, and decrease power imbalances (Goldstein & Benassi, 1994). However, in social work education literature, little conceptual or empirical attention has been given to self-disclosure other than in the classroom by an instructor to his/her students (Gilson, 2000 in Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008) and purposeful self-disclosure by a therapist to a client in therapy. Referencing a basic social work text, Rasmussen & Mishna (2008, p. 194) state that "the existing literature does address such issues as instructors disclosing their sexual orientation (Allen, 1995; Cain, 1996), forms of disability (Gilson, 2000), and aspects of one's identity and personal story (Allen, 1995)." Moreau and Frosst (1993) also note that the power differential between workers and clients in social work settings can be reduced by "maintaining respect for the client's dignity and autonomy, validating strengths, articulating limits to the professional role, clear contracting, encouraging self-help and the use of groups, and self-disclosure" (p.126). There is no literature that I have found to date which clearly discusses the disclosure process of a social worker who is receiving services as a client.

Allen said that "feminists are concerned with disclosures that reflect the pain, objectification, and subjugation of personal experience (1995, p. 137)." Whereas Cain suggests that "personal disclosures by instructors can be an important part of this professional and political undertaking (1996, p. 66)," linking the course content to

broader social and political contexts. Issues related to power imbalances, the relationship between personal and political actions, homophobia, heterosexism, and oppression are raised in relation to this self-disclosure. Cain advances the idea that self-disclosure by the instructor can reduce the power and status differential between instructor and student and can nurture an environment in which students feel more inclined to risk their own self-disclosure (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008).

Self-disclosure within a therapeutic setting has been discouraged since Freud encouraged therapists to "operate much like a surgeon, providing a blank sheet onto which the patient would project (Miller, 2002, p.4)." He was concerned about the need to maintain appropriate boundaries and uphold technical ideals (Rachman, 1998). These ideals of anonymity, abstinence, and neutrality, meant that therapists would consciously reveal very little about themselves as people.

On the other hand, Aron (1996) had a thoughtful consideration of self-disclosure as it flows from a contemporary relational perspective that assumes a certain kind of mutuality in the therapeutic relationship. In 1981 Kitano and Mitsushima (in Rassmussen & Mishna, 2008) added that self-disclosure by the therapist may also contribute to the deepening of trust with… clients, and may allow the client to become more open with the therapist. Finally, Knox and Hill (in Rassmussen & Mishna, 2008, p.197) provided guidelines based on the current research of self-disclosure by instructors which nicely correlates with social workers disclosing their position as a client. Of the nine guidelines, one clearly relates to the findings in this study: "The content of the disclosure should be

appropriate and not pertain to matters that are highly emotional. In this regard, they suggest that the disclosure be 'carefully calibrated'".

Why then are social workers hesitant to disclose their profession within the context of their personal-selves receiving support services? From the feminist perspective, the power imbalance between social worker and client is ever-present, even when both parties are social workers. This may encourage the *professionally informed client* to withhold this information fearing the repercussions of disclosing or may elicit a disclosure to mitigate the power of the professional social worker. Repercussions of disclosures are discussed in this study through the voices of participants but one can visualize what negativity may come as a result of disclosure such as stigma in the workplace, rumours, and being seen as incapable or even unsuitable to practise in the profession. Of course, there are also positive outcomes to disclosing and with a *professionally informed client*, this decision to self-disclose or not is often well-informed and not taken lightly. The section that follows describes some of the subtleties our profession uses when important information needs to be relayed and yet we feel our hands are tied.

Reading Between the Lines

Three years ago, when my home situation became serious, I engaged with the Violence Against Women system and I experienced, as so many women do, the shame, guilt, panic, and other emotions that accompany the realization that I would need to take steps to ensure the safety of myself and my child. When I attended the women's shelter to inform them of my concerns and plans for leaving my marriage, a comment made to

me struck me like a knife. After telling my 'carefully calibrated' (Knox & Hill, 2003) story, the worker looked at me with concern and said, "After what I heard just now, if you were not a social worker, I would be calling the Children's Aid Society with concern for you and your child's safety. But, since you are a social worker, I am going to trust that you are going to do the right thing here and keep him safe." This dual role of professional and consumer strongly reverberated through me. I was shelved in a privileged place where I was trusted to make decisions because of my professional background, regardless of my personal trauma. I was expected to "keep it together" and contained and move forward with my professional knowledge, not my instincts as a woman seeking assistance.

Lackie (1983) observed that professional caretaking provided by social workers is not only a circumstance for healing and soothing their clients but also a venue for self-healing and self-soothing. What writers have agreed upon regarding the "wounded healer" argument (Maeder, 1989 in Regehr, C. *et al.*, 2001, p. 129; Bell, 2009; Frank & Paris, 1987; Guy, 1987; Miller & Baldwin, 1987) is twofold. On one hand, they claim that social service professions generally attract individuals who are seeking to resolve their own personal needs or distress. On the other hand, the wounded healer theory also refers to a more benign view that prior painful experiences simply serve to inform and sensitize the helping professional to the problems of others. In this respect, it is not the psychological wounds so much as the secondary heightened sensitivity and concern for others' distress that influence the individual to pursue a professional helping career with

the ability to gracefully vault across the boundary as required (Regehr, Stalker, Jacobs &

Pelech, 2001).

Being Invisible in the Literature

The social work literature contains few in-depth discussions of boundary issues or

social workers experiencing the dual roles previously discussed. Most examinations have

focused on dual relationships between social workers and clients that are exploitive in

nature and have not critiqued dual roles. Certainly these are important and compelling

issues; however, many boundary and dual role (Landau, 2008; Slonim, 1997; Daley,

2006) issues in social work are more subtle than these flagrant forms of ethical

misconduct. Many academics (Ringstad, 2008; Evans, 2006; Kaplan, Kocet, Cottone,

Glosoff, Miranti, Moll, *et al.*, 2009) have acknowledged the confusion in social workers

hosting dual relationships and dual roles. Herlihy and Corey (1997) noted,

> "The pendulum of controversy over dual relationships [and dual-roles],
> which has produced extreme reactions on both sides, has slowed and now
> swings in a narrower arc. It is clear that not all can be avoided, and it is
> equally clear that some types of dual relationships (such as sexual
> intimacies with clients) should always be avoided. In the middle range, it
> would be fruitful for professionals to continue to work to clarify the
> distinctions between dual relationships [and dual roles] that we should try
> to avoid and those into which we might enter, with appropriate
> precautions."

I have not found any direct article that clearly addresses the concerns in this

discussion. This omission in the literature causes questions and concerns to arise as I

wonder why this topic does not appear to have been previously investigated. As my

research progresses, the "us and them" approach in both ideology and language becomes

problematic. Who then is writing or speaking of my experience? Who gets to know how this struggle has impacted and enlightened social workers' practise?

Through my years of study at McMaster I was encouraged to look at the counter-story; the one that is not often in the dominant discourse. It brought to light the essentialism felt toward clients as the 'others.' My resistance to even name my struggle publicly gave strength to the position that if it is so arduous to discuss or difficult to hear then someone needs to disseminate this quandary. I hope that this research has an overarching relevance to social justice as it delves into the complexities both within our discipline and outside of it in considering that *professionally informed clients* transcend the boundaries of social work. It is this discomfort that I feel when reflecting on my position and the reaction of other social workers to this topic that validates this query.

Reflexivity

There have been many variations and definitions of reflexivity regarding social work over the years. Within our profession, practise and practise knowledge are critically questioned in relation to how professional power operates with professional knowledge (Forkby, 2009; Parton & O'Byrne, 2000; Taylor & White, 2000) that presents both 'opportunities' for emancipation and 'dangers' of oppression (Ferguson, 1997), whether in social work practise or research (Stanley & Wise, 1993; Huntington, 2001; Kneifel, 2001; Powell, 2002; D'Cruz, 2004; D'Cruz & Jones, 2004). In discussions of these social work agendas, two concepts have become particularly popular. These concepts, 'reflexivity' and 'reflection', are offered as constructive (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000) and critical (Fook, 1996, 1999; Taylor & White, 2000) approaches to practise.

In reading this literature, however, there appears to be some blurring between the concepts. In some sources, the concept of 'reflexivity' is used interchangeably with other, similarly worded concepts, such as 'reflectivity', 'reflection' and 'critical reflection' (Jessup & Rogerson, 1999; Leonard, 1999; Pease & Fook, 1999). Others differentiate between 'reflexivity' and 'reflectivity/reflection' in relation to social work practise (Fook, 2000; Raffel, 1999; Sheppard *et al.*, 2000; Deacon, 2000; Powell, 2002, citing Usher & Bryant, 1989).

For the purpose of this study, the definition of reflexivity focuses on an individual's response to his/her situation, particularly in terms of self-development, and the choices available about the future course of his/her life. Concepts of "reflexive modernity" (Beck, 1993 in Kritzinger, 2002, p. 548) underlie definitions in this variation, implying that dominant perspectives in contemporary Western society require individuals to make sense of rapid change and make personal decisions based on some form of risk assessment. Many of these opportunities are new and were not available to previous generations (Ferguson, 1997). Reflexivity, as understood here, is "a self-defining process that depends on monitoring of and reflection upon, psychological and social information about possible trajectories of life" (Elliott, 2001, p. 37).

Ferguson (2003) argues in support of a meaning of reflexivity (taken from Giddens, 1990 and Beck, 1992) proposing that clients as citizens now have new opportunities to shape their lives. He defines reflexivity as a competency, as "the ability to act in the world and to critically reflect on our actions and in ways that may reconstitute how we act and even reshape the very nature of identity itself" (Ferguson,

2003, p. 199). Reflexivity becomes defined as a 'project of the self' as an active and

creative subject (Roseneil and Seymour, 1999; Elliot, 2001). To this end I would offer a

positive view of *professionally informed clients* as citizens who are able to manoeuvre

through social services to respond to their needs, as they (clients) themselves define such

needs, and it demonstrates how clients might use the social service system to engage in

the process of 'life-planning' to find safety from abuse, disengage themselves from

'toxic' relationships and overcome the psychological effects of childhood trauma.

Ferguson describes such clients as 'creative reflexive citizens' (1997). However, critics

of such a view (Scourfield & Welsh, 2003; Lash, 1994, Ferguson, 2003) argue that many

clients of social services and others subject to structural inequality are unable to exercise

such choices because people lack the wherewithal and skill with which to engage in self-

reflexivity (Lupton, 1999 in Gillingham, D'Cruz & Melendez, 2007).

In the sections to follow, the method for this study is examined and the voices of

social workers who are *professionally informed clients* are heard. It will be from their

voices and experiences that we will acknowledge the strengths that they, as clients, bring

to any relationship with other professionals. This is in contrast to approaches to current

social work practise that typically causes clients to feel powerless.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

"When narratives are used...they can be seen as a tool of advocacy for both ourselves and our clients (Chambon, 2004, p. 1)."

