

**THE MANAGERIAL STRUCTURE OF CHILD WELFARE:
PERSPECTIVES FROM FRONTLINE WORKERS**

**THE MANAGERIAL STRUCTURE OF CHILD WELFARE:
PERSPECTIVES FROM FRONTLINE WORKERS**

By

BONNIE E. HENDERSON

B.A., BSW (HONS.)

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Master of Social Work

McMaster University

Copyright by Bonnie E. Henderson, August 2008

**MASTER SOCIAL WORK
(2008)**

**McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario**

**TITLE: The Managerial Structure Of Child Welfare:
Perspectives From Frontline Workers**

**AUTHOR: Bonnie E. Henderson
B.A. (Brock University)
BSW (Hons.) (Windsor University)**

SUPERVISOR: Donna Baines

NUMBER OF PAGES: iii, 66

ABSTRACT

The job of a frontline child protection worker is highly demanding and very emotional. Issues of job-related stress have become an inevitable part of child welfare practice. The majority of research that attempts to understand the stress experienced by child protection workers perpetuates a larger held belief that places the responsibility of managing stress upon the individual worker. This body of research also offers micro-level strategies for alleviating the stress experienced by workers.

This research project sets out to understand the issue from a broader perspective and to consider socio-economic factors as central to the critical analysis. The purpose of this research project is to engage in conversations with frontline child protection workers in order to build a sense of the context in which these workers experience job-related stress. A contextual framework is missing from most of the research that has attempted to understand the experience of job-related stress of frontline child protection workers.

The two themes that connected all the research participants was the degree to which their agencies acknowledged stress as an issue and the strength of supportive networks within their work environments. From the responses of the workers it was apparent that their work environments do not necessarily provide a safe haven for them to acknowledge the emotional impact of their job and to simply think about the work they do. The author suggests that further research that challenges the structure of broader systemic issues will be the best path to begin developing strategies to alleviate the stress experienced by child protection workers and to retain experienced, educated and dedicated workers who are committed to ensuring the safety of children.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first offer my gratitude to the McMaster University School of Social Work. The McMaster University School of Social Work's philosophy and dedication to social justice has been enlightening and inspiring. Upon reflection of the past twelve months, each moment has been an opportunity to learn, think and critically analyze the professional field that I have decided to develop a career in. These moments have been unsettling, at times, and have left me wondering if I would find myself searching for a new career in the near future. At the conclusion of this chapter of my life, however, I find myself energized about continuing my career in social work and am certain that I have much to contribute to the field.

Through the course of my journey I have met wonderful professors who have demonstrated to the students their commitment and dedication to the School's philosophy of social justice and communicating the message that social workers are agents of change in society. I thank these professors for their enthusiasm when teaching their classes and, for some, whose words I will carry with me as I continue in my career. I extend an enormous thank you to another dedicated faculty member and my thesis supervisor, Donna Baines. Donna, I appreciate all the time you have spent supervising my research project and being a source of calm when I thought I had no clue about the direction I was headed. Your enthusiasm about social justice and labour issues was contagious and your experience helped to focus and develop the topic for my project.

I would like to thank my friends and family for bearing with me for the past twelve months. Thank you for listening to me cry when I wondered how I would finish the journey and listening to me retell all the new ideas I had heard about in classes. Thank you mom and dad for letting me know how proud you are of me.

I would like to also thank the new friends I have met since beginning this journey. The people who I have had opportunities to share classes with have been wonderful and have only added to the learning experience as we shared ideas and discussed our similar struggles and frustrations.

Finally, I would like to thank Jorge. My love, you have been a constant source of support, energy and patience. Thank you for sharing in this journey with me and always offering your strength and optimism. Thank you, my love, for making me smile.

To all the crossroads that present themselves throughout the journey of life. Some crossroads are very difficult and initially bring great sadness, but know that there is always joy waiting for you. From this part of my journey - I wouldn't change a thing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
LITERATURE REVIEW	3
Introduction	3
Broader Societal Context	3
The Impact Upon Social Work Practice	5
Existing Research Literature	8
The Goal of the Project	11
METHODOLOGY	12
Introduction	12
Recruitment	12
Interviews	13
Data Analysis	14
Final note regarding Methodology	15
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION	16
Overview of the Research Project	16
The Daily Work of a Child Protection Worker	16
The Impact of Stress Upon Job Performance	19
Concrete Sources of Stress	21
Abstract Sources of Stress	24
How the Structure of the Agency Impacts the Stress Experienced	28
Where Support Is Found	36
CONCLUSION	42
REFERENCES	44
APPENDIX A: Recruitment Poster	48
APPENDIX B: Letter of Information/Consent	49
APPENDIX C: Interview Guide	52

INTRODUCTION

The job of a child protection worker is undoubtedly, highly emotional and demanding. Frontline child protection workers carry the heavy responsibility of ensuring the safety of children by making decisions and carrying out their tasks in a work environment that is characterized by unpredictability, emergencies and immediate responses. Due to this work environment and the responsibilities they carry, it is no wonder that child protection workers experience some of the highest levels of stress when compared to other helping professions (Regehr, Leslie, Howe and Chau, 2000).

Despite the acknowledgement of the emotional and demanding aspects of the job, an interesting notion exists within child welfare. Some workers are thought not to be ‘cut out’ for child welfare. This includes those who enter and quickly exit the field or for those who manage to continue in the job, but experience ongoing internal struggles. These workers are perceived as having difficulty in coping with the emotional aspects of the job and who are unable to manage ongoing stress they experience. The implication of this statement is that if the worker cannot manage the stress, the workload and the accompanying emotions, then the worker is not right for the job. Another common phrase stated by both colleagues and supervisors in response to a worker’s attempts to identify the struggles of the job is, “that’s child welfare”. Implied in such a response, is that the worker is left to deal with her experiences of stress and if the struggles are too much, the worker will make her quiet exit from the field of child welfare. This response provides no space for workers to challenge the structure of child welfare and to develop ways to address the stress they experience. Although the structure of the job is considered to be a landmine for inevitable stress, it is the worker who is targeted as the one responsible for both the cause and remedy of the stress they experience.

This notion was pervasive throughout my experience as a frontline child protection worker. I can recall countless conversations with colleagues who struggled with the decision to stay in the job or search for other employment. From these discussions, a theme began to emerge. The workers blamed themselves and their personal and/or professional inadequacies for being unable to cope with the stress of the job. This way of thinking logically flows from the token phrase in child welfare circles that promotes the process of a new worker figuring out if they are ‘cut out’ for child welfare. Implicit in this message is the assumption that if a worker becomes too overwhelmed by the workload, too overwhelmed by the emotional impact of the job; in short – too stressed – than the

simple conclusion is that the worker is not 'made' for child welfare, regardless of their education and experience.

Research has successfully brought the issue of stress experienced by frontline child protection workers to the forefront; however, these attempts have done little to alleviate issues of job-related stress. In these attempts, the individual worker is placed at the centre of the exploration or the critical analysis of this issue has stopped at the level of the agency. The majority of the existing body of research has separated the worker from the context of their daily practice. The recommendations offered by most researchers provide insufficient ways to alleviate the stress workers experience, continuing to leave workers with the responsibility to manage their own stress.

The objective for this research project is to add to the small, but growing body of research that attempts to explore the issue of job-related stress experienced by frontline child protection workers through another lens. Using the framework from this body of research, this research project sets out to understand the issue from a broader perspective and to consider socio-economic factors as central to the critical analysis. In the next section, the argument is presented that socio-economic factors, over the past three decades, have greatly influenced our construction of the knowledge that surrounds issues of job-related stress experienced by frontline child protection workers. This argument is extended by highlighting how the majority of academic research has been influenced by ideologies of broader socio-economic factors in determining the framework and direction of research that explores this issue. The methodology of this research project is then outlined that emphasizes the need for research that provides context to the daily practice of child protection workers in order to deepen our understanding of the job-related stress they experience. The interviews with the research participants and the interpretation of their responses are presented and discussed. Finally, remarks regarding the themes that emerged from the participants' responses will be concluded and a call for further research that sets out to understand the issue of job-related stress experienced by child protection workers within a similar framework is emphasized. It is the strong opinion of this author that further research that challenges the structure of broader systemic issues will be the best path to begin developing strategies to alleviate the stress experienced by child protection workers and to retain experienced, educated and dedicated workers who are committed to ensuring the safety of children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In order to appreciate the current phenomenon in which individual workers are held responsible for the levels of job-related stress they experience, we must first consider how this phenomenon has developed within our society. The social constructionist paradigm suggests that knowledge is constructed through social processes and must be considered within a cultural and historical context (Burr, 1995). The construction of knowledge is also greatly influenced by structures within society that have access to social power (Campbell and McGregor, 2002). For example, governments and political groups hold great influence over what ideas are defined as ‘truths’ and what ideas are ignored or abolished. These ‘truths’ will shift over time and across cultures depending upon the issues that are most pertinent to the society. I argue that the political agenda over the past few decades has had profound impact upon the notion that frontline child protection workers should be individually blamed for their experiences of job-related stress. Arches (1991) suggests that to understand the issues related to job-related stress, we must first consider “the historical and organizational context in which they occur” (p.203). I will argue further that the political agenda has reshaped the organizational context of child protection.

Broader Societal Context

Since the end of the 1980s, there have been significant changes in the relationship between the government and the country’s citizens (Aronson and Sammon 2000; Brodie, 1999; Fabricant and Burghardt, 1992). During the past thirty years, the government has distanced itself from citizens in need and from the responsibility of ensuring these citizens have their needs met by social services. These changes were set in motion by a government that proclaimed the country was facing a devastating deficit that demanded immediate attention and action (Brodie, 1999). Following this message to the nation, the government began slashing government funding to social services and withdrawing their accountability to the citizens (Brodie, 1999).

The government’s focus on the national deficit was driven by the increased importance of the global market. The governments in developed regions of the world including Britain, Australia and North America, justified decisions to cutback or eliminate funding for social services in order to become

more competitive in the global market competition. To support the political agenda, a new way of everyday thinking was promoted. The ideology of neo-liberalism buttressed moves to “shift the burden of responsibility for social support from government to individuals and communities” (McKeen, 2004). As Rees (1999) notes, it became “irrational” to argue that the state should continue to play a lead role in financially supporting social services. The message was made clear that it was “better to lessen state responsibility, encourage self-reliance, and make the user pay” (p.194). Hence, services that those in need were previously entitled to were either significantly reduced or completely eliminated in order to meet the greater political agenda of fiscal accountability.

The discourse of neo-liberalism stressed the importance of ‘encouraging self-reliance’ and the concept of individualization. Brodie (1999) suggests that individualization was a logical consequence to neo-liberalism, a system in which the state moved away from what had been a more collective approach to social issues. The responsibility for addressing social issues was placed upon the shoulders of communities, families and individuals. Communities, families and individuals were then blamed for ‘individual’ failings. Through this process the government quietly increased the distance between itself and the citizens. The government also became even more removed from the responsibility and accountability for the welfare state. As an example, poverty, as a social issue, translated into “a matter of genetics passed from mother to child” (Brodie, 1999, p.45). Ironically, this inverts the feminist claim: the political became personal.

Dependency became another ramification that emerged from re-instituting the notion of individualization. As Rees (1999) states “the stigma of dependency was revived” (p.194). Rees states further that a person’s “strength of character became part of economic strategy” (p.194). Individuals who were in need of social assistance were perceived as socially deficient. In many ways, the government encouraged discrimination against marginalized persons. It became the role of the government not to assist and support families, but to take steps to ensure families looked after their own (Abbott and Wallace, 1992 as cited in Brodie, 1999, p.43).

