CLIENT COMPLAINTS IN CHILD WELFARE: LESSONS LEARNED

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By

Julie Horning, B.S.W.

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AUTHOR: Julie Horning, B.S.W.

            (McMaster University)

SUPERVISOR: Sheila Sammon

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ABSTRACT

In 2006, the Ontario government introduced and implemented a provincial client complaints policy through changes to the Child and Family Services Act. The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of complaints managers in Children's Aid Societies under this new policy. Data was collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews with six complaints managers from Southern Ontario. Analysis of the data revealed that the client complaint mechanism is procedurally driven and contradicts the spirit of Child Welfare Transformation, compelling child welfare staff to spend significant time complying with rules and regulations with there being less emphasis on outcomes. The public presentation of the complaint process and the resulting practices contribute to service recipients having false expectations of what can be accomplished. As well, the power differentials that already exist in the relationship between service users and professionals are exacerbated. Although the mechanism appears to have been designed with the intent of holding Children's Aid Societies accountable for their actions and decisions, it is not linked with other accountability mechanisms and does not include a process for provincial review. The process was implemented in a climate where Children's Aid Societies face persistent negativity and it is not surprising that child welfare staff unconsciously shield themselves through defensive responses. Service recipients have a right to raise concerns. Power imbalances must be challenged to ensure inclusive practices are developed and that demonstrate satisfactory outcomes are desired and achievable. The value of truly 'hearing' complaints is that we open ourselves to the possibility of improving practice and being more inclusive of client voices.

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INTRODUCTION

Child welfare in Ontario predominantly engages with people at the margins of society who live with the daily experience of multi dimensional and intersecting oppressions. Child welfare takes for granted the way inequalities of privilege and power exist and are perpetuated through work that is structured to treat everyone the same regardless of their social location or position in Society. This is problematic as it assigns individual blame for structural, relational and societal problems. This is often at the root of client complaints particularly as child welfare work in the past decade has been influenced by a focus on deficits in a climate of risk management.

The foundation of social inequality and resulting oppressions rests on structures of unacknowledged differences upon which privilege and power rely. This includes differences rooted in race, ethnicity, culture, sexual orientation, gender, ability and class. A focus on privilege and power and resulting intersecting oppressions is necessary to transform child welfare practice toward a focus on client engagement, client strengths and collaboration. Social work's inability to acknowledge and address the relational and structural aspects of the power differential inherent in dynamics of difference and privilege contributes to oppressive practices, particularly those in child welfare.

We must recognize that child welfare workers acquire a great deal of knowledge from their experience that aids in identifying and defining problems that contributes to the protection of children involved in the child welfare system. However we must find a way to balance this professional knowledge with a family's knowledge of their personal needs and strengths. Child welfare workers must no longer consider themselves to be the 'expert' when it comes to problem definition or developing solutions. We must reach beyond our western social work education to absorb, acknowledge and integrate ideas from others who hold different worldviews. With this approach, we must authentically hear the voices of marginalized clients as we shift our gaze from them to ourselves and our relationship with them. Formal complaint mechanisms are important as a means of addressing and accepting responsibility for client dissatisfaction and offer the opportunity to begin this exploration.

POLICY BACKGROUND

The Ministry of Children and Youth Services (MCYS) was established in 2003 offering the Ontario government the opportunity to demonstrate dedication and commitment to children and youth. Once developed and after research and consultation, the MCYS developed "a strategic plan for a flexible, sustainable and outcome oriented service delivery model" (Child Welfare Secretariat, 2005) for children, youth and their families. Part of this strategic plan included development of a policy framework called the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda.

In addition to expanding intervention options connected to service delivery, Transformation included "a rationalized and streamlined accountability framework" (MCYS, 2005, p. 7) which included policy changes related to review and monitoring mechanisms. The accountability framework was built upon the notion that "government and governance structures and process will focus on ends, not means". (MCYS, 2005, p.8) with attention to results that will guide service delivery.

Bill 210, an act to amend the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA), was developed to create laws that would support the necessary changes to service delivery. Legislative amendments were made to Section 68 of the CFSA which is the section regarding client complaints. Following proclamation on November 30, 2006 the subsequent Regulations were implemented to direct and guide changes in practice. Complaint procedures were established within Regulation 494/06 (CFSA, s68, 2006), the Regulation also gave rise to the rights of clients to bring concerns to the Child and Family Services Review Board (CFSRB).

The legislation provides three distinct, yet potentially overlapping paths a client may take if they wish to file a complaint. They may undertake an *informal* process by expressing their concerns to someone at the Children's Aid Society from which they are receiving service. This informal process often begins with the client speaking with the worker and subsequently contacting the relevant supervisor or service manager. Through this process, attempts to rectify the concern often include meeting with the client in an effort to better understand his/her concerns. The focus in this process is to gather information to better understand the concern and determine what action or steps may be required to resolve the concerns. This often involves a meeting between the client, worker and the supervisor.

Another path of resolution a client may pursue is the *internal* process which is precipitated by the client submitting his/her concerns to the Children's Aid Society in writing. The focus in this process is to hold an Internal Complaint Review Panel allowing the client the opportunity to have his/her concerns heard by panel members who are not connected to the client's file.

The final option for filing a complaint is for a client to complete and submit a complaint form to the Child and Family Services Review Board (CFSRB), which is the legislated third-party reviewer. In addition to providing process details including: who can apply and how to do it; what to expect during the process; the Boards' decision making powers; and the timeframes in which the process will occur, the CFSRB website says this about their function:

> "The Board is an adjudicative tribunal that conducts reviews and
> Hearings on a number of matters affecting children and families in
> Ontario. The Board operates under the jurisdiction of several pieces
> of legislation including the *Child and Family Services Act.*"
> (http://www.cfsrb.ca/en/cfsrb/about)

Upon receipt of a complaint form, the CFSRB contacts the client and the relevant Children's Aid Society to initiate proceedings and all three parties collaborate in an effort to seek resolution. The focus of this process is formal information gathering. Sharing and communication occurs through correspondence, teleconferences and in person hearings.

Consultation Prior to Implementation

In my experience, changes to child welfare legislation and policy are usually precipitated by recognition that there are problems or difficulties in the system which require assessment and revision. Given the fact that child welfare interventions are mandated by the state, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services, those in the field and other relevant stakeholders generally collaborate to evaluate system difficulties and new policy development often follows.   This is true of the most recent revisions to the Child and Family Services Act and client complaints were one component of those revisions. Prior to the amendments, client complaints were first addressed by the local agency and there was then opportunity for a review at the Ministry.   Recognition of the deficits with the former process led to a consultation process with significant stakeholders. Additionally, given the often complex and contested nature of child welfare policy and intervention, other regulatory organizations put forth their position on policy matters in public arenas.

Three relevant sources provided evidence of discussion and consultation in the field prior to implementation including: the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS), the Ontario Ombudsman and the Auditor General of Ontario.

OACAS

In 2004, The Ministry of Children and Youth Services published a paper entitled, "Accountability Discussion Paper: Finding the Right Balance". (MCYS, 2004) This discussion paper explored a regulatory framework to create the right balance of accountability between the Ministry and child welfare agencies. In November 2004, following field consultation, the OACAS published a combined response to this paper on behalf of member agencies titled "Achieving a better balance". (OACAS, 2004) It stated "One of the key objectives of Bill 210 is to allow for the more timely and effective resolution of client complaints". (OACAS, 2004, p.23) It provides this description of the complaint process at the time;

> "The *Child and Family Services Act* currently requires each Society to have a written complaint mechanism which includes the opportunity to review the complaint with the Society's Board of Directors. If the matter is not resolved by the Society's Board of Directors the complainant may request a ministry Director's review of the complaint. The ministry Director may make recommendations but does not have the authority to overturn or rescind the Society's decisions." (OACAS, 2004, p.23)

This document outlined concerns with this policy which included: lack of consistency across the province; lack of minimum requirements of the process; confusion about who can make a complaint, what kinds of decisions can be reviewed, and concern about what the review could accomplish. (OACAS, 2004, p.23) While recommendations were made to address each of these concerns, there was a suggestion that there would be less need for a client complaint process if feedback from clients became part of the Quality Assurance process. (OACAS, 2004, p.7)

In February 2005, the OACAS released a position paper entitled, "Proposed Child and Family Services Act Amendments" where it was stated:

> "The Board of Directors has not proven to be an effective complaints resolution step, given the reluctance of board members to overturn decisions made by social work staff and the Society's Executive Director. The Ministry Director has also proven to be an ineffective complaints resolution step, given the lack of statutory authority to overturn or rescind decisions made by a Society." (OACAS, 2005, p. 44)

Given these concerns, recommendations were made for amendments to Section 68 of the CFSA including: changing the name to the client complaint resolution procedure; eliminating review by a Board of Directors and Ministry Director; identification of specific criteria to initiate a complaint; and criteria to limit who can complain and the nature of what constitutes a complaint. (OACAS, 2005, p.45)

Auditor General of Ontario

The Auditor General (AG) of Ontario states it functions as an audit office for Ontario's Legislative Assembly conducting independent 'value-for-money' and 'compliance' audits of government programs. The Auditor General claims that through such audits they "contribute to better-managed government programs and better accountability to the Legislature and the public". (http://www.auditor.on.ca)

The 2006 Annual Report of the Auditor General included a review of the four largest Children's Aid Societies in Ontario. Their review was conducted prior to proclamation and reflected the legislation at the time. While many of the findings were related to fiscal responsibility, the report included information regarding client complaints. Their findings revealed there was no system in place to track complaints.

> "In addition, the Ministry does not request detailed complaint information from the Societies. As a result, the Ministry cannot perform any analysis on complaints received by Societies."
> (Auditor General, 2006, p.55)

The Auditor General expressed concern that the review revealed that on average only 5% of all complaints made it to the Executive Director or Board of Directors for review. They made the following recommendation:

> "To help identify areas of concern regarding service delivery and compliance with ministry policies, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services should require that Children's Aid Societies: maintain information on complaints; and annually report the number and types of complaints and how they were resolved."
> (Auditor General, 2006, p.55)

In a follow up report released on January 29, 2008, the Auditor General stated that the MCYS, with proclamation of Bill 210, had followed their recommendations. While the Auditor General appears to take credit for recommending these changes, it fails to highlight the fact that these changes were part of legislated amendments that were proclaimed five days prior to the release of the report.

Ontario Ombudsman

The Ombudsman's authority to oversee the delivery of public services is established by the Ombudsman Act. The Ombudsman does not have oversight authority of Children's Aid Societies, although it first identified a desire to do so in the mid 1980's. The Ombudsman website identifies oversight of Children's Aid Societies as a "hot topic":

> "Ontario has fallen behind in oversight of non-governmental organizations providing critical public services referred to as the "MUSH" sector - municipalities, universities, school boards, hospitals, nursing homes and long-term care facilities, police, and children's aid societies. The Ombudsman of Ontario's authority with respect to this sector is the most limited in Canada. (http://www.ombudsman.on.ca/en/hot-topics/push-for-mush.aspx)

The Ombudsman has oversight of child welfare services in eight Canadian provinces. This oversight has not been instituted in Ontario which may be due to the fact that child welfare services are provided by "non-government agents" in Ontario. (Ombudsman, 2008, p.14) While the Ombudsman clearly wants authority to oversee child welfare services, in the Annual Report of 2003-04, the Ombudsman, Clare Lewis, highlights the effectiveness of internal complaints procedures.

> "When an organization deals effectively internally with complaints, it serves to enhance its credibility and reputation. Having an effective internal complaints process, enables an organization to reflect upon and assess its operations and their effects. Effective internal complaints mechanisms can lead to service improvements and prevent future complaints." (Ombudsman, 2004, p.8)

The 2005-06 fiscal year brought renewed interest on the part of the Ombudsman's office, to be "the independent watchdog of all government action"; specifically stating oversight mandate should include Children's Aid Societies. (Ombudsman, 2006, p.7) To emphasize the significant role his office could play, the current Ombudsman, Andre Marin states,

> "Without the Ombudsman oversight, they make do with law suits, in-house complaint processes, part-time boards without powers or expertise in evidence gathering, and inquests and commissions that come along after things have tragically failed." (Ombudsman, 2008, p.15)

Annual Reports for the past few years include vague statistical information citing the number of complaints and enquiries received about child welfare services, for which the Ombudsman has no authority or oversight. While the types of complaints and enquiries are not specified, the report indicates the majority are regarding children in the care of Children's Aid Societies, matters unrelated to this research.

Fiscal Year	Complaints/Enquiries
2005-06	436 (Ombudsman, 2006, p18)
2006-07	600 (Ombudsman, 2007, p19)
2007-08	431 (Ombudsman, 2008, p12)

While this information is being published in annual reports along side pleas of public and media support to give the Ombudsman oversight, it does not provide the full context of the nature of the concerns being brought forward, where they get redirected and how they are ultimately resolved.

The Ombudsman's comments on legislated changes make two significant points about the limitations of the new process including the fact that the CFSRB has no authority to carry out independent third-party investigations into actions of Children's Aid Societies and it does not deal with systemic problems. (Ombudsman, 2008, p.18)

"To compound this situation, instead of being empowered to tackle significant issues regarding child welfare protection policies and practices, the board's authority is largely focused on procedural defects relating to the administration of CASs. Substantive complaints regarding the services sought or received from children's aid societies remain subject only to internal review. The promise of a system of external, transparent, and accountable oversight of the complaints process was never kept." (Ombudsman, 2008, p.13)

It is interesting to note the Ombudsman's office has jurisdiction to consider complaints about the Child and Family Services Review Board, however that role is limited to investigations of the conduct of the board. (Ombudsman, 2008, p.18)

LITERATURE REVIEW

While I was able to locate documentation related to policy development and implementation, the topic of client complaints in child welfare is not well conceptualized in the literature. Related to client complaints, I reviewed child welfare literature regarding parental views of intervention, worker skill, errors in decision making and the importance of organizational culture. The focus of my review of the literature specific to complaints took me to other sectors including medicine, nursing, community, social and public health services. Many researchers indicate their findings are transferable across public and social service sectors.

Child Welfare: Organizational and Systems Context

It is commonly recognized in the literature that when a complaint is registered about service received, blame for the dissatisfaction is often ascribed to the individual who provided the service. In child welfare, this can lead to an examination of worker action or inaction, behaviour and attitude all of which are ultimately reflected to some degree in the worker-client relationship. My experience has been that complaints are individualized and structural and system issues are rarely reviewed as part of the process.

Eileen Munro is recognized for her work examining systems errors within child welfare. Her research explores the nature of errors that are made by individuals within the context of structural and systems issues. Munro has found that many common errors in child welfare are avoidable even in circumstances where workers are making swift, complex risk decisions on the bases of very limited knowledge. (Munro, 1996) She indicates that all assessments should be considered tentative and open to review. She suggests that workers are slow to modify their judgments and this strongly influences case management decisions and client satisfaction. (Munro, 1996) Rather than a focus on worker error, there is recognition that child welfare practice occurs within organizations where the standards of good practice are neither realistic nor achievable. She takes into account both the statutory and organizational culture:

> "They need to work in a culture that recognizes that good practitioners make mistakes, that new facts or ideas make them review and often revise their judgments, and that acknowledging such errors is a sign of strength not weakness." (Munro, 1996, p.794)

Researchers suggest that senior management needs to create appropriate conditions in the work environment to support workers. This includes acknowledging that errors occur and encouraging workers to open themselves to scrutiny so that service delivery can be improved. (Munro, 1996; Yip, 2006; Rzepnicki & Johnson, 2005) This

is particularly difficult to achieve in an environment of intense public scrutiny and accountability. The literature recognizes that while most child welfare workers want to engage and partner with families, there is still a preoccupation with risk management. (Spratt & Callahan; Dumbrill 2006; Stalker & Mandell, 2007; Baker, 2007; Holland & Scourfield, 2004) While client engagement is presented as the concern of individual workers, ultimately their ability to effectively engage families is influenced by organizational and systemic influences over which workers have little control.

> "The author contended that social workers cannot be expected to implement policies which promote child welfare perspectives without recognition, at the governmental and organization levels, of the inherent contradictions in the state's relationship with the family, which, while subjugated at policy level, are unavoidably expressed at practice level." (Spratt & Callan, 2004, p.209)

Child welfare service delivery is shaped by the political and social climate. (Dumbrill, 2006; Munro, 2005) It is organized in a highly bureaucratic manner where each level of accountability is influenced from above; the government imposes on organizations and their senior managers; senior management imposes on the front line and the entire process has a direct impact on service delivery and constrains and limits the success of worker-client relationships. A system focused approach for improving child welfare services, one which removes the focus from worker actions and recognizes the limits of their autonomy has been recommended. (Munro, 2005) System improvements should be geared towards determining if workers have the required knowledge, skills and resources to support them while at the same time determining if the organization sets realistic, consistent and achievable goals.