Questions about new ways of knowing, the politics of knowledge creation, and how to attain some of the long-standing ideals of the social work profession amidst changing and challenging times are the basis for my research questions. I am passionate about this topic as both an insider and outsider and the discourse is likely to be fraught with conflict, discomfort, and hopefully, understanding.

Before I began meeting with participants, I had concerns over disclosing my own experiences as an insider to this topic and struggled with trying to remain an outsider in my data collection. Disclosing this information might result in "perceptions or judgments of a student integrating clinical, personal and academic knowledge (Gere, 2004, p.288)." As a woman, social worker, and past client within the system, my experiences crossed many boundaries and social locations but also informed my research questions. In Lawson and Alameda's article *What's Wrong with Them is What's Wrong with Us* (2001) they determine that "boundaries denote territorial possessions, both concrete and symbolic, that can be encroached upon, colonized, and reallocated (Becher, 1989, in Lawson and Alameda, p. 83)." Some boundaries are defended so closely by their constituents that they are impenetrable. Others, like those experienced by social workers who are also *professionally informed clients,* are weakly contested and open to fluid interactions and synapses.

The journey of a social worker is usually initiated by a desire to help others in their own struggles. An altruistic mission or drive for social justice is then moulded and

shifted as we encounter agency policies, professional values and social discourse. When social workers are confronted with the need or requirement to access services within the social services system, boundaries and opportunities, or lack thereof, are illuminated. How do we situate our experiences of being insiders and outsiders within the same moment? What benefits are there to having inside knowledge about the system you are navigating?

With these thoughts in mind, I developed the following research questions:

- How do social workers feel when they are required to access services as a client?
- What motivates social workers to disclose their profession, or not?
- How did our professional community support social workers in this experience?
- In what ways did the experience of being a client inform their practise?

The participants in this study have had the experience of being insiders and outsiders interchangeably and have engaged in clinical conversations about the 'others' they work with and yet identify as 'others' themselves. This research is not intended to look at the weakness of the system, loopholes or road bumps that were experienced or to frame our dual role as social workers and *professionally informed clients* as weak, negative, or unprofessional but to empower us in our quest for social justice. The idea of knowing versus understanding will be discussed in the pages that follow as I outline how this research was conceptualized and undertaken in the community of social work.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

"It's almost as if we carry this invisible shield around us… 'oh we're social workers; we don't have any problems.' It's a perception that's out there (Christina)."

For this study I chose a qualitative research methodology for a number of reasons. According to Creswell (1994, p.174) "a qualitative study is defined as an inquiry process of understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in a natural setting."

The questions that guide this research pertain to the experiences of social workers as *professionally informed clients* within the social services system. It is their stories, reactions and words that bring their experiences to life. Quantitative data, simply counting similar and dissimilar responses to questions, would hardly provide the depth of understanding I intended this research to achieve. "The motivation for doing qualitative research, as opposed to quantitative research, comes from the observation that, if there is one thing which distinguishes humans from the natural world, it is our ability to talk" (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994 in Myers, 2007, p. 1). Qualitative research methods are designed to help researchers understand people and the social and cultural contexts within which they live.

This research places emphasis on understanding through a careful examination of people's words, actions and records. This methodology examines the patterns of meaning which emerge from the data and these are often presented in the participants' own words which is valued in feminist research. The task of the qualitative researcher is to find patterns within those words and to present those patterns for others to examine while at

the same time staying as close to the construction of the world as the participants

originally experienced it. The goal of qualitative research is to discover patterns which

emerge after close observation, careful documentation, and thoughtful analysis of the

research topic. "What can be discovered by qualitative research is not sweeping

generalizations but contextual findings. This process of discovery is basic to the

philosophic underpinning of the qualitative approach (Cresswell, 1994, p. 174)."

In order to conduct and/or evaluate qualitative research, it is therefore important

to know what these (sometimes hidden) assumptions are. In the case of social workers,

one assumption may be that they do not/ should not require the same services that they

are providing as professionals. Another may be that social workers should be able to help

and heal themselves. As the study will show, assumptions are one significant piece in the

discussion of *professionally informed clients*.

A central concern of qualitative research is the difficulty of using language that is

not of one's own in constructing knowledge (Meyer, 2001, p.101). This too was a

concern when choosing my research methodology. To address the research questions, I

considered exploring studies about social workers experiencing personal problems. I

considered involving practitioners who provided service to social workers seeking help,

for example EAP workers. But these options led me to ask whose voice, whose

'language' will be heard. Therefore, I chose to interview social workers who were

professionally informed clients.

Orlikowski and Baroudi (1991) suggest three types of qualitative studies:

positivist, interpretive and critical. These three research epistemologies are

philosophically distinct (as ideal types), and in the practise of social research these distinctions are not always so clear cut.

My attraction to both the interpretive and critical methodological schemas is multifaceted. After reading the literature and previous research conducted around this topic, I would situate myself as both an interpretive and critical social science researcher. In contrast to positivism's instrumental orientation often involving large samples and engaging in statistical analysis, the interpretive approach adopts a practical orientation. It is concerned with how ordinary people manage their practical affairs in everyday life. It is the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people (Neuman, 1997, in Burger, 2007, p.545).

However, critical social science offers a third alternative methodology. It is often associated with conflict theory, and feminist analysis. It is a critical process of inquiry that goes beyond the surface illusions to uncover the real structures in the material world that affect people's experiences in order to help people change conditions and build a better world for themselves (Neuman, 1997). Critical researchers assume that social reality is historically constituted and that it is produced and reproduced by people. Although people can consciously act to change their social and economic circumstances, critical researchers recognize that their ability to do so is constrained by various forms of social, cultural and political domination. The main task of critical research is seen as being one of social critique, whereby the restrictive and alienating conditions of the status quo are brought to light. Critical research focuses on the oppositions, conflicts and

contradictions in contemporary society, and seeks to eliminate the causes of alienation and domination (Bohman, 2005, p.353).

Interpretive researchers start out with the assumption that access to reality is only through social constructions such as language, consciousness and shared meanings. Interpretive studies generally attempt to understand phenomena through the meanings that people assign to them and interpretive methods of research are aimed at producing an understanding of the context of the information, and the process whereby the information influences and is influenced by the context (Myers, 2007). Interpretive research does not predefine dependent and independent variables, but focuses on the full complexity of human sense making as the situation emerges (Kaplan & Maxwell, 1994).

I appreciate the interpretive and critical approaches as they relate to the nature of human beings as social beings who create meaning and who constantly make sense of their world by creating, adapting and interpreting experiences and deriving meanings and definitions from them (Neuman, 2001). I have settled on engaging in the interpretive methodology for this research as it connects well with navigating through what participants tell of their experiences and then interpreting the greater meaning for the social work community and the *professionally informed client* and I am able to explore my own interpretation of the data based on my social location.

Theoretical Frameworks

Research methodology can be either broadly or narrowly defined depending on the perspective of the individual and the type of research (qualitative or quantitative). "So how do epistemology and theory link with methodology?" (Kovach, 2005. p. 29).

Methodology seems entwined with methods. It is a planning process that guides the

choice of methods (Creswell, 2003) and is the foundational element of science within

social science research (Neuman, 1997). A narrow definition of methodology focuses

primarily on the methods (interviews, survey, coding) of research without acknowledging

theoretical assumptions implicit in the work (Alford, 1998).

In qualitative research, feminist scholars and critical researchers have illuminated

the importance of both theory and method in methodological considerations. Feminist

scholars have argued that one's theoretical lens ought to guide the research methods and,

as such, methodology encompasses not only the mechanisms of research, but "how

research does or should proceed" (Harding, 1987, p. 3). To ensure that methodology

does not focus solely on methods of research, I have placed each in separate categories –

methodology being theory that guides method, and methods as the techniques used by the

researcher (Esterberg, 2002).

Feminist research practises rest on a critical analysis of what is knowledge, how

we recognize it, who are seen as experts in our society, by what means someone acquires

this status, and by what means competing knowledge claims are adjudicated so that some

are legitimated while others are dismissed (Stanley & Wise, 1993). I definitely resonate

with the feminist theory as it challenges differences in experiences and examines the

counter-story. The feminist framework really questions the epistemology, or theory of

knowledge, underlying much social science research (Neysmith, 2001). We know that

there is not one feminist theory, but many feminist perspectives and definitions

gathered under the umbrella of feminist theory. Archer (2009, p.150) reminds us that Reinharz (1992) wrote, "just as there are many 'feminisms,' there are also many feminist perspectives on social research methods. She describes the feminist researcher as one who grounds herself in two worlds. One is the world of the disciplines, which supplies the method; the other world is that of feminist scholarship, which supplies the perspective." Reinharz theorizes that the intersection of the two might be viewed as either problematic or beneficial, the latter generated by the tension between the two elements. As for the former, the researcher might consider the intersection of research and the feminist perspective a "double burden" (Reinharz, 1992 in Archer, p. 150). Feminist scholarship is expected to be creative in all aspects of the process, focus on women, emphasize multiplicity, and value inclusiveness, while demonstrating reflexivity on the part of the researcher. Apparently, the double burden to which Reinharz refers is that the feminist researcher must also learn and adhere to the strict conventional procedures of the scientific research method utilized.

My own stance at the intersection of feminism and research is not problematic. I consider it to be a viable intersection, both theoretically and practically. Acknowledging feminist methodology includes addressing the influence of the researcher in the research. This integral piece sees researchers as having so much power in the research enterprise that only a conscious tending to this dynamic will allow others to assess how it influenced the project and thus evaluate the validity of findings. A feminist perspective is further appropriate given social work's history as a woman's profession and caring and caregiving are central concerns in this research.

When venturing into territory as a researcher, insider and outsider, I am aware of the fact that this research will not be altruistic since my experience and knowledge of the topic inserts me into the dialogue in a very different place than someone who has no internalized understanding of the complexity of the topic. Any decision that was made, interview question written, or article chosen will come from a place of privilege (Aguilar, 1981; Chilungu, 1976; Hayano, 1979; Merton, 1978; Srinivas, 1967).

A feminist framework guided me in determining which issues were important to study; the participants that were included in the study, my role as researcher in relation to the research participant, and finally, theory determined how this research was presented and written.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a research method that seeks to develop theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analyzed. According to Martin and Turner (1986, p. 144), grounded theory is "an inductive, theory discovery methodology that allows the researcher to develop a theoretical account of the general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observations or data." The basic idea of the grounded theory approach is to read (and re-read) the textual data (such as questionnaires or interviews) and discover or label concepts and their interrelationships. The ability to perceive variables and relationships is termed "theoretical sensitivity" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 281) and is affected by a number of things including one's reading of the literature and one's use of techniques designed to enhance sensitivity. The major difference between grounded theory and other methods is

its specific approach to theory development - grounded theory suggests that there should be a continuous interplay between data collection and analysis. In this study, this was done by combing through the interviews several times to have themes emerge and then to address those themes in the interviews that followed.

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS

*"I would suggest that sampling strategies involving people...
are more akin to opening Pandora's box (Curtis et al., 2000, p. 1008)."*

Just as there are various philosophical perspectives which can inform qualitative research, so there are various qualitative research methods. A research method is a strategy of inquiry which moves from the underlying philosophical assumptions to research design and data collection (Myers, 2007). The choice of research method influences the way in which the researcher collects data.