The government looked to private sector means of operation in order to change the face of public sector services (Munro, 2004). The private market is driven by measures of fiscal accountability aimed at demonstrating the profitability of services in this very competitive environment (Lawler, 2000). The philosophies of the private sector also have specific ideas about how to manage services in order to demonstrate cost-effectiveness and accountability to consumers and stakeholders. Social services were compelled to provide the best possible services to the community “within the constraints of a limited budget and managerialism was seen as the means by which this could be achieved” (Harlow, 2003, p.31). The rise of ‘managerialism’ within the public sector “refers to the development of the interests of management, as opposed to any other function or position in the organization” (Lawler, 2000, p.33). The “interests of

management” have become focused predominately upon the cost-effectiveness of services as a measurement of the quality of the services provided (Eakin, 2007).

Dixon et al (1998) suggests that there are several distinct assumptions about managerialism that sets it apart from alternative means of administration:

It places emphasis on policy management and implementation rather than on policy development and design in public administration; stresses efficiency, effectiveness, and quality, as against process and equity in the management of public resources;...advocates the use of private-sector management practices in the public sector; seeks to diffuse responsibility and to devolve authority;...shifts the public accountability focus from inputs and processes to outputs and outcomes and prefers to create wherever possible a competitive public administration.

(as cited in Lawler, 2000, p.34)

Interestingly, ideas that boasted private sector processes and managerialism were rarely contested. The majority of the country’s citizens had come to assume that this was simply the best and only way to alleviate the concerns about the country’s deficit and that “every organization could and should become preoccupied with greater productivity, competitiveness, efficiency, and financial accountability” (Rees, 1999, p.195). There was little to no space left for alternative strategies to be considered.

The distancing of the government from its responsibility to citizens and its strategic construction of both neo-liberalism and managerialism, ultimately led to significant structural changes in the operation of public sector services. The paramount focus of social services, over the past three decades, has been upon “delivering welfare services with utmost economy, efficiency and effectiveness” (Harlow, 2003, p.29). Rees (1999) suggests that to strive for these values, “a competitive organization would have a clear mission, be well controlled, financially accountable, have no surplus fat, and pursue no activities that could not be economically justified” (p.194). Terms and language that reflect the dominant concern with fiscal accountability have become embedded within the philosophies that guide social services and have shaped the daily practice of social services.

The Impact Upon Social Work Practice

The goal of demonstrating fiscal accountability within agencies has been the lead factor in changing the structure of social services. Since public services were seen by the government to be a drain on the economy and significantly contributing to the country’s deficit, measures of accountability were implemented to ensure agencies and activities by workers were the most efficient and cost-effective (Munro, 2004). In doing so, individuals and organizations

“could be blamed for past failures to demonstrate competitiveness and efficiency” (Rees, 1999, p.194). Auditing systems have become a common aspect of social services. Most critics note that while auditing systems have a high economic component, they do not necessarily accurately measure the effectiveness of social service programs (Munro, 2004). In other words, auditing systems are more reflective of how accurately workers and agencies follow procedures and manage funding and are less reflective of how effectively a service impacts its users.

Auditing systems must be able to be efficient in gathering the required information from social services and producing the results. In order to assist in this process, the work of social workers has become standardized. To begin with, the tasks within a social service agency are broken down into specific departments and the teams of individuals within these departments are responsible for each element of the specialized areas (Harlow, 2003). Arches (1997) notes, “even though social services is not a field that lends itself to routinization, “efficiency” is nonetheless accomplished by standardizing work through a rigid division of labor and centralized decision-making” (p.53). For example, within a typical child welfare agency there are teams of people within separate departments that are responsible for administration, initial assessments that determine a need for service and another department for ongoing intervention with the family. The persons within these departments are responsible for the competencies that correspond with their role within the agency (Harlow, 2003). For example, a worker responsible for initial assessments would not take responsibilities related to ongoing intervention.

The standardization of social work practice further serves the interests of those who support the ideals of managerialism. The purpose of standardization is motivated by cost-effectiveness, as practices are streamlined and criteria for eligibility for services are clearly defined. Social workers are able to speed through a checklist in order to complete an assessment for a service user and then quickly make a decision as to what services will best meet the needs of the client or even if the person is eligible for services. In this way, the standardization of social work practice serves a very distinct purpose. This being, to move a service user quickly through the agency with a focus on output and efficiency as “each closed case represent[s] a success that can be added to the totals in the monitoring report” (Harlow, 2003, p.35).

There are two unfortunate consequences to the standardization of social work practice. The first is in relation to how standardization impacts the relationship between the social worker and the service user. From standardization, the relationship between a social worker and service user is less nurturing, supportive and therapeutic and more characterized by a transactional relationship that is contractual and service-oriented (Howe, 1996 as cited in Harlow, 2004, p.171). De Montigny (2003) criticizes the standardization within social work practice by stating:

...the daily lives of people are not standardized. Instead in the lived worlds of social service clients daily life is marked by profound ambiguity, uncertainty, disruption, and unanticipated emergencies.
(p.38)

De Montigny suggests further that social workers are at risk of blaming the clients for the issues they are experiencing. As noted earlier, the concept of individualization was born out of the neo-liberal paradigm. Individualization creates space for families and individuals to be held responsible for the cause and remedy of what had once been considered social issues. De Montigny claims that the standardized tools provided to social workers to conduct assessments offer a narrow focus of the factors contributing to the issues experienced by service users and eliminates the social dimensions impacting upon the problem. Further, the structure of standardized tools, influenced by individualization, provides opportunity for the service users to be pathologized and blamed for their present circumstances.

The second unfortunate consequence to the standardization of social work practice is the impact upon the relationship between the social worker and management within the agency. As a result of standardization “the social worker’s use of self is lost from the equation if he or she is simply the co-ordinator of services” (Harlow, 2003, p.39). Within standardization and managerialism social workers have less autonomy to make decisions in their assessments of service users whose needs are often very complex (Lawler, 2000; Sapey, 1997).

The transparency of social worker’s activities is directly related to accountability measures. The implementation of standardized tools to conduct activities within social work practice has provided space for all aspects of the social work process to be monitored and evaluated by supervisors (De Montigny, 2003). In keeping with the philosophy of managerialism, the performances of social workers can be observed and monitored for quality control to ensure cost-effectiveness and efficiency (Harlow, 2003). Further, in relation to a field such as child welfare, the transparency and standardization of frontline practice allows for the agency to ensure that decisions and actions were taken by the worker to minimize the level of risk to the service user (De Montigny, 2003). In devastating situations such as Inquests into a child’s death, decisions and actions by the worker will be scrutinized in order to determine if the worker is at fault for failing to take steps to avoid such a tragedy from happening. Tilbury (2007) suggests that such monitoring “tend to be procedural, with a role of detecting mistakes, rather than developmental and addressing the underlying source of the problem” (p.217).

The social and political context that has developed over the past thirty years has established a work environment for social workers in which they are struggling to meet needs with less financial resources. The government has sent a

clear message to the country that social services are not a necessity that citizens are entitled to, thus, undermining the profession of social work and the value of social services within communities. The obsession with demonstrating fiscal accountability has consumed almost all aspects of the public sector and has changed the structure of social services to one that is now motivated more by efficiency than effectiveness. The standardization of social work practice has left workers with decreased professional autonomy as they have less room to make decisions to meet the increasingly complex needs of service users and has resulted in the perpetuation of placing blame for social issues at the level of communities, families and individuals. The workers are conducting their activities of their jobs under the subtle, and at times overt, surveillance by supervisors and management.

This context sets up a difficult work environment within child welfare and provides the backdrop for exploring how the stress experienced by frontline child protection workers has become an individual problem. In the next section I will present information from existing research that attempts to explore the issue of job-related stress experienced by social workers and where possible, more specifically, child protection workers. I argue that the neo-liberal paradigm has trickled down to influence several areas of social processes, including research and that the majority of existing research that attempts to explore the job-related stress experienced by social workers has embraced the neo-liberalism paradigm and has upheld the ideology of individualization.

Existing Research Literature

The job of child protection workers is complex and highly emotional. As Callahan (1993) writes, “There are few other jobs with a mandate to enter the privacy of family life, make judgments about the behaviour of family members, and take actions that can alter significantly the membership and functioning of that family” (p. 73). In today’s societal climate, the needs of families are becoming more complex and child protection workers are expected to ‘do more with less’ (Aronson and Sammon, 2000). Child protection workers carry with them, the ominous pressure of ensuring the safety of children. “Child welfare social workers make difficult decisions that can profoundly influence the lives of the children and families concerned” (Tham and Meagher, 2008, p.2). Callahan (1993) summarizes this pressure: “If mistakes are made, children may die, parents may break down, and families may be permanently damaged” (p. 73). It is no wonder that child protection workers experience some of the highest levels of stress as compared to other helping professions (Regehr, Leslie, Howe and Chau, 2000).

There is a body of research that is dedicated to understanding the job-related stress of child protection workers and this research has significantly increased in recent years. There are three arguments researchers pose as to why the understanding of stress experienced by child protection workers is imperative

to the field of child welfare. First, researchers have noted that employers are experiencing difficulty in recruiting new workers to the field (Tham, 2007; Weaver, Chang, Clark and Rhee, 2007; Tham and Meagher, 2008; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991). Weaver et al (2007) states “child welfare is facing its own acute shortage of social work personnel” (p.6). Second, child welfare agencies are experiencing difficulty in retaining workers leading to a high turnover rate of workers who enter and quickly exit the job (Tham, 2007; Anderson, 2000; Weaver et al, 2007; Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005; Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006; Tham and Meagher, 2008; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991). Researchers have claimed that a new worker in child welfare will remain on the job, on average, for two years (Regehr, Leslie, Howe and Chau, 2000). Drake and Yadama (1996) claim that the issue of worker retention in child welfare has reached a “crisis” situation (p.179) and other researchers echo this sentiment. Interestingly, the issues of worker recruitment and retention are not isolated to North America but are experienced by child welfare agencies in Britain and Sweden, too.

Finally, researchers have highlighted the impact that issues of worker recruitment and retention have upon the services provided by child welfare agencies. Researchers have concurred that the levels of high turnover in child welfare negatively impact upon service delivery (Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005). There are also concerns related to the quality of services provided as workers entering and exiting the job disrupt the continuity of services (Anderson, 2000; Weaver et al, 2007; Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006). Drake and Yadama (1996) suggest “the swift turnover in agencies means a relative lack of skills and competencies in a large percentage of the child welfare workforce” (p.179). In addition, high turnover of workers “places significant work overload on those who must cover their own plus departing worker caseloads” (Anderson, 2000, p.839). Researchers suggest that the levels of high turnover financially drain the agencies given the costs of staff replacement for both recruitment initiatives and training of new workers (Anderson, 2000; Weaver et al, 2007; Conrad and Kellar-Guenther, 2006).

Researchers have drawn connections between the levels of stress experienced by child protection workers and the ‘crisis’ of worker recruitment and retention presently occurring in the field of child welfare. The researchers, however, enter the issue of stress with a narrow focus upon either the individual or the organization as areas most contributing to stress and neglect to consider broader societal influences. An overwhelming portion of the research requires participants to complete exhaustive questionnaires and surveys (Tham, 2007; Weaver et al, 2007; Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005; Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005; Regehr et al, 2004; Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989; Himle, Jayaratne and Thyness, 1993; Collings and Murray, 1996). This elicits responses from a significantly large sample of workers, but has several limitations inherent in the chosen method of data collection. For example, by using the standardized

questionnaire instruments the researchers enter the issue as the experts with predefined notions about variables that impact upon stress experienced by workers. The very use of questionnaires that require participants to rate their responses on 5-item Likert scales, provides no space for other factors to be considered. There is simply no space allowed for other 'truths' to be considered. Tham (2007) notes this limitation of data collection and states "this method does not allow follow-up questions, which can add depth to the picture or further clarify what the respondent more specifically has in mind" (p.1241).