Client Feedback

There is a great deal of research demonstrating deficiencies in child welfare service delivery practices. While client complaints do not form part of this literature, obtaining client feedback is a well documented step in determining what changes are needed. It has been proposed that client feedback in child welfare can have at least three direct benefits: service delivery improvement, knowledge building, and empowerment. (Baker, 2007) This research also found that few agencies and government entities systematically collect client feedback data. Lack of attention and effort in this regard may represent the significant power imbalances inherent in the entrenched culture of child welfare staff as 'expert' professionals. The environment is not one that welcomes input or feedback from clients whose identity may be narrowly defined in relation to the nature of their actions and behaviours that precipitated child welfare intervention.

Through an exploratory study of the viability of asking parents to evaluate services they had received, Dumbrill and Maiter (2004) found that parents candidly discussed their experiences and offered practical suggestions for more effective service

delivery. "Listen to Parents More", "Allow Parents Choice and Participation", and "Keep Parents Informed" are the three concluding recommendations of their study. (Dumbrill & Maiter, 2004, p.19) While these seem to be simple, common sense concepts, the system following child welfare reform in 1998 reduced the capacity of front line workers to take the necessary time for such straight forward communication.

Dumbrill's (2006) research into parents' perceptions of child welfare intervention has revealed that parents' perceptions of the power being used *with* or *over* them directly influences their view of the intervention and contributes to their reaction to it. Within the Transformation agenda, efforts are underway through training and organizational initiatives to improve client engagement practices, focus on client strengths and develop collaborative partnerships with parents. The tensions inherent in practice that must balance family preservation and risk management and resulting power imbalances may preclude the possibility of developing equitable partnerships. (Dumbrill 2006; Holland & Scourfield, 2004; Trotter, 2002) Regularly seeking client feedback regarding service provision may begin to build a bridge to mitigate the effects of these tensions.

Worker-Client Relationship

In child welfare, a worker's presentation and approach can be a significant factor when clients choose to file a complaint. The necessity of a good worker-client relationship in the procedurally driven, bureaucratic field of child welfare is highlighted in much of the research. de Boer & Cody (2007) suggest "a good helping relationship is commonly characterized by mutual respect, acceptance, trust, warmth, liking, understanding and collaboration". While there are worker and client influenced factors that contribute to the relationship, there is consensus that there are many structural and organizational obstacles to the development of good working relationships including: workload, recording, unpredictable emergencies and most significant, the power imbalance that privileges workers and leaves client vulnerable (Dumbrill, 2006; Munro 2005; de Boer & Cody, 2007; Baker, 2007; Trotter, 2002; Coyle, 1999; Kapp & Vela, 2004).

de Boer and Cody (2007) provide an excellent description of the particular skills and attributes of workers that support the development of good working relationships. Amongst these skills and attributes are workers being mindful of their power and actively sharing their power through conveyance of trust and collaboration in a supportive manner. This can be achieved through the worker being open to hearing the family's perspective. Workers who demonstrate empathy and recognition of the impact of their intervention on the family while clearly communicating the reasons for involvement are more apt to develop a good working relationship. Also, workers who approach families honestly and directly and who demonstrate no prejudgment on the basis of historical occurrences tend to have more successful working relationships. (de Boer & Cody, 2007)

Research on complaints

Much of the complaint research in the literature has occurred in the field of health and community services. (Wood, 1996; Allsop & Mulcahy, 1998; Beardwood et al, 1999; Coyle, 1999; Javetz & Stern, 1996; Mulcahy & Lloyd-Bostock, 1994; Mulcahy & Tritter, 1998; Preston-Shoot, 2001; Sbaraini & Carpenter, 1996) Many of the findings relate to bureaucratic processes and human nature, both on the part of the complainant and those charged with responsibility for resolving them. It seems the bureaucratic nature of most health and community service organizations hold similarities to the bureaucracy of child welfare and as such, the variety of approaches explored and their findings could also apply to complaints in child welfare.

Whereas this research was aimed at exploring the experiences of complaint managers it became evident through my review of the literature that barriers to complaints are an integral component of reviewing complaints procedures. Wood (1996) suggests that rather than focusing on whether or not existing mechanisms are effective, the focus should be on the barriers that prevent people from coming forward with their concerns. The literature suggests that low self esteem and confidence in those who already feel powerless, hopeless and dissatisfied with their own lives can lead to reluctance to challenge agency practices and decision making. Also, researchers have found that feelings of fear, vulnerability, shame and pride can have the effect of preventing some from filing a complaint. (Preston-Shoot, 2001; Mulcahy & Tritter, 1998; Aronson, 2006; Preston-Shoot, 2001) Often those who did complain were generally dissatisfied with the outcome of the process. It was also found that having to file a complaint with an employee of the same organization about which they are complaining intensifies an already unequal power relationship. (Preston-Shoot, 2001)

There is agreement in the literature that an effective formal complaint procedure must be accessible to everyone, well publicized and easy to use, and specify that people should not be required to put their concern in writing. (Seneviratne & Cracknell, 1988; Wood, 1996) A complaint mechanism which requires people to tackle a bureaucratic hierarchy "assumes a certain amount of knowledge about the bureaucracies and relies upon a high degree of motivation to pursue the complaint". (Seneviratne & Cracknell, 1988, p.184)

Impact of Restructuring

Complaints are often characterized as a problem between individuals, often premised on the notion that the professional made errors or did something wrong. Literature related to the restructuring of the welfare state demonstrates the impact of managerialist techniques on professional autonomy focusing on diminished skill and subsequent transfer of power to the public through disciplinary practices. (Beardwood, Walters, Eyles & French, 1999) The end result is that complaints become individualized;

thereby distorting the role of the government in the restructuring that altered professional practices in the first place.

Managerialism is discussed in the literature:

"Managerialism refers to the development of the interests of management, as opposed to any other function or position in the organization. This development stresses the role, power and accountability of individual managers and accentuates their position as managers rather than as administrators, officers or senior professionals." (Lawler, 2000, p. 33)

Flowing from this definition of managerialism, Lawler (2000) indicates that a new framework of power has been created resulting in tension between front line staff and those who manage them. The tension develops from lack of autonomy and deskilling of front line professionals as a result of more managerial control. This was highly evident in child protection in the years following child welfare reform in 1998 and continues to be a challenge today. (Dumbrill, 2006)

Managerialism is rooted in the implementation of business management practices into public sector services to increase efficiency and subsequently create cost savings. Managerialism has influenced the development of rules and procedures which become imbedded in the structure of organizations and promote greater regulation through policy and procedures, resulting in resistance to change. (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992) The funding framework, risk assessment tools and case load benchmarks are examples of the influence of managerialism in child welfare services. Such practices have led to an emphasis on the skills and knowledge of mangers to control through hierarchical relationships. The values and technologies of managerialism become invisible and lead to a separation of funding bodies and service providers. (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992) Subsequently, accountability rests with the individual organization which is viewed independent from the funding body.

Managerialism places confidence in management techniques to resolve the problems of the organization and managers come to share a common awareness of their responsibility for the well being of the organization. (Lawler, 2000) Managerialism justifies the bureaucratic nature of child welfare organizations through attempts to maximize consistency and minimize arbitrary decision making. Consistency is equated with fairness or social justice and is then confidently presented as such.

The combination of these factors within a risk management environment contributes to conditions where workers find it difficult to appropriately engage clients to develop effective working relationships. (Aronson & Sammon, 2000)

An example of the impact of various business strategies on service to child welfare clients is the implementation of a funding framework. Through this framework

standardized work tools, benchmarks for workload volume and time frames for length of service provided were developed. (Dumbrill, 2006; Aronson & Sammon, 2000) Heavier workloads and the need to work more quickly resulted in workers not being able to take the necessary time to engage with their families (Aronson & Sammon, 2000) and files closing files too quickly often causing the need for files to be reopened. The impact on the client is that they are constantly exposed to different workers, they often have to defend previous or numerous openings, they never get the full quality service that should be provided as there is a tendency upon opening to focus on the presenting problem or immediate crisis and this leaves little time to explore other issues and spend quality time with families to affect change. (Aronson & Sammon, 2000)

> "The impact of fiscal crisis and, more specifically, cost-containment policies has seeped into every part of the social service structure. Work practices, agency structure, client expectations, and perhaps most fundamentally, *definitions of services* have been altered." (Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992)

Role of Complaints Managers

The literature poses the question of whether or not an internal complaints manager can be anything but oppositional to the complainant. (Mulcahy & Lloyd-Bostock,1994; Mulcahy, 2001) The literature describes the inevitable tensions of this role, the complaints manager is trying to promote the interests of the organization while also attempting to be fair with the complainant. The tensions are generated through managing dual roles of gatekeeper and dispute handler.

> "They [complaints] form part of the drive towards accountability but may prove an inadequate counterbalance to organizational power because they represent one aspect of a public sector orientation to consumerism. This emphasizes responsiveness and redress rather than rights or a more fundamental reconfiguration of relationships between service users and providers." (Preston-Shoot, 2001, p. 702)

Wood (1996) argues that complaints managers needs to ensure that the outcome of a complaint process reflects what has taken place, not the relative power of those involved. Senior managers need to take responsibility for creating a culture where complaints function as intended.

> "In services and professional bodies where many complaints are made, but few are upheld, there is a real possibility that this reflects the fact that the service, individual worker or professional body has relatively more power in relation to the complaint process than does the individual service user." (Wood, 1996, p.33)

The literature points to the difficult balancing act a complaints manager must cope with regarding the use of individual, organizational and system power during the complaint resolution process. This is complicated by the fact that complaints managers tend to hold a reasonably high status within the organization which affords them the clout necessary to rectify matters. (Xanthos, 2007) The conflict in the role of complaints manager comes with the intrinsic nature of their organizational status, the same status that appropriately positions them to manage complaints. The complaints manager must strive to resolve complaints without imposing this power on the complainant through the process.

Mulcahy (2001) takes the perspective that state sanctioned dispute resolution processes have as a central tenet, that those charged with resolving them must be neutral. She argues that neutrality is unobtainable and that it can "serve to reinforce the status quo". (Mulcahy, 2001, p.523) She further argues that processes that strive for neutrality, and yet do not achieve it, undermine the credibility of the process. This represents further contradiction in the role of the child welfare complaints manager who must balance the needs of each party, effectively utilize their status within the organization without overpowering the service user and uphold the value of neutrality throughout the process. It would seem this could contribute to the stress and anxiety of those in the role of complaints manager and would not lend itself to making it a desirable position.

Organizational Culture

The concept of a "just culture" is raised in the literature (Weiner, Hobgood & Lewis, 2008) as it relates to identifying organizational processes that contribute to fair practices that encourage error reporting.

> "The more general term "organizational culture" refers to the shared pattern of beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that are held by organizational members and that shape their interaction with each other and with stakeholders outside the organization." (Weiner et al, 2008, p. 404)

A "just culture" is described as being a non-punitive environment where errors can be reported without fear of reprimand and balanced with accountability. In such an environment there is an expectation of fair treatment which engenders a sense of trust, predictability about the process and outcome with there being some assurance about the intention and motives of those resolving the situation. The findings indicate that people are reluctant to report an organizational problem if they believe that doing so exposes them to unjustified negative consequences. (Weiner et all, 2008, p.405) This relates to staff reporting issues of concern, perhaps even disclosing errors that have been made. If they cannot feel safe and comfortable discussing these issues, they will not welcome client complaints which cause their work to be scrutinized by those in the organization who are in the most powerful positions.

Linked to this is the notion that improving organizational climates to support workers influences both worker and client satisfaction and subsequently, outcomes. (Bednar, 2003; Stalker, et al, 2007; Rzepnicki & Johnson, 2005) It is imperative that organizations, and, in particular, managers, recognize this as they must play a critical role in developing an atmosphere of trust in which open communication, cooperation and honest expressions of feelings can flourish. This emphasizes the relational nature of the process.

WHY THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

Prior to recent changes to child welfare legislation, client complaints were managed within the applicable Children's Aid Society. With proclamation of Bill 210, the client complaint mechanism now offers a multi level process with varying degrees of formality. Service recipients may bring their concerns directly to the Children's Aid Society via their assigned worker and supervisor or they have the opportunity to put their concerns in writing and attend an Internal Complaint Review Panel to discuss their concerns and seek resolution. Alternatively, service recipients may take their concerns to the Child and Family Services Review Board for an independent third party for review without first notifying the relevant Children's Aid Society that they have a complaint. Service recipients may also choose to utilize all three avenues at the same time.

While its implementation and public promotion suggests an alignment with societal values of accessibility, consistency and neutrality for publicly funded organizations, the emergence of the legislated complaint mechanism also represents the state's desire to shift responsibility and mistrust of the child welfare system to the local level, placing responsibility on individual organizations and within them, individuals.

My assumption is that this mechanism has been implemented as an accountability measure to hold Children's Aid Societies responsible for resolving concerns expressed by service recipients. As well, I assume that it is intended as a strategy to empower service recipients to bring forward their concerns and voice dissatisfaction against a system that holds a lot of power. My experience of the process thus far has caused me to question if the process can accomplish these two objectives.

I believe that a client complaint process should serve the purpose of enhancing service delivery and I've found little evidence to suggest this process includes any means of informing service delivery across the province. There is no indication of how complaints will be monitored and no description of the type of resolution outcomes that may be expected.

It does not include any process for provincial review of outcomes and therefore there is no inherent strategy to inform practice across the province. As well, the public promotion of this mechanism removes from the public's view any notion of the existence of other accountability measures in child welfare. Other accountability measures include Service and Financial Data Reviews; Crown Ward Reviews; Child Death Reporting and Review, Foster Care Licensing and Serious Occurrence Reporting. (OACAS, 2005) These mechanisms may be more effective and have a significant impact on service delivery improvements. A public review of the effectiveness of this particular mechanism might be hindered given client confidentiality. If there was interest and opportunity to review individual complaints within agencies, client consent would be required to share confidential information from the file. While non identifying

information could be gathered and conclusions drawn from it, the specific context of the identifying data would most likely be helpful in this type of examination.

My impression is that the design of the current complaint mechanism excludes the government from having to take responsibility for the current state of child welfare practice. Rather than there being any focus on how child welfare work and practices are structured and measured through state control, the focus in each complaint, is on the individual worker's actions or organizational practices and behaviours within individual agencies.

I believe that child welfare staff and the organizations in which they work are fallible and improvements need to be made. I believe that formal complaint mechanisms are important and both child welfare staff and the state must accept responsibility for client dissatisfaction. I am concerned that this cannot be an effective accountability mechanism if there is no system in place to monitor the quality of resolution outcomes. The mechanism does not address the systemic issues which are influenced and shaped by outside forces that create a work environment that generates dissatisfaction.

DEFINITIONS

I define a client complaint as any expressed dissatisfaction with how someone has been treated and with how decisions are made.

Complaints manager are defined as those staff within Children's Aid Societies who have been assigned the responsibility of coordinating and facilitating client complaints following implementation of the current process in December 2006.[1]

When I speak of an *informal* process, I am referring to a resolution process that usually works from the bottom up. That is, clients try to resolve their concerns with the service team, beginning with the worker, then supervisor, then senior manager. When I refer to the *formal* process, I'm referring to the process that works from the top down. That is, clients try to resolve their concerns by contacting senior staff within the organization, usually either the Executive Director or the complaints manager. This can also include direct contact with the Child and Family Services Review Board, the designated third party reviewer.

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[1] I will refer to the process prior to November 30, 2006 as the former process.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the knowledge about client complaints in child welfare through an exploration of the present policy as well as past and current practices. The underlying question this research endeavoured to answer was: What has been the experience of Children's Aid Society Directors and Managers of Services who have been using the client complaint policy implemented in November 2006, as a means of receiving, reviewing and responding to the complaints and concerns of service users? Further, how can their experiences and opinions assist others in managing these complaints in the future?

Secondary questions I attempted to answer through this research include: Does the description of the process offered help clients establish realistic expectations of what can be achieved through the process and is it client friendly? And finally, if consistency and accountability are achieved through the current process, are these concepts congruent with fairness and social justice?

I elected to conduct a qualitative research study as my research questions were best answered where the emphasis is on exploring and describing participant perspectives and experiences. This focus allowed me to discover emergent themes and study multiple perspectives from a small sample of participants in their natural setting, providing opportunity to interpret the meaning they brought to this topic. This further allowed me to contextualize my findings rather than making far reaching generalizations. A qualitative design permits the use of in depth interviews and review of relevant documents for data collection. It afforded me the opportunity to be an active learner while at the same time allowed me to bring myself, as an insider, into the study. Finally, I believed that a qualitative study would be well received by my intended audience and could lay a foundation of understanding as the basis for further research in the future.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Theoretical Framework

This exploratory, qualitative research project was undertaken from critical social science perspective (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006). This approach is most congruent with my desired research goals and is the most effective to explore the experiences of complaints managers within Ontario Children's Aid Societies. This allowed me to gain an understanding of their experiences in order to critique the social relations imbedded in the constructs of the process. A critical approach is action oriented and aims to uncover and address structural power imbalances for transformative change. (Kreuger & Neuman, 2006)

I undertook this research with an assumption that the relationship between service users and the organization plays a significant role in determining whether or not a complaint is filed and if it is resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant. I was particularly interested in developing an understanding of how the complaints process has been constructed and how perceptions of the process are influenced by organizational practices and social relations with service users.