Breakdown of the Research

The method for my research study consisted of a number of components. The first part involved participants completing an anonymous online questionnaire. The second part involved participants taking part in a confidential interview. The two parts of this research were separate. Some participants completed the online questionnaire without agreeing to participate in the confidential interview. I offered both of these avenues for them to participate since I understood the risk it would be to come forward and identify themselves as clients and I respected the privacy of those who wanted to remain anonymous.

Sample

The sample consisted of self-identified social workers in the community who also engaged as clients within the social services system. This research did not involve social workers who engaged with Employee Assistance Programs (EAP). The decision not to include this group of social workers who seek services is because EAP support is typically related to employment and helping clients to improve productivity and

engagement, reduce employee absences, lower health, and drug and disability benefits costs and attract and retain employees.

Rather, I was interested in speaking with those who have engaged in the social services system, be it child welfare, violence against women, family court, mental health, addictions, as these systems often intersect and involve professionals from many areas. The likelihood of encountering a colleague or professional social worker in the course of treatment and then in employment is high and increases the complexity and sensitivity of the position of *professionally informed clients*.

Questionnaire

I started by carving out a questionnaire [see Appendix 2] which was posted on www.surveymonkey.com where social workers were invited to complete and submit it anonymously. The invitation to participate was send through the School of Social Work office at McMaster University to all current social work students, alumni and staff to gather a sample. I also forwarded the request to community agencies throughout Southern Ontario that employed social workers.

At the bottom of the questionnaires participants were invited to contact me if interested in participating in a personal interview regarding their experience as both a social worker and a client within the social services system. My interest was not what specific agency they accessed or why, but how their experience was shaped through the reactions, responses and support they received. The central purpose to this questionnaire was to inquire whether their critical path was typical of clients or if their status as a *professionally informed client* influenced their journey. The personal interviews that took

place delved deeper into the themes that began emerging from the online responses and shaped the interview questions for the second part of this study.

Interview Questions

My interview questions were sensitive and explored how the social workers engaged with these various systems and if they felt or experienced varied care due to the fact that they were *professionally informed clients*. I then explored how those situations were experienced or internalized for them. I wondered about their comfort disclosing this part of their lives to colleagues or classmates within the social services fields, and how these experiences informed their current practise. In using grounded theory, each interview was built upon the previous one so that the earlier interviews provided new questions for later interviews.

Ensuring Anonymity of Participants

Due to the sensitive nature of the information collected as well as the identity of the social workers who came forward, identities were immediately changed to pseudonyms remaining confidential and only relevant identifying information has been referred to in the writing. All parties were asked to choose a pseudonym for their documents and we also used it during the interview in the event that a quote or piece of information was relevant to pull out in the analysis and writing. Also, the names of the organizations or agencies where they received services have also been generalized (i.e. Child Welfare Agency instead of Children's Aid Society of Ottawa). My thesis Supervisor has not had access to the names of the participants nor to the raw data since the social work community is quite small and names travel across boundaries.

Transcripts and/or questionnaires have been kept locked in my home office and will be destroyed following the completion of my thesis.

Recruitment and Data Collection

Considering the number of agencies employing social workers in Southern Ontario and the potential number of participants, I chose to send my recruitment poster to 20 organizations who employ social workers with a MSW designation. Participants for this study were recruited via posters [see Appendix 1] which included the web link to the online anonymous questionnaire. These posters and accompanying Letter of Information: Questionnaire [see Appendix 3] were forwarded from the School of Social work to all students and alumni, posted at McMaster, emailed, and/or faxed to agencies in Southern Ontario requesting participants. The agencies only served as a conduit to forward the information, they were not involved in any monitoring and did not receive any information of who participated. Participants saw or received the recruitment email/ poster, and letter of information then went online to complete the anonymous questionnaire. At the end of the questionnaire they were invited to contact me if they were willing to be interviewed at which point they received the Letter of Information: Interview [see Appendix 4].

During the recruitment process the confidential nature of the data was explained to the participants. The letters stating the purpose of the research and consent form also indicated confidentiality and included information about the Duty to Report. At the start of each interview, confirmation of consent to participate or withdraw was verbally sought as well as the Duty to Report explained.

Eight personal interviews were conducted with voluntary participants between May and June 2010. Most interviews took place in a mutually agreed upon location which consisted of coffee shops, libraries, over the phone, and at a public park and one interview took place via email interaction.

Electronic communications and transcriptions of each interview completed have been password protected and only I have access to the confidential information. Digital audio recordings were deleted following transcription. While all identifying information has been removed from the transcripts, participants were invited to read their personal transcript to ensure that the stories they shared did not identify them. I advised participants that, while I did my best to avoid identifying information in the written portion of this research, some information about their stories or terminology about a specific encounter may need to be revised to allow for clarity and comprehension of the information while ensuring their anonymity.

Of the fifteen online participants, fourteen identified as female and one male; five identified as being between twenty and thirty years of age, five were between thirty and forty, three between forty and fifty, one between fifty and sixty, and one between sixty and seventy. I also asked for information regarding the length of time they have worked in the field of social work which resulted in five identifying as a Novice (0-5 years), five as Intermediate (5-10 years) and five as Advanced (10+ years). Information regarding ethnic backgrounds was not requested though some shared this information in their online responses or in personal interviews. However, in the interest of confidentiality, I have

chosen not to specify these traits in my writing as this information may identify the participants.

In terms of those who participated in personal interviews, of the eight participants, all identified as female; two identified as being between twenty and thirty years of age, four were between thirty and forty, one between forty and fifty, and one between sixty and seventy. I also asked for information regarding the length of time they have worked in the field of social work which resulted in three identifying as a Novice (0-5 years), three as Intermediate (5-10 years) and two as Advanced (10+ years).

The participants were not asked to provide information regarding their current occupation in the field of social work as the information this study was seeking was more related to their experiences as clients, not in their role as social work professional. Online data was gathered and coded during the one month window that the survey was active online. Following the closing of the online questionnaires, I printed the data from Survey Monkey and then coded the participant's responses. Then, following each interview I listened to the recording and took notes before proceeding with the next. This process allowed me to familiarize myself with each interview prior to the commencement of the one that followed. For both pools of data, coding was done using coloured pens and highlighters and making notations in the margins of paper copies of the questionnaire responses and interview transcriptions. Codes were derived from key words, phrases or themes in the transcriptions that I interpreted as noteworthy. These themes have been organized into the basic categories found in the Findings section of this study. I read and re-read each interview several times and sub-categories began to emerge.

In using this grounded theory, I listened to and combed through three of the interviews multiple times organizing comments into themes and sub-themes. I found this to be very interesting and insightful as participants also made recommendations on what to ask those that followed to gather a rich understanding of the complexities of being a *professionally informed client*.

Informed consent was completed in three ways. The recruitment posters clearly described the study; the questionnaires were anonymous; and the interviews, for those who were interested in participating, were confidential and accompanied a consent letter for the questionnaire [see Appendix 3]. Secondly, when a participant came forward to participate in the interview, a letter with the consent form outlining again what was being asked, including risks and benefits to participation was given [see Appendix 4]. Lastly, at the start of the interviews I asked, verbally, if they agreed to participate in the research and informed them of their option to withdraw at any time.

I chose to provide the interview questions to the participant in advance of their interview so they could read it over at their leisure and ask any questions. Being aware of the sensitivity of the situation, I requested verbal consent instead of asking the participant to sign any documents which might identify them beyond their pseudonym. The consent form is a statement of informed consent outlining basic details of the research and is a formal agreement to participate (Krueger & Neuman, 2006). My consent form confirmed their pseudonym and collected basic demographic information. This information was collected in the event that the data analyzed might benefit from considering experiences

that were related to gender, number of years in the social work sector or age of

participants.

Ethical Considerations

        This research was approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board at McMaster

University. There were some psychological risks that concerned me at the outset of this

research such as the participant having feelings of stress or upset at the memory of an

unpleasant event or experience. During the recruitment process I ensured that the

participants knew in advance the kind of information we would be discussing so they

could come prepared or make the decision to withdraw at any time. Participants were

also permitted to skip questions if they chose to. Lastly, contact information for local

Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) was discussed following the interviews to ensure

that they had support if they required it after our interviews.

        Working and receiving service within the social services sector may have

involved the participant and me as the researcher crossing paths professionally.

Disclosing that I had personal experience in this dual role was also risky as a professional

but was done to provide the participant with a sense of belonging and understanding.

Participants were informed of the confidential nature of the interviews and how the

information was coded, stored, and analyzed. I offered participants an opportunity to

read their own transcripts before I analyzed them to ensure their thoughts, phrases, and

comments were accurate.

        Participants were informed in the original recruitment posters that they were able

to withdraw at any time during the process. This was reiterated again in the written letter

and consent form, as well as before any interview began. Participants were informed that if they chose to withdraw, they would be asked if their data collected to date would be admissible in the study or if they'd like their data destroyed, in which case it would be shredded or deleted. In the section that follows, the words of social workers come to life as they describe their journeys through the social services system as *professionally informed clients.*

CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

"The help I ended up receiving was a result of who I knew in the system (Online participant #8)."

Through their questionnaire submissions and personal interviews, research participants shared details of their journey as social workers and *professionally informed clients* within the social services system. Their journeys were filled with ups and downs but in the end, they still have chosen to share their stories and unveil how their experience has informed their practise and now the social work community.

This section explores the participants' stories and comments gathered thematically to weave a rich tapestry. I will look at the decision to seek services as well as the experience of having services imposed upon them, how disclosure affected participants, the power dynamics in professional relationships, ways that social workers evened the playing field or 'stacked the deck', blurred boundaries and the feelings associated with being an insider and outsider will come next. Rounding off the chapter will be a discussion of how the participant's journeys have informed their practise and made them the social workers they are today.

Can I Not Heal Myself?

This section draws upon experiences from social workers who have either made the decision to seek social work services or have been required to see a social worker due to various issues. Making that difficult decision to access services is not one people often take lightly. Within our field there also seems to be a dishonouring if a social worker requires additional support. On one hand you need the support and it is available, yet you are wary of using it for fear of repercussions from colleagues and superiors.

> *"I know that I definitely delayed treatment and kind of tried to social work myself for a little while. But once I kind of realized I couldn't, and then accessing services was easy because I was a social worker and I already knew how it works (Eve)."*

Stigma is one word that echoed several times throughout the online questionnaires and personal interviews with participants.

> *"I didn't want the stigma of not being able to help myself. I was a social worker after all (Online Participant #7)."*

On one hand we want to be treated as a typical client and afforded all the empathy and kindness the system can offer us in our time of need. On the other hand, we feel somewhat entitled and anxious to have a part in the decision-making process. This illuminated another wondering about what judgements we must have of our clients if we experience being a client with such stigma. We want a different level of understanding which for some did not come easily.