Despite researchers' partial focus upon searching for individual factors that may contribute to the stress experienced by child protection workers, the message appears to be clear from many research findings that organizational variables impact upon stress levels more than personal factors. Several research findings have reflected the notion that the structure of child welfare organizations significantly impacts the level of stress experienced by workers (Tham, 2007; Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005; Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005; Regehr et al, 2004; Storey and Billingham, 2001; Collings and Murray, 1996). From their approaches to measuring stress, researchers have repeatedly compiled lists of work-related factors that participants have ranked as being most influential to the experience of stress. These lists included such work-related factors as high volume of work (Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005; Storey and Billingham, 2001; Collings and Murray, 1996), lack of resources (Storey and Billingham, 2001; Collings and Murray, 1996), inadequate staff (Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005), deadlines (Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005; Collings and Murray, 1996) and not feeling valued by superiors (Tham, 2007; Regehr et al, 2004). These lists, however, fall short of understanding the stress experienced by workers. Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson (1991) suggest "Research which simply asks people to rate the importance of particular stressors is likely to miss the complexity and subtlety of the relationships between stressors and strains" (p.465).

Research that enters the issue with predetermined answers that participants must rank and that only begins to explore factors that impact upon job-related stress has resulted in recommendations for change that remain at either an individual or organizational level. Some recommendations for alleviating the levels of stress experienced by workers has been to increase staff levels in order to decrease workloads (Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005) or to address the "persistently stressful aspects of the job" (Regehr et al, 2004, p.344). Recommendations for change based upon findings have also centred upon stress management workshops (Dillenburg, 2004; Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005) or improving coping strategies in workers (Anderson, 2000). Researchers also call for employers of organizations to be more supportive of workers and to give greater recognition and sense of being valued for their work (Tham, 2007; Tham and Meagher, 2008). Other research has asked participants to respond to possible ways of alleviating job-related stress; however, the authors note that these changes may not be easily implemented due to the associated costs and without

evidence that such changes would be effective (Storey and Billingham, 2001; Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989). The solutions and recommendations made by researchers seem overly simplistic for what is undoubtedly a complex issue.

Issues raised by the recommendations of researchers bring us back to the structural socio-economical issues reviewed in the previous section and we find ourselves no further ahead in alleviating the stress experienced by child protection workers. Although researchers continue to make attempts to extract relationships between individual characteristics and the stress experienced by workers, the theme that has emerged is that factors outside of the individual have a greater impact upon job-related stress. Researchers, however, only expand their scope to factors that remain at a micro-level to either supervisors who need to be more supportive or organizations that need more resources and to demonstrate they value their employees. With an appreciation for the present social and political climate, we are left wondering how such recommendations for change will be implemented when agencies have the paramount pressure of demonstrating fiscal accountability. There is a need for research that goes beyond micro-level factors that influence job-related stress and begins to make connections to broader systemic issues with the anticipation that the appreciation for the broader context will elicit more effective recommendations for change.

The Goal of the Project

Motivation for this thesis project has been drawn from both what was found to be lacking in the existing research, but also what has been found in an existing smaller portion of the research. Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook and Dews (2007), Regeher, Leslie, Howe and Chau (2000) and Aronson and Sammon (2000) have all made efforts to bring larger socio-economic context to the understanding of stress experienced by child protection workers. These researchers have engaged in conversations with child protection workers and by doing so have enhanced and deepened our understanding of issues related to job-related stress. Aronson and Sammon (2000), especially, is an exemplary piece of research that sets out to understand the stresses of child protection workers within the context of the current political climate.

This research project hopes to add to this small but growing body of research. The goal of this research project is to engage in conversations with frontline child protection workers in order to establish the larger context in which the workers experience stress. During the data analysis stage of this project, this author paid close attention to themes that may contribute to the perpetuation of the neo-liberal notion of individualism within child welfare. Research must move in the direction of developing context and making connections with the existing social and political climate in order to address the complexities of work-related stress. The professional field of child welfare depends on it.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this research project is to engage in conversations with frontline child protection workers in order to build an understanding of the context in which job-related stress is experienced by these workers. The analysis of the data collected generated themes that reflect the influence of neo-liberal ideologies that have become embedded within the social structures of child welfare. As presented in the previous section, a large portion of the existing literature has used standardized tools such as questionnaires and surveys to explore this phenomenon. For this project, I engaged in qualitative interviews with frontline child protection workers. In a qualitative study of front-line social workers Aronson and Sammon (2000) also used interviews “To explore the character of front-line practice” (p.169). Qualitative research is ideal when researchers set out to further understand the definitions or meanings people attach to the experiences in their social worlds (Hewitt, 2007).

An Interpretive Social Science methodological framework (Neuman, 1997) guides this research project. Neuman (1997) suggests that Interpretive Social Science sets out to understand people’s meaning of social phenomenon by use of narratives. From these narratives, the researcher develops theory by “revealing the meanings, values, interpretive schemes, and rules of living used by people in their daily lives” (p.71). The dialogue I engaged in with frontline child protection workers established the narratives for this project.

Recruitment

Contacting Children’s Aid Societies in the Southwestern Ontario Region and requesting a recruitment poster be posted in the different agencies initially attempted recruitment for this project. The McMaster University Research Ethics Board provided approval for the research project and the recruitment posters (see Appendix A: Recruitment Poster). In the beginning stages I contacted a total of five different Children’s Aid Societies. Four of these agencies did not respond to my requests or showed minimal interest in the project. One agency did agree to post the recruitment poster and the poster was distributed via a mass email to all workers in the agency. I received one response through this method.

The decision was made between the thesis supervisor, Dr. Donna Baines, and myself to expand the recruitment method to include ‘snowball sampling’.

Kreuger and Neuman (2006) suggest that snowball sampling relies on the interconnected relationship between people in a social network. The method of recruitment is that preliminary participants are established from the social network of interest and these participants are then asked to provide names for subsequent participants in the project. The recruitment process ceases when no new names are given to the researcher or if the social network is so large that the researcher has reached the limit for the project. For this project, the names for possible participants were provided via personal contacts within the agencies and those who participated were asked to provide one other name for further recruitment. Due to time constraints and some difficulties experienced in recruiting participants, the project involved a total of four participants.

The potential participants were contacted via telephone with accompanying voicemail or email. This preliminary contact provided the worker with my name and contact information, my affiliation with McMaster University as a graduate student completing a thesis project and the purpose of the research project to understand the job-related stress experienced by frontline child protection workers. The workers were advised that their participation in the project was completely voluntary. The workers were also asked to confirm their position within the agency and all those who participated confirmed they were frontline child protection workers. Those who voiced interest to participate were emailed the Letter of Information/Consent (see Appendix B: Letter of Information/Consent) and invited to contact me further to schedule a time and date for the interview. Further communication was conducted via email or telephone to finalize details of the interview, such as, time, date and location.

Interviews

All interviews took place between June 2008 and July 2008. The participants were individually interviewed. During previous correspondence and prior to the commencement of the interview, participants were given the opportunity to discuss any questions they had about the study and were provided details about the confidentiality of their involvement in the project. All participants consented to their participation in the project and signed a Consent form before the formal interview began. Participants were also reminded that they could stop the interview or withdraw from the project at anytime.

Interview locations varied depending on the decision made by the participant. I encouraged workers to avoid interviews at the agency site in order to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants. However, one interview did occur at the agency site as per the decision of the participant. Two interviews occurred in a public place and due to this environment, one of the interviews had a few instances of inaudibility that I became aware of during transcription. These particular instances are not included in the final analysis to reduce the chance of misinterpretation of the participant's responses. All

interviews were tape recorded for later transcription and analysis. All participants consented to the tape recording of the interviews. The interviews varied in duration ranging from forty-five minutes to ninety minutes.

The interviews were conducted by following an interview guide that was generated from a review of the existing literature (see Appendix C: Interview Guide). The objective of the questions formulated was to hopefully elicit responses that would provide a context to the gaps found in the existing literature. The interview questions provided a focus for the interview, but also allowed the participants to be the experts on their personal experiences of job-related stress. To supplement the Interview Guide, probing questions were used to further engage with the participants and to explore the context of the participants' experiences in depth. The Interview Guide attempted to generate responses that allowed the participants to discuss the topic of stress as related to the broader context of child welfare, their personal experiences of job-related stress, how the management of the agency discusses and addresses the issue of job-related stress, how stress impacts their job performance, how the topic of stress is discussed amongst colleagues and the sources of support found within their jobs.

Due to the sensitive nature of the area being discussed, all participants were reminded about the agency's Employee Assistance Program should they experience any emotional distress following their participation in the project. All participants were encouraged to contact me if they had any further questions about the project, any further information to share that they felt was pertinent to the project or if they would like to request any information regarding counseling services.

Data Analysis

I personally transcribed all interviews. This can be considered to be a preliminary phase of the data analysis phase of the project, as common themes began to emerge during the transcription. Connolly (2003) presents a clear and useful model of qualitative data analysis that guided the data analysis of the participants' responses. Based upon this model, the transcribed data was reviewed by generating codes based upon my interpretation of the potential meaning from each word, sentence and paragraph of the participants' responses. Themes were then generated from these codes and iteration back to the questions in the Interview Guide. During the subsequent phase of data analysis, I identified patterns, relationships and connections between the themes to develop conceptual categories. Connolly (2003) notes that the validity of the data analysis is increased when the researcher revisits the codes and themes of the initial phase and ensures that there is a logical flow from these themes to the conceptual categories. In the final phase, I linked the data to the existing body of research in order to provide theoretical explanations for the interpreted meaning of the participants' responses.

Final note regarding Methodology

According to Hewitt (2007) it is important to the research process for the researcher to identify her values and beliefs related to the research project. For myself, I have experience and education in the field of child welfare and have been a frontline child protection worker for the past three years. During this time, I have gained first-hand knowledge about the field of child welfare. I have also experienced significant episodes of job-related stress, as a result. There are weaknesses and strengths associated with me conducting research with child protection workers, due to my social location within child welfare. A possible weakness is that I had to be careful not to assume that I understood child welfare jargon and terms, instead I had to remember to seek clarification from the participants during the interview when they used these types of terminology and acronyms. Further to this, I had to do my best to remain cognizant that I did not assume the participant's experience simply because I have been a worker, myself. I also tried not to assume or agree that I knew what a participant was talking about and asked for the participant to explain the meaning of their experience as fully as possible. A strength to my background in child welfare is that child protection workers appeared to feel comfortable and spoke candidly with me about the topic of job-related stress, possibly assuming that I brought with me a compassion and understanding for the job itself.

Feedback from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board recommended that the questions of the Interview Guide be posed in a neutral and general form. Therefore, the questions that make up the Interview Guide do not make specific reference to concepts of individualization or managerialism within the workplace. It is believed that questions that had a more specific scope and inquired about these concepts directly may have generated responses from the participants that deepened the understanding of to what degree these ideologies are apparent within their workplaces. The responses from the participants, however, did provide some insight into how these concepts have become embedded within the daily practice of child welfare.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Research Project

The purpose of this research project is to engage in conversations with frontline child protection workers in order to build a sense of the context in which these workers experience job-related stress. A contextual framework is missing from most of the research that has attempted to understand the experience of job-related stress of frontline child protection workers. The findings of the research project will expand and add to the knowledge that exists about the job-related stress experienced by frontline child protection workers, but also provide direction to guide further research and improve the strategies aimed at alleviating these experiences.

The objective of the research project was to explore whether and how neo-liberal ideologies have become embedded within the field of child welfare. Specifically, whether aspects of managerialism and individualization have found their way into the structural operation of child welfare practice. The analysis of the data paid special attention to this area of interest; however, the responses of the participants provided detail rich in information that reflected the realities of their daily practice.

The Daily Work of a Child Protection Worker

The participants were asked to comment on their activities during a 'typical day' in their job as a child protection worker. All participants responded that they experience some level of stress on a daily basis and that this level of stress is either 'high' or 'very high'. One worker stated, "in terms of stress – oh, I think my level is like here" as she placed her hand above her head. Another worker stated that on a scale of one to ten, she believed that the number seven reflected the stress level "for all sorts of days", but that this number could easily "spike to a ten" when an emergency happens. These responses parallel other research that has asked child welfare workers to respond to a scale of how much stress they experience in their job. Stress levels have been reported as either high or very high (Storey and Billingham, 2001; Dillenburg, 2004).