Insider Benefits and Disadvantages

There are many components to my understanding of what it means to be an insider when conducting research, all of which are relevant to this project. My commitment to the field of child welfare spans 19 years. Although I have worked in just one child welfare agency during that time, I've held a number of positions and have faced client complaints from a different perspective in each position. As a front line worker, complaints were made about me, as a supervisor I was responsible for informal attempts to resolve complaints against my staff, and currently I receive complaints when service recipients are dissatisfied with resolution attempts by the worker and supervisor. Given the extent of my experience and my choice to research this issue, I bring a number of values and opinions to this research. I am therefore an *insider* given my dual role of researcher and member of the child welfare professional community. (Lasala, 2003)

As an insider I experienced many advantages conducting this research especially in the recruitment and data collection phases. Disclosure of my experience and current position as well as the timeliness of my project in the recruitment phase contributed to the credibility of the project. My prior knowledge of the process provided significant advantages in designing my project and in choosing and accessing appropriate participants. My understanding of the roles and responsibilities of child welfare staff and the culture of a child welfare organization allowed me to easily engage participants. This included my knowledge of the complexity, stress, time constraints and tensions

inherent in the work and allowed participants freedom to discuss their experiences without providing a great deal of explanation about the general nature of their work. (Williams, 2001)

As an insider I also faced some disadvantages. To ensure the credibility of my study, I had to ensure I did not conduct the research in such a manner that my findings were simply confirming my own experiences and perceptions. (Lasala, 2003) To mitigate this I took care to maintain an open, mindful position and pursued concerns related to this with my supervisor. As an insider I also had to exercise care that my own position and experience was not impacting the perception of this project or the participants. (Williams, 2001) Having knowledge and experiences similar to that of participants I had to be cautious not to assume things in their statements which might lead to missing points they were trying to make or misinterpreting their statements.

Sample and Recruitment

As I intended to interview human subjects for this project, I underwent the McMaster Research Ethics Board approval process. Throughout the process, I gave a great deal of thought to mitigating potential harm to participants and to protect the identity and confidentiality of participating organizations and participants. Following approval of McMaster University Research Ethics Board, (See Appendix A & F) I began my recruitment process.

I sought to recruit four to six participants which is congruent with an interpretive social science approach as described by Kreuger & Neuman (2006) and is a sufficient size to uncover rich detailed information. I assumed these staff would have significant child welfare experience which is an important component in developing a context for the data I was collecting as well as establishing the credibility and integrity of the project. My sample represents what Kreuger & Neuman (2006, p.209) refer to as a non probability sampling technique and this is congruent with targeting a very specific population given my intent to collect data from child welfare management staff that have the experience and possible expertise in managing client complaints.

Each of the 53 Children's Aid Societies across Ontario Society is overseen by an Executive Director who reports to a Board of Directors. (OACAS, 2005) While the management structure within each organization is similar, it varies depending on the size and needs of each organization. The task of managing complaints is not assigned to a particular role with each agency, but rather, is carried by people fulfilling different functions. In order to collect relevant data, it was necessary to recruit participants who have responsibility for the management of client complaints. Luborsky & Rubinstein refer to this as "sampling for meaning" (Luborsky & Rubinstein, 1995, p.98) where the research takes the insider perspective.

Personalized emails were sent to twelve Executive Directors within a two to three hour drive of Hamilton to determine their willingness to support my recruitment attempts. (Appendix C) In consultation with my Executive Director who has familiarity with Executive Directors across the province, I targeted specific organizations where we believed there could be support for my project. I quickly received favourable responses from these Executive Directors who forwarded the email to pertinent staff. Within a week I had arranged interviews with six individuals willing to participate.

Special Ethical Considerations

Hewitt (2007) outlines key components of an ethical research relationship that are essential to keep at the forefront of awareness through the research process from start to finish. These include confidentiality, avoidance of exploitation, respect for autonomy, rapport, rigor and acknowledgment of bias (p.1155). In consideration of possible risk of participating in this research I provided ample opportunity for each individual to express their concerns both in advance and at the time of the interview. I also confirmed that I would not provide information about their participation to their Executive Director, although no one expressed concern about this.

In the email sent to Executive Directors, I stated if they were interested in assisting me with my recruitment, they could simply forward the email to relevant staff. I stated that participation was voluntary and confidential and that I would not inform the Executive Directors about the participation of their staff. What transpired following my initial recruitment email was a flurry of emails where participants readily identified their interest. Although I took every precaution not to reveal the identity of those who contacted me, the Executive Directors and their staff appeared unconcerned about this. Executive Directors demonstrated interest in my project by forwarding the email to relevant staff and asking those staff to get in touch with me. They copied me in on these emails. Some directed me to contact particular staff. Some staff responded to me with an interest to participate and copied the email to their Executive Director. Another issue that must be considered is whether or not the interest of the Executive Directors, as well as my identification as an 'insider' influences participant comments throughout the interviews.

There is common agreement amongst researchers that participants must be voluntary and must be provided with sufficient information about the goals and purpose of the study as well as the methods to be employed, how the information will be used and the potential risks associated with participating in the study. (Murphy & Dingwall, 2007)

In one circumstance I was contacted by someone and arranged an interview time. I then received another email from a different person within the organization indicating I had to go through an internal ethics approval process. I contacted the person with whom I had already scheduled an interview to advise them of the additional process. This

resulted in several emails between me and each of them, and between them. They copied each other and their Executive Director on each email they sent while I sent individual emails to the two of them and never corresponded with the Executive Director again. Fortunately, following submission to them of my McMaster Ethics approval, I was able to get their ethics approval very quickly.

The recruitment process caused me great anxiety given my explicit plans to protect the confidentiality of all participants and organizations as outlined in my ethics application. I took all necessary steps to ensure I did not violate anyone's privacy as I responded to email individually and did not copy anyone else on them. What became quite evident through this process is that there was a great deal of interest on the part of Executive Directors to have their organization participate and all participants informed their Executive Director of their participation. I suspect this is the result of the eagerness of those in the field of child welfare to discuss and explore this process. All of this suggests to me that this is a topic that is timely and relevant in the current child welfare experience and people are eager to talk about it.

Participants

Each of the six participants interviewed hold management positions within their organization. They are the primary person responsible for coordinating and managing client complaints in their organization with respect to Section 68 of the CFSA (MYCS, 2006) and often work in conjunction with their legal counsel.

3	Manager/Supervisor
1	Other
1	Director of Services
1	Executive Director

Each individual contacted me via email to express their interest to participate in this research project. I provided them with the Letter of Information/Consent (Appendix B) and my Interview Guide (Appendix D) in advance of agreeing to participate. As well, I provided interested participants with as much information as possible in advance of the interview with respect to the process and they were offered the opportunity to ask questions prior to meeting and again at the beginning of each interview. Participants were advised that their privacy and that of their organization would be respected and that very little identifying information was relevant to the purpose of my study.

Data Collection

Each participant chose to be interviewed in their office. Upon meeting each participant, they provided me with their signed consent form and agreed for the interview to be audio taped. Interviews ranged from one hour to one hour forty-five minutes.

Prior to the official start of each interview, rapport was initiated through a natural inquiry of my child welfare experience as it relates to theirs. In addition to sharing details of my interest in client complaints, at the end of each interview there was a discussion about how I might move forward with the findings of my study.

My interview guide (Appendix D), while offering specific questions, provided me with a "defined set of topics" (Greenhalgh & Taylor, 1997, p.740) to structure my in depth interview with each participant.

Data collection was done through conducting semi-structured interviews with each participant. The semi structured interview was chosen over an unstructured interview as I had a good sense of the type of questions I needed to ask to begin to generate the type of information I was seeking.

Data Analysis

My analysis of the data began after each interview. The interviews were digitally recorded and I made minimal notes during the interviews. I made slight amendments to the questions for further interviews to include new issues raised.

The digital recordings were transcribed and I listened to each recording while reviewing the transcripts to fill in sections that were inaudible to the transcriptionist. After correcting the transcripts I conducted my analysis by reading them looking for key concepts and ideas and, identified emerging themes and patterns. Where two or more participants made similar statements or agreed on particular ideas or concepts, these ideas were considered a theme.

The analysis of this data aimed to uncover commonalities and differences of participants in an attempt to determine in their experience. Although all themes intersect and overlap, the analysis resulted in the emergence of four major themes: process versus outcome; false expectations; contradiction of the spirit of Transformation; and power imbalances.

In the interest of researcher time constraints, participants were not afforded the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview. The opportunity to do this may

have provided participants a chance to ensure that I, as the researcher, had accurately represented the meaning of their experiences.

Limitations

While my intended focus for this project was to examine the experiences of complaint managers, this project reflected the perspective of a portion of only one key population who are essential to the development of an effective client complaint mechanism in Ontario. This limited my ability to generalize my findings across all similar settings.

I am aware that data collection from this target population excluded the important perspective of others and as such, has consequences and limitations of only providing one perspective. The issue of client complaints could be explored from the perspective of service users in general, service users who have filed a complaint, front line staff, supervisors, government staff as well as other community stake holders. The inclusion of these other populations would serve to broaden and enhance the scope of exploration into client complaints and provide a more in depth and rich understanding.

There are 53 Children's Aid Societies in Ontario and I interviewed staff from six urban agencies in Southern Ontario, representing approximately 11% of the province's child welfare agencies. It can not be stated that my findings are transferable to all child welfare organizations especially given expected differences I anticipate would exist in organizations that serve native and rural populations.

FINDINGS

Child welfare interventions are premised on the notion that something has gone wrong and that someone within the family is responsible for this wrong doing. Interventions are geared towards identifying these factors and those responsible and developing goals to improve the family situation. The focus is on the client explaining or defending their actions and behaviours. When a client files a complaint, the tables are turned. The focus then shifts to claims made by the client that the worker has done something wrong, perhaps behaved inappropriately or ineffectively, and the client utilizes the complaint mechanism as a form of redress. In this circumstance, the worker is in the position of having to defend their actions and behaviours.

In both situations, one side feels attacked by the other and feels justified in their response and reactions. Both situations lay blame and focus on the individual, rendering invisible the influence of social and economic structure on the establishment and maintenance of inequality and injustice. An anti-oppressive perspective encourages the recognition that many difficulties and problems experienced by individuals are rooted in such external structure and a critical perspective seeks to uncover these to enable transformative change. (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007) I have used a critical, anti-oppression perspective for my analysis aimed at examining how local social relations are developed and influenced by extra local means.

The following identifies four themes generated from my analysis. While I have organized them as distinct themes, the concepts within them intersect and overlap.

PROCESS VERSUS OUTCOME

The most striking theme of each interview was the sense that the complaint process is procedurally driven and that adhering to the process is privileged over demonstrating good outcomes and resolutions. The process as described by participants is very bureaucratic with a foundation that is hierarchical by design and organized through expertise and role clarity. Consistency is supported through management by rules which include standardized time frames and actions focused on satisfying the requirements of procedures set by the state. While participants described attempts to meet the individual needs of clients coming forward, in general, the process is standardized and does not account for difference.

> "You know, the pamphlet put out by the Ministry was only done in English and in French. We had it translated into a number of different languages to meet our clients' needs. The process doesn't take into account cultural differences. We try to balance this through our internal process and our approach so that the community is represented, but it's tough."

Another participant stated:

"The way the process is designed, it doesn't deal with ethnic minorities and different languages – people who can't read or write – people with addictions or mental health issues – all those things are important to consider if the process is going to be effective and fair."

The resulting effect is the process can seem impersonal. While not intentional on the part of participants, the process allows for professional efficiencies and activities to prevail, seemingly favouring the needs of the organization over those of the client.

All participants described how the structure of the new policy compels agencies to have a central complaints manager to coordinate the activities required to resolve complaints. The coordinating function is viewed positively as it encourages better communication and consultation.

"It forces agencies to have one central person to manage these complaints. We tend to function well when we centralize tasks – people then understand the chain of command and it's easier to stay in the loop and close things off. If you don't have one person coordinating the information, people don't know who to turn to and sometimes the responsibility of it gets lost."

This not only provides internal consistency but allows one central person to collaborate with all parties relevant to the complaint and follow it through to resolution. From an organizational perspective this may provide opportunity to encourage collaboration across service areas and promote open discussion for more collective responsibility for resolution.

All six participants expressed that many client concerns do not come to their attention as they are resolved informally between the worker and the client.

"I have no doubt that a large majority of complaints are resolved informally by workers on a day to day basis without the need for any of this. That every day they're helping us solve problems that are not resulting in the need for formal complaints."

The notion that the first step toward resolution of complaints should be at the most local level is supported in the literature as it helps avoid delay and strengthens the ability to problem solve. (Preston-Shoot, 2001) Three of the participants described how the skills and efforts of front line staff to resolve issues with clients, reduces the likelihood those concerns will reach the complaints manager. These resolutions at the front line level are viewed as the most desirable and potentially the most effective.

"You know I think the most useful complaint resolution process is the one that happens with the service team directly. And these are more successful if the service team comes in with proposed resolutions."

One participant described resolution at this level as promoting better communication and information sharing in addition to diminishing the number of formal complaints.

"The complaint process doesn't often result in shifting decisions or altering a case plan – it often results in a lot more sharing of information. And that may happen more effectively in a less formal way. We have always endeavoured to sort problems out informally before coming to the conclusion that this does require a formal complaint and as a result we haven't had many formal complaints."

The current complaint policy offers three processes with varying degrees of formality to address complaints about services received. The processes are not *ordered* as clients may initiate their complaint at any of level at the same time. Each process includes some degree of formality and, while all participants agreed the least formal process is the preferred first step; clients may exercise their right to take their concerns to the CFSRB at any time without notifying the relevant CAS of their concerns.

"What we're finding typically happens is that people don't even bother with the internal process, they want to go directly to the CFSRB. So the first thing you know is you're getting one of those contacts from the CFSRB saying they've got a complaint from so and so and they'll be determining eligibility and so the whole process begins."

The least formal resolution process occurs when the client directly approaches the service team including the assigned worker and often their supervisor. The other processes are the Internal Complaint Review Panel (ICRP) and third party review by the Child and Family Services Review Board (CFSRB).

Internal Complaint Review Panel

Following informal resolution, participants preferred the ICRP as an avenue of complaint resolution although there was recognition that the panel can be intimidating for clients. While the legislation requires participation of a minimum of two panel members including at least one senior staff person and one person from the community. There is some discretion for each organization with respect to the size of the panel, how the panel structures the meeting and how clients are involved in the process.

"We at first thought we'd go with a 3 or 4 person panel but the volume has been such that it has been hard to get that many people and it's also kind of intimidating I think for the client if you walk into this big room with a large group."

Participants describe having between two and three panel members, a chair person and minute taker, as well as relevant service staff and supervisor. One participant described the tension of trying to make it less formal:

"We've tried to structure it as a more of a resolution focus than a formal adversarial tradition. But it is still adversarial and it makes it pretty hard for clients to go back and work for the service team and vice versa after that's happened.

The Ministry pamphlet which is given to anyone wishing to file a complaint states the client can bring one support person with them to an ICRP. While not the intention of the complaint manager, clearly this creates an imbalance that privileges the position and status of professionals over the client. This may reflect an organizational need to demonstrate accountability while managing risk through maintaining control over the proceedings. This represents another tension in the role of complaints managers as participants repeatedly expressed concern about the potentially intimidating effect of the panel on clients.

"We try to be careful about the service team not being in the room when the client comes in. We try to have everybody come in at the same time so it doesn't appear to the client as if all the Children's Aid people are lined up against them. We want to be fair and recognize that clients can be nervous and intimidated by such a large group."

During the eighteen months since implementation, half the participating agencies have held less three internal panels and the other three have held between five and eight. Participants report the number of complainants that have gone to CFSRB range from 3 to 14. All participants report that they believe the numbers of complaints that come to the attention of the complaints manager are relatively low given the contentious and adversarial nature of child welfare work.

"I'm always surprised that we don't get more people complaining – it's natural in this kind of work for there to be a lot of disagreement and resistance. With that in mind, we have always endeavoured to sort problems out informally before coming to the conclusion that this does require a formal complaint. And as a result we haven't had many formal complaints."

Many researchers have made the point that few instances of dissatisfaction emerge as formal complaints and that receiving a low number of complaints does not demonstrate high levels of satisfaction or high quality of service. (Javetz & Stern, 1996, Preston-Shoot, 2001; Sbaraini & Carpenter, 1996; Mulcahy & Tritter, 1998) Participants recognize many clients are likely choosing to forgo the process of filing a complaint for any number of reasons.