> *"I received the same access/services as a typical client, though I requested different services/different individuals provide the service to me; than those that would see 'my clients.' This was not honoured. I further requested a different meeting location other than the agency's office due to my position in the community and this was again not honoured. I ceased using their services because of these factors (Online participant #9)."*

The quote above reflects a longing for special consideration and a worry about receiving service with clients. It reflects the complex concerns facing social workers when they are expected to be "experts" yet receive services as a typical client. There is a need to maintain professional boundaries but there is a need to also address the stigma that they attribute to themselves as clients and their own clients who seek help. There is a crossroad when you are a social worker and *professionally informed client*. It is that

moment when you realize you are not able to 'social work' yourself, you may see

yourself as different from your clients and that you do require additional support.

> *"If awkwardness is an emotion, then that is one that I felt! It was odd to*
> *know the kind of responses social workers might have to me as a client. I*
> *felt embarrassed as well – I suppose it's sort of like when a doctor gets sick*
> *and has to go to the hospital. Somehow, I expected to be able to 'treat'*
> *myself even though I know that it is not possible (Gordana)."*

A similar crossroad may arise when services are not optional and you realize you

are about to step onto the other side of the line. Knowing the system can work to your

benefit and can also pose its own challenges of being too familiar and knowing what

comes next. This is the position of insider/outsider.

> *"It's kind of like admitting defeat in a way. To be like, 'No, I can't do this*
> *on my own.' So it's a very humbling experience…and the thing with me is*
> *that I portrayed it for a long time, as like a weakness. But then I was*
> *thinking, 'That's so strange because I never view my clients as being*
> *weak.' I am always glad they are there and that is so weird that I would*
> *think it was a weakness in myself but strength as a client (Eve)."*

Confidence in any system is difficult at the best of times and when the issues

requiring support related to people as individuals or their families, emotions and concerns

are heightened. As social workers receiving social work services as clients, these

participants clearly illustrate how unclear these decisions are even in a system we work

within and ask our own clients to trust in. The water is further muddied when Social

workers are faced with disclosing their position – or not.

Disclosures – Rewards and Regrets

Through reflecting on the interviews and examining the transcripts, I found the

reports of varied intentions regarding disclosures and reactions to social workers

disclosing their position either to the professional social worker from whom they sought

services or to colleagues, superiors and classmates as a client receiving social work

services. Being vulnerable and sharing intimate information with a stranger (the social

worker) is an expectation we often have of our clients. When we are confronted with a

client who does not disclose information or is cynical and questioning, some may begin

using discourse about them such as 'closed, disconnected, difficult, unwilling or

concerning,' to name a few. However, when it is *you* disclosing information to a system

you know as an Insider, some may feel that one might have the upper hand.

> *"...I did think about [my disclosure] a lot after about how lucky I was to
> know how the system worked. If somebody didn't have the knowledge to
> keep going up with complaints, they wouldn't know to do that. I was able
> to kind of wrap things up quickly because of what I knew (Pat)."*

What was evident from the online questionnaires as well as in the personal

interviews was that people chose to disclose for very different reasons. For some it was

by mistake or was forced upon them to satisfy some sort of managerialist forms. Others,

as we read below, made very conscious decisions, acknowledged themselves as

professionally informed clients, and used their disclosure as an opportunity to further

their position in the journey.

> *"I had no intention of actually disclosing it. I went in and was adamant
> that I was not going to talk about my work or disclose that I was a social
> worker, and I actually disclosed it because I felt bad for my social worker.
> Because, like, she was doing, like, genograms of my life and I was just
> like...ok...let's cut all of that out to get to where I am at. So I did disclose
> mostly for her sake, but I'm glad I did (Eve)."*

From accelerating processes to being savvy and knowing the intricacies and

loopholes of our system, social workers repeatedly expressed discomfort in this dual role

of social worker and client and not being in control of the process or their destiny was

clearly a point of contention. Some participants were forced to disclose their profession

and others wrestled with being on the other side of the desk and longed to make a

connection.

> *"I did not intend to reveal that I was a social worker at all. I only did because I felt the Social worker was saying things I already knew (i.e. She was trying to "social work" me) and referring to theories and treatment options I was already familiar with. I felt as though I was being talked down to and suspected that if the Social worker knew I was a Social worker we could communicate as equals (Online participant #6)."*

Another theme that emerged in the data was that of power and using our

knowledge as social workers to make things lean to our advantage.

> *"I pushed at the hospital to see a social worker about the discharge planning and this was directly related to my education and knowledge. I thought 'Yes, I have a right to this…I am a family member here and I need to know what's being planned for my [relative].' I made that push deliberately and consciously and with full knowledge of what I was doing and why I was doing it and that's because I was a social work student (Christina)."*

Knowing when to advocate and when to stay silent, realizing our rights, and

looking out for ourselves in the process was described by many participants as an

ingrained response from our education and experiences as social workers.

The last theme to discuss is that of being a professional receiving service from

another professional. Knowing what comes next, the typical questions to be asked, and

traditional social work behaviour makes it difficult to focus on just being a client.

> *"I was comfortable initially, however also felt as if I was watching the encounter from the outside and found myself critiquing the social worker (Online participant #5)."*

> *"I got to see first hand, how a brand new worker treated her clients. From the first impression of her sloppy gum chewing, could care less attitude, to the token meeting to speak to a director to resolve the issue, I felt that*

treating people with respect was overlooked (Online participant #2)."

As social workers, we are expected to adopt a professional etiquette, some ethical principles and dominant discourses. Then, when we have the experience of being a client it creates a conflict on one hand as we desire a safe haven in a social worker's office (to be emotional, feel out-of-control, ask questions and receive support) and on the other hand, the ingrained expectation to relate to other professionals in a professional way is an interesting challenge.

Evening the Playing Field or Stacking the Deck

The ironies of appearing competent in the professional role while feeling overwhelmed in one's personal life and the need for support from professionals are elaborated on in this section. Lundy suggests, "Reducing the power between client and worker is integral to the helping relationship (2004, p.66)." Participants in this study experienced both sides of this dilemma as they shared their status as a professional and also a *professionally informed client*. In both cases, power was the central issue.

> *"From the get-go, I made sure the worker knew that I was a social worker because I know some people can come off very heavy handed and wield their power. I didn't feel that we had done anything wrong. I had nothing to hide (Pat)."*

If you are seeking services you feel somewhat in control but when services are imposed upon you, though one has knowledge in the field, the ride is still likened to a rollercoaster.

In a effort to remain somewhat in control in a system that often sees clients as powerless and at the mercy of the system, we see social workers who are *professionally informed clients* using professional jargon in their sessions, speeding through rapport

building to get to the point, or just demanding what they need in a system they have

knowledge as an insider.

> *"Being a social worker, I knew how to better navigate the system. That was a benefit for me and I knew all of my rights. I benefited more than an average client would (Nicole)."*

When you are engaged in the social services system; whether it be child welfare,

mental health, violence against women; or any other, each decision or comment can be

like a chess move. Knowing the system may provide advantages to *professionally*

informed clients in navigating their journey several steps at a time.

> *"The help I ended up receiving was a result of who I knew in the system (Online participant #4)."*

In discussing this research with colleagues a question struck me. I was asked if,

by disclosing that we are social workers, in fact, stacking the deck in our favour? By

doing so, do we then opt out of supports and services we are entitled to? For example:

> *"I think I received care differently. When the social worker from the [child welfare] agency called me a few days after the domestic assault report I told her I was a social worker. I said that I was very competent and had already changed my locks etc...I used much of the social work language she was used to hearing. Not to manipulate her or anything, it was just the way I related to her best...I think she closed the case right after my discussion with her on the phone that day. She pretty much took my work for granted. I never got another call from her. I am not sure if there are policies related to that decision she made (Ashley)."*

In an effort to salvage some feeling of power and control in this situation, Ashley

essentially disclosed her way out of receiving services. Rightly or wrongly, by stating

she was a social worker, it was perceived that she must be able to manage the situation on

her own and therefore the professional closed the case. Herein lays the dichotomy of

being an insider and outsider.

"I clearly remember being in the lobby of my building with a representative from the [court] who was representing my child. I was visibly upset and shaken after our interview. She said, "I am not able to say anything on the record, but, being a social worker, you can read between the lines..." I knew in that moment that I was more than just a mother standing there. I was expected to be so much more."

For my experience and these study participants, the journey as a client was buoyant in that at times they related to their social worker or were related to on a professional level and other times they were clearly a client. Their relationship wasn't static but a fluid exchange based on the topic at hand or the comfort level between the professional social worker and the participant.

Already it is clear that the positions the participants in this study encountered were not black and white. What furthers the issue is when professional and personal boundaries are blurred in the interactions with professionals or in the expectations and laws we, as social workers, are expected to uphold.

Blurred Boundaries

When is it acceptable for a social worker to break down and sob? When is it appropriate for policies to be ignored? When is it suitable to use deeply rooted professional language with a client? As we will read in the words of participants that follow, these questions and many others have blurred the boundaries participants held as *professionally informed clients* during their experiences. For many of us who come to this profession, our empathy, caring, and desire to help others transcends our everyday lives. It is part of who we are and difficult to just turn-off. As the participants describe below, it as a social worker, you can not ever be 'just a client.'

> *"I was involved in [a support group] with those who also experienced*
> *violence. A lot of the clients abused their children. This was very difficult*
> *as I had a duty to report – and did – yet this made group work difficult for*
> *me as they then saw me just as a social worker (Online participant #14)."*

In this case, being a social worker impacted the participant's level of service when she reported the abuse but in fact, Duty to Report is the responsibility of all adults in our society. There was a struggle between their professional responsibilities and personal desire for support and in the end, professional responsibilities won. Where then does this leave the rights of the participant to service?

With best intentions, participants were challenged to release their professional status or have their own social workers relate to them as clients requiring support. There were a high percentage of participants who felt that this dual role worked to their benefit and welcomed the even playing field.

> *"I feel that my time spent with the social worker was a bit different than*
> *other clients there (although this is difficult to say for sure because I was*
> *not privy to other people's conversations with [my social worker]). They*
> *were different in that [my social worker] and I both knew I was a social*
> *worker, and so we sometimes had conversations about the treatment*
> *options on the floor, and some of the decisions being made by the nurses*
> *and/or other medical staff that we didn't always agree with, in light of our*
> *social work training. As well, [my social worker] was about to undertake*
> *a personal experience that I had already gone through – and when she*
> *found this out, we began to have a great deal of conversation about my*
> *experiences. I gave her a great deal of advice about my experience, and so*
> *many of our conversations were more personal in nature (Gordana)."*

An interesting correlation for further study would investigate what benefits the professional social workers receive from having social workers as clients. From the statements above, the comfort level and boundary crossing are reciprocated but respect

for a fellow social worker in the social services system doesn't always come too freely and isn't always expected when we are expecting to be in the role of a client.