The workers provided responses that provided insight into the reality of their daily practice. The level of stress, although at the higher end of the spectrum, appears to go up and down within the higher spectrum, as one worker stated:

Participant: Um, I would say very...I'm not sure how you would describe, um.

Interviewer: It looks like you're doing, like, a roller coaster.

Participant: Yeah, like some days are just, like, holy shit, everything is um, uh, urgent and we must do it now, now, now, now. So you have to prioritize the priorities, you know, so that can be really difficult.

This sense of constant urgency and immediate responses to emergencies was a popular theme throughout the interviews with the workers, as one worker stated that in a typical day for her she is "here, there and everywhere", another stated, "I'm go, go, go, go, go" and another used the word "scurrying" to describe how she spends her day trying to accomplish tasks. Research by Regehr, Leslie, Howe and Chau (2000) also found that child protection workers have to attend to "competing demands immediately and simultaneously" (p.6).

Another theme related to the theme above is the unpredictability of daily practice. In response to asking one worker to describe a 'typical day', the worker quickly stated, "There are no typical days". Another worker stated:

So, typically when I get in [to the office] I take a few minutes to get my desk in order, get it together and figure out a general plan for the day which seems to always change, but, um, I need to do that and I carry lists with me constantly because - even though they change.

In other words, no matter what plan a worker may set out for her days, this plan can be quickly discarded as soon as emergencies and crises arise.

Another theme that emerged from the data regarding the daily practice was the complexities that arise from working with "people". One worker articulated:

I think that there's stress in any job. This is just a little maybe higher intensity because it's not, like, a numbers stress or a paper stress - it's people. And people matter, so I think that's why it's a little harder to deal with.

The worker went further to say:

If you work until midnight, people don't suddenly fit into the Service Plan. It's still going to be unpredictable the next morning at eight-thirty when you get there. Things are never perfectly put away in a file, things are always pretty unpredictable, but it's what's kept me coming back, is the interest of meeting people and trying to figure things out – it's not sitting at a desk all day.

There is, however, a potentially traumatic side to working with people, especially in the field of child welfare where workers carry the heavy burden of ensuring the safety of children and this burden was felt amongst all workers. As one worker stated:

It's enormous the amount of stress. Just knowing that the welfare of children are in your hands. And that you may miss something. It could be detrimental. Um, and or, or not, you know, kind of, I can't think of what it is I want to say. Um, kind of going the other extreme where you're so afraid something might happen to these kids that you're bringing them into care or you're on top of them all the time. So, just trying to find out that balance and not, um, you know, not missing anything. That's huge.

Another worker recollected a time when she had experienced stress as a result of working with a family who were new parents and refused the involvement or assistance of any supports for new parents. The worker entered the home and found the baby in an unsafe position. The worker felt great anxiety about this family, "So, like, that's stressful because what if that baby, from the time you leave that home and – I think, 'oh, my god, what if that baby had suffocated?'" The responsibility and expectation to ensure "that we've done everything that we possibly could do" is daunting and something that, to some degree, all workers felt.

The emotional consequences for carrying such a burden seemed consistent among the participants. All of the workers stated that they had cried as a result of the stress experienced from their job. One worker stated, "I've never been in a workplace where people sit and cry". Due to the highly emotional level of the job, the workers found it difficult to not take the reactions of clients personally. One worker stated:

I've had kids ask me, "are you going to take me away from my parents"? God no, like, I hope not, like, put a knife through my heart. We think we're there to help and instead we do nothing but create trauma for these kids while we're there. So, it's not an easy job to go out on, on the best of days with the best of clients because kids and parents are scared of us as soon as we get there.

Another worker recalled an incident when she had to remove a child from the parent's care and "I had to sit there and the little girl looked at me and she said, 'I hate you'. So, that was – it was very difficult for me".

The emotions associated with the job of a child protection worker are reflected in a portion of the existing research. The difficult decisions that workers have to make can greatly impact upon the children and parents they are involved with (Tham and Meagher, 2008). Child protection workers have upon them the burden to judge a parents' capacity to care for their children and if this is misjudged, workers are constantly aware that the consequence could be that a child may be injured or die (Anderson, 2000). Researchers have found that child protection workers feel a sense of responsibility for their clients' lives (Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991) and experience anxiety about the possible death of a child on their caseload (Gibbs, 2001). The paramount responsibility upon child protection workers is an ever-present aspect within a worker's daily practice.

The Impact of Stress Upon Job Performance

An attempt to understand the stress experienced by child protection workers cannot be complete without considering how the stress impacts upon the workers' ability to perform in their daily practice. The participants easily articulated how the stress they experienced impacts upon their job performance. Two of the participants stated that they become slower at accomplishing tasks when they are stressed. One of these workers stated, "If I'm too stressed out I think I'm slower, I think I do a shitter job to be honest with you". When this worker was asked, "How does stress impact the job you do?" she responded by stating:

Well, I don't know which part – I think it's just part of the job and I think, you know, you do it, but I think, if I'm feeling too stressed out, um, I don't – I can't get anything done. I'm, like, my Recordings – it takes longer.

Another worker revealed that she had developed health problems as a result of the job-related stress and this exacerbated her ability to perform well at the job:

I wasn't sleeping and, therefore, when you're not sleeping – and I think this happens across the board, too – you can't think, you're not articulate, you're slower, you just kind of have this brain freeze. And, so, for myself, I really focus on my clients then and make sure that I'm a hundred percent there for them, you know. Because that's important. My clients for me are everything. That's why I'm in the work. I'm not in the work for all the rest of the office politics and policies and everything. My clients are really important, so I focus on them and made sure that I did, but then I found I would forget to do things unless I wrote it down, like, I didn't put

the proposal in or I was supposed to make a referral and I forgot. It just keeps going and you're not well. Your health suffers and you become very emotional. I was able to hold it together for the most part at work, all the time, but at home I just went home and cried. And I've talked to other workers and they do the same thing. Everybody. I'm thinking, "oh, what is with this work"?

For this worker it appears that as her health suffered, as result of the stress she experienced at work, she was unable to do the job to the best of her ability due to the high demands of the job.

Two of the participants stated that they have had negative interactions with clients as a result of feeling highly stressed. One worker stated, "I would imagine, at times, I'm short with people, even clients, when they catch me on a bad day and I know that's not proper practice". Another worker stated:

I think I probably, maybe, aren't as thoughtful or pleasant with people as I could or should be. You know, when someone's calling for the fifth time and yelling at me and I'm just, like, you know, "go fix your alcohol problem", instead of being really sensitive like I should be. And I honestly do think that - I think stress does that.

One worker stated that she becomes more rushed rather than stress slowing down her job performance:

Um, it makes everything a lot more rushed because, typically, if I'm stressed it means that I'm running out of time. Um, if I have a file coming in everyday or more than I'm paying less attention to clients and more attention to just trying to get the file closed before another one comes in. As you know, the less Recording you do, the more work you have to do. So, if you can just get your Recording done and over with then you're ready for the next one to come in. Um, I wouldn't say it makes me care any less, I just think I have less time to care, the more stressed I am.

For this worker, it appears that her paperwork becomes the priority when she experiences stress and less time is available to spend with clients. In this worker's defense, however, she is very aware of how quickly her workload can increase if she does not stay on top of all of the paperwork for which she is responsible.

The topic of stress impacting job performance is an important aspect to consider when understanding the stress experienced by child protection workers. Thompson, Stradling, Murphy and O'Neill (1996) state, "...a pervasive culture of stress in an organization will not only affect the well-being of the service providers but will reduce the quality of the service they deliver". (p.661). Himle,

Jayaratne and Thyness (1993) echo this by stating that the stress experienced impacts the “quality of service given to a client” (p.230). Unfortunately, research that has incorporated this theme into their work has not provided a further context to understand how job performance is impacted by stress (Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991; Storey and Billingham, 2001). An exception to this trend is the research by Aronson and Sammon (2000), in which the responses from workers highlighted that due to a lack of time, the workers felt a pressure to rush through their meetings with clients. This same theme is reflected in the last participant’s response and the potentially devastating consequence of job-related stress in which pertinent information may be missed when workers feel compelled to rush through meetings with clients.

The responses of the workers who reported having less patience with clients when experiencing high levels of stress is a key element of burnout, a condition that has been well documented throughout the research literature. This component of burnout is termed depersonalization. The process of depersonalization is “an unfeeling and impersonal response toward recipients of one’s care or service” (Maslach and Jackson, 1986, as cited in Drake and Yadama, 1996, p.180). This concept, however, does not accurately reflect the experiences of the two workers in this study as the workers implied that this depersonalizing behaviour was not constant in their work lives. Rather, depersonalization occurred only in isolated periods of time. Over time, if these workers continue exhibiting this pattern, they may be at a higher risk of burnout.

Concrete Sources of Stress

This section of findings is focused upon sources of stress that are tangible and could easily be observed by people outside of the work environment. These sources of stress are not about a worker’s internal struggles with the job, but are more a list of items the participants identified as being significant sources of stress for them. The findings from this research project have provided an extension to what other research findings lack and that is context to deepen our understanding of these sources of stress.

Three of the participants noted that the heavy workload is a source of stress for them. Two of these workers identified that the ongoing paperwork associated with each file has decreased since legislative changes in child welfare, but that completing paperwork still consumes approximately fifty percent of their time and the number of files they are responsible for continues to be unmanageable. In addition to this, two of the workers commented that there is always a lack of time to accomplish all the tasks. One worker stated:

Participant: And then the expectation that magically you can do the impossible by the end of the day and it's like...

Interviewer: Impossible as far as...

Participant: Well, I went into the office and my manager had emailed me this, you know, all these emails with these lists of all these things. And I said, "well, we've got to prioritize because the baby comes first, right"? And at the end of the day I said, "this was how far I made it. I'll do what I can tomorrow".

The research shows that stress associated with the high workload demands is common. High workload demands, accompanied with insufficient time to complete the tasks, are a common reality for child protection workers (Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005; Storey and Billingham, 2001; Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989; Stanley, Manthorpe and White, 2007; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991; Collings and Murray, 1996; Gupta and Blewett, 2007; Regehr et al, 2000; Aronson and Sammon, 2000; Regehr, Hemsworth, Leslie, Howe and Chau, 2004). The stress of high workloads has been found to be associated with a worker's intention to leave the job (Tham, 2007) and it has been suggested that a reduction in workload would alleviate the stress levels of workers (Dillenburger, 2004).

Another aspect associated with workload and lack of time is connected to files that have court involvement. Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson (1991) found that court involvement was a significant source of stress for workers, but there was no context to develop a better appreciation as to why this was a significant factor. Participants from this research project stated that court involvement is stressful due to the paperwork required to bring a file into court, as one worker stated, "then there's all of the court papers associated with that – you're warrant and all of the court documents and that is just so stressful and overwhelming".

Further to the workload demands that come into effect when a file is in court, the participants commented on the wasted time spent on the days a worker must attend court and wait for their matter to be heard. One worker stated:

Interviewer: Right. So, just so I have an understanding in written form...so, having cases in court, how does that change your day?

Participant: That changes my day because it's so unpredictable. We have to be at court at nine o'clock – nine-thirty – and we could be there until after five. So, therefore – and your case may not even be heard. Typically it is. There's no place where you can get confidentiality, so even making phone calls is really difficult. So, it's just a total waste of a day. And very, very frustrating because you want to do things and you can't. You're hands are tied.

Another worker echoed these sentiments:

And I would think – I would say the two main issues for the office I'm in are Family Service is overwhelmed with court, they're in court every single Monday...So, I can empathize with that. It sucks. You lose an entire day every week just to sit there and do nothing.

Another worker stated:

...when you have all of that, there isn't any acknowledgement that you're spending days sitting in court, days doing court papers, all of that is – you have to see your clients and you have your clients in crisis, and...