> "Sometimes, it is just too much for the client ... they may not really be literate and not able to express themselves or put their concerns in writing. They might figure it isn't worth the time and effort. I think that they worry... they worry about how making a complaint might work against them later, when decisions are being made on their case."

Another participated stated:

> "It's not fair, expecting people to put it in writing. I don't think that's fair or equitable for our clients. And I think that most ... your newer immigrants are not going to put a complaint in writing and appear in front of a panel."

Participants recognized the potential obstacles to filing a complaint, as well, they acknowledged that the ICRP process, when initiated, can produce anxiety and be intimidate clients. However, when discussion of the CFSRB process was initiated, it became even clearer why the internal process is preferred. Complaints managers expressed the desire and ability to maintain some level of control to mitigate the impact on clients when resolution is managed with the Children's Aid Society.

Child & Family Services Review Board

This process was described by participants as an adjudicative model relating to procedural matters.

> "I understand you know they base their eligibility decision on those little check boxes where they listen to ... did the agency describe for the client the reasons for decisions, did we observe the client complaint process that kind of thing. They're not going to fully investigate what happened. They're not going to change our decisions or alter the course of what happened. They don't have the power to do this under section 68."

Once a complaint form has been submitted, the CFSRB makes a decision about eligibility. If a complaint is eligible for review a teleconference is held, involving the client, the CFSRB and Society staff. The intent is to canvas the issues and these may last

from two to three hours. Participants described the entire CFSRB process as largely a legal process that is very labour intensive. Although this process may give the appearance of challenging and shifting institutional power and organizational structures within Children's Aid Societies, in fact, the process as described by participants may cause a significant frustration for clients given the investment of time and emotions compared to the outcome.

> "The client gets a letter saying their complaint is eligible. So they think great – they are going to hear my complaint. Then we go in an argue jurisdiction and all of a sudden, their complaint isn't eligible. It's the jurisdiction eligibility question... even if they could be saying something different at the beginning which is 'this is what eligibility means' you know and it doesn't mean that we will necessarily be able to hear your complaint but you do fit under one of these criteria. It's frustrating for clients – they put their time and energy into it... for nothing sometimes."

The primary issue raised by participants regarding eligibility and jurisdiction was the fact that the Board is not intended to hear matters that are currently before the courts. At least four participants described examples where clients were first told by the Board that their concerns were eligible for review.

> "I think the process could work, but then be clearer about what's eligible, what's not eligible and stop letting things in that shouldn't be let in. Because a number of these that went to the CFSRB and clearly weren't eligible according to the legislation but the CFSRB seemed to think they were. If they followed the rules, clients would have to go through this unnecessary process. That would have redirected people back to us and I think people would have been happier instead of being more adversarial after there time has been wasted."

It was a common theme that the Board hears matters that are not eligible according to the legislation. Agencies are then placed in the position of having to attend a CFSRB hearing to argue they have no jurisdiction. The possible negative response of clients to this process was repeatedly mentioned by participants recognizing the conflict between what they must accomplish by virtue of their dual role and what clients might hope to achieve.

> "So I think clients go into this thinking that here's the place that's going to vindicate them, they're going to, somebody's going to say yes and beat on the agency and issue a different decision and they get really disappointed when they find these people really can't do a heck of a lot. I think there's lots of possibilities for them not being satisfied and yet not taking any further."

Role of Legal Counsel

A finding that was surprising was the Societies extensive use of legal counsel in reviewing and managing complaints under the new process. One participant described the process:

> "At the very beginning we set up weekly meetings between me and our chief counsel. So at least once a week sometimes twice a week, I would review every complaint letter that came in; we'd sit down together and look at them. We still review them together unless it's very clear then I'll make the decision myself. It takes a lot of time on the part of legal counsel to give legal advice."

The extensive use of legal counsel under the new process was described by participants as being utilized through the life of the complaint. Participants described that agency lawyers review complaints as they come in, they participate as members of the ICRP and they participate in all matters related to the CFSRB. One participant stated that a lawyer was hired on a part time basis just to manage client complaints. Each of the other five participants stated that within their organization, one lawyer is assigned to manage complaints. While considerable legal resources were described as essential, none of the participants articulated why this was so. I got the sense that each organization wanted to ensure appropriate adherence to the legislation and a reliance on legal counsel, those deemed best able to interpret legislation, is essential. It may be that agencies have adopted the use of legal counsel as a means of providing support to the complaints manager given the difficult tasks they face carrying out their responsibilities on behalf of the organization.

> "It requires a huge amount of legal time. Attending or doing pre conference teleconferences, attending the hearings, doing the prep work for that. It's huge. We have one lawyer on staff who has handled all of them. We're just fearful that he'll be on holidays one day because he's become a great expert at it."

Another participant summed it up:

> "But it's a legal system and it's operating in legislation you know so how do you how do you deal with that in a way that's fair to clients and yet also protects the integrity of what we think the legislation says."

The litigious nature of the CFSRB process and potential impact on clients were well described. One participant stated an example:

"We go in with a lawyer and the client is there by himself. We were there from 9 in the morning till 5 as was the client and at the end of it ... they announced to the client that they would be coming back to him with a decision about whether or not they could hear his complaint. And this guy quite rightly said I don't get it, you sent me a letter two months ago saying it's eligible. So he ended up having several days with the complaint review board and in the end he just packed his papers up and walked out because I think he was, he just could see this thing was going nowhere in terms of what he wanted."

However, this was balanced with justification of agency practices,

"We're quite well aware that the perception of agencies coming in with lawyers and how that unbalances the ... you know the playing field and yet we're making legal arguments you know does it make sense not to have a lawyer?"

This statement from one participant emphasizes again the tensions inherent in the complaint manager's role as they must negotiate the intricacies of a risk management environment structured by the state while accepting individual responsibility to respond locally to the problems and concerns brought to their attention. This speaks to the common culture of stress and fear and I believe the use extensive use of legal counsel is related to the need to protect the organization at a time when practices and behaviours are under increased scrutiny by clients, the public and the state.

There was also overall agreement that there has been a significant increase in demand on staff resources of the organization, both for ICRP and CFSRB.

This includes the consultation with pertinent staff, information gathering and synthesizing, contacting appropriate and relevant people, chairing meetings, and the provision of documentation and correspondence. The investment of time collaborating with clients to seek resolution was barely mentioned. It seems that time spent with clients, while requiring a lot of staff resources, is the least significant as all the other procedures described are more time consuming.

The process that was in place prior to implementation of this process was described as being much less reliant on agency lawyers in responding to and resolving client concerns. In my experience, informal attempts to resolve complaints with the service team and without the use of legal counsel, promotes more client contact and collaboration which often has a positive influence on future service delivery.

Policy Development: Intent and Rationale

Participants recognized the current policy was not developed in isolation and while they acknowledge the process included consultation, there was agreement that the final design did not reflect all the recommendations made throughout this process. There was recognition by participants that the development of the legislative changes, while under the general umbrella of Child Welfare Transformation, were also developed under great political pressure, especially from the Office of the Ontario Ombudsman.

"The Ombudsman was sort of looming large on the scene. I think that really pushed the Ministry to put together an alternative approach that might have been different from what the (Child Welfare) Secretariat had been planning but would at least fend off the Ombudsman. And put something in place that looked as if it had a greater independence than the agency review procedure. "

Participants offered a number of suggestions with respect to the probable intent and rationale behind the policy.   Four participants expressed the belief that the government was trying to develop consistency across the province and generate improvements over former practices. One participant suggested it was intended to produce practices that are transparent and accountable. This suggestion is supported by the requirement of the legislation that complaints managers with Children's Aid Societies must be fairly high ranking, positioning them to bear the responsibility of accountability.

Two participants believe it was intended to provide for third party overview in an effort to and empower clients who have a right to be heard. Participants did not object to a third party review and recognize that often a fresh set of eyes can assist in revealing clarity and perhaps lead to resolution. Although, while the advantages of a third party review were recognized, there remains tension inherent in a process that leaves complaints managers and their organizations and staff feeling scrutinized.

Two participants suggested that development of the current policy was premised on the perception that agencies were mishandling complaints and that the former process was inconsistent, unfair and ineffective.

"I think there are a number of rationales. One would be its part of the accountability process obviously in terms of the Ministry's whole framework around that. I think secondly you know to be honest it's founded on a perception that we were mishandling them in the past and that there wasn't consistent practice and I think that was that was directed both to us and to the regional offices. I think they wanted consistency, they wanted some very clear time frames, they wanted a more accountable process and they probably wanted the regional offices out of the loop. I think those were the main thrusts behind it and presumably they wanted they wanted to address what they perceived from calls that come to them that our process was ineffective or unfair."

While this may be true, a critical review of the current process must include an interrogation of whether or not these conditions have been reversed. The bureaucratic organization of the process involves the assumption that those at the top hold the power and subsequently, it is more beneficial to bring your concerns to those with perceived power. In this circumstance, this may cause frustration for clients given potential expectations and misunderstanding of the limitations of the Board. The primary limitations of the Board are: that it lacks the power to truly investigate the actions of Children's Aid Society staff related to client complaints; it cannot alter decisions made by Societies; and it not deal with systemic problems related to child welfare practice and policy.

FALSE EXPECTATIONS

A prevailing theme amongst participants is the notion that there is a great likelihood that clients will expect more from the process than it can provide. The design and public promotion of the process provides the illusion of opportunity for individuals to air their grievances, have their voices heard and even obtain some level of satisfaction or redress.

> "If you ask did they get what they wanted I believe the majority of them would say no. I'm not sure they're all that satisfied with the outcome but they feel they've been   heard and for many of them that's what they wanted."

Another participant stated:

> "Well we just realized that funnelling people through the formal process is not going to get them their results and they'd be increasingly frustrated by that process because they think they can get more than they can. I think a number of them would say 'I got a response, I had a meeting, they listened to me'. I think we'd get that from them that they're being heard, there's a dialogue but in terms of decision making things that get overturned it doesn't happen often."

The findings suggest that the level to which clients are satisfied with the process and outcomes remains to be seen. Additionally, no formal mechanism to review the effectiveness of the process has been established. In fact there are few Ministry expectations with respect to data collection and reporting related to complaints that have been filed. Participants stated that on a quarterly basis, each agency is expected to report how many complaints were received in writing, what service area they related to and at what level they were resolved. Details related to the specific nature of the complaint, resolution sought and outcomes are not reported. A more thorough evaluation of specific complaints could enhance further knowledge development.

Limitations of the CFSRB

While participants expressed a good grasp of the limits of what the CFSRB is able to do, they were equally cognizant the clients did not have this same understanding. Eligibility for review by the CFSRB is limited to matters where the CAS: refused to proceed with a complaint; did not follow the complaint review process or timelines; did not give reasons for decisions affecting the service recipient; did not provide opportunity for the service recipient to be heard and represented when decisions that affect their interest were made; did not provide opportunity to express concerns about services received; and, inaccurately recorded something in the case file. (MCYS, 2007) As such, the Board has no authority to investigate other child welfare case management decisions or practices.

The Board's decision making is limited to directing the relevant CAS to revisit and follow the complaint process when the service recipient believes they have not. Additionally, child welfare matters that are before the court, and often the most complex and contested, are not eligible for review by the Board. There was recognition by participants that the Board is *learning* the process and participants were able to articulate strengths and challenges within this context.

One participant described the CFSRB as "a good functional third party" who are still trying to sort out what is coming to their door. Four participants used the term "bending over backwards" when describing efforts of the CFSRB to determine eligibility. From a positive perspective, participants believe the Board is attempting to respond to client needs as they sort through the process. From a negative perspective, they do not follow the guidelines and this has a direct and negative impact on client expectations. The most common example offered was with respect to the CFSRB hearing issues related to court matters which they have no mandate to review. This was described as "blurring the boundaries" because they give the impression these complaints are eligible for review. Children's Aid Societies respond to this by arguing jurisdiction, a purely legal argument, which most often results in clients being told their complaint will not be heard.

> "I think the, that clients view the CFSRB as having a lot more power than it does. And then they get frustrated because in the end they can't do much. They can order you to give an explanation if your reasons weren't clear, they can order you to hold a hearing if you hadn't held a hearing but there isn't much of any substance that they can do. They're not going to reverse decisions if that's what the client's challenging ...and that's usually what clients want."

A specific example of frustration caused by this process was provided by one participant. In the example the client was advised by the CFSRB their complaint was eligible for review. After participating in a lengthy teleconference and a full day hearing where the Society argued CFSRB had no jurisdiction, the client was told their complaint

would not be heard. The end result was the client invested a significant amount of effort, time and emotion only to become very frustrated and without resolution.

> "I don't think it's clear ... I think clients have the perception that this body is going to change the course of what's happened, people perceive this body has some authority to change what is happening, but that's not the case...it's not clear at all."

Participants unanimously expressed the concern that the current process offers clients the ability to go through both processes at same time or just to the external Board without raising concerns at an internal panel first. This related to their belief that the informal process and the ICRP would be more easily manage by client and would result in more satisfying outcomes for clients. They also described the process as inherently insensitive to the needs and possible ability of clients to negotiate such a bureaucratic system based on culture, educational level, and cognitive ability to understand and articulate their concerns in writing.

In general, the process was described as not being user friendly due to the requirement to put concerns in writing, it sets up unrealistic expectations, and it is very much a litigious process that requires a great investment of time on the part of everyone involved in the process, with little evidence of satisfactory or successful outcomes. While the desire to manage complaints internally was not described as such, I got the sense that complaints managers felt that when they had more control over the matter, they were better able to negotiate the protection of the staff and the organization.

This process is not congruent with an anti-oppressive perspective that aims to eliminate oppressive structures of domination and privilege through embracing and promoting social justice through inclusion and transformation. Rather, it erects and maintains oppressive structures fraught with power imbalances where professional skill and knowledge is privileged over personal identity. (Barnoff & Moffat, 2007)

Mutually transformative relationships require recognition, understanding and validation of difference in an environment of sensitivity and respect to avoid privileging one perspective or position over another. While participants described their attempts to maintain the dignity and respect of clients during the process, the evolution of the CFSRB process is portrayed as being disrespectful of clients. This is particularly concerning in the context of the Transformation Agenda which encourages child welfare staff to recognize difference and to develop responses accordingly. Collaborative decision making with families with a focus on ends versus means is a key principle of transformation and yet the complaint process does not adhere to this.

For those receiving social work interventions, Yee and Dumbrill (2003) express concern that marginalized populations are over represented. This is particularly true in child welfare and the authors suggest an anti-racism and anti-oppressive approach

"engaging in strategies that dismantle concrete barriers and structures that may intentionally or unintentionally exclude ethno-racial people from equal participation in society" is essential. (Yee & Dumbrill, 2003, p. 111)   This is congruent with the service delivery goals the Transformation agenda was designed to influence and impact.

CONTRADICTS THE SPIRIT OF TRANSFORMATION

At the heart of Transformation is the notion of improving child welfare services through an anti-oppressive approach. Many of the intended goals are congruent with such an approach including the provision of a more streamlined accountability framework that is outcome oriented with a focus on ends not means.   Another objective of Transformation is for child welfare staff to recognize diversity and embrace flexibility, acknowledging that one size will not fit all. A central tenet of Transformation is a focus on building family and community strengths and the promotion of family participation in decision making through collaborative processes. Additionally, there is an emphasis on the importance of research and evaluation to develop best practice guidelines. (MCYS, 2005) Regarding the issue of public accountability the Ministry says this,

> "People relate most to their local services and will judge overall
> system quality and responsiveness on that basis. Feedback received from   the
> public should be incorporated into the organization's quality improvement
> and training process." (MCYS, 2005, p. 8)

This sets the context within which many child welfare changes have been occurring and client complaints is just one small part. Yet, the design of the complaints process seems to maintain what are already adversarial relationships between child welfare staff and the clients they serve.

Professional Identity

DeMontigny (1995) describes the power inherent in child welfare workers, "The use of specialized language produces a standpoint, a form of consciousness, and a reality for members inside an institutional nexus. The socially organized language of child welfare social work thus shapes how we think about our work and our clients."(p. 70) In essence, we assign truth to our professionally organized style of thinking and speaking and this contributes to our perception of our professional power and authority. Through our thinking, talking, and recording we privilege our own knowledge and understanding over that of our clients and this separates us from them. DeMontigny (1995) suggests this must be disrupted if we are to practice from an anti-oppressive perspective within the spirit of Transformation and ethical social work practice.

Professional identity and staff responses to client complaints are influenced by organizational culture. Organizational culture is determined in part by Ministry objectives and in part through the style of management within the organization. Child welfare organizations are described in the literature as having a culture of stress. "Individuals respond to stress by avoiding anxiety through behaviour that is risk averse; agencies respond to stress by attempting to reduce uncertainty through the application of rules and procedures that regulate behaviour." (Rzepnicki & Johnson, 2005) This often leads to a culture of compliance where the adherence to rules and procedures lead to practice designed to minimize error by diminishing worker autonomy of decision making. Client complaints contribute to organizational stress as they are perceived as a threat rather than being welcomed as a learning opportunity.