> *"[Other professionals] either tried to use my 'expertise' as a social worker against me saying I was using what I knew to frame a situation to benefit me in a system I was familiar with when I was really just telling my story (Ashley)."*

It is challenging to keep abreast of the right way to act in a situation. In this research, I attempted to offer a neutral environment for participants but struggled with not engaging with the emotions and feelings they presented with. The next section breaks that mould as participants describe their inner emotion and honest feelings of their journey.

Emotions and Feelings

Asking someone, "How do you feel about that?" is often perceived as a typical social work-type of question. In research, emotion is something that cannot be measured, counted, tested or graphed very well, or ignored. In talking about emotions and feelings, a study becomes rich and alive as participants share how it truly felt to be a client. Asking participants questions about emotion brought our connection to another level as they describe their experiences below.

A few clear themes emerged through the data analysis for this portion of the study. Participants describe feelings of embarrassment, shame, weakness and being incapable coupled with an unsaid experience of higher than normal expectations for their progress. In a profession that holds empathy and respect in the highest regard, as participants describe, this is not always true when the client is also a social worker.

"It seems like a weakness to need the services of a social worker when we are studying to work in that field. It's as if there is some kind of expectation that our lives should be perfect, that our families don't experience problems, and so on. So it would have seemed shameful and embarrassing to me to admit to my classmates that I had come into personal contact with social work services (Online participant #6)."

The participant's responses left me asking a number of questions. Could it be possible that how we think of ourselves as clients may parallel how we unconsciously think of our own clients?

"My initial feelings were embarrassment and shame. Which then got me thinking – what must it be like for people who don't know ANYTHING about the system to come for help if we, who are educated and at least 'know the system' and what to expect, have such a hard time. We should be aware of how difficult it is for people who don't have that knowledge to come to us as they do (Gordana)."

Do we hold our own colleagues to a different standard? Why should we be different?

"I think those in the social work field expected more from me – expected I progress more/quicker (Online participant #8)."

Are there perceptions in our profession to how a social worker is expected to be and not be? Are there perceptions about who clients are expected to be and not be?

"I never told anybody. My doctor needed to know. I remember wearing my social work sweatshirt...[The doctor] was just really rude to me...I wasn't really feeling well and I was really close to tears. He was like, 'oh and you're in the social work department' and it was the tone that he said it, like 'well you shouldn't be in social work'. I didn't say anything and he said 'well that's what your sweatshirt says.' I felt discriminated against because I got emotional and that I shouldn't be in the social work department (Nicole)."

It is challenging to break the expected mould of what a social worker should be and situate our experiences, feelings and emotions through the eyes of a *professionally*

informed client. Being impermeable to upset, heartache, trauma, and challenges is not in our job descriptions but it was clearly an unsaid expectation for these participants:

> *"...I felt somewhat ashamed... (Gordana)."*

> *"...I wouldn't feel comfortable going to a local agency because of confidentiality... (Jamie)."*

> *"...powerless... (Online participant #1)."*

If social workers were asked how they would describe their professional persona on an emotional level, many would be dismayed and would not know how to answer. The participants in this study were able to describe beautifully if they were an emotionally different worker because of their experiences as clients. How they then informed their practise is what we discuss in the final section of this chapter.

Informing our Practise

The making of a good social worker is not as elementary as a dash of compassion and a pinch of empathy. We cannot be cut from the same cookie cutter or expected to march to the same drum just because we use the name social worker. What shape us are our experiences, learning, observances, interactions, triumphs and defeats. It is in these moments when we have the opportunity to inform our practise with the new knowledge and understanding we have been provided. As the participants in this study eloquently articulate, their experiences as *professionally informed clients* within the social services system was profound and impacted their lives in many ways.

Participants who experienced a situational affinity to one particular group of consumers experienced highs and lows during their journey. What they were left with was a deep understanding of the roles we all play no matter what our profession may be.

"Although I always considered myself someone who tried to understand the client experience, being a 'mental patient' is an experience that will always stick with me. I will never forget the sense of powerlessness and the sense of defeat that I experienced. I will also never forget the kindness and sensitivity that I was treated with by [my social worker]. I was surprised at how difficult I found it to be a mental health patient – I had always considered myself fairly advanced in my thinking about how to understand mental health difficulties. However, now having experienced it myself, I have even more respect for folks who struggle with mental health on an ongoing basis. I hope that my experience will help inform my work, and make me a better social worker in the years to come (Gordana)."

Informing our practise also means to look inward at the ways we have practised previously. Dissecting our role as social workers and realizing the unspoken power we have in our interactions with clients is beneficial in moving forward with a new understanding.

"I am more aware of the power imbalance and make an active effort to reduce it. I am now aware of how condescending social workers can inadvertently be and how that made me feel when I was receiving treatment – I strive to relate to clients in a more respectful and constructive way. I am now more aware of how it feels to reveal incredibly private information to someone you know nothing about. As a result, I empathize more with clients now – how uncomfortable the helping process can be (Online participant #5)."

Participants had the opportunity to take both positive and negative traits from their experiences and incorporate them into their own practise or ensure that they are not part of their dealings with clients.

"I questioned everything that she did. I was very sceptical and very critical. She incorporated a lot of holistic stuff and I always wondered what her motive was or what she was trying to teach me. I also found myself thinking, 'I could do that.' I would take brochures away with me and think that I could do that with a client (Jael)."

"Part of my disappointment in the social workers I've dealt with in those situations was that I looked to them with such hope and high expectations that they could give me something to hang on to…I felt like I didn't even

get thrown a life buoy, I was drowning in difficulty. If the social worker at the hospital...understood how much power she had, a simple comment would have given me something to hang on to. She didn't see that. Or if she did, she didn't grasp it. That's her profession, to give somebody hope (Christina)."

When asked about what changed on an emotional level after their experiences as clients, participants' resounding response was that this affected them profoundly.

"I don't make assumptions... (Nicole)."

"I am not emotionally the same worker. I am far more compassionate (Gordana)."

"I have a much deeper connection than I did before (Ashley)."

"...it has taken the pressure off me to be perfect... and just lets me relax and be human (Eve)."

After reading of the insight and new knowledge these social workers have, one might wonder how to bottle that new energy or imprint it into a book we can read and learn from.

Suggestions

As a community of social workers there is much to be done to support the education of new workers and those continuing their education at a higher level. If there is not a venue to discuss the complexity of social workers as clients then social workers will continue feeling that they don't fit or don't belong in the field if they encounter some personal trials along their journey. The participants in this study had some clear recommendations for how they would have wanted to be supported and how we can pay forward our learning.

"...it's a good place to insert a discussion about the fact that sometimes you may need to ask for services or there may be a situation where social

*services are thrust upon you. It would be one way to open the doors and
discuss how to handle something like that (Jael). "*

*"I would incorporate more client training. By that I mean, having actual
clients come in to speak to social workers. Clients who have experienced a
number of different systems, and have had both good AND bad
experiences. I would also challenge students to think about situations
where they have been clients of some kind of system, and to apply that
knowledge to their own experiences as much as possible (Gordana)."*

What was evident from the participants' accounts is that the decision to seek

services is not effortless regardless if you have prior knowledge in the field or are

engaging with a system for the first time. Issues arose such as individual barriers

(attitudes/actions of social workers), systemic barriers (laws and policies, social and

cultural attitudes), and institutional barriers (ambiguous and inconsistent policies,

flexibility in treatment options for professionals). In the chapter that follows, I discuss in

more depth the how ethics and emotion can both be woven in to social work research, the

role of a social worker in such research, and take a look at reflexivity. Recommendations

and future implications for social work education and future research will be shared

including how we can give a voice to *professionally informed client*s.

CHAPTER SIX: DISCUSSION

"As social workers, our instrument is our brain and personality and that is all impacted by all of these kinds of experiences (Christina)."

The unique stories of participants in the previous section serve to inform our knowledge and understanding of being a client in the social services system as well as insight into our social work community and its supports. The participants had common themes and vastly different interpretations leaving us with questions about how we situate and construe our experiences within dual roles. As social workers we receive training and are encouraged to be in touch with our emotions and use self-disclosure in our practise to move the therapeutic relationship with a client along. Yet as a *professionally informed client*, there is often a disconnect between what we have be taught to do as social workers, what we expect our own clients to do, and what we choose to do when it is us who sits vulnerable to the workings of the system.

In the section that follows I will explore concepts of ethics versus emotion in the dealings and lived experiences of social workers. The journey of having this study approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board will be discussed and how recommendations made early in the process created a neutral series of questions for participants rather than open-ended emotive questions. How this impacted participants and what decisions were made to alter the study will be explained. I will then look at the role of social workers in research and how our desire to change from neutral interviewer to empathic listener was a struggle throughout this study. A natural progression will be to look at reflexivity and how, as an insider, I attempted to be an outsider in the research, and the implications that had in the data. Then, recommendations for practise and policy

will be discussed including opportunities for future research. I will also include how our

social work community and educational institutions can incorporate the experiences of

social workers as *professionally informed clients* and weave support, knowledge-

building, and different ways of knowing into the dominant discourse of our learning.

Lastly, the chapter will conclude with researcher's reflections including trials and

tribulations of researching a community that isn't accustomed to look at themselves as

'others' in the room, but as professionals. What follows are just some of the many

developments within the numerous intricacies of the data.

Ethics vs. Emotions

When I began this research project, one point was relayed to me regarding the

McMaster Research Ethics Board approving my Ethics Application. A representative

from the Ethics committee that I met with to discuss my initial application made strong

suggestions regarding ethics and emotions in research. The research questions I had laid

out were typical of a social worker interviewing participants. They elicited information

and respected the participant's experiences and the emotion within their stories. I was

advised to remove any questions such as, 'how did you feel', or 'tell me about your

emotions' in order for Ethics to approve it. I left our meeting feeling a sense of

frustration but understood the committees concern just the same. When discussing

emotion with participants, it has the possibility of growing into an emotional situation

that may not be able to be contained by the researcher. Also, eliciting emotion regarding

personal trauma, upset, or difficult experiences may also revictimize the participant

without intending to do harm. The fact that it was a social worker researching the

personal experiences of social workers also was of concern since our community is so small and often transcends boundaries of the specific agencies we work within. Therefore, heightened sensitivity to confidentiality and anonymity was further heightened to ensure participants were comfortable. In actual fact, as a social worker conducting research, it was more ethical to be present and respond to participants' emotion rather than not to engage in a conversation about it. Especially in the case of this research that was focused on the emotions related to their journey as a client, not on the emotions felt before they sought or received service.

What is a researcher to do when their vision of the research is required to be altered and neutralized to be accepted? In respecting the sensitivity of the research and concerns of the Ethics Committee, I made changes to some phrases that may have elicited emotional responses and a straightforward, clear and concise application was written. However, discussing situations that elicited emotion and then not addressing that emotion was like ignoring an elephant in the room. This research with *professionally informed clients* needed to incorporate emotion to fully and respectfully relay the stories of the participants. It was after my first interview when I played the recording back that I felt I may have failed to respect the participant because I did not respond to the emotion that was clearly emerging behind her response. At this point I searched out supplementary material on ethics and emotion (Maturana, 1988).