The responses of these workers provide insight into why court involvement is a source of stress for child protection workers. These workers spoke about the added pressure they feel to accomplish their daily tasks in an even more restricted timeframe when so much of their week can be consumed by court-related tasks. When they are attending court for a whole workday, and often spend hours waiting for something to happen, they would like to be able to do work tasks. However, they are restricted by the lack of confidentiality and privacy provided by a court waiting room. The time lost to work on their tasks is not acknowledged by the agency and the expectation still remains that they will accomplish all tasks. There is no time compensation or workload adjustment provided by the agency if a worker has one or ten files with court involvement.

Another theme that emerged as a source of stress for two of the participants was the violent nature of the job and the threats to their personal safety. One worker commented that receiving phone calls from clients who are screaming and swearing have, at times, been stressful because she has found it difficult to not take it personally. This same worker shared a very recent experience in which she was at the home of a family and three of the adult family members began to surround her during the confrontation. This worker felt very threatened by the actions of the family members and used her skills to maintain a calm situation for as long as needed to get herself out of the home before the situation escalated. Another worker has experienced an increase in the stress related to her personal safety because she is pregnant and is very aware of her increased vulnerability when she is out on appointments by herself. This worker stated:

...and it's even worrying about my own personal safety as I go out. You know, like I said, because of the situation I'm in now I'm really trying to never go out alone just because you never know. Nothing's ever happened – ever, ever – you know, knock on wood, but what if that one

time I do go out alone and it is someone who's violent? Then there's nothing I can do. I'm where I'm at and that's the end of the story, right?

Both of these workers drew from very recent experiences that had triggered this theme to be relevant for them; however, research supports the idea that social workers and child protection workers experience anxiety and stress about possible or actual threats to their personal safety (Regehr et al, 2000; Gibbs, 2001; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991; Storey and Billingham, 2001). Child protection workers who had been exposed to threats or violence at work were found to be more likely to have intentions of leaving the job (Tham, 2007).

Abstract Sources of Stress

This theme emerged as a result of the workers identifying sources of stress that did not adequately fit into the category of the theme discussed in the previous section. These sources of stress were interpreted as being much more abstract than the sources of stress that were identified in the previous section, such as, stress caused by paperwork and threats to a worker's safety. These sources of stress are not to be misinterpreted as having a greater or lesser impact upon stress levels, but simply that the themes brought out by the responses of the participants warranted a separate section for discussion. Unfortunately, for this section there is minimal existing child welfare research to draw from that either supports or challenges the responses of the workers. This is due to the fact that an overwhelming portion of the research requires participants to respond to single-statement questions that do not allow for context to be added to the responses. The themes of this section only emerged because the participants were given the opportunity to speak in detail about their daily practice and provide a rich understanding of what they identified as sources of stress.

Two of the participants commented that they experienced stress when their work life blurred into their personal life. Both of these workers expressed frustration about the amount of overtime the job requires in order to fulfill the responsibilities associated with the job. One worker stated that she is "not a fan" of doing "the unexpected overtime" and most evenings she cannot predict when she will be arriving home. Another worker explained her frustration with work life blurring into her personal life:

And then after dinner when I should have been playing with my daughter and with my husband, um, I was madly typing away and they're getting ready to go to the park and I'm, like, "hold on, just a minute". And I thought, "you know what, I'm just not going to do that". So, I guess, now I'm learning – boundaries, boundaries. And that's a constant, ongoing, everyday thing.

Unfortunately, for workers in child welfare, the notion of overtime is almost inherent in the responsibilities of the job, for as one worker stated, “if emergencies come up, you’re expected to stay” and as referred to previously, emergencies can be a constant reality for child protection workers.

Researchers have consistently found that the overtime required in child welfare is a significant source of stress for workers. Research has reflected the notion that overtime hours are an assumed part of a child protection worker’s daily practice in order to meet the demands of the job (Regehr et al, 2000; Stanley, Manthorpe and White, 2007; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991). Research has also supported the idea that workers experience significant stress and frustration when the overtime needed to complete tasks impacts upon their personal lives (Bennett, Plint and Clifford, 2005; Regehr et al, 2000; Aronson and Sammon, 2000).

Two of the workers spoke about the stress they have experienced when their “integrity” was questioned or challenged by management. One worker stated:

...piddley things like, um, the expense people, you know, sending things back to me because I was point five kilometers over and I think, “Are you, like, out of your mind”? Like it’s that kind of stuff. I’d rather deal with irate clients than deal with accounting sending me back something that’s like, “you were three point two kilometers over, and I’m like, you know what, I’m just like, unbelievable. It’s unbelievable. Are you telling me that you’re not trusting me that what I’m putting down – it’s almost like an attack on your integrity.

Another worker stated:

And I think one thing that I’ve found stressful or some things that I find stressful is when a family will put in a complaint about you...So, and I think, I don’t think that that part was as stressful as, you know, maybe your manager saying, “well did you do that”? That was the part that was stressful. Um, you know, “what about this and what about that”, you know, so it just seems like your integrity is on the line. That I find more stressful than dealing with all kinds of client issues. It’s where – whenever my integrity is looked at or questioned.

For these workers the scrutiny from management on how their time was spent and the decisions they had made significantly impacted upon the stress they experienced. For both workers they felt attacked and not supported by management. This left an atmosphere of mistrust between the worker and the agency.

Another source of stress for two of the workers was seeing a client's situation worsen after an investment of time and energy by the worker. For example, one worker stated:

And then it's very, very stressful when things do come up, particularly with clients that you think you've done so well, and then, all of a sudden, they just blow up.

This worker was referring to a family that she had worked with for a period of time and had attempted to coordinate several community supports for this family, but the child was later removed from the parents' care and placed in a foster home.

Another worker spoke about the frustration of seeing a file open, close and then later reopen to the agency. This worker stated that she felt "guilty" about knowing that she had been the worker for the family and there had been no concerns found during the previous times, but then the file reopened when a more significant event for the family occurred. The responses from these workers are indicative of the workers feeling a sense of responsibility for the lives of the clients (Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991). It is also possible that the workers interpret these scenarios as reflections upon their professional skills and may question the strength of their skills when situations like these occur.

One worker had an intriguing response about the stress she experiences as a result of her colleagues experiencing stress. This worker stated:

Participant: What I find, and this is not talked about at all, is the, um, oh now I've lost the word. Um, secondary stress, but that's not what it's called, um. Stress when other people have stress, right, oh my goodness, what is that?

Interviewer: Would it be like, vicarious?

Participant: Vicarious.

Interviewer: Okay, vicarious stress.

Participant: Right, so, what I find very stressful is your supporting, continually supporting, people in your - on your team because they're having a rough day, they're having a run-in with the manager, they're having, you know, all kinds of issues and I find that really difficult because, um, it's not - I can't really do anything about it, really. I have to support them to make suggestions to make a move to make some changes or approach somebody, but it - particularly if they have trouble with

management. Between a rock and a hard place and I can't do anything about that.

Bell, Kulkarni and Dalton (2003) have suggested that social workers who engage in empathic working relationships can be at risk for experiencing vicarious trauma. Vicarious trauma can be internalized as a result of working with clients who have experienced traumatic events and being exposed to the details of these events.

It is also possible that workers may be at risk for vicarious trauma as a result of listening and supporting their coworkers. Researchers suggest ways to reduce the impact of vicarious stress, such as fostering a work environment that acknowledges the inevitability of being affected by the work; group support which allows workers to debrief; effective supervision which fosters a trusting environment for the worker to safely express their emotions and this space is separate from a more evaluative space which involves administrative tasks. These suggestions can also be broader suggestions for alleviating stress and have been touched upon throughout this research project.

Interestingly, only one worker commented upon the stress experienced as a result of negative perceptions about Children's Aid Societies that are held by the public. This worker stated:

Clients' attitudes about Children's Aid are stressful because we're sometimes hated before we even walk through the door. So, my experience, we're either hated before we walk through the door or we're loved because we're their new best friend and that's not a working relationship either. So, that's stressful to try and let them know that we're not friends. We are here with a job to do.

The fact that only one worker commented on the stress of knowing that the community, generally, does not hold a positive perception of Children's Aid Societies was interesting because a large amount of research has reflected that this is a common source of stress for child protection workers (Regehr et al, 2004; Storey and Billingham, 2001; Jones et al, 1991; Collings and Murray, 1996; Gupta and Blewett, 2007; Regehr et al, 2000). Tham (2007) states, "...social workers, especially those working in the field of child welfare, are frequently under criticism and a target for negative publicity in the press, in which their actions or failures to act are subject to blame" (p.1242). Child protection workers must then mitigate the negative views held about their jobs by the people they work with while attempting to establish rapport and a good working relationship with their clients (Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989). This is not to say that this source of stress is absent for the other three workers. It could simply be that the workers have not directly experienced this stressor in their daily practice or the

workers felt that other sources of stress were more significant for them and more relevant to the discussion.

How the Structure of the Agency Impacts the Stress Experienced

An objective of the research project was to explore whether neo-liberal ideologies have become embedded within the field of child welfare. Specifically, whether aspects of individualization and managerialism have found their way into the structural operation of child welfare practice. Three of the four workers unknowingly spoke about individualization, specifically, the phenomenon that the stress they experience is their issue to address and manage. One worker stated that the agency encourages workers “to take care of themselves” and that this is a way in which the agency attempts to address issues regarding job-related stress. Another worker stated, “there’s a lot of lip service about self-care”, again, placing the responsibility upon the worker to manage their own stress. This worker stated that there is some degree of acknowledgement by the agency that the job is stressful and this is why workers are given four weeks’ vacation to use each year. This worker implied that this was not a sufficient way of addressing the issue. This worker went on to say that because of the agency’s inadequate means of addressing job-related stress, the workers “have to keep reminding ourselves that we need to do self-care”. According to this worker, this “self-care” needs to be made a priority to find ways to “help take care of yourself”. Further to these statements, another worker implied that responsibility for managing the stress of the job falls upon the shoulder of the worker:

You have to be able to be somebody that can walk out the door at the end of the day and leave all the stuff at work. And if you can’t, then you will likely burnout. Um, some days are more stressful than others. There’s stress – different stressors would be related to case types, what the topic is or what the nature of the concerns are, but there’s also stress related to getting your paperwork done on time and, so, um, but again, it’s all how you manage it.

For these workers, the message that workers are individually responsible for the management of their stress has been embraced into their daily practice. These responses reflect an interesting contradiction that acknowledges the stress associated with the job of a child protection worker, but that failure to manage this stress is not a reflection of the structure of child welfare, but of the workers’ abilities. Workers are set up to blame themselves and question their professional abilities if they are unsuccessful at dealing with the stress and emotional aspects of their job.

The ideals of managerialism were also apparent in the responses of the participants. This was evident when workers spoke about how the job is heavily

task-oriented and accountability is paramount within daily practice. One worker noted that management encourages workers to maintain boundaries in their daily practice, by reminding workers to take their breaks and take their full lunch hour, but there are contradictory subtle and sometimes blatant messages received by workers:

It's supposed to be the policy that you don't work through your lunch hour, but of course that's expected on certain times, certain days, when things are going on. And when - and it's a pet peeve of mine because I like to take my lunch.

This worker explains further:

They don't leave and then I feel that based on what they can get done in a day, compared to someone who takes an hour and a quarter away from the job, it looks like some people are not as good at doing their job, but other people are feeling so overwhelmed and so stressed that they have to, you know, "come for lunch", "come to the park, it's nice". "I can't because I have all this work to do". And they're just kind of, like, shaking. It's, like, insane.

The conflicting messages received by workers, according to this participant, are that workers are subtly and blatantly praised for not maintaining boundaries. This worker further responded:

So, I have the same manager, but my manager formerly was praising someone who was actually there after hours, "Oh, you're here every night. Look at you. Look at how dedicated you are". Rather than saying, you know, "these are your hours, the job is too much, you need to go home".

This worker also stated that the agency frowns upon workers doing overtime hours because workers either take this time off somewhere else or are paid for accumulated overtime. In order to accomplish tasks, workers simply take the extra time without accounting for it:

And, in our particular unit, I would say that a lot of people don't take a flex day for their overtime hours and it's really difficult to get paid because - so, you have to say, "well I had this crisis situation, that's why I had to work all these extra hours". You know, you have to, um, defend yourself, why you worked so much and I can tell you many people are losing hours. They're working way more. Some of them, like, I would say some of them, easily, six to ten hours a week they're working more than they should be. Um, some workers would take - when we had the

old Recording, they would take the stuff home and do it over the weekend and not book their time.

Child protection workers are left with an interesting paradox. Workers are overwhelmed with an unmanageable job that has a high workload and not enough time to accomplish all the tasks required. The workers are encouraged to maintain boundaries and to accomplish tasks in the time of a normal workday, but this is next to impossible. Workers are then left to use time that seeps into their space to take a break from the job and regroup or reenergize. They are also encouraged to use time that is not accounted for. The management of these agencies ignore or subtly encourage what is going on and that this is a problem that has the great potential for negatively impacting upon the stress experienced by workers.

Additional aspects of managerialism were evident in other responses from the participants. Two of the participants spoke about the predominant focus of supervisors and management upon accountability and ensuring that tasks were completed. In addition to this, a task-focused orientation left little or no space for acknowledging the emotional aspects associated with the job. One worker stated that the agency has the expectation that workers complete all of their paperwork and for those who struggle to maintain boundaries by taking their breaks and lunches, there is a message sent to these workers that questions why other workers have accomplished more tasks and they have not. Another worker reflected upon her frustration with management being preoccupied with the completion of tasks:

Anyway, so, typical day, and sometimes, as I'm increasingly finding out, um, uh, I've decided I am going to, recently, no more work at home. They give you recording days at home. Um, and so, recently I got challenged on the time, like, "how come you only got X number of recordings done in that period of time"? And that really, frankly, I won't swear on your tape, but that really ticked me off.

The response from management was not of concern or consideration for the possible complexity involved with the files that the worker was reporting on or even the quality of assessment the worker completed, but only on the number of files completed. Another worker who stated her frustration with the structure of supervision echoed these sentiments:

I find that, um, management, when you have your supervision, they want to know what's going on in your cases and how are you going to do this and how are you going to do that, rather than how you're feeling and how overwhelmed and how it's impacting you and how hard that was.

This statement reflects, again, management's primary task-focused orientation to the job and the lack of acknowledgement for the stress a worker may be experiencing. One worker stated further that formal meetings with colleagues also do not allow space for these discussions:

Participant: But, as workers, even at our Unit meetings we don't talk about the stress, we don't talk about what's going on for us and how difficult that is.

Interviewer: Wow, that's interesting. And what a great opportunity to have those discussions.

Participant: Exactly.

Interviewer: What are the discussions of in Unit meetings?

Participant: In Unit meetings a lot of what's coming down from the agency, you know, policies and procedures and all of those wonderful things.

The workplace environment experienced by these workers is in stark contrast to the workplace environment experienced by another worker:

We have a unit meeting once a month where we just sit down in a group and talk about what's going on. I mean, we have specific things we need to talk about, but after that we just talk about general things. We share what's going on with everybody. But, um, I mean, certainly the people in my office – we talk about – openly all the time about what's going on and how we're feeling. So, I would say, definitely stress-related things are talked about at work.

The responses of this worker reflect a workplace environment that acknowledges the stress associated with the job and her supervisor has established a good balance between ensuring workers complete their work and ensuring workers have formal space to debrief and process the stress and emotions they experience. The responses of the previous two workers reflected a significant absence of this balance and the lack of formal space provided by their supervisor or the agency to discuss the emotional side of their job.

Research confirms that management is often primarily concerned with tasks completed by workers. With the increase of measures of accountability, supervision has increasingly become space where supervisors are merely task-focused and determine which tasks have been completed and provide the worker with a list of the next tasks to be completed (Gibbs, 2001). Supervision is no

longer an opportunity for workers to reflect on the complexities of their work and to feel supported by management (Gupta and Blewett, 2007). The methods and activities of social workers become targets of surveillance and space for social workers to discuss how they feel about their jobs is pushed out (Tham and Meagher, 2008). In fact, child protection workers who intended to leave the job perceived their workplace environment as more distrustful and suspicious (Tham, 2007). A worker who is routinely reminded of tasks yet to be completed may very well soon be fed up with these interactions with management and decide to leave the job.

The primary focus on task completion leaves little to no space for management to communicate to workers that they are valued and doing a good job. Research has reflected the importance of management communicating to child protection workers that they are valued by the agency and acknowledging the stress they experience. Tham (2007) found that child protection workers who intended to leave the job reported feeling less rewarded by management for a job well done and perceived that management was not concerned about their health and well being. Gibbs (2001) found similar themes for the participants who reported not feeling valued by management and not receiving approval for a job well done. Bennett, Plint and Clifford (2005) found that workers' satisfaction with the job was strongly correlated with being perceived by colleagues to have done the job well. Further, Dillenburg (2004) found that stress levels of child protection workers were negatively impacted by the lack of acknowledgement by management of the stress the workers experience.

Research has suggested, "management needs to acknowledge and validate staff members' stress related to the work" (Regehr et al, 2000, p.13). Employers need to provide a means for helping staff that suffer from work-related stress and increase their understanding of the stress experienced by workers (Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989). Collings and Murray (1996) suggest that supervision should be a balance between supervisor-oriented tasks and reinforcing the worker's value to the agency. Tham and Meagher (2008) suggest that the psychological demands of the job of child protection workers may increase need for recognition and reward from management. This was clear from the responses of the participants for this research project.

Another theme began to emerge from all participants when considering how the structure of the job impacts upon the stress experienced by the workers. This theme is based upon a pattern that has developed within social service agencies that are now dominantly operated under philosophies of managerialism and bureaucratization. Two of the participants provided responses that suggested the heavy reliance they have upon their supervisor for direction in their job. One worker stated:

So, um, not saying you ever want to pin everything on a manager, but if I have something saying, like, “my manager approved me to do this”, then nobody can come back on me and say, “well you didn’t do that right” because that was what I was instructed to do.

This worker stated further:

Because then, I’m very careful to always make sure that I’ve documented everything that we’ve talked about and my manager signs off on it, so that, at no time, can nobody say, “well you just did that on your own without direction”.

Finally, this worker spoke about the stress she has experienced when she has not received proper direction from her supervisor:

...but if you don’t feel that your manager’s giving you the, sort of, direction and all those things, that significantly increases your stress because you kind of feel lost. And you don’t really know what you’re supposed to be doing or if you’re doing the right thing and I think that’s what increases people’s stress.

The responses of this worker suggest that her professional confidence significantly diminished when she no longer had direction from her supervisor to guide her actions.

Another worker spoke in a similar language about the importance for her of receiving direction from her supervisor. This worker spoke about how the agency has attempted to change the structure of the agency from a top-down structure to one in which the workers share the task of the decision-making process:

Participant: So, and it’s an agency where workers have a lot more say than what I’m used to, it’s not a top-down, like, “I’m a supervisor, do what I say or go home”. We have a lot more say, like, we’re supposed to talk about things and we’re very social workey there. Completely different. Um, so that’s really nice. It’s a really nice thought, but it doesn’t work.

Interviewer: Really?

Participant: Well then you have five bosses trying to figure out what to do.

Interviewer: Gotcha.

Participant: I'd rather just have one and just learn what the rules are and do them.

Interviewer: Right, right. So, when the decisions need to be made and they need to be made kind of fast –

Participant: They don't.

Interviewer: It's a slower process.

Participant: Yeah because it's left up to five of us and the supervisor says, "well you guys meet, talk about it, I'm going to leave the room, let me know what you figure out".

Interviewer: Wow.

Participant: It sounds good – it's not. Because you – we say, "well this month we'll try it that way", next month we'll try it a different way. You can barely keep track of what you're supposed to be doing. I would rather just have a more authoritative supervisor saying, "this is the way it is, do it".

These workers place a heavy reliance upon the supervisor to make decisions and guide their daily practice. In the defense of both of these workers, this reliance upon the supervisor appears to be a successful survival tactic for the workers to remain at their job. The context of a child protection worker's daily job is one that encompasses unpredictable emergencies requiring immediate responses and several priorities can exist simultaneously. In order to overcome this chaos, these workers may have adopted a reliance on their supervisors for direction, while they spend energy on managing their time to complete their tasks and some time on smaller problem-solving tasks. Further, to this, the decisions and actions made by child protection workers are the first target of scrutiny when a devastating event occurs, such as, the death of a child. These workers may reject opportunity for the sole responsibility of their actions as a result of examples found in the media and smaller situations that may be found within their own agencies. One worker commented about the pervasive message to "cover your butt" that is embedded within the field of child welfare. The worrisome aspect of these worker's responses is that they may hold a false confidence in their professional skills.

The pushing out of professional decision-making as social services become more organized like corporate bureaucracies is well documented in research. The structure of social service agencies presently has little or no space for workers to exercise and develop their professional autonomy, judgment and decision-making. Gibson, McGrath and Reid (1989) suggest:

“Social work is of particular interest [when understanding the relationship between stress and lack of autonomy] since professional practice requires high levels of autonomy and independence whereas the hierarchical, bureaucratic organizational structures which characterize statutory social services agencies tend to undermine autonomy”. (p.8)

The structure of today’s social service agencies contradicts the education being taught in schools of Social Work, which fosters the development of professional judgment (Ewalt, 1991). The very structure of child welfare is arranged so that workers have a high level of responsibility with a low level of control (Guterman and Jayaratne, 1994). The primary concern with measures of accountability pervasive in social service agencies results in agencies wherein the actions of workers are predetermined by standardized rules, again, leaving no room for professional judgment (Ewalt, 1991). The task-focused nature of supervision depicts an environment in which the expert informs the novice who is simply told what to do and is not encouraged to actively engage in the problem-solving process (Gibbs, 2001).

The lack of opportunity for professional autonomy and decision-making has been found to negatively impact upon workers’ stress levels (Dillenburger, 2004; Jones et al, 1991; Stanley, Manthorpe and White, 2007) and intentions to leave the job (Tham, 2007). Aronson and Sammon (2000) found that workers reported that due to the increased demands of their work, they are left with no space to simply reflect and think about the work they are doing. Researchers have suggested that stress levels of workers may reduce if workers are provided more control over the decisions that are made (Guterman and Jayaratne, 1994) and that workers are more satisfied in their job if their professional judgment is not stifled, thereby, increasing the professional autonomy workers have with their clients (Arches, 1991). Thompson et al (1996) state:

“...moving away from the constraints and restrictions of bureaucracy with its emphasis on following rules and instructions and developing greater professional autonomy. By giving staff greater control and responsibility for their work, ownership and creativity are encouraged – and both of these can be seen as important safeguards against stress”.
(p.663).

Of course, these changes in the workplace environment must be accompanied by a change in the philosophy of the structure of child welfare to one that communicates confidence and value in the workers to make these decisions and for the workers to trust that they will be supported in the decisions they make.

Where Support is Found

Another aspect that must be included when deepening an understanding of how job-related stress impacts upon child protection workers is where they find support to alleviate the stress they experience. For all the stress the workers experience and the emotional aspects associated with the job, participants had much to say about where they find support in order to cope with their stress and emotions. One theme that was consistent for two of the workers was that they found having a sense of humour about the job was one way of combating the impact of the job-related stress. One of these workers stated:

I've asked some people how do you deal with stress, you know, they joke about all sorts of things and the people I work with have a wonderful sense of humour.

This same worker stated further:

And smile. I try to have a good sense of humour about it. That's my biggest weapon, I think – sense of humour.

Another worker reported that the sense of humour is shared amongst her colleagues as a way of coping with some of the, at times, heart-breaking aspects of the job:

Um, I'd say between workers we say, "If we don't laugh about it, we'll cry about it". So...you know, many people are aware that we make fun of a lot of the situations – try to find something funny about it because if you don't laugh, you'll cry.

Interestingly, the theme of a sense of humour to combat against the stress that accompanies the job of a child protection worker is something that has not been reflected in research, however, for both of these workers a sense of humour is key to alleviating some of the stress they experience.

Two of the workers referenced the agency's Employee Assistance Program (EAP) as a potential source of support. The EAP provides an avenue for workers to access counseling services in the community and the cost of these services are generally covered through the worker's benefit package. One of the workers commented that the agency sends out an email, twice a year, to all employees reminding them of this service, but this worker had never accessed this option and she was not aware of any colleagues that had either. Another worker stated that she felt the EAP was not "substantial enough" as means to address job-related stress issues. This worker stated that she had accessed this service on one occasion, but that she experienced difficulty in sharing her emotions and thoughts.

The benefits of EAP services have been explored in research. Ramanathan (1992) set out to understand if workers' stress levels were reduced after accessing EAP services. The findings showed that there were immediate changes in workers stress levels and productivity; however, these changes were not lasting. Ramanathan challenges the effectiveness of EAP services on two counts. The first being that EAP services focus on the individual as the problem and plans for intervention flow from this, ignoring factors that may be present in the work environment. The second is that EAP services focus upon improving the coping skills of the worker simply to allow the worker to continue in their job and improve their productivity. This only provides a superficial means of addressing the stress a worker experiences and does not provide long lasting change.

The responses from workers were mixed as far as receiving support from their supervisor and colleagues. In terms of support received from a supervisor, three of the workers did not express confidence in their supervisors playing a supportive role. One worker stated that the role of the supervisor is imperative to surviving in the job, "and I think if you have a manager that is not very good – in this work, I don't know how you could survive. I really don't". This worker stated that her supervisor is "awesome", however, she qualified this by stating that this was only in comparison to how she had heard coworkers speak negatively about their supervisors. Another worker stated that "on a good day" her supervisor is a source of support, implying that the support received is not consistent. When asked where she sees her supervisor's role in coping with the stress, another worker responded:

Participant: To be helpful or hurtful?

Interviewer: Um, either.

Participant: Both. It's been both at times. I go up and down with her, as I probably have with any of my supervisors. Some days I love her and some days I don't.

This worker stated that her supervisor is "pretty supportive", but she rather go to colleagues for support before her supervisor.

Only one worker was consistent and confident that her supervisor is a significant source of support for her:

And my manager's awesome. So anytime that – and she constantly checks in with us, "how are you feeling about this"?, "what are you feeling about that"?, "where are you to date"? Um, and she's very good at taking things off our plate. So, um, she tries to manage and handle as much as she can, but is not overstepping her boundaries and her role.

This worker consistently stated that her supervisor was a source of support and it was apparent that she felt very comfortable in approaching her supervisor to advise her when she was feeling overwhelmed with the job.

The supervisor as a source of support for child protection workers has been relatively consistent in research. Child protection workers and social workers have reported, for the most part, that their supervisors are sources of support for them in the workplace (Tham and Meagher, 2008; Storey and Billingham, 2001; Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989; Regehr et al, 2000). The support received from a supervisor has shown to reduce the level of distress experienced by workers (Regehr et al, 2004) and be related to reducing a worker's intention to leave the job (Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005). Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson (1991), however, found that a worker's relationship with her supervisor can sometimes increase the level of stress experienced by a worker. This idea was apparent from workers in the previous section whereby supervisors can increase the pressure and expectations upon workers.

The participants also spoke about the support they receive from colleagues. Two workers received a significant source of support from their colleagues. The worker who confidently reported having a supportive supervisor also reported having supportive colleagues:

...certainly we talk about stressful events among my colleagues. We'll talk about our cases with one another and, um, we're very good at – my team specifically, I can only speak about my team – my team is very good at recognizing when other people are stressed.

The worker, who stated that her supervisor could be supportive, but that this is inconsistent, spoke highly about the support she receives from colleagues:

Yeah, I think it's really important to have at least one or two good friends that you work with who can be there and understand who you're complaining about and what you're complaining about. Completely vital to lasting in the job.

Interestingly, this worker referred to her coworkers as 'friends', which make up a supportive network within the workplace to cope with the stress of the job. The first worker also used this language of friendship as she described the importance of getting to know coworkers "on a personal level":

I think getting to know each other on a personal level outside of work really helps because then you genuinely care about the people that you work with and you care about supporting them and you care about helping them out.

For these two workers, the support received from colleagues was as important as the support received from their supervisor, if not more, for colleagues are generally the ones that are easily accessible for workers for venting and debriefing.

The other two participants did not have the same experience as the previous two workers. The support from colleagues appeared to be lacking for both of them. One worker spoke about a stressful and negative interaction she had with a colleague that she experienced when she first came on the job. Since this time, this worker became cautious about her interactions with colleagues:

Participant: But I just thought – that just kind of made me put up a wall and I thought...

Interviewer: So, that relationship with colleagues?

Participant: Yeah. So, I'm careful about what I say. I'm not much of a gossip. I don't have time to gossip, I don't know who does in this job anyway. So, that was really stressful, I could've – I found it really stressful, but then I thought, well, as far as I'm concerned, we solved it and that was a huge stress for me.

Interviewer: When you're looking for support from colleagues and senior workers.

Participant: Absolutely.

This worker made a conscious decision to distance herself from coworkers in order to avoid another potentially stressful and emotionally exhausting incident. Another worker reported not feeling close to her coworkers:

Right now, I'm going to say that there's not a lot of coworkers that I'm close to. I mean we all get along really well, but everyone else seems to be so stressed out or so focused on their own job...So, I mean, I think that you're careful about who you say what to because they don't need any more added stress.

For this worker she was not close to colleagues because she did not want to add to her colleagues' stress levels. There seems to be an atmosphere that workers rather not share their experiences of stress and believe it easier to manage their stress on their own.

The support received from coworkers has also been consistently reflected in research (Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005; Storey and Billingham, 2001; Gibson, McGrath and Reid, 1989; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991). Regehr et

al (2000), however, noted that due to higher workloads coworkers were reported to be less likely to help and support each other than in the past. This is consistent with the experience of the workers referred to earlier in this section. Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin (2005) suggest the importance of support received in the workplace, “employees benefit from a supportive network within which to conduct their daily work lives...” (p.95). Without this support, the consequences for child protection workers could be devastating and lead many workers to decide to leave the job (Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005).

Although I asked the participants to reflect upon which sources of support are available to them in the workplace, all of the participants could not help but speak to the support they receive from family. One worker stated:

And I think, you know, partners can be very supportive, although you can't talk about specifics. You can say, “oh, I had this really horrible day and I can't believe this”, and, you know, and just get your support that way. So, I think the supports that we have outside of work are often just as valuable.

Another worker stated, however, that although workers may rely upon family for support, this may not always be received well:

...we had a little giggle about it because she said that for years she would talk about stuff with her daughter, whatever, and recently her daughter said, “I don't really want to hear about it mom”. I think there's a lesson there. Our families don't want to hear about all the stuff we do. So the question is, “what do we do with it”?

The stress that accompanies the work of a child protection worker and the heart-breaking stories that accompany the clients mean that child protection work is sometimes too devastating and too much for those outside of the situation to hear about.

Support from friends and family is also reflected in research almost as often as support received by supervisors and colleagues is captured by research (Storey and Billingham, 2001; Jones, Fletcher and Ibbetson, 1991; Regehr et al, 2000). However, Gibson, McGrath and Reid (1989) found that social workers reported their coworkers and supervisors as their primary sources of support and not their family and friends. The researchers suggest that these findings are “perhaps an indication that social workers for whatever reason, be it confidentiality or otherwise, do not knowingly burden their families with their work-related stress” (p.14). The support received from friends and family has been found to be less associated with a worker's intention to leave the job (Nissly, Mor Barak and Levin, 2005).

The one worker raised an important question to consider, “what do we do with it”? What are workers to do with the emotions and stress that they experience from their job? Two of the workers appear to be managing these aspects of the job relatively well due to a strong support network that exists for them within the workplace. The other two workers appear to not be managing these aspects of the job as well, as they report not receiving consistent support from their supervisors and not having close relationships with colleagues. The support they receive from family may be limited as suggested by research. Family members, who have a limited understanding and appreciation for the complexities the job entails and the emotional aspects that can be devastating and overwhelming, may not be able to listen to these aspects of the job, over time. It may be possible that workers who do not have sufficient support at work will not be able to remain in the job regardless of their skills, competencies and passion for the job.

CONCLUSION

The topic of job-related stress experienced by child protection workers has been extensively written about in academic literature; however, despite this knowledge, the issue still remains and continues to have negative consequences for both frontline child protection workers and service users. This research project has attempted to do what only a small portion of the existing research has done and this is to provide a context for the realities of child protection workers' daily practice (see: Aronson and Sammon, 2000; Regehr, 2000; Gibbs, 2001; Ellett et al, 2007; Gupta and Blewett, 2007). The participants of this project were provided a space to speak openly about the job-related stress they experience, how the stress they experience impacts upon the job they do and how the agencies they work for are either helpful or hurtful in the process.

By allowing the participants to speak in detail about these areas, the workers offered a rich understanding of how the structure of their agencies impacts upon the stress they experience. From the participants' responses, two interrelated themes emerged concerning how changes in the structure of child welfare agencies could alleviate much of the job-related stress frontline child protection workers experience. The two themes that connected all the research participants was the degree to which their agencies acknowledged stress as an issue and the strength of supportive networks within their work environments. From the participants' responses, it appears as though the workers who presented as being less stressed spoke of a work environment that acknowledged and encouraged the discussion of the emotional aspects of the job by providing both informal and formal space for these discussions. In comparison, the workers who presented as being more stressed spoke of a work environment that placed a heavy emphasis upon the administrative tasks of the job, while ignoring the emotional aspects and space was not made available within the workplace for these workers to debrief about the emotional complexities of their job.

Interestingly, none of the workers spoke about collective action or their relationship with their union as a source of support and as a way to advocate for themselves to improve the level of job-related stress they experience. This may be because workers may fear negative repercussions from management, such as further scrutiny or surveillance, if they were to organize a formal group. Further research may help to understand the relationship between frontline child protection workers and their union. Identifying and strengthening this relationship may be an ideal place to begin challenging the broader socio-

economic structures that impact the daily practice of frontline child protection workers.

The context of child protection workers' daily practice is complex, highly emotional and highly demanding. From all the negative outcomes that neo-liberalism has had upon the welfare state an outcome that was strikingly apparent from the child protection workers interviewed is that the places in which they work are not "safe havens" for them to acknowledge the emotional impact of their job and to simply think about the work they do. For changes in the structure of child welfare agencies to take place that reflect the themes identified in this research project, a dismantling of the neo-liberal paradigm must occur. The political agenda must loosen its reins upon measures of accountability and communicate an appreciation for the workers who are dedicated to ensuring the safety of children. The field of child welfare can no longer stand to continually lose experienced, educated and dedicated workers. Children, families and the community depend on it.

References

- Anderson, D.G. (2000). Coping strategies and burnout among veteran child protection workers. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 24(6), 839-848.
- Arches, J. (1991). Social structure, burnout, and job satisfaction. *Social Work*, 36(3), 202-206.
- Arches, J. (1997). Burnout and social action. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 8(2), 51- 62.
- Aronson, J. and Sammon, S. (2000). Practice amid social service cuts and restructuring: Working with the contradictions of 'small victories'. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 17(2), 169-187.
- Bell, H., Kulkarni, S. and Dalton, L. (2003). Organizational prevention of vicarious trauma. *Families In Society*, 84(4), 463-470.
- Bennett, S., Plint, A. and Clifford, T.J. (2005). Burnout, psychological morbidity, job satisfaction, and stress: a survey of Canadian hospital based child protection professionals. *Archives of Disease in Childhood*, 90, 1112-1116.
- Brodie, J. (1999). The Politics of Social Policy in the Twenty-First Century. In D. Broad and W. Antony (Eds.), *Citizens or consumers? Social policy in a market society* (pp.37-45). Halifax: Fernwood.
- Burr, V. (1995). What is social constructionism? *An Introduction to Social Constructionism*. New York: Routledge.
- Callahan, M. (1993). The administrative and practice context: Perspectives from the front line. In B. Wharf (Ed.), *Rethinking child welfare in Canada* (pp.64-97). Toronto: McLelland Stewart, Inc.
- Campbell, M. and Gregor, F. (2002). *Mapping Social Relations A Primer in Doing Institutional Ethnography*. Aurora, Ontario: Garamond Press.
- Collings, J.A. and Murray, P.J. (1996). Predictors of stress amongst social workers: An empirical study. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 375-387.
- Connolly, M. (2003). Qualitative analysis a teaching tool for social work research. *Qualitative Social Work*, 2(1), 103-112.
- Conrad, D. & Kellar-Guenther, Y. (2006). Compassion fatigue, burnout, and

- compassion satisfaction among Colorado child protection workers. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 30, 1071- 1080.
- DeMontigny, G.A.J. (2003). Textual regulation of child welfare. *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 52, 33-50.
- Dillenburg, K. (2004). Causes and alleviation of occupational stress in child care work. *Child Care in Practice*, 10(3), 213-224.
- Drake, B. & Yadama, G.N. (1996). A structural equation model of burnout and job exit among child protective services workers. *Social Work Research*, 20(3), 179-187.
- Eakin, L. (2007). *We Can't Afford To Do Business This Way: A Study of Administrative Burden Resulting from Funder Accountability and Compliance Practices*. Toronto: Wellesley Institute. (Exec summary, 5pp.).
- Ellett, A.J., Ellis, J.I., Westbrook, T.M. and Dews, D. (2007). A qualitative study of 369 child welfare professionals' perspectives about factors contributing to employee retention and turnover. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29, 264-281.
- Ewalt, P.L. (1991). Trends affecting recruitment and retention of social work staff in human services agencies. *Social Work*, 36(3), 214-217.
- Fabricant, M.B. and Burghardt, S. (1992). *The Welfare State Crisis and the Transformation of Social Service Work*. New York: M.E. Sharpe.
- Gibbs, J.A. (2001). Maintaining front-line workers in child protection: A case for refocusing supervision. *Child Abuse Review*, 10, 323-335.
- Gibson, F., McGrath, A. and Reid, N. (1989). Occupational stress in social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 19, 1-16.
- Guterman, N.B. and Jayaratne, S. (1994). "Responsibility at-risk": Perceptions of stress, control and professional effectiveness in child welfare direct practitioners. *Journal of Social Service Research*, 20(1/2), 99-120.
- Gupta, A. and Blewett, J. (2007). Change for children? The challenges and opportunities for the children's social work workforce. *Child and Family Social Work*, 12, 172-181.

- Harlow, E. (2003). New managerialism, social service departments and social work practice today. *Practice Social Work in Action*, 15(2), 29-44.
- Hewitt, J. (2007). Ethical components of researcher-researched relationships in qualitative interviewing, *Qualitative Health Research*, 17(8), 1149-1159.
- Himle, D.P., Jayaratne, S. and Thyness, P.A. (1993). The impact of setting on work-related stress and performance among Norwegian social workers. *International Social Work*, 36, 221-231.
- Jones, F., Fletcher, B.C. and Ibbetson, K. (1991). Stressors and strains amongst social workers: Demands, supports, constraints, and psychological health. *British Journal of Social Work*, 21, 443-469.
- Kreuger, L.W. and Neuman, W.L. (2006). *Social Work Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Applications*. Toronto: Allyn and Bacon, Pearson Education, Inc.
- Lawler, J. (2000). The Rise of Managerialism in Social Work. In E. Harlow and J. Lawler (Eds.), *Management, social work and social change* (pp.33-55). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Munro, E. (2004). The impact of audit on social work practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34(8), 1075-1095.
- McKeen, W. (2004). The shifting discourses of the progressive social policy/child poverty advocacy community. Whither social justice? *Canadian Review of Social Policy*, 53, 88-106.
- Neuman, L. (1997). The Meanings of Methodology. In, *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches* (pp. 60-87). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Nissly, J.A, Mor Barak, M. E. and Levin, A. (2005). Stress, social support, and workers' intentions to leave their jobs in public child welfare. *Administration in Social Work*, 29(1), 79-100.
- Ramanathan, C.S. (1992). EAP's response to personal stress and productivity: Implications for occupational social work. *Social Work*, 37(3), 234-239.
- Rees, S. (1999). Managerialism in social welfare: Proposals for a humanitarian alternative – an Australian perspective. *European Journal of Social Work*, 2(2), 193-202.

- Regehr, C., Hemsworth, D., Leslie, B., Howe, P. and Chau, S. (2004). Predictors of post-traumatic distress in child welfare workers: a linear structural equation model. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 26, 331-346.
- Regehr, C., Leslie, B., Howe, P. & Chau, S. (2000). Stressors in child welfare practice. *OACAS Journal*, Nov.1-17.
- Sapey, B. (1997). Social work tomorrow: Towards a critical understanding of technology in social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 27, 803-814.
- Stanley, N., Manthorpe, J. and White, M. (2007). Depression in the profession: Social workers' experiences and perceptions. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 281-298.
- Storey, J. and Billingham, J. (2001). Occupational stress and social work. *Social Work Education*, 20(6), 659-670.
- Tham, P. (2007). Why are they leaving? Factors affecting intention to leave among social workers in child welfare. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 1225-1246.
- Tham, P. and Meagher, G. (2008). Working in human services: How do experiences and working conditions in child welfare social work compare? *British Journal of Social Work*, 1-21.
- Thompson, N., Stradling, S., Murphy, M. and O'Neill, P. (1996). Stress and organizational culture. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 647-665.
- Tilbury, C. (2007). The regulation of out-of-home care. *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 209-224.
- Weaver, D., Chang, J., Clark, S. & Rhee, S. (2007). Keeping public child welfare workers on the job. *Administration in Social Work*, 31(2), 5-25.

APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT POSTER

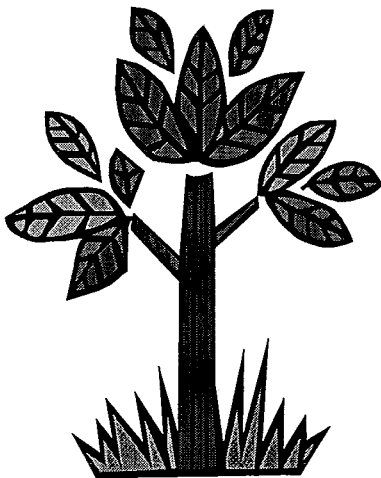
LOOKING FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS...



Inspiring Innovation and Discovery

I'D LIKE TO SPEAK WITH
FRONTLINE CHILD PROTECTION
WORKERS
ABOUT...

YOUR EXPERIENCE OF JOB-RELATED STRESS?
FACTORS OF THE JOB THAT IMPACT YOUR STRESS?
WHERE YOU FIND SUPPORT?



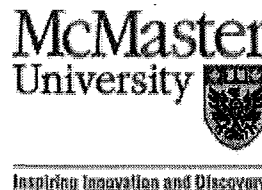
PLEASE CONTACT ME TO DISCUSS
THIS RESEARCH PROJECT FURTHER...

BONNIE E. HENDERSON, B.A., BSW(HONS.)
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Bonhenderson5@hotmail.com

One-hour interviews will be conducted, at a location of your choosing, to discuss these and other related questions.

This research project has received approval from the
McMaster University Research Ethics Board

**APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMATION /
CONSENT**



April 30, 2008

Letter of Information /Consent

A Study of the Stress and Structure of Frontline Child Protection

Student Investigator: Bonnie E. Henderson
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 24596

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Donna Baines
School of Social Work
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
(905) 525-9140 ext. 24596

Purpose of the Study

I am completing this project as part of my degree requirements. In this study, I want to understand the experiences of job-related stress, as defined by frontline child protection workers. I hope to learn about how the structure of child welfare, for example, through the legislation, the policies and the practice of child welfare, impacts the stress experienced by frontline workers. I also hope to find out where frontline workers find support from within the job to reduce the impact of stress.

Procedures involved in the Research

You will be asked to engage in a interview related to the your work as a frontline child protection worker. During the interview you will be invited to openly discuss examples of stress you have experienced and/or experience on a regular basis. I will ask questions about how the policies that govern your work impact on the expectations of the job and, ultimately, the stress you experience. I will also ask you to identify areas of support that help to reduce the level of job-related stress you experience. The interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon place that is away from the site of the agency, to ensure your anonymity and confidentiality. The duration of the interview will be approximately one hour in length, although this may vary depending upon the conversation generated. The interviews will be tape recorded, with your permission and later transcribed by a third party. I will make hand-written notes during the interview, with your permission.

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts

It is not likely that there will be any harm associated with the interview process; however, there is potential for some feelings of discomfort, as we will be discussing experiences of stress that may

bring about strong emotions and frustrations. You do not need to answer questions that make you uncomfortable or that you do not want to answer. During the interview, you will also be able to stop the interview and take a break if you wish.

Potential Benefits

Child protection workers have a paramount focus to ensure the safety of children and it is apparent, through existing research, that child protection workers are required to do so under increasing levels of stress from the job. I hope that this research project may contribute to the better understanding of the relationship between experienced stress and the structure of child welfare.

The research will not benefit you directly.

Confidentiality:

Anything that you say or do in the study will not be told to anyone else, with the exception that the data will be analyzed in collaboration with the faculty supervisor. Anything that I find out about you that could identify you will not be published or told to anyone else, unless I obtain your permission. Your privacy will be respected. I will not be asking you to provide your name or any personal information. Your employer will not know if you participated or what you said.

The information obtained by me will be kept in a locked filing cabinet that will be accessible only to the faculty supervisor and myself. The information will be destroyed following the completion of the research project.

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

Your participation in this study is voluntary. 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:

You may obtain information about the results of the study by contacting me, via email, in October 2008 to be forwarded a summary of the research findings or access to the fully completed research project.

Information about Participating as a Study Subject:

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

Student Investigator: Bonnie E. Henderson

Bonhenderson5@hotmail.com

Faculty Supervisor: Donna Baines, Assistant Professor

905-525-9140 ext.23703

bainesd@mcmaster.ca

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 Bonnie E. Henderson, 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: INTERVIEW GUIDE

Information about these interview questions: This gives you an idea what I would like to learn about job-related stress experienced by frontline child protection workers. Interviews will be one-to-one and will be open-ended (not “yes” or “no” answers). Because of this, the exact wording may change a little. Sometimes I use other short questions to help make sure I understand what you told me or if I need more information when we are talking, “So, you are saying that...?”), to get more information (“Please tell me more?”), or to learn what you think or feel about something (“Why do you think that is...?”).

- 1) Please describe a typical day for you as a frontline child protection worker?
- 2) How much stress would you say is connected to Child Welfare work?
- 3) How is the topic of stress spoken about in the workplace? What language is used?
- 4) What aspects of the job impact the stress experienced by child protection workers?
- 5) Is/Are there (an) area(s) of the job that significantly impact your experience of job-related stress?
- 6) How does the agency / management address issues of stress amongst employees?
- 7) Would you be willing to share with me examples of stressful experiences you have had as a frontline child protection worker.
- 8) Does stress impact the job you do? How?
- 9) Do colleagues generally feel the same way you do re: issues of job-related stress? Are there discussions amongst workers related to advocating for changes in the workplace to improve stress experienced? Where are sources of support to begin this?
- 10) What are your sources of support within the job?
- 11) How accessible are these supports?
- 12) Is there something important we forgot? Is there anything else you think I need to know about the stress experienced by frontline child protection workers?