Professional responses to complaints in other fields of study suggests that complaints can be viewed as an attack on professional identity and a defensive, emotional response is often designed to maintain a sense of control over the situation and individual safety and security. (Coyle, 1999; Allsop & Mulcahy, 1998) It is interesting to note that while professionals often perceive complaints as a threat to professional identity, literature shows that clients who are dissatisfied also feel a threat to personal identity where they often experience feelings of being "dehumanized, objectified, stereotyped, disempowered and devalued". (Coyle, 1999)

This evokes a sense that both clients and workers feel threatened by the process. This raises concern about the impact of a number of inherent power imbalances within the system and subsequently the process. The power structures inherent in the system are bureaucratic and hierarchical in nature. Each participant enacts some power depending on the stage of the process and the specific interactions. Workers may feel clients have the power to disrupt their work through the scrutiny related to a complaint. Clients may feel disempowered in relation to the worker who holds significant power to make decisions that affect the client and their family. Front line workers may feel disempowered in relation to their position compared to that of a high ranking complaints manager. While complaints managers may be perceived as carrying a great deal of power inherent in their position and role in the process, they may feel powerless to work outside the bounds of the mandated proceedings. The potential impact of how these overlapping and intersecting power imbalances are played out throughout the process may inhibit the inclination to collaborate in efforts toward conflict resolution.

Responses to complaints are varied but participants agreed the most common response is defensiveness.

> "Some workers and supervisors are upset, especially if they didn't see it coming and they're sitting there thinking, well if they'd come and talk to us we could have done something about it. I think ... previously and even now complaints, having a formal complaint is a bit disconcerting and the worker ... you know wonders oh my God what am I going to have go, is this going to affect my job."

Viewed from the perspective of professional identity, workers may view complaints as a challenge to their expertise and authority. This is congruent with research into complaints against doctors. (Allsop & Mulcahy, 1998) Child welfare professionals may establish a narrow view of the identity of the client compared to their identity as a professional with expert knowledge. This inherent power differential contributes to a limited and problematic perception of client rights and subsequently what a client should be able to complain about and how they express this complaint. The individual worker or agency is inherently awarded more credibility given their position of power within the process compared to the service user. (Wood, 1996)

Participants conveyed numerous responses they have encountered as a complaints manager. Although the responses are understandable, they hint at the idea that child welfare staff have not fully embraced the ideology of Transformation of balancing family preservation with risk management. This is not surprising given negative media portrayals of child welfare staff and the tendency towards erring on the side of caution to avert taking risks that result in poor outcomes or tragedy. Staff responses include anxiety, fear, worry and defensiveness. Participants suggested that these manifest as reluctance to engage in the process, distorting what the client says, defensive arguments about what the client has done or not done and, most significantly reluctance to reflect on their own behaviour and possibly uncover or admit to some of their own errors.

"I think staff now generally view complaints as a fairly serious matter. I think at one time, possibly under the old procedure, I think there was a bit of an attitude like, 'we've had it we these people, you deal with it, that's what we pay you for and see what you can do with this guy' – almost a disowning of responsibility for the situation."

This defensive posturing is a normal human response to what often feels like a personal attack and is likely the result of trying to preserve their job and professional reputation as well as not wanting to expose the agency to liability.

"I'm not sure that front line staff and supervisors see clients complaining as an opportunity – I think they see it as, you know, more difficulty, clients being resistant."

This was coupled with a general recognition on the part of the participants that errors are made in the system and staff do not always want to acknowledge or admit this.

"The system tries to shut down and protect and there may be good reasons for that.... but again, we hold the power and imagine a client who doesn't really have the know how or means to navigate the system ... we're right and their wrong ... I think that's wrong. Sometimes we need to step back and say what's happening here and rethink our approach. If you get a complaint... it is a signal of something."

One participant suggested some of the defensive posturing is the result of not recognizing the limits of our role and likened the role of social work to the medical profession indicating:

> "We've not evolved to a capacity of professionalism where we talk openly about the limits of our roles. I think we still think we're doing something above and beyond the call of duty ...like the medical profession is good at saying ... look this is all we can do. *We* tend to keep pushing ... if something is diseased it can't be cured in the medical profession – that's it – here it's like we're going to try and fix you ten times over and we try to maintain that position even when the client pushes back."

Both the medical and child welfare interventions involve a process of on-going assessment and evaluation. The medical professional may reach distinct limits in what they are able to do for a patient given the diagnosis. They also possess a knowledge base pertaining to specific medical conditions which patient input is unlikely to alter. On the other hand, child welfare assessments are much more fluid and must rely on the client's perception of what is problematic when determining the nature of service provision that is required. The client's knowledge of their family's problem, needs and strengths is integral to developing an effective service plan.

One of the limitations of current changes described by Dumbrill (2006) is that policy makers and other professional stakeholders continue to define supports families need rather than families being involved and defining it for themselves. While the Ministry did invite comments from parents as part of the transformation process "the absence of parents as full partners at the policy planning table undermines the entire ethos of partnership and collaboration that the government seeks to achieve." (Dumbrill, 2006, p.15) This is an example of how the current complaint mechanism contradicts the intent behind the Transformation agenda, in particular the promotion of family participation in decision making through a collaborative process. (MCYS, 2005) The comments of the participants clearly indicate that the current complaints process, while it is interactive, it is not collaborative.

Communication

My own experiences related to the management of client complaints were reinforced through my findings. Communication and miscommunication between child welfare workers and clients was identified as the most common root of complaints. Participants depict communication issues as giving rise to unclear expectations which can result in frustration, the breakdown of trust and fractured relationships. Further, poor communication can also result in diminished capacity to engage a client in the initial development of a working relationship. While this often falls within the scope of worker skill and ability, there was recognition amongst participants that the bureaucratic nature

of child welfare practice and resulting procedures influence the workers ability to practice effectively.

> "In a large majority of the cases I believe a lot of these issues could have been resolved if there had been better communication between the worker and the client. I'm sure workers are saying 'yea it's easy for you to say cause we're out there every day just trying desperately to keep up with the workload'. So having to constantly call clients back to keep them up to date on these things, to avoid miscommunication has got to be a major problem for them. I see both sides – I'm not blaming the workers because clients don't return phone calls either, they're hard to reach, they've got their own lives."

While an anti-oppressive approach to practice would encourage recognition that many problems people experience are rooted in external structures, despite the Transformation agenda, child welfare continues to blame individuals for the problems they face, shifting responsibility from broader societal and structural issues. This is indirectly communicated with clients in our interventions and our contact with them, especially through the complaint process. The complaint process reinforces the notion that the worker or the client is at fault for the problems associated with the complaint rather than responsibility resting with organizational policies or structural forces in society.

There was also recognition amongst participants that as a field, we need to spend more time reflecting on issues related to client complaints to generate information to improve service delivery. While this notion is congruent with the Transformation agenda, participants recognized many other organizational priorities related to Transformation have limited the time available for such reflection. Participants believe the policy should be reviewed in relation to both the process and the potential outcomes for clients. The lack of provincial wide reports about the nature of the complaints being heard, perpetuates the definition of problems with either the client or the individual worker or organization and prevents a system wide interrogation of law, policy and fiscal spending a the heart of the complaints.

In addition to commenting on the strengths and challenges of the current complaint process, participants offered suggestions and demonstrated willingness to potentially improve the system. This includes improvements to direct service delivery as well as suggested improvement to the complaint processes.

With respect to direct service delivery, participants suggested that further integration of the differential response model of service delivery and an emphasis on a strengths based, solution focused approach could enhance service delivery and client satisfaction. Three participants suggested that better communication is required to improve service delivery. This was defined by individual participants as the need to

listen better, to offer better explanations and reasons and to help clients understand what is expected of them and why. It was suggested that workers could put these expectations in writing, in a way the client understands, that is clear and explicit and communicates all decisions and their rationale.

Another participant suggested we need to enhance our ability to engage clients and recognize what populations we do not do well with and develop better understanding of those populations, what is needed and what type of approach to take. One participant noted that child welfare staff need to be less rigid, more flexible and willing to change their minds in addition to acknowledging to clients that we are not always right. Participants also mentioned that an emphasis on other methods of alternative dispute resolution such as Family Group Decision Making and Mediation would be beneficial.

With respect to the complaint process, all participants agreed that the provision of a formal, provincial mechanism to discuss the process and outcomes could augment the ability of child welfare staff to learn from one another. It was also suggested that individual organizations need to prioritize time internally to review lessons learned through the process and translate that into changes and improvement in service delivery.

One participant explained:

"I think a process for sharing information provincially would be really useful. It's nice to hear what other people are experiencing. It is helpful to hear what other people have been experiencing and what kind of decisions they're getting from the CFSRB. I'd be happy to learn there was somebody out there in the Ministry who was interested in feedback in the process, monitoring that and actually willing to say yea you know what we as the Ministry we're prepared to hear that from you and maybe make amendments to it as we go."

All the participants noted the system would be improved if the CFSRB would follow their own rules. As well, it was expressed that the provision of a better definition of eligibility was essential to eliminate some jurisdiction hearings and allow clients to have more realistic expectations of the CFSRB can and cannot do.

Each participant felt the process should integrate the expectation that clients must first attempt to resolve their concern through informal process with the service team prior to seeking third party review. However, they also felt that if that process was unsatisfactory, clients should not have to file their complaint with the CFSRB, the agency should automatically apply on their behalf.

Finally, two participants felt that there should be follow up with clients who have been through the process so that outcomes can be examined to determine what has been successful and unsuccessful.

Based on my review of the literature, an essential component in working toward system improvements is the role management must accept to modify the work environment to welcome complaints and utilize them for learning so I was pleased that participants shared so many ideas and demonstrated a will to be part of the process.

POWER IMBALANCES

While the three tiered approached evokes a sense that somewhere in the process, there is the possibility that power can be shifted, my findings reveal numerous instances and examples where power imbalances already inherent in child welfare practice are upheld. In fact, participants alluded to the establishment of new power imbalances as a result of the process. Regardless of the level of approach, traditional patterns of interaction prevail and professional status dominates them, rendering clients virtually powerless in the process.

When speaking of *power* I use Burr's (2003) Foucaudian interpretation of power which is that power does not reside within any particular person or group, but rather exists within the socially constructed relations between and amongst people. From this perspective knowledge and power are linked. "If we think of knowledge as one possible account of events, but one which has received the stamp of 'truth', then to the extent that this version brings with it particular possibilities for acting in the world, it has power implications." (Burr, 2003, p70) The power differential at play between child welfare staff and clients relates to this and can only shift if we create space for inclusion of all perspectives and alternate versions of the truth.

Barriers

A common theme in the literature is that managers must be aware of barriers to filing a complaint if they are going to develop practices within the organization that are designed to overcome barriers. (Mulcahy & Tritter, 1998; Wood, 1996; Seneviratne & Cracknell, 1988; Allsop & Mulcahy, 1998; Xanthos, 2008; Kapp & Vela, 2008; Coyle, 1999; Preston-Shoot, 2001; Beardwood & Eyles, 1999). While my questions were not developed to generate a discussion about barriers faced by clients, I believed information of that nature would come to light during the interviews. There were two issues raised during the interviews related to barriers. These included the unfair expectation that clients must file a complaint in writing and that the process does not recognize other possible limitations including language and cultural barriers. Other significant factors mentioned in the literature related to barriers were not raised and I wonder if this relates to the promotion of the current policy as consistent, fair and accessible. It seems that the complaints managers are busy completing the numerous tasks related to the complaints process and may not have opportunity to give potential barriers much consideration.

Taking their best chance

Three of the six agencies represented by the participants have had more complaints go to the CFSRB than to the ICRP. As pointed out earlier, informal resolution between the service team and the client are not generally tracked or monitored at the senior level and therefore cannot be part of the comparison. Participants unanimously agreed that the informal process that was central to the former process was described as more likely to result in better outcomes as well as strengthening the working relationship through successful conflict resolution. When comparing the various levels at which a client may file a complaint, one participant captured the frustration of several with this comment.

> "People want to go to the top because that's where all the answer are. What folks don't realize is the top doesn't have any answers. The top won't even know who you are or what your case is about so you get really frustrated."

This statement reflects another tension in the role of a complaints manager and a notion shared by many participants, that while they recognize the responsibility of the role, they are also aware of the limits of what can be accomplished. Interestingly, while this was agreed upon by all participants, two participants made reference to putting themselves in the place of clients and what their expectations would be and how they would want to proceed.

> "But in a way you can see why they would go directly to the CFSRB because if I wanted to complain where would I think I had my best chances. Would it be insiders who are likely to not disagree with what they've done as an agency or with somebody who I think has got a bit of independence? I mean I'd go for the outside board."

My own experience as a supervisor during child welfare reform was that clients readily approached me as a supervisor for answers and decisions they believed their worker could not make on their own. Participants echoed this, commenting that during that time, in large part due to the great number of check in points between worker and supervisor, clients became adept at contacting the supervisor for decision making and quite readily contacted the supervisor with concerns or complaints. Clients recognized greater success and decision making was achieved by soliciting assistance from those in positions of power within the organization.

While the field has been *transforming* for almost two years, my experience is that workers have yet to make a full shift in thinking and intervening that is congruent with an anti-oppressive approach and as a result, clients are not yet realizing the potential benefits of such an approach. I believe this is a result of the sizeable learning curve staff are faced with including integration of new: standards of practice, service delivery approaches, client engagement strategies and recording practices. While they continue to

learn and integrate this new information, they are still faced with the reality of negative scrutiny, still work in a culture of stress and fear and as such, feel more safe and comfortable with risk management strategies.

I agree with participant views that the CFSRB is likely not meeting the needs or providing the nature and degree of results expected by clients. My findings suggest that the alternative approach, the ICRP may not yield any better results.

The 'Internal' Alternative

By legislative design, complaints managers are fairly high ranking CAS staff, most having substantial child welfare experience. The guidelines clearly indicate that complaints managers are to be staff that are neutral in relation to the file on which the complaint has been filed. This implies that the use of neutrality allows the process to be managed in an objective and fair manner. Participant responses regarding the problematic nature of their role are congruent with the literature. As complaints managers they juggle many tensions in their conflicting roles and expressed concern that it is difficult to be completely objective or neutral as suggested by the following comments.

> "One of the problems I find is you're trying to sometimes mediate or resolve issues but you're not really truly independent. I don't consider myself totally independent. I try to be objective."

> "Because, think about it, a board of director or myself can be influenced – like staff are going to come to me and argue their case ... I'm torn between loyalties... you really have to be impartial and independent."

Complaints managers must participate in a legalistic, socially organized process where they are responsible for balancing the needs of the organization with the clients' needs through the coordination of file reviews, organization of meetings and other related activities. While these activities may be procedurally efficient, it is the professional viewpoint that determines what is reviewed, who gets contacted, who is involved in the process and how matters are concluded. Whereas clients may feel empowered when they initiate the complaint process, the professionally dictated activities associated with the process diminish their control of the situation and quite likely disempowering them.

Although participants spoke of the difficulty and many tensions inherent in their role, they predominantly described the difficulty of trying to remain objective and neutral given conflicting positions. The literature agrees that the role is fraught with contradictions and tension and suggests this goes even deeper. Complaints managers spoke at length about their role and where there is room for them to influence the resolution process. There is some discussion in the literature that suggests that even when complaints managers believe they are being neutral given the design of the process,

they may privilege certain discussions and topics over others and they have the power to frame and control the content of the discussions which may reveal unspoken partiality for one normative framework over another. (Mulcahy, 2001) This particular piece of research sheds doubt over dispute processes that by design, appear to provide neutral complaints managers. Neutrality is considered to be synonymous with fairness and it raises the question as to whether or not anyone can be truly neutral or objective.

The expressed difficulty of being neutral and sensitive to the impact of the process on clients is echoed in research by Mulcahy and Lloyd-Bostock (1994) who believe it is challenging for an internal complaints manager to balance allegiance to their organization with redress for client needs. Preston-Shoot (2001) echoes this notion indicating that having to complain to an employee of the same organization about which you are complaining exacerbates an already unequal power relationship. While complaints managers face the difficult task of trying to balance the needs of both parties, clients must overcome obstacles to file a complaint in the first place.

> "This observation connects with the concept of internalized oppression. Those whose voice has been discounted and/or have lived in rule-bound institutions and/or been left with the impression they cannot effect change, may not believe that they can voice negative opinions." (Preston-Shoot, 2001, p. 708)

With this in mind, it is easy to understand why those who have regularly experienced oppression may find it difficult to initiate and follow through with the process.