The starting point for considering the implications of emotions and ethics in research is that the ethical component of conduct is pervasive. In this view, all our behaviour in consensual domains has an ethical dimension because it changes the lives of

those with whom we interact. Thus, we are immersed in ethics: A human behaviour that affects the lives of other human beings is ethical conduct. All our behaviours within the consensual domains that we establish with other human beings are, therefore, behaviours with ethical significance.

However, we only have ethical concerns when we perceive a breakdown in Human respect. Ethics, therefore, have to do with our emotions, not just with our rationality. No doubt we use reason to justify our ethical concerns, and we speak as if there were values that validate our arguments against what we consider unethical behaviour. "What determines whether we see a given behaviour as unethical, and that we act accordingly, is an emotion - not reason (Maturana, 1988 in Bilson, 2007, p.1376)."

So what place does emotion then have in research? Wright (2005) sums up the centrality of emotion in our entire doings saying "I am drawn to conclude that we encounter the world in emotion: emotionally. Our communication ripples with it. The subtle nuances of contentment are no less emotional than the alienating terror of rage. To deny that constancy is to fail to acknowledge the richness of that through which we encounter, or in Maturana and Varela's terms, 'bring forth', our world" (quoted in Bilson, 2007, p.1380).

During my initial interviews my Interview Guide was static and unemotional. However, following each interview I asked the participants if there was anything that should have been asked or added to the study. What I found was that most often their recommendations related to bringing in the feelings and emotions of *professionally informed clients.* I remained ethical by only probing for emotional reactions to

participant described experiences, not exploring the emotional state and reactions to their specific reason for seeing a social worker. Additional questions were then incorporated into the Interview Guide that elicited a deeper connection to the topic and emailed these same questions to the initial participants who responded via email reminding them that they need not answer all of the questions if they were uncomfortable doing so.

Using grounded theory allowed me to analyze and modify the questions posed to participants in this study as required. In eliciting information regarding the participants emotions and feelings through their journey has not only made the information richer, I believe the audience broadens when we can connect with an issue on an emotional level, not just professionals sifting through jargon. My role as a researcher and social worker also required some shifting refocusing during this study, which follows.

Role of a Social Worker in Research

Nodding knowingly, eye contact, open stance, empathic tone and a warm presence are all tools that we, as social workers, apply to encourage our clients to feel comfortable (Schubert, 1971). Researchers, on the other hand, are usually experienced as neutral blank slates collecting data and not connecting personally with their subjects. Where then does social work intersect with research?

Throughout the interviews and even reading the online questionnaires, my senses were alive and my empathy was in action. I found it challenging to sit stiffly in my chair asking questions and recording responses. The lived experiences of the participants were emotional, at times eliciting visible emotion. At other times the conversations were quite matter-of-fact. My nature as a giving, caring person was wrestling with the right way to

conduct research. What I found was that as a social worker, it was difficult not to reassure participants, to ask probing questions on various topics, or to help solve their problems. That was not my role however.

This experience has not been unlike when social workers seek services as a client, in that moment they are conflicted between being a client feeling emotional, scared, angry, and looking to the social work professional for support and guidance and being a social worker who knows what is coming next, who is not able to drop their guard, and feels the need to keep composed. Keeping those components of ourselves compartmentalized is challenging and often one seeps into the other. I found myself feeling that if I remained rigid, I would not only be failing to respect the vulnerability of the participants, but I would be missing an opportunity for true understanding through empathetically listening and hearing them. Reflecting back and forth on my multi-layered position in this study has brought me a great deal of satisfaction and peace. Where once I was frustrated, I have found a revitalized energy for recognizing the gaps in our community and the literature and have moved that frustration into excitement for future implications.

Throughout this study I have been challenged to critically reflect on my position as researcher, social work student, social worker and *professionally informed client*. Where once I felt alone, I now have heard the voices of many professionals in the field of social work who also felt they had no voice. Instead of 'those clients' we have taken a stand to inform the literature that 'we' are here in classrooms, treatment centres, groups, courtrooms, hospitals, and community agencies. The participants in this study have

clearly illustrated the complexities of being a social worker and client and put forth the call for change and an increase in understanding for this dual role. Considering the researcher in the research was an integral piece of this study as I carefully balanced the perceived power in the research enterprise against my sincere desire to draw out the experiences and recommendations of the participants.

Recommendations from participants in this study follow in the next section as they discuss the lack of support they felt in their experience both in literature and in their educational/employment settings. I then consider how social work education can better support *professionally informed clients* and implications for further research.

Recommendations

Thus study was initiated after I spent years searching for myself in the literature and listening for myself in our MSW lectures. As social workers we hear about self-care and burnout but it has not been considered to date if the reason social workers are leaving the field is due to their own troubles and trying to pilot their personal journey while also being responsible for their professional journey.

> *"I'd say there is a definite absence of that type of literature. But I think it is an extremely important area, because the more people you talk to, the more you realize that this is common. It is very common for social workers to have social workers at some point or another. So I think it is a definite gap in the information. And I would have loved if before I sought treatment if I could have gone online and looked for literature ...I think it's common but there is not a lot of information out there which is one of the reasons I agreed to do this (Eve)."*

This participant clearly highlights the need for further examination of this topic and how to best support our social workers through more literature on the matter and more education for social workers.

Implications for Education and Training

The findings and literature surrounding the issue of social workers experiences as clients provides guidance for enhancing our understanding of this complex position. In addition, other resources may exist that may be helpful in identifying important components for educational activities such as self-care workshops, disclosure training, and forums related to brainstorming emerging trends in our communities for policy makers and professionals.

In an educational institution such as McMaster, educational workshops through the School of Social Work may include a component that allows the individual participant to analyze personal beliefs and values related to who our clients are. Programs may focus on the communication aspects of providing empathic social work service to *professionally informed clients* by exploring how assumptions and stereotypes influence interactions between social work professionals and clients as well as between social work professionals in workplace settings. On a similar note, discussions about who clients are perceived to be and that we are all potential clients could be helpful as we address our own judgements and stigmas.

Indeed, training in the provision of social work services with clients who are also social workers may include teaching skills that are applicable to many professional groups such as physicians, as well as those that are targeted at providing care to a specific clientele such as child welfare. Because individuals are influenced by their own personal experiences and may or may not subscribe to group assumed norms, individuals who share the same biases or judgements related to social workers requiring social work

service may think and act quite differently. For this reason, it is important that programs

intended to address the complex journey of *professionally informed clients* not perpetuate

stereotypes or stigma.

In particular, varying levels of social work literacy may present considerable

barriers to providing service to all clients. Strategies to overcome these barriers to

eliminating disparities in the services social workers are able to receive and comfortable

receiving are complex and could be costly. However, the education of social workers has

the potential to improve the provision of social work services at the source. At the

undergraduate and graduate levels of social work, for example, institutions and programs

could be encouraged to set an example by supporting and challenging our professions

misconceptions about who our clients are and offer opportunities for open dialogue about

the impact of being a social worker and client at the same time. It is recognized that such

a suggestion, although popular in some venues, is also problematic as it may open

dialogue into student's past and present situations which may require a strong facilitator

to manage what results. Another educational endeavour that merits institutional and

program support is teaching students and faculty how to use to their best advantage the

resources in the community of clients with exceptional knowledge and information about

various systems just from journeying through them. At a minimum, social work curricula

should include educational components that invite an array of clients to share their

experiences in our system, including *professionally informed clients*.

Education and training to enhance the provision of support to social workers must

be integrated into lifelong learning for social work professionals and other social service

professionals and include didactic and experiential components. Toolboxes provide a concrete curriculum with defined objectives for learning and application in clinical work and other professional activities. The Ontario Association for Social Workers and Social Service Workers could also develop a section on their website devoted to the provision of services to *professionally informed clients* that provides a variety of educational resources, policy, and data on this issue. Using such modalities, current and future social workers and other helping professionals can become better prepared to meet the needs of clients who also identify as social workers or professionals from within the field they are receiving service.

Implications for Future Research

In my original review of the data and responses from participants, and in the Literature Review, I presented some recommendations for education and training for our social work colleagues and students studying in the field. While this study represents a good beginning, it is my hope that it is only a springboard for further dialog and research about social workers experiences as clients. As with any new topic or finding, there is much room for further debate and investigation.

When considering *professionally informed clients*, additional opportunities to discuss if their position as a professional in the field exempted them from services would be one area of interest. Some queries for future research may include an investigation into the discourse surrounding social workers requiring social work services in the workplace and how that impacts and influences social workers decisions to disclose their position or if it impacts their decision to seek service. Another area for further study may

look at how social workers who provide service to *professionally informed clients* experience their journey and understand the dual role their client holds. A third query could look at differentiating between the journey of a voluntary client and involuntary client and how the two might impact perceived stigma in the community. Each of these, any many more, fall out of this initial look at social workers as clients in the social services system.

The term *professionally informed client* may also be considered in various disciplines as it transcends professional boundaries and affects anyone who has prior knowledge or experience about the discipline or system from which they are seeking services. Though these recommendations have been made and highlighted as an important factor in the social work discourse, in the end we can only do what we can to impact and affect change in our work settings and in our professional practise.

Future researchers on this topic should be wary of difficulties in recruiting participants for their studies. I was fortunate to have access to the social work students, alumni and faculty at McMaster who were invited to participate in this initial research. If researchers did not have access to such a large pool of potential participants, it may be challenging to entice people in the community to come forward. This topic is new to the realm of professional practise and professionals who come forward also risk being identified as a client. From our learning in this study, taking that step is filled with trepidation, stigma, and conflict. The responses from participants in this research study have answered many questions about this dual-role yet many questions remain unanswered.

Limitations of the Study

This study was designed to be as inclusive and barrier-free as possible. However, one could not be so naive to think that barriers didn't exist. The fact that the study was made available to students, alumni and faculty from a reputable educational institution cut off the opportunity for dialogue with other *professionally informed clients* who were not connected to McMaster. With best of intentions, the two mediums for participation were laid out so encourage anonymous participation. In hindsight, what that anonymity did was create a neutral starting point for participants, an assumed common blank slate. It may have been valuable to consider other factors that may contribute to their journey such as individuals who identify as disabled, racialized, and others that may further alienate participants from participating. In my early comments I discuss the reasoning behind why this factor was not included in the study, and that is because my desire was to highlight the complexity of the position of *professionally informed client* as an entity in itself. I thought this would provide participants a feeling of solidarity and unite them in knowing that there were others out there who could also relate to their challenges regardless of which sector they came from, level of education they had, or from which backgrounds they identified.

However, the findings of this study should not be viewed as an end in themselves, but rather as the starting point for further discussion and learning. The very notion of social workers requiring the services of social workers needs time to be discussed, challenged and understood.

Researcher's Reflections

Looking back to the beginning of this research I was anxious to open this discourse yet hesitant to identify myself in the process. My concern that participants would not be drawn to speak of their experience weighed heavily as I embarked on this journey. What I found through informal discussions about my research topic, was that there were social workers in the community who also felt strongly about their experiences as *professionally informed clients* but hadn't had a forum to discuss it. Their insight and recommendations were helpful and shaped the questions asked. This research has posed questions to our profession about how it is we encourage our own clients to seek out service and to be comfortable with the process; yet when the tables are turned and it is a social worker who requires services, stigmas and judgements abound and the support they receive as a client has provided a medium for empathy and education for professional social workers everywhere.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

*"I always say that I do the best I can in the job that I have so I can lay my head
on my pillow at night and know that I did my best (Pat)."*

This study explored the conflicted position of social workers as *professionally*
informed clients as they untangled their positions within the social services system. In
broadening our understanding of how this dual role unravels I looked at how they have
chosen to situate themselves in the discourse, engaged with various systems and then
journeyed back into the professional realm. Expectations and typical ways of practising
were examined as social workers told their stories of being on the other side of the desk
and their own judgements about who clients are and how they are perceived began to
emerge.

In the end, it will be our profession's choice how to respond to social workers
who are also clients. The suggestions related to social work education, training, and
research may help to move practise. As a *professionally informed client* myself, I choose
to continue to carry the torch and do what I can to inform our community and my
colleagues of this complex position. I found this legend from the Middle East about a
spindly little sparrow lying on his back in the middle of the road. A horseman comes by,
dismounts and asks the sparrow what he's doing lying upside down like that.

"I heard the heavens are going to fall today," said the sparrow.

"Oh," said the horseman, "and I suppose your spindly little legs can hold up the
heavens?"

"One does what one can," said the sparrow. "One does what one can."

Those of us engaged in the field of social work must sometimes appear to be like this little sparrow, wishfully thinking that somehow we are going to be able to stem the tide of human need. And the horseman of our day come riding by and point out how our spindly efforts will never keep the weight of the population from eventually crushing the life out of all of us. Yet most of us would empathetically echo the little sparrow…one does what one can. The challenge we face today is to consider and accept that *professionally informed clients* are throughout our social work community though we don't always feel comfortable identifying ourselves.

My desire is that this study becomes the first of many to explore the position of social workers as *professionally informed clients* and how we choose to situate our experiences and inform our practise as we continue on the path of social work.

"The road of life twists and turns and no two directions are ever the same.
Yet, our lessons come from the journey, not the destination
(Don Williams Jr.)."

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APPENDICIES

McMaster
University

Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS AS CLIENTS
WITHIN THE SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

Are you a Social Worker or Social Work student who has also identified as a Client?

If you have answered 'Yes', please consider participating in my MSW Thesis research.

Format: As a research participant, you will complete an anonymous online questionnaire about your experiences as a Social Worker who has also accessed Social Work services within the social services sector. Questions will not focus on the reasons you accessed services, but rather your experience navigating through the system as a Social Worker. At the end of the questionnaire you will be invited to attend a confidential interview to discuss some of the challenges this dual-role may have posed and how the experience of being both a Social Worker and Client *at the same time* has informed your practise.

Withdrawal: Participants are able to withdraw from the process at any time during the study without question.

Who: Social Workers/ Social Work students who have accessed Social Work services as a Client in the social services system; not EAP; at the same time.

What: Anonymous online questionnaire and/or confidential interview regarding your experience as a Client within the social services system.

When: Questionnaires are on Survey Monkey at **www.surveymonkey.com/s/5WJ9QYR**
Interviews will occur between April and May 2010, based on participant's schedule.

Where: A mutually agreed upon neutral location.

Why: To complete my Master's of Social Work, a Thesis is to be submitted to McMaster University.

Notes: If you decide to participant in an interview, you will be asked to choose a pseudonym upon signing up to participate. Identities will remain confidential from Thesis Supervisor to ensure privacy. You will be able to read your transcripts before the data is used.

If you have any questions about this study or you would like to participate, please contact:

Amy Obendorfer-Woods, MSW candidate
Phone: (289) 337-6240
Email: woodsac@univmail.cis.mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Amy Christine Obendorfer

School of Social Work
McMaster University

Survey posted on SurveyMonkey.com
http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/5WJ9QYR

1. Thank you for participating in this questionnaire

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT TO QUESTIONNAIRE

A Study of Social Workers Experiences as Clients

Investigators:

Principal Investigator: Name: Amy Obendorfer-Woods, MSW candidate
Department of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 289-337-6240
E-mail: woodsac@univmail.cis.mcmaster.ca

Co-Investigator(s):   Faculty Supervisor: Professor Sheila Sammon
1280 Main St. W.
Hamilton, ON L8S 4M4
(905) 525-9140 ext.23780
Email: sammon@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

There are times during a person's adult life that one may require the services of a Social Worker. The journey through the social services system is often arduous and tedious for Clients trying to navigate their way. This experience gets complicated when it is a Social Worker who requires Social Work services. There is little written about the dual role of being a Social Worker and Client at the same time. My research explores the experiences of Social Workers who also engaged in Social Work services as Clients within the social services system; not EAP; at the same time.

What will happen during the study?

This portion of the study is an anonymous online questionnaire. You will be asked to answer 10 questions about your experiences as a Social Worker who received Social Work services as a Client at the same time.

Following the questionnaire, you will be invited to participate in a confidential interview. It is not mandatory to participate in the interview portion of the study and it is your choice.

Questions about the Study?

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me.

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:
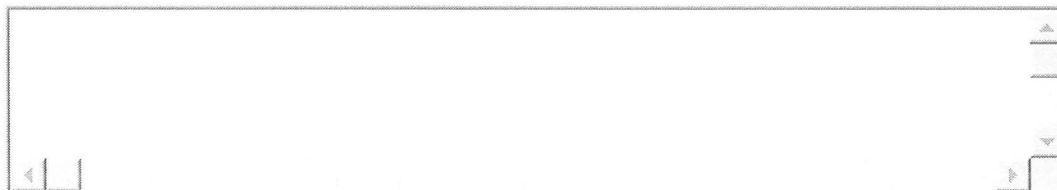
McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142
c/o Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

2. Questionnaire

1. Within which sectors did you receive Social Work services as a Client?

☐ **Child Welfare**

☐ **Violence Against Women**

☐ **Office of the Children's Lawyer**

☐ **Children's Mental Health**

☐ **Addictions**

☐ **Other**

Other (please specify):

[text box]

2. How comfortable were you disclosing that you were a Social Worker?

Extremely Uncomfortable	○
Uncomfortable	○
Neutral	○
Comfortable	○
Very Comfortable	○

Please comment:

[text box]

3. Was your treatment, care, or opportunities varied because you are a Social Worker? For example, did you receive access to the same services, supports, and programs that typical Clients would access? If so, how?

[text box]

4. Were there any policies that you feel were overlooked because of your status as a Social Worker (i.e. Duty to Report)?

[text box]

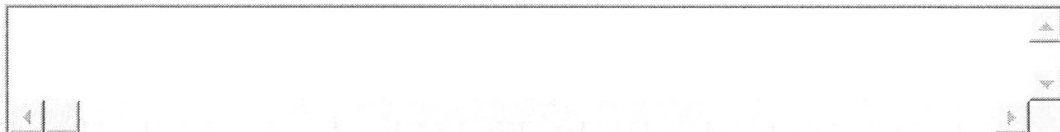**5. Do you find that disclosing your profession as a Social Worker:**

	Definitely Not	No	Not sure	Yes	Absolutely
Worked to your advantage	☐ Definitely Not	☐ No	☐ Not sure	☐ Yes	☐ Absolutely
Worked against you	☐ Definitely Not	☐ No	☐ Not sure	☐ Yes	☐ Absolutely
Affected the level of support you received	☐ Definitely Not	☐ No	☐ Not sure	☐ Yes	☐ Absolutely
Informed your navigation through the system	☐ Definitely Not	☐ No	☐ Not sure	☐ Yes	☐ Absolutely

Please Comment:

[text box]

6. How comfortable were you to disclose your dual-role as Social Worker and Client to your colleagues/classmates?

☐ Not comfortable with anyone knowing

☐ Not comfortable with most people knowing

☐ Doesn't matter to me who knows

☐ Comfortable with only a few people knowing

☐ Very comfortable to share this with colleagues

Please comment:

7. How comfortable were you to disclose this dual-role of Social Worker and Client to your superior (i.e. Manager, Professor, Director, etc.)?

☐ Not comfortable with anyone knowing

☐ Not comfortable with most people knowing

☐ Doesn't matter to me who knows

☐ Comfortable with only a few people knowing

☐ Very comfortable to share this with my superiors

Please comment:

8. Please describe any comments from the other social services professionals that stuck with you during your journey in the social services system.

9. Did your experience as Social Worker and Client inform or change the way you do practise now?

☐ Not at all

☐ No

☐ Haven't thought about it

☐ Yes

☐ Definitely

Please Comment:

[text box]

10. Demographic Information

	Gender	Age	Experience in Social Work field
Female	☐	☐	☐
Male	☐	☐	☐
Other	☐	☐	☐
20-30 years of age	☐	☐	☐
30-40 years of age	☐	☐	☐
40-50 years of age	☐	☐	☐
50-60 years of age	☐	☐	☐
60-70 years of age	☐	☐	☐
Novice (0-5yrs)	☐	☐	☐
Intermediate (5-10yrs)	☐	☐	☐
Advanced (10+yrs)	☐	☐	☐

Is there anything else you would like to share?

3. Request for Interview

Thank you for completing the Questionnaire.

At this time I'd like to invite you to participate in a brief interview to discuss more in depth your experience in being a Social Worker and Client at the same time. My interest is not what specific agencies you accessed or why, but how your experience was shaped through the reactions, responses and support you received.

If you think you may be interested, please get in touch with me. I would be happy to send you a copy of the interview guide and Letter of Information for you to consider as you decide.

4. Contact Information

If you would like to participate in a brief personal interview, please contact me:

Amy Obendorfer-Woods, MSW candidate

Phone: 289-337-6240

Email: woodsac@univmail.cis.mcmaster.ca

Thank you again for your time and consideration in participating in this Questionnaire and/or Interview.

Amy Christine Obendorfer

School of Social Work
McMaster University

<DATE: >

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT FOR QUESTIONNAIRE

A Study of Social Workers Experiences as Clients

Investigators:

Principal Investigator: Name: Amy Obendorfer-Woods, MSW candidate
Department of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 289-337-6240
E-mail: woodsac@univmail.cis.mcmaster.ca

Co-Investigator(s):   Faculty Supervisor: Professor Sheila Sammon
1280 Main St. W.
Hamilton, ON L8S 4M4
(905) 525-9140 ext.23780
Email: sammon@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

There are times during a person's adult life that one may require the services of a Social Worker. The journey through the social services system is often arduous and tedious for Clients trying to navigate their way. This experience gets complicated when it is a Social Worker who requires Social Work services. There is little written about the dual role of being a Social Worker and Client at the same time. My research explores the experiences of Social Workers who also engaged in Social Work services as Clients within the social services system at the same time.

What will happen during the study?

This portion of the study is an anonymous online questionnaire. You are asked to answer 10 questions about your experiences as a Social Worker who received Social Work services as a Client at the same time.

Following the questionnaire, you will be invited to participate in a confidential interview. It is not mandatory to participate in the interview portion of the study and it is your choice.

If you decide to participate in the interview portion of the study, you will be agreeing to participate in an interview that will take place at a mutually agreed upon neutral location and that will last no than one hour.

I will be asking you questions such as:

- As a Social Worker, how did you find the experience of accessing services as a Client?
- At which point in your journey as a Client did you disclose that you are a Social Worker?
- Do you feel that your treatment, care, or opportunities varied because you are a Social Worker?
- Tell me about your experience disclosing that you are a Social Worker?
- Did you find your position worked to your benefit? If so, how?
- Did you find your position worked against you? If so, how?
- Were there any policies that you feel were overlooked because of your status as a Social Worker?
- Tell me about any comments from the other social services professionals that stuck with you during the process.
- How comfortable were you to disclose your dual-role as Social Worker and consumer to colleagues?
- Would you say that your experience informed your current practise? If so, how?

I will also be asking you for some basic demographic information such as your gender, age range, experience in the field. I would like to tape our interview session and have them transcribed so I am able to focus on our conversation and questions rather than taking notes, but this will be done only with your permission. You will have the opportunity to read the transcript before any data is analyzed.

Are there any risks to doing study?

The risks involved in participating in this study are minimal. You may feel anxious about speaking on these sensitive issues or experience feelings of stress or upset at the memory of an unpleasant event or experience. You may also worry about how others may react to what you say. You do not need to answer questions that you do not want to answer or that make you feel uncomfortable. You will be able to review your transcript before any data is used/analyzed to make changes or clarify points if required to ensure your thoughts, phrases, and comments were accurate. You can withdraw at any time. I describe below the steps I am taking to protect your privacy.

Are there any benefits to doing this study?

The research will not benefit you directly, however, I hope to enhance society's knowledge about how Social Workers engage and experience services within their own social services system. It would provide educational institutions distinct commentary and recommendations for how to better support those in our profession who are put in a position to ask for help or seek resources within our own community. Each interview

participant will receive a travel coffee mug and a $20 gift certificate to a local coffee company.

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

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified; you will be referred to by a pseudonym only. 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 deidentified data.

All raw data connected with this study will be stored in a locked drawer of my office when not in use. Only I have the access key to this storage drawer. The computer that I will be writing my thesis on is my personal laptop which is password protected. Once the study has been completed, the data will be deleted. Any paper documentation will be shredded.

Legally Required Disclosure

Although I will protect your privacy as outlined above, if the law requires it, I will have to reveal certain personal information (i.e. child abuse) as required by the Duty to Report. Please be aware of this before disclosing such information during the course of our interview(s).

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

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can decide to withdraw, at any time. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions 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 August, 2010. If you would like a brief summary of the results sent to you personally, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me.

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 Office of Research Services
> E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Amy Christine Obendorfer

School of Social Work
McMaster University

<DATE: >

LETTER OF INFORMATION / CONSENT FOR INTERVIEW

A Study of Social Workers Experiences as Clients

Investigators:

Principal Investigator:	Name: Amy Obendorfer-Woods, MSW candidate Department of Social Work McMaster University Hamilton, Ontario, Canada (905) 289-337-6240 E-mail: woodsac@univmail.cis.mcmaster.ca
Co-Investigator(s):	Faculty Supervisor: Professor Sheila Sammon 1280 Main St. W. Hamilton, ON L8S 4M4 (905) 525-9140 ext.23780 Email: sammon@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study

There are times during a person's adult life that one may require the services of a Social Worker. The journey through the social services system is often arduous and tedious for Clients trying to navigate their way. This experience gets complicated when it is a Social Worker who requires Social Work services. There is little written about the dual role of being a Social Worker and Client at the same time. My research explores the experiences of Social Workers who also engaged in Social Work services as Clients within the social services system at the same time.

What will happen during the study?

This portion of the study is a confidential interview. If you decide to participate in this portion of the study, you will be agreeing to participate in an interview that will take place at a mutually agreed upon neutral location and that will last no than one hour.

I will be asking you questions such as:

- How did you come to require services as a Client?
- How was your treatment, care, or opportunities varied because you are a Social Worker?
- Tell me about your experience disclosing that you are a Social Worker?

- How did you find your position worked to your benefit?
- How did you find your position worked against you?
- Were there any policies or procedures that you feel were overlooked because of your status as a Social Worker (i.e. Duty to Report)?
- Tell me about any comments from other Social Work professionals that stuck with you during the process.
- How comfortable were you to disclose your dual-role as Social Worker and consumer to colleagues?

I will also be asking you for some basic demographic information such as your gender, age range, experience in the field. I would like to tape our interview session and have them transcribed so I am able to focus on our conversation and questions rather than taking notes, but this will be done only with your permission. You will have the opportunity to read the transcript before any data is analyzed.

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

Every effort will be made to protect your confidentiality and privacy. I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified; you will be referred to by a pseudonym only. 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.

All raw data connected with this study will be stored in a locked drawer of my office when not in use. Only I have the access key to this storage drawer. The computer that I will be writing my thesis on is my personal laptop which is password protected. Once the study has been completed, the data will be deleted. Any paper documentation will be shredded.

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Although I will protect your privacy as outlined above, if the law requires it, I will have to reveal certain personal information (i.e. child abuse) as required by the Duty to Report. Please be aware of this before disclosing such information during the course of our interview(s).

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

Your participation in this study is voluntary and you can decide to withdraw, at any time. If you decide to withdraw, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise. If you do not want to answer some of the questions 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 August, 2010. If you would like a brief summary of the results sent to you personally, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me.

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 Office of Research Services
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Amy Obendorfer-Woods, of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested. I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time. I have been given a copy of this form. I agree to participate in the study.

Consent will be obtained verbally at the start of each interview.

Pseudonym of Participant (Printed): _____

1. I agree that the interview can be audio recorded. ☐ YES ☐ NO

2. ☐ 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.

3. I agree to be contacted to read my transcript, and understand that I can always decline.

☐ YES – How to contact me _____

☐ NO

Demographic Information:

Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male

Age Range: ☐ 20-30 ☐ 30-40 ☐ 40-50 ☐ 50-60 ☐ 60-70

Experience: ☐ Novice   ☐ Intermediate   ☐ Advanced
                 (0-5 yrs)   (5-10 yrs)   (10+ yrs)

Interview Guide
'Social Workers Experiences as Clients'

Questions

- How did you come to require services as a client?
  - Tell me a little about your comfort level in accessing services.
  - How did you feel when you were deciding to access services?
  - How did you feel when you had services imposed upon you?
  - Were you required to access services within your home community?
  - Did you have a choice as to where you access services?

- Tell me about your experience and feelings/emotions when disclosing that you are a social worker.
  - What motivated you to disclose this information?
  - At what point in your services did you disclose? Why?
  - How did you perceive the response/reaction of the social worker counselling you when you disclosed?
  - Did anything change in your interactions?

- Do you feel that your treatment, care, or opportunities varied because you are a social worker?
  - Were the treatment options that were presented to you the same as typical clients?
  - Did you experience any barriers to treatment? If so, what?
  - Were you able to skip processes or steps because of being a social worker?

- How did you find the typical processes and procedures that clients experience when they see a social worker?
  - Were there any policies that you feel were overlooked because of your status as a social sorker?
  - Did your critical path proceed typically or were you provided with additional support, less support?
  - Did you feel your role as a social worker was blurred at all during your treatment as a client (i.e. Duty to Report)?
  - How did you emotionally find the experience of being a client within the system?

- Did you find your position worked to your benefit? If so, how?
  - Did anything shift after you disclosed (i.e. language, demeanour, etc.)?
  - Were there opportunities made available to you following your disclosure that may not have been otherwise? Was anything taken away/removed?

- Did you find your position worked against you? If so, how?
  - If you had the opportunity to require social work services in the future, do you feel you would disclose your position as a social worker again? Why? Why not?

- How comfortable were you to disclose your dual-role as social worker and client to colleagues/classmates/ your superiors?
  - How did you feel during this process?
  - How are professionals who require the support of social work services perceived in your circles?
  - Were there any consequences professionally to disclosing this information to your colleagues/classmates/superiors?
  - What do you feel the main concerns are about disclosing this dual-role to colleagues/classmates/ superiors?
  - If you had the opportunity to require social work services in the future, do you feel you would disclose this to colleagues/classmates/superiors (again)?
  - Why? Why not?

- Tell me about any comments from the other social services professionals that stuck with you during the process.
  - Tell me about any comments from any outside professionals regarding your dual-role of social worker and client that stuck with you during the process that affected you. Did anything stick with you in an emotional way?
  - Did anything stick with you regarding your response to certain processes, procedures or comments along your journey? How did you experi4ence that process in terms of your own emotions?
  - Were you surprised by any thoughts you had or feelings you experienced?

- Would you say that your experience informed your current practise? If so, how?
  - Were you left with any biases, judgements, encouraging thoughts that you will carry forward?
  - If you had the opportunity to say anything anonymously to your social worker now regarding your experience with them, with no repercussions or tensions, what would you say?
  - How do you feel this dual-role of social worker and client is supported in the literature or lectures we receive during our social work education?
  - Would you make any changes to the way social workers are trained or educated after your experience as a client?
  - Overall, what are some of the main emotions or feelings you associate with being a social worker and client at the same time?
  - Is there anything else you would like to share?
  - Is there anything I should have asked?
  - How did the interview feel for you?

Amy Christine Obendorfer   School of Social Work
                                                  McMaster University

<DATE:>

FOLLOW UP LETTER

Dear,

I am writing to thank you for your important contributions as a participant for my
research project called ***Social Workers Experiences as Clients within the Social Services
System***. Your time is valuable and I am extremely grateful for your willingness to share
your knowledge, experience and personal story. The data I was able to collect from our
meeting has been incredibly helpful to me and will provide information that is both rick
and deep for analysis. I have enclosed a copy of the 'Findings' section for you to keep
which includes some of the transcribed comments from your interview. Please feel free
to offer feedback, questions or concerns by calling me at 289-259-5716 or email:
woodsac@univmail.cis.mcmaster.ca

It is my hope that the outcome of this project will serve to expand the understanding of
how this dual role plays out and how social workers who are *professionally informed
clients* have chosen to situate themselves in the discourse. I am hopeful that this research
will enhance society's knowledge about how social workers engage and experience
services within the social services system. It will also provide the scholarly community
distinct commentary and recommendations for how to better support those in our
profession who are put in a position to ask for help or seek resources within our own
community.

Social workers like you are an inspiration and it makes the challenges we face as social
service providers a bit easier knowing that there are professionally informed clients as
skilled and thoughtful as you who are in the struggle with us. It was my pleasure to listen
and dialogue with you. Thank you and best wishes in your future endeavours.

Sincerely,

Amy Obendorfer-Woods
M.S.W. Candidate
McMaster University School of Social Work