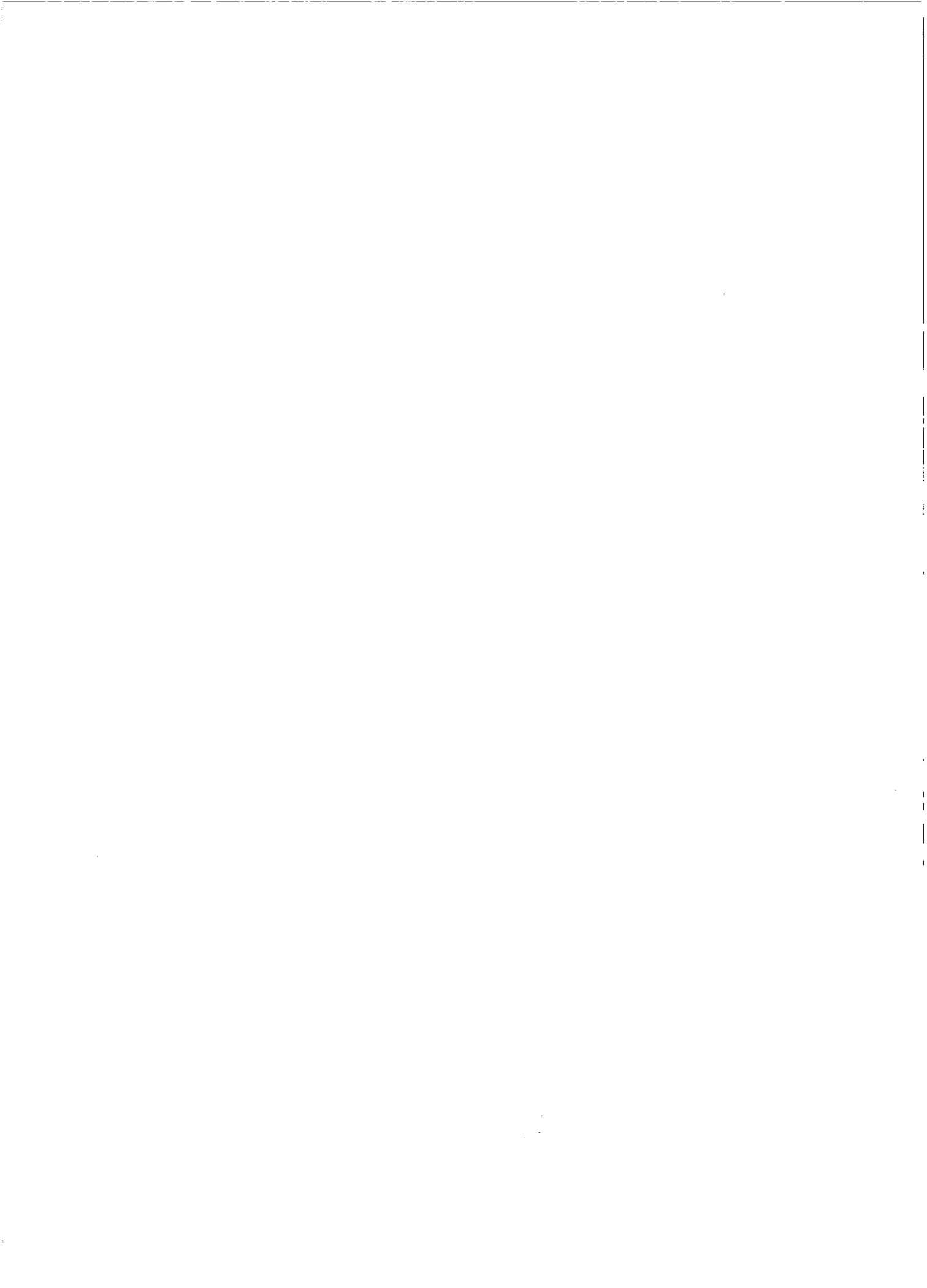


DISCRETIONARY DECISION MAKING IN CHILD WELFARE



**DISCRETIONARY DECISION MAKING IN CHILD WELFARE:
FINDING SPACES FOR ANTIOPPRESSIVE PRACTICE**

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**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial
fulfillment of the degree Master of Social Work**

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Abstract

For the purposes of this thesis I interviewed four women. The interviews sought to uncover how these women experienced discretionary decision-making and whether it was a vehicle for novel and emancipatory work. I also asked what and how did the competing policies structure their work and decision-making? What have been their experience and their power in the change making process? Where are some of the locations of change as they experience and understand it? Where do they see change necessary in the structure of these policies?

These four women worked in two different child welfare agencies. The larger of the two agencies has recently undertaken an anti-racism education and organizational change initiative. This work is critical to maintaining or establishing healthy communities. The experience and energies of practitioners must be harnessed as generators of practical assessments and solutions regarding systemic oppression and practical problems. This experience must also be employed as a vehicle for political change both at the frontline and throughout the policy making process.

Although discretionary decision making could clearly be a site for emancipatory work and a vehicle for antioppressive practice, the data show that it was not utilized as such to any great extent in the professional lives of these four women. All four respondents spoke about antioppressive practice and change as a regular aspect of the work in their agency; all also indicated that there are a significant number of barriers to practicing within this framework.

This work of critical analysis is not covered under existing funding frameworks, nor is it quantifiable through current accountability measures, and thus it remains invisible work. In an era of *New Public Management* with the contracting out of services, lean service provision built upon principals of just-in-time production, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify these efforts of resistance and service reform. Unless the lack of an antioppressive framework can be linked to increased risk to children and families, and thus become a liability to the service providers, it seems unlikely that this reform will be effectively engaged and carried through to completion.

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403 calls for 5:30 breaks

Dairy Queen Dinners