> "Complaints need to be seen as opportunities to understand "clients" perspectives and needs, and to monitor service standards and outcomes, rather than as threats." (Preston-Shoot, 2001, p. 711)

Given that service providers generally do not welcome complaints, Preston-Shoot (2001) recommends that a designated complaint officer could be beneficial. This raises the question of who is in the best position to be a complaint manager in relation to other roles and responsibilities. Some participants suggested an external advocate might best fill the role.

Impact of power relations

Each of the participants made statements that suggest that part of their responsibility as a professional and as a complaint manager is to consider the impact of the process on clients. In general, the consensus among participants was that while the process meets some of its intended objectives; it falls short in other areas. In addition to statements of how the process further promotes what is already an adversarial relationship between organizations and clients, many posed questions that one should ask

themselves when proceeding with a complaint to ensure the organization is making every effort to address the clients concerns.

> "What's their point? Do they have a valid point? Did we do what we said we would do? Did we return their phone calls? How do we involve fathers? How do we explain our decisions, do we explain them in a way that's reasonable to people, that's understandable, that's not talking down to them but not using our lingo in a sense? Did we really listen to this person and understand their story?"

Participants expressed that the reflection instigated by such questions often occurs during the complaint process and would be valuable for workers to do on a regular basis, but especially when clients begin to suggest they have a concern about services.

Participants identified how time consuming, frustrating and fruitless the process can be for clients. They took this further and offered a description of some child welfare practices, questioned how these practices negatively impact clients and often lead to dissatisfaction and sometimes complaints.

> "Clients get really frustrated that workers don't listen to them. No one gets back to them and workers don't hear what their issue is – no one really explains the system – why they're involved – when a client is trying to find out what is happening – instead they're just being told – do a,b,c."

With respect to their role as complaints managers and their attempts to mitigate the impact on clients' one participant noted:

> "This system promotes adversity – so it needs objective views of what is happening – and that's not because one side is wrong or right – but sometimes another set of eyes can help with the problem solving by looking at a situation differently – and because workers are busy – they don't sometimes see the bigger picture and the impact – they get bogged down – it's not a criticism – but sometimes you need a process that is fair – clients rights aren't trampled."

Back to the beginning

While one of the intended outcomes of the new complaint mechanism was to ensure consistency across the province, it was evident that within my sample this has not been achieved. All six participants mentioned that while the legislation provided a framework within which to manage client complaints, there is space for interpretation. This point resurfaced during discussions about the definition and conceptualization of what constitutes a complaint. This is an important point given how expressions of dissatisfaction are defined determines how they will be processed.   It was evident that

while there are similarities amongst participant experiences, one consistent definition does not exist.

> "So in a way its back to that old question when is a complaint a complaint? When is it just part of the work, and conflict resolution is part of every day work, especially in child welfare."

In defining their role, the concept of interpretation was also phrased as the use of discretion and judgement in determining if communication from a client is intended to be a formal complaint or an expression of dissatisfaction that can be resolved through other means. While judgment plays a role, participants expressed the difficulty in making a determination given the nature of the work of child welfare.

> "I think it's very difficult to draw the line, even now, between what is a complaint that requires a formal process as opposed to a problem that needs to be solved in somebody's business. I mean, virtually all cases will always have contentious issues in them, things that need to be solved, matters that need people to sort of work together to find a solution, its very difficult to know when do you actually cross the line and you're now into an official complaint procedure."

Child welfare workers are often the first point of contact for a complaint and they may use their position of power to reinforce themselves as the legitimate knower. They can decide not to inform the client of the complaint process and they can contribute to incorrect perceptions as they may misinterpret or reframe the client's concerns in discussions with their supervisor. Another area where power plays a role is that workers are often better able to articulate their position given the extent of their experience in doing so. Clients are more likely to communicate from an emotional position. Workers also have a professional process of case recording and supervision through which they can formulate and polish their assessment and account of the situation while the client is often limited to the use of memory or notes they make. These are important issues to remember when considering what knowledge is perceived as credible or who provides the best evidence in support of their position.

Selick, Delaney and Brownlee (2002, p.494) make the point that "Shielding our knowledge from inquiry and critique by claiming authority for it, mystifies our work and makes us less accountable, not more.". They also support the point that we privilege our actions over those of our clients through our documentation processes. (2002, p. 494)Child welfare staff are not infallible and they must allow scrutiny and interrogation of their knowledge and practices to be truly accountable to their clients. This cannot be achieved without organizations offering and valuing opportunities for self reflection and consultation with colleagues. (Ruch, 2005) While a client complaint process compels organizations to look at their actions, I worry that too often the actions of the individual worker become the focus rather than considering that those actions are a product of the system and organizational culture.

The everyday action of child welfare workers serves to maintain inequalities and we "reproduce social injustice in and through how we practice". (Strega, 2007, p.73) To practice child welfare from an anti-oppressive perspective blame must be shifted from the individual to the structural and societal inequalities and injustices. Workers must be aware of cultural and class biases that dominate the process and these are used to justify practices which can be oppressive. This requires reflexivity which is described as,

> "Reflexivity is about continually thinking through how our values, beliefs, location and social difference from clients, as well as our access to various forms of power, affect client-worker interactions." (Strega, 2007, p.77)

DISCUSSION

The intent of this study was to examine the experience and practices of child welfare complaints managers in Ontario. I undertook this study from a critical approach recognizing that the current mechanism has the appearance of being an effective means of holding child welfare authorities accountable but wanting to uncover what is not visible in terms of how societal structures and social relations impact and influence the process. In the spirit of a critical and structural approach my intent was to uncover the structural and systemic processes where the bias in social relations is towards the interests of the dominant.

Summary of Findings

The client complaint mechanism as designed by the state is procedurally driven compelling child welfare agencies to spend significant time ensuring compliance with the rules and regulations. Whereas the process appears to have been designed under political pressure for the state to demonstrate that it holds Children's Aid Societies accountable, the development and implementation of the policy is not linked or connected with other accountability mechanisms. The new policy does not include any process for provincial review of outcomes or resolutions and thereby does not provide any opportunity to inform practice in a broad sense or to examine the structural forces that lead to client complaints. There are only informal avenues for discussion of how the policy is working.

With ongoing time pressures and constraints in child welfare, often the only opportunity for review of service delivery is at the point of a complaint or service audit. As such, there is little discussion in the field about client complaints and while organizations continue to *transform* there is limited opportunity to reflect on themes that may be emerging from complaints that have been heard. One implication for practice resulting from my research is the need for organizations to make time for reflection both to evaluate the policy but also to examine potential outcomes that stem from current practices. This reflection must also include recognition that systemic issues influenced by outside forces and the role of the state contribute to a work environment that often generates dissatisfaction.

Although the current policy arose from Transformation legislation, my analysis demonstrates that it contradicts the spirit and intention Transformation as the focus remains on 'process' rather than 'outcomes' for clients. The structure of the process contradicts the rhetoric of empowering clients and hearing their voices which may be stifled in the process. My study highlights the tensions between what Transformation is intended to do and how the processes created within it challenge the philosophy upon which it was established.

While the current client complaint process is very bureaucratic and there are elements outside the control of participants, it was described as not being completely prescriptive, leaving room for interpretation and input by individual organizations. The system was described by participants has having some strengths over the former process but some specific limitations and challenges were identified. Participants expressed a significant willingness and desire to ameliorate the negative impact on clients through their own involvement in the process.

Participants identified the client's ability to take complaints directly to the CFSRB and bypass the service team as the primary limitation of the current system. The process continues to be professionally driven, litigious, and time consuming resulting in little evidence of satisfactory outcomes. As such the process is not responsive to client needs and in fact may create unrealistic expectations that cannot be met when seeking resolution of their concerns.

Connecting Literature to my Findings

The literature reviewed offers examples of how complaints are defined and categorized, the effectiveness of a variety of complaint mechanisms, and the impact of power relations related to credibility, barriers and expectations. Both informal and formal processes are discussed and the perspective of professionals and service users is evident. A common theme in the findings is how complaints processes challenge professional identity and expertise and how that impacts responses and resolutions.

The research also emphasizes the degree to which managing service users complaints is a difficult task. It highlights the fact that a good complaint process that is well perceived by both professionals and services users would encourage openness for service user redress, promotion of service user satisfaction as well as providing information to managers with respect to service delivery and accountability. While the findings in the literature on complaints are congruent with many of my findings, I suggest there are implications for future research. Specifically, are the findings from other service sectors relevant to child welfare complaints and are there intricacies within child welfare that would shed a different light on the processes and outcomes? It raises the question of how previous research can be utilized to influence future research in child welfare.

Macro Level: Policy Implications

There is no doubt that a client complaint mechanism is essential as an avenue of conflict resolution for recipients of child welfare services, particularly those services which are involuntary and may lead to dissatisfaction.

The literature and my findings support the use of informal mechanisms where possible and desirable on the part of the client. A complaints process that begins with the

service team holds the possibility of resolving complaints more quickly and can contribute to the development of a better working relationship between worker and client as they work through the process. It may even afford workers the opportunity to truly see the client's perspective and change decisions or interventions based on the inclusion of a different perspective rather than having decisions enforced through an external body. Such an informal process offers better opportunity for reciprocal relationships, does not require legal input and can be fluid and flexible eliminating the need for regimented procedures. This type of process may well be more comfortable for the client and holds the possibility of disrupting the power imbalances if done with a view towards doing so.

While the potential benefits of an informal process are attainable, it is more difficult to determine if such a process can lead to distinguishing and addressing organizational and structural factors that contribute to dissatisfaction and client complaints. In order to achieve any gains related to this, child welfare staff and service users would have to collaborate and identify larger issues that are outside the control of the individual organization. For example, a client complaint that was reported by each participant was that workers do not return telephone calls of clients. This raises the question of how workers function and find the time to return telephone calls when carrying high caseloads. If this issue is explored through an informal complaint, would clients understand how case load size can interfere with best practice and how could that information be effectively utilized to examine the role of the state?

My findings give rise to the question of whether or not the internal formal process and the external third party review can effectively and satisfactorily address clients concerns. Working from the assumption that neutrality and objectivity contribute to a process which affords opportunity for better outcomes for the complainant, then the policy should remove the process from the hands of anyone with a vested interest. One participant suggested the development of regional branch offices of the CFSRB with changes to the role and function of CFSRB members. I would suggest the membership could include client representatives or advocates whose role could include assisting clients in preparing to bring forward their complaint or to conduct full investigations into the complaints that are filed. The process could possibly be more client friendly and assist in establishing more realistic expectations of what can be achieved.

The second implication of my study for policy relates to my concern that within the current policy, there is no formal mechanism of review to evaluate the effectiveness of the process. If the process is truly intended to ensure accountability and in effect, meet client needs, some type of review and evaluation mechanism is essential. This review should focus on both how the processes in place are working and the nature of outcomes resulting from these processes. This could be achieved through consultation and feedback from major stakeholders, especially clients and child welfare staff at all levels. Feedback of child welfare staff could be coordinated through the OACAS who explore and examine provincial issues on behalf of the membership of all 53 Children's Aid

Societies. Client feedback and consultation could be done at the local level by each agency as well as at a broader level through Ministry initiatives.

Such a review would provide data to support changes to the policy and subsequent processes and would also offer an opportunity to see emergent themes and utilize this information for quality assurance and service delivery purposes. It would also be a strong move towards enhancing the credibility of the state and individual organizations as it would serve to examine system issues related to client complaints rather than simply focusing on individual issues at each organization. It could assist in the development of a reporting structure that demonstrates care and concern about the ends rather than just the means.

Micro Level: Practice Implications

This research has endeavoured to demonstrate that well intentioned front line workers, supervisors and complaints managers do not intentionally use their power to create an environment that diminishes the ability of clients to have their voice heard. Yet, this occurs on a regular basis and is often at the heart of client complaints. There are several means through which child welfare practices could begin to mitigate the negative impact of this reality for clients for practice development and improvement all of which are related to organizational values and culture.

Agencies need to illicit client feedback to determine from the client's perspective what is working well and in what areas improvements could be made. This could be done through exit interviews upon closure of a file, surveys during the course of intervention and a general welcoming of client input and feedback in the daily work of service staff. This could also be accomplished through the development of client advocacy groups or committees. Providing some structure in seeking feedback could also provide a side benefit of helping clients complain better by helping them to understand how the system works and why we respond the way we do. Seeking regular feedback could serve the purpose of demonstrating a willingness to open ourselves up to scrutiny and possibly resulting in making our actions and decisions more visible to clients. Gathering the information is insufficient and organizations would need to be committed to demonstrating how this feedback has been incorporated into our service delivery. We place many brochures in our waiting areas, including brochures about a client's right to file a complaint. We could easily produce pamphlets or handouts indicating what we have learned from our client's feedback and how we have integrated that into our work.

Second, agencies need to develop a *just* culture that constructs appropriate conditions to deliver service in a more flexible and respectful manner. Such an environment would be accountable for staff actions but not punitive when errors or misjudgments come to light. Such a system would recognize the context of structural issues related to individual worker actions.

One aspect of a just environment would be where workers could trust that they could provide feedback to the organization about potential problems with the work, the system, and management styles without facing retribution. In effect this could provide opportunity shift power imbalances within the organization where front line staff are typically those with the least amount of power. If this shift of power could be modeled within the organization, this may translate to workers having a better ability to share power with clients. While all staff could contribute to the integration of this, it definitely needs to be embraced and approached at the top of the management structure to be successful.

Another important aspect evident in a just environment is that management would need to take the lead in instituting an approach to internal policy development and service delivery that strives for equity, equality, inclusion and fairness for all individuals within the organization. Achieving this internally may go a long way towards realizing similar benefits in our work with clients. One example of how this could be implemented would be through a case consultation model and group decision making process where all opinions are welcomed and valued and staff become accustomed to opening their work to scrutiny of others. This could then lend itself to workers developing better working relationship with clients as they approach the work from a position of collaboration toward common goals where both the opinion of the client and the worker is valued.

This type of vision requires a champion at the top of the organization's power structure to work collaboratively with all staff to create the shared vision and model the behaviour and actions they wish to see between supervisors and staff and between staff and service users. This type of environment may assist us in communicating better with our clients and offering clients opportunity to be at the table when making decisions, not just when they have a complaint about service. This could increase the chance of developing better working relationships which in turn can lead to better outcomes for clients.

Developing Allies

Ultimately an effective client complaint process in an ideal world involves having ideal organizational conditions where complaints are welcomed and viewed as an opportunity to improve service delivery. This includes having ideal conditions for clients to express their concerns which involve anticipation of potential barriers to filing a complaint and working towards breaking down these barriers. In an ideal system there would be mechanisms in place to learn from what we already know such as the significance of good communication in the development of trust and respect. Ultimately we need to recognize how the bureaucratic structures render clients powerless when professional positions are privileged and we need to interrogate our own role in this through regular reflection.

The development of allies within the field is vital to initiate a united approach to making changes in the system. As I concluded each of my interviews I discussed with each participant my interest in continuing to move forward with my ideas about the complaints policy after completion of my degree. In my experience, successful projects involve working collaboratively rather than in isolation and those in similar positions at other Children's Aid Societies are generally very open to sharing experiences and ideas.

In an effort to increase knowledge and develop better practices with respect to client complaints I would like to initiate a process of pulling together others with an interest in this area. The format could be such that we would start with a small group of interested partners and then gradually increase the size of the group as we progress. This would ensure that the initial group is small enough to allow input and discussion as well as having participants at the table that have an interest in the topic and who are interested in moving forward ideas. As ideas and discussions are generated, others would be invited into the group to participate. Many of the participants expressed an interest in discussing these issues more formally on a local regional or provincial level and I believe a small group of this nature could be easily and quickly formed.

Future Research

The findings of this research suggest there are several implications for future research. As I have indicated, child welfare client complaints are not conceptualized well in the literature and I've made links to findings through the use of other research related to complaints in community and social service settings. The commonality across service sectors is the bureaucratic organization of most services, where clients are positioned makes them powerless in these settings and this impacts their ability to complain. Clients are often constructed as bad or inadequate parents and this affects how their complaints are perceived and resolved. In addition to research exploring the possibilities of why child welfare client complaints are not discussed in the literature, further research is required to determine if findings in other service sectors are truly relevant to child welfare or if there are other intricacies and factors that need to be considered.

As I have already pointed out, this project has considered the perspective of only one portion of one population of stakeholders related to client complaints. The issue of client complaints could be explored from the perspective of service users in general, service users who have filed a complaint, front line staff, supervisors, government staff as well as other community stake holders. The inclusion of these other population through further research would serve to broaden and enhance the scope of exploration and provide a more in depth and rich understanding.

Additional research to explore the feasibility of policy and structural changes to support improvements in the process would be beneficial in determining if there is a will

to evaluate and revise current policy as well as determining what resources would be required to facilitate this.   The initial stage of this research could include exploring the information, knowledge or data that would be required to support the infrastructure to make this happen. It could also serve the purpose of initiating conversations in the field with the goal of determining what type of evidence is required to demonstrate that changes to the process and system are required.

Finally, further research could attempt to quantify the volume of complaints to determine the extent of the issue; determine what is required to develop a just environment in a child welfare organization and how this might be achieved. It could also be used to determine the general areas of concern for clients so that structural, legislative, organizational and individual worker considerations can be explored and analyzed. Additionally it could serve the purpose of exploring the intended purpose of complaints processes in child welfare and what function they can serve.

Continuing Developments

In an interesting twist and to demonstrate the timeliness of this research, on August 25, 2008 the OACAS released information to the member organizations about changes to the CFSRB process. A letter was sent to the membership following a meeting between OACAS staff and CFSRB staff and Board members.   The letter advises the membership that CFSRB staff recognize the positive roles of society staff as they work to find creative solutions to complex issues related to client complaints and that the CFSRB estimates that over 60% of the cases that are brought to their attention are resolved without going to a Board Hearing.

The letter introduces the CFSRB's new Settlement Facilitation Process for applications under Section 68 of the CFSA, those that pertain to this research. This new process is intended to assist clients and Children's Aid Societies in resolving disputes with the assistance of a Board member as a facilitator. The process is described as voluntary and will be offered once a determination has been made that the complaint is eligible for review. The Board anticipates this new informal process will result in more timely resolution without proceeding to a full Hearing. It is suggested that this informal process may contribute to more creative resolutions and will result in a more positive environment that can enhance the future working relationship between clients and child welfare staff. This process is now being introduced and will be reviewed in six months.

The introduction of this process raises a number of additional questions but especially: what prompted the development of yet another layer of resolution; who will be conducting the review and will it focus on process or outcomes; and finally, whose interests are truly being served by it.

CONCLUSION

Through my research into the experiences of six complaints managers from Southern Ontario Children's Aid Societies as well as my review of current policy and related literature, I have expanded my understanding of the current policy. I've also begun to uncover and identify a number of related issues, provoking many unanswered questions.

It is important to recognize that while many of the bureaucratic, professionally driven procedures that stem from the current policy are conducted in accordance with the legislation, they are also carried out in an environment of high accountability, stress and fear. Complaints managers are challenged to balance the needs and well being of the organization and staff with the needs of the complainant. While the level of client satisfaction at the conclusion of complaints has not been ascertained, evidence suggests that agency practices are often geared toward the primary objective of preventing potential organizational liability, while still trying to be accountable to the complainant.

The reality is that many child welfare clients are from vulnerable, marginalized populations that don't hold much power. Given this, what are the consequences for any CAS at the conclusion of any single complaint and why do organizations feel such a strong need to self protect?

Child welfare agencies have been identified in the literature as having a culture of fear and stress. Anyone who has worked in child welfare can attest to this fact. The sense of fear and stress is heightened when someone threatens to make a complaint or a complaint is filed. Child welfare is highly accountable work that is mandated, funded and constantly reviewed by the government. Those in child welfare face constant scrutiny and criticism. Much of the work is done with involuntary clients who are anxious to have their files closed. From the public's perspective we are often either too intrusive in the private lives of families or, when tragedy strikes, we are not intrusive enough. The media sheds a persistently negative light on the work of child welfare, reporting examples of how the system fails to protect children or violates the rights of parents and caregivers.

Not only do we face the criticism of our clients and the public, we are not always well regarded by other social workers. It can seem to be a thankless job with this constant barrage of negativity and it is therefore not surprising that we turn to self governance and self regulation. Defensiveness and self preservation are normal reactions and become second nature in the context of this unhealthy environment.

The relative powerlessness of clients gets overshadowed by the unconscious need to shield ourselves and our work from further disapproval. It becomes difficult for child welfare staff to think through the steps necessary to facilitate a more inclusive process. It

is difficult to set aside the fear and stress to make time for reflection and it is easier to follow clear procedures to get through yet one more task in an already hectic schedule. The system must find a way to overcome all of this and shift the emphasis away from a focus on process, to focus on results. Power imbalances need to be acknowledged and challenged, not only between professionals and clients, but within the professional system as well. Rather than a focus on individual actions and behaviours, structural and systemic issues must be interrogated and must become the focus of change.

Service recipients have a right to raise concerns and complaints about service delivery. The child welfare *system* needs to ensure that these concerns are taken seriously, that the input is valued and that it does not erect barriers to prevent this from occurring. Inclusive practices must be developed that demonstrate satisfactory outcomes are desired and achievable. The value of truly 'hearing' complaints is that we open ourselves to the possibility of improving practice and being more inclusive of client voices.

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Appendix A – Ethics Proposal

McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
FACULTY AND GRADUATE
Application to Involve Human Participants in Research
[Behavioural / Non- Medical]

Please refer to the McMaster University Research Ethics Guidelines and Researcher's Handbook, found at prior to completion and submission of this application. If you have questions about or require assistance respecting completion of this form, please contact the Ethics Secretariat at ext. 23142, or ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

You can LOCK the form to CHECK the CHECKBOXES. If you don't see the icon of the LOCK – go to VIEW - TOOLBARS – FORMS. Make sure FORMS is checked then you will see the icon of the LOCK.

to the Ethics Secretariat, Office of Research Services, Room 305/H Gilmour Hall, ext. 23142, ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca. If you want to change a previously approved protocol, please complete the "Change Request" form.

| Date: March 24, 2008 | Application Status: New ☒   Change ☐   Renewal ☐ | Protocol#: |

<Helpful Hints> Check all Bold Blue hypertext links for help on completing this form

SECTION A – GENERAL INFORMATION

1.   **Title of the Research Project:** Client Complaints in Child Welfare: Lessons Learned

2.   **Investigator Information** (This form not to be completed by **Faculty of Health Science researchers**)

	Name	Dept./Address	Phone No.	E-Mail
Faculty Investigator				
Faculty Co-Investigator(s)				
▓▓▓▓▓▓	▓▓▓▓▓▓	▓▓▓▓▓▓	▓▓▓▓▓▓	▓▓▓▓▓▓
Student Investigator(s)	Julie Horning	Stoney Creek, ON	905-664-1713	Julie.horning@hamiltonccas.on.ca
Student Faculty Supervisor	Sheila Sammon	School of Social Work	905-525-9140 Ext. 23780	sammon@mcmaster.ca

3.   **Proposed Date** (a) of commencement: May 1, 2008   (b) of completion: August 2008

4.   **Indicate the location(s) where the research will be conducted:**

McMaster University   ☐
Hospital   ☐ Specify Site
Community   ☐ Specify Site
Other·   ☒ Specify Site Children's Aid Societies in the province of Ontario

5.   **Other Research Ethics Board Approval**

(a) Is this a multi-centred study?   ☐ **Yes** ☒ **No**
(b) Has any other institutional Ethics Board approved this project ?   ☐ **Yes** ☒ **No**
(c) If Yes, there is no need to provide further details about the protocol **at this time,** provided that
all of the following information is provided:
        Title of the project approved elsewhere:
        Name of the Other Institution:
        Name of the Other Board: ⁖ Date of the Decision:
        A contact name and phone number for the other Board:
        A copy of the application to the other institution together with **all** accompanying
        materials
        A copy of the clearance certificate / approval   ⁞

**If all of the above information cannot be provided, please complete the balance of
this application.**

(d) Will any other Research Ethics Board be asked for approval?   ☐ **Yes** ☒ **No**
If yes, please specify

6.   **Level of the Project**

☐ Faculty Research   ☐ Post-Doctoral   ☐ PhD.
☒ Masters   ☐ Faculty/Hospital Research
☐ Other (specify)

7.   **Funding of the Project**

(a) Is this project currently being funded   ☐ **Yes** ☒ **No**
(b) If **No,** is funding being sought   ☐ **Yes** ☒ **No**
(c) Period of Funding: From   To:
(d) Agency or Sponsor (funded or applied for)

☐ CIHR   ☐ NSERC   ☐ SSHRC   ☐ ARB

☐ NIH   ☐ Other (specify):

8.   **Conflict of Interest**

(a)   Will the researcher(s), members of the research team, and/or their partners or
        immediate family members:

        (i) receive any personal benefits (for example a financial benefit such as
        remuneration, intellectual property rights, rights of employment, consultancies,
        board membership, share ownership, stock options etc.) as a result of or being
        connected to this study?   ☐ **Yes**   ☒ **No**

(ii) if **Yes**, please describe the benefits below. (Do not include conference and travel expense coverage, possible academic promotion, or other benefits which are integral to the conduct of research generally).

N.B. *If you are using Microsoft VISTA and Word 2007 you may experience difficulty filling in the Tables on this form. If that is case, please contact our office, because we don't know a fix for that. You might have to use the PDF version of the application form*

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(b)   Describe any restrictions regarding access to or disclosure of information (during or at the end of the study) that the sponsor has placed on the investigator(s).

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SECTION B – SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH – *Please be as Clear and Concise as Possible*

9.   **Rationale**

Describe the purpose and background rationale for the proposed project, as well as the hypotheses(is)/research questions to be examined.

As part of the Child Welfare Transformation Agenda, the Ministry of Children and Youth Services established a provincial Client Complaint Resolution mechanism that was implemented in December 2006.   The new policy was intended to provide service users with an accessible, consistent and neutral process for resolving concerns and complaints about services sought and received.   Each Children's Aid Society is responsible for advising clients of the complaint process and must make available and provide a copy of the Ministry's pamphlet entitled **"Do you have a complaint about services you have sought or received from an Ontario Children's Aid Society?"**

Prior to implementation, each of Ontario's 53 Children's Aid Society developed and implemented their own policy and procedures for the management of client complaints. These procedures typically involved having the client complete and submit an agency form outlining their concerns, indicate who they have spoken to and how they have tried to resolve their concerns as well as indicating what resolution they were seeking. The preferred method of resolution was between worker and client with the client accessing the supervisor, manager or director if they were dissatisfied with a response at any level. Previous legislation provided for client concerns to be reviewed by the Executive Director, Board of Directors or the Director of the Ministry of Children and Youth Services.

Under section 68 of the Child and Family Services Act, amended in November 2006, the Child and Family Services Review Board was established as the independent body responsible for reviewing complaints related to Children's Aid Society services and decisions. The amended legislation allows for a review by this external Review Board at

any time. However, the legislation specifically states that it is preferable for clients to first attempt to resolve their concerns through the internal review process of the Children's Aid Society. Each Children's Aid Society received guidelines from the Ministry, for developing internal review procedures which includes preferred practices, time frames, documentation and the development of an internal review panel.

In conducting my initial literature review regarding organizational complaints procedures, I have found literature related to complaints in medicine, psychiatry, nursing, community mental health services and other generic community services, but have yet to find literature specific to client complaints in child welfare.

The purpose of this research is to contribute to the knowledge of client complaints in child welfare through an exploration and comparison of past and present policy and practices.

Research Question: What has been the experience of Children's Aid Society Directors and Managers of Services who have been using the client complaint policy implemented in November 2006, as a means of receiving, reviewing and responding to the complaints and concerns of service users?

10.   **Methodology**

Describe sequentially, and in detail, all procedures in which the research participants will be involved (e.g. paper and pencil tasks, interviews, surveys, questionnaires, physical assessments, physiological tests, time requirements etc.)

N.B. Attach a copy of all questionnaire(s), interview guides or other test instruments.

This is a qualitative research study and as such, I will conduct semi-structured interviews with each research participant. Although I will offer to interview participants in a location of their choice, I expect that most interviews will be conducted in participants' offices. While I am offering complete confidentiality in terms of who agrees to participate, I will warn them of the possibility that their participation in the study may be revealed should they choose for the interview to take place at their place of employment.

I expect each interview will take from one to two hours and will be scheduled at a time and location of their choice.

I will audio tape each interview as well as taking and using handwritten field notes during the interview process. I have attached a tentative interview guide to indicate the areas I wish to cover in each interview. A semi structured interview will allow me to ask other

questions where necessary and my handwritten notes will be used as a prompt throughout the interview. I will leave room for the participants to raise questions.

I will make handwritten field notes following each interview to capture my immediate reactions and observations related to the specific participant interview. I will then type these notes afterward and plan to reread my notes frequently and record ideas generated by these notes in addition to transcripts.

I will hire someone to transcribe the interviews and expect to have these transcripts done as I complete each interview. I will give advance direction to the transcriber as to how I would like the transcripts to be edited (for example removing crutch words, false starts and words such as uh, um and ah). When using direct quotations from the transcripts for my written work, I will indicate if the quote has been edited for the sake of clarity.

I will then review each transcript and my field notes and use rudimentary descriptive coding techniques to identify general themes that emerge from the data for analysis. After all of the interviews have been conducted I will use the initial codes to break the data down into even greater detail to allow for further analysis of conceptual categories, emergent themes, relationships and patterns. I expect to use analytic memo writing to document my thoughts and ideas as I code the data, to track the location where particular themes occur in the data as well as to link the data to the literature I have reviewed.

11.   **Experience**

What is your experience with this kind of research?

I have no previous experience with this kind of research. However, I have 19 years experience as a social worker in child welfare and as such have extensive interviewing experiencing. In this independent project, I will be consulting with my faculty supervisor for ongoing advice and supervision.

12.   **Participants**

Describe the number of participants and any salient characteristics (such as age, gender, location, affiliation, etc.)

I expect to interview between 4 and 6 participants. I am specifically targeting Children's Aid Society staff that are in a Director of Services or Manager of Services role. I have chosen individuals in these positions as they have responsibility to address and manage client complaints. And have the specific experiences and information that I will be seeking.

Staff in these roles may be male or female and generally have a great deal of child welfare experience. Most would have at some point been in the role of a child protection worker and child protection supervisor. They have access to file information and in particular, client complaints. Many Directors and Managers of Services also have overall responsibility for the management of supervisory staff and as such have access to a greater knowledge of complex case situations and outcomes as a result of clients having lodged a complaint.

13.   **Recruitment**
       Describe how and from what sources the participants will be recruited, including any relationship
       between the investigator(s) and participant(s) (e.g. instructor-student; manager-employee).

       N.B. Attach a copy of any poster(s), advertisement(s) or letter(s) to be used for recruitment.

I will begin by contacting Executive Directors of Children's Aid Societies in Ontario to advise them of my research project and request their assistance in recruitment if they are in agreement with their staff participating. My first contact will be via email where I will introduce myself and briefly introduce my project. I will also attach the Letter of Information/Consent as they may wish to forward my initial email directly to relevant staff. I will advise them that I plan to follow up with them by telephone and the approximate period of time within which I plan to make the follow up telephone call.

I will then contact them by telephone within a predetermined time frame to ask if they will agree to share this information with Managers and Directors of Service for possible participation. I will determine if they have any questions or need clarification about my study. I will ask them to assure potential participants that the Executive Director will not know of their participation. My contact information as well as contact information for my Faculty Advisor is documented on the Letter of Information/Consent and Executive Directors who agree to pass this on will be asked to have their staff contact me directly.

I will assure the Executive Director that all participants as well as the organization they are affiliated with will remain confidential. I will also advise the Executive Director that I will not advise them of the participation of their staff. I will offer each Executive Director a summary of my results at the conclusion of my study.

When I receive telephone calls from potential participants, I will thank them for their interest, provide a brief overview of my study and outline the process I will undertake with each participant with respect to consent and confidentiality, time commitment and expected time frame for conducting interviews. I will review the Letter of Information/Consent with them and offer them an opportunity to ask questions that will assist them in making decisions about their participation. If they wish to participate I will arrange an interview with them at a time and location of their choice and convenience. I will also advise them that I will call them in advance of our interview to confirm these details.

14.   **Compensation**   **Yes**   **No**

    (a) Will participants receive compensation for participation?   ☐   ☒

                                     Financial   ☐   ☒

                                     In-Kind   ☐   ☒

Other (specify)
(b) If yes, please provide details.

There will be no compensation provided to any of the participants.

    (c) If participants choose to withdraw, how will you deal with compensation?

This is not applicable as there will be no compensation.

SECTION C – DESCRIPTION OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

15.   **Possible Risks**

    1. Indicate if the participants might experience any of the following risks:

    a) Physical risk (including any bodily contact or administration of any substance)?   ☐ Yes ☒ No

    b) Psychological risks (including feeling demeaned, embarrassed worried or upset)?   ☒ Yes ☐ No

    c) Social risks (including possible loss of status, privacy and / or reputation)?   ☒ Yes ☐ No

    d) Is there any deception involved?   ☐ Yes ☒ No

    e) Are any possible risks to participants greater than those the participants might encounter in their everyday life?   ☐ Yes ☒ No

    2. If you answered **Yes** to any of a – e above, please explain the risk.

The possible psychological risks in this research project are relatively low. There is some risk that participants may suffer minimal psychological risk such as embarrassment or discomfort. For example, in reviewing their organizational processes and experiences with me, they may experience embarrassment in sharing information which suggests service delivery or staffing concerns. They may feel discomfort with my questions, in particular if they believe I may be critical of the practices within their organization. The possible social risks in this research project are also relatively low. There is some potential that given the relatively small size of the child welfare community, participants

may be identifiable by what they say, or the accounts they provide. This could potentially put them at some risk at their place of employment if their Executive Director thinks they have been critical of the agency. The other possible social risk relates to the fact that I am a colleague they may already know and we may have other professional contact following this study.

3. Describe how the risks will be managed (including an explanation as to why alternative approaches could not be used).

In an effort to minimize these risks, I will provide them with the interview guide well in advance of our scheduled interview in an attempt to diminish any discomfort they may have related to the interview. I will also express my hope that they will share both positive and negative experiences with me. I will advise them that their information will be held in the strictest of confidence. I will advise them that I do not expect to hear confidential and potentially identifying information about clients which should minimize this risk. I will also advise them that I will delete or change any potentially identifiable information they provide. I will also warn participants that I will make every effort to protect their identity but they may want to exercise care in what they reveal to me.

I will remind them that they do not need to answer questions that make them uncomfortable or that they do not want to answer.

I will also advise them that I will not discuss their participation with anyone and will make no future reference to their participation in any professional contact we may have.

16.   **Possible Benefits**

Discuss any potential direct benefits to the participants from their involvement in the project. Comment on the (potential) benefits to (the scientific community) / society that would justify involvement of participants in this study.

A potential direct benefit is that in reviewing internal practices and process related to client complaints with me the participants may spend focused time analyzing their own current practice which they may otherwise not have opportunity to do. This could benefit them in seeing themes or difficulties they might not otherwise pay attention to allowing them to utilize this information for transformation and change within their own individual practice and organization.

The child welfare community may benefit from the contribution this research may make to the understanding of client complaints procedures and outcomes. The current provincial client complaint mechanism provides no formal opportunity for shared discussions across the province. A possible benefit of this research is that I will be

> gathering information from several organizations which will provide an opportunity to share information that can then provide a broader perspective provincially.

SECTION D – THE INFORMED CONSENT PROCESS

17. **The Consent Process** (link to sample consent form:

  Describe the process that the investigator(s) will be using to obtain informed consent, including a description of who will be obtaining informed consent and a script of what they will say, if anything.

> I will provide a copy of the Information and Consent form to each Executive Director to share with potential participants.
>
> Once contacted by willing participants, I will review this form with them over the telephone and determine if they have any questions. I will also offer them the opportunity to speak with my Faculty Supervisor if they wish.
>
> If they agree to participate in my study, I will have them sign this consent form at the time of the scheduled interview.

  Indicate how consent will be documented. Attach a copy of the Letter of Information if applicable and the consent form if applicable. If there will be no written consent, explain why not and describe the alternative means that will be used to document consent. Attach the content of any telephone script that will be used in the consent process (if applicable)

  For information about the required elements in the letter of information and the consent form, please refer to "**Instructions for the Preparation of an Information Letter/Consent Form**":

> I have attached a copy of the Information and Consent form.

18. **Consent by an authorized party**

  If the participants are minors or for other reasons are not competent to consent, describe the proposed alternate source of consent, including any permission / information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the alternate consent.

> This is not applicable.

19. **Alternatives to prior individual consent**

If obtaining written documentation of participant consent prior to commencement of the research project is not appropriate for this research, please explain and provide details for a proposed alternative consent process.

My participants will all be professionals within the child welfare community. I believe it is sufficient to review their consent in advance via telephone and have them sign the consent form when we meet. I expect to call each participant prior to our scheduled interview to confirm they are still in agreement with participating in my study.

20.   **Debriefing (Participant feedback)**

Explain what feedback/ information will be provided to the participants after participation in the project. (For example, a more complete description of the purpose of the research, access to the results of the research).

N.B. Please provide a copy of the written debriefing form, if applicable.

I will provide each participant with my contact information including a telephone number where I can be reached and my email address. I will advise them that I expect to conclude my research by September 2008 at which time I will provide them with access to the results if they wish.

I will offer to send a summary of the results of my study to each Executive Director I contact in my recruitment phase. With expressed interest, I will forward a summary to them at the conclusion of the study.

21.   **Participant withdrawal**

a) Describe how the participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project. Outline the procedures which will be followed to allow the participants to exercise this right.

The letter of Information and Consent clearly outlines the participant's ability to withdraw at any time. I will contact each participant in advance of our scheduled interview to determine if they are still interested in participating. At the time of each interview I will again review their right to withdraw at any point.

b) Indicate what will be done with the participant's data and any consequences which withdrawal might have on the participant, including any effect that withdrawal may have respecting participant compensation.

The participants will be advised there are no consequences should they choose to withdraw at any point in the study. I will advise them that the information gathered from them, should they withdraw, will be destroyed and not be used in my study.

---

c) If the participants will not have the right to withdraw from the project, please explain.

This is not applicable.

SECTION E – CONFIDENTIALITY

22.   a) Will the data be treated as confidential?   ☒ **Yes** ☐ **No**

b) Describe the procedures to be used to ensure anonymity of participants or confidentiality of data both during the conduct of the research and in the release of its findings.

The identify of each participant will be protected in the following ways:
Each interview will be audio taped and I will be careful when interviewing to only identify participants by their first name. When these tapes are being transcribed they will each be assigned a participant number. There will be no identification of their specific organization. I will not be asking or recording any personal information.

c) Explain how written records, video/audio tapes and questionnaires will be secured, and provide details of their final disposal or storage.

I will hire someone to transcribe the audio tapes from each interview and I will have them sign a confidentiality agreement. The audio tapes and the typed transcriptions will be secured in a locked filing cabinet in my home. I live alone and no one else will have access to them. At the conclusion of my study, I will personally shred each transcription and destroy each audio tape.

d) If participant anonymity/confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, explain, including providing details of how all participants will be advised of the fact that data will not be anonymous or confidential.

This is not applicable.

SECTION F -- MONITORING ONGOING RESEARCH

23.   **Annual Review and Adverse Events**

a) Minimum review requires the completion of a "Renewal/Project Completed" form at least annually. Indicate whether any additional monitoring or review would be appropriate for this project.

It is the investigator's responsibility to notify the REB using the "Renewal/Project Completed" form, when the project is completed, or if it is cancelled.

> I will submit a Project Completed form, once the study is done.

b) **Adverse events** (unanticipated negative consequences or results affecting participants) must be reported to the REB Secretariat and the MREB Chair, as soon as possible and in any event, no more than 3 days subsequent to their occurrence.

24.   **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

(Use an additional page if more space is required to complete any sections of the form, or if there is any other information relevant to the project which you wish to provide to the Research Ethics Board.)

> Within Ontario there are 53 Children's Aid Societies. The number of potential participants will vary depending on the size of the agency. I will likely seek participation from CAS's that are within two to three hours of travel from Hamilton. As such, it is likely that given the small number of potential participants, I may encounter participants with whom I have had a working relationship. I'm uncertain if this will have a positive or negative impact on my recruitment process.

25.   **POSTING OF APPROVED PROTOCOLS ON THE RESEARCH ETHICS WEBSITE**

a) Effective January 1, 2006, it is the policy of MREB to post a list of approved protocols on the Research Ethics website. Posted information usually includes: title, names of principal investigators, principal investigator department, type of project (i.e. PhD; Faculty; Masters etc)

b) You may request that the title be deleted from the posted information.

c) Do you request that the title be eliminated from the posted information? ☐Yes ☒No

d) The ethics board will honour your request if you answer **Yes** to the above question 25 c) but we ask you to provide a reason for making this request for the information of the Board. You may also use this box for any other special requests.

> This is not applicable.

SECTION G – SIGNATURES

Faculty InvestigatorAssurance:

"I confirm that I haveread the <u>McMaster University Research Ethics Guidelines and Faculty Handbook</u> and I agree to complywith the conditions outlined in the Guidelines".

Signature of FacultyInvestigator   **Date**

Faculty Supervisor Assurance: For undergraduate students and graduate students where the supervisor is the primary supervisor for a thesis:

"I confirm that I haveread the <u>McMaster University Research Ethics Guidelines and Faculty Handbook</u>, and I agree to complywith the conditions outlined in the Guidelines. I have read the application and proposal and deem the project to be valid and worthwhile, and I agree to provide the necessary supervision of the student(s) and to make myself available should problems arise during the course of the research."

Signature of FacultySupervisor   **Date**

Signature of Graduate Student   **Date**

Faculty Supervisor Assurance: For graduate students where the supervisor is not the primary supervisor, and where the research is not for a graduate thesis:

"I confirm that I have the <u>McMaster University Research Ethics Guidelines and Faculty Handbook</u>, and I agree to comply with the conditions outlined in the Guidelines. I have read the application and proposal and deem the project to be valid and worthwhile, and I agree to make myself available for consultation should problems arise during the course of the research."

Signature of Faculty Supervisor   **Date**

Signature of Graduate Student

McMaster University

Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

Appendix B – Letter of Information/Consent

May 20, 2008

Letter of Information /Consent

A Study of Client Complaints in Child Welfare

Investigators:

Student Investigator: Julie Horning
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 745-4188

Faculty Supervisor: Sheila Sammon
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140   ext 23780

Purpose of the Study

In this study, I want to examine CAS Directors/Managers of Service experiences using the Client Complaint Resolution process implemented provincially in December 2006. I hope to learn if this complaint mechanism results in different resolutions or outcomes than the process that was previously in place. I also hope to find out if there are lessons to be learned from the practices of individual organizations which can be shared with others to possibly have a positive impact on the management of client complaints or the effectiveness of service delivery.

Procedures involved in the Research

I will conduct individual interviews with Directors/Managers of Services. I will be gathering very little personal information although I will ask about the nature of your experience both in child welfare in general and in managing client complaints. My Interview Guide is attached. I will ask you to answer questions without making reference to specific cases in a way that might compromise the privacy of the individuals

involved in those cases.   I will be extra vigilant in using anything you may tell me about specific cases to make sure that third parties are not identifiable.

I expect the interview will take from one to two hours and will schedule this at a time and location of your choice. I will be tape recording our interview with your permission which will be transcribed by someone I have hired to do so.   The transcriber will sign a confidentiality agreement.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

It is not likely that there will be any harms or discomforts associated with my interview. The Interview Guide has been provided in advance in an attempt to diminish any discomfort you may have related to the interview.

There is some chance you may feel uncomfortable with my questions, in particular if you believe I may be critical of the practices of your organization. Also, in preparing for our interview, you may come across client complaints which have not been handled well and there is some risk you may be embarrassed to share this with me. It is my hope that you will share both positive and negative experiences with me. I will hold your information in the strictest confidence.

You may also worry about how others will react to the views you express. I discuss below the steps I am taking to protect your identity and ensure the confidentiality of what you tell me.

You do not need to answer questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer.

Potential Benefits

The current provincial client complaint mechanism provides no formal opportunity for shared discussions across the province. I hope to recruit participants from several Children's Aid   .
Societies and a possible benefit of this is the opportunity to share information that can then provide a broader perspective provincially. This may help inform the practice of others in your position, both in affecting the management of client complaints, but also in service delivery.

It is not uncommon in child welfare practice to have little time to stop and reflect upon our work. In reviewing internal practices and process related to client complaints with me it may afford you an opportunity to spend focused time analyzing your own current practice which you may not otherwise have opportunity to do. This may benefit you by allowing an opportunity to see themes or difficulties you might not otherwise uncover. Reflecting on your own practice may allow you to then utilize this information for affecting change within your organization.

Confidentiality:

Anything that you say in this study will not be told to anyone else. Anything that I find out about you that could identify you or the organization for which you work will not be published or told to anyone else. Your privacy and the privacy of your organization will be respected. To ensure your anonymity I will reference each participant in my transcripts by a number rather than by name. The person I have hired to transcribe the audio tape of our interview will only know you by first name and will not know what organization you are associated with.

I will take every precaution to protect your identity as well as the privacy of your organization. I will not be using your name, the name of the agency you work for, nor any information that would allow you and/or your agency to be identified. Nevertheless, given the relatively small size of our community, you may be identifiable through the references you make or the views you express. Please keep this in mind through the interview.

The information obtained by me will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my home and may not be accessed by anyone else. The information will be destroyed at the conclusion of my research project.

Participation:

Your participation in this study is voluntary and although your Executive Director brought this project to your attention, I will not be reporting to your Executive Director who has or has not participated. It is your choice to be part of the study. If you decide to participate, you can decide to stop at any time, even after signing the consent form or part-way through the study. If you decide to stop participating, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided to that point 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.

Information About the Study Results:

If you wish to obtain information about the results of this study, you can provide your email address to me and I will forward a summary to you at the conclusion of the study in September 2008.

Information about Participating as a Study Subject:

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact Julie Horning at 905-525-2012 ext. 3112 or my Faculty Supervisor, Sheila Sammon at 905-525-9140 ext 23780.

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

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

CONSENT

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Julie Horning, of McMaster University. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time, if I choose to do so, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

_____

Name of Participant

Appendix C – Recruitment Email

Dear (name of Executive Director):

My name is Julie Horning; I'm the Manager of Protection Services at the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton. I have a strong commitment to the field of child welfare and have been employed with the Society for 18 ½ years. I'm currently completing my M.S.W. at McMaster University. In partial fulfillment of my MSW I must complete a Research project and Thesis. I'm sending this email to introduce myself and my project and to determine if you would support my recruitment attempts by sharing information about my project with relevant staff in your organization.

In my research study, I want to examine Children's Aid Societies experiences using the Client Complaint Resolution process implemented provincially in December 2006. I hope to learn if this complaint mechanism results in different resolutions or outcomes than the process that was previously in place. I also hope to find out if there are lessons to be learned from the practices of individual organizations which can be shared with others to possibly have a positive impact on the effectiveness of service delivery or the management of complaints.

It is important that I collect data from Directors or Managers of Services – staff who are assigned the responsibility of managing client complaints within your organization. I have attached my Letter of Information/Consent as well as my Interview Guide for further information and so that you may forward this email directly to relevant staff if you are in agreement with extending an offer for your staff to participate. For confidentiality purposes, I will not be able to advise you of whether or not staff from your organization participated. However, I'd be happy to send you a summary of my findings at the completion of my study in September 2008.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Sheila Sammon is my Faculty Supervisor.

You may respond directly to this email or alternatively, I will contact you via telephone by June 13, 2008 to determine your interest in extending this invitation to your staff or to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you for your time and for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Julie Horning
Manager of Services, Catholic Children's Aid Society of Hamilton

Appendix D – Interview Guide

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Tell me about your child welfare experience
2. Tell me about your experience managing complaints prior to legislative changes in 2006.
3. What is your understanding of the rationale and purpose of the provincially implemented client complaint resolution mechanism?
4. Tell me about your experience managing complaints under the new system.
5. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each system?
6. What is your experience of how client complaints are viewed by front line staff, supervisors, and your organization?
7. Do you have any opportunities to share information (provincially) about the effectiveness, benefits or challenges of this new system?

APPENDIX E

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

Project Title: **A Study of Client Complaints in Child Welfare**

This research project is being conducted by student investigator Julie Horning, School of Social Work, McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario).

In this study, I want to examine CAS Directors/Managers of Service experiences using the Client Complaint Resolution process implemented provincially in December 2006. I hope to learn if this complaint mechanism results in different resolutions or outcomes than the process that was previously in place. I also hope to find out if there are lessons to be learned from the practices of individual organizations which can be shared with others to possibly have a positive impact on the management of client complaints or the effectiveness of service delivery.

I, Karen Rachner, *Transcriber*, have read and agree to:

1. Keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the *student investigator*.

2. Keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.

3. Return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the *student investigator* when I have completed all transcriptions.

4. After consulting with the *student investigator*, erase or destroy all information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the student investigator (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).

_____   _____ June 25/08 _____
Transcriber's Signature   *Date*

If you have any questions or concerns about this study please contact:
Julie Horning, School of Social Work
McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario
Phone: 905-745-4188

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

APPENDIX   F

McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
c/o Office of Research Services, MREB Secretariat, GH-305/H, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

Application Status: New ☑ **Addendum** ☐ **Renewal** ☐ **Project Number** 2008 054

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:

Client Complaints in Child Welfare: Lessons Learned

Faculty Investigator (s)/ Supervisor(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
S. Sammon	Social Work	23780	sammon@mcmaster.ca

Student Investigator(s)	Dept./Address	Phone	E-Mail
J. Horning	Social Work	905-664-1713	julie.horning@hamiltonccas.on.ca

The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:

☐ The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification.

☑ The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification.

☐ The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:

COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS: Ongoing approval is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and approved before any alterations are made to the research.

Reporting Frequency:	Annual:		Other:

Date: May 21, 2008 Dr. D. Maurer, Chair/ Dr. D. Pawluch, Vice-chair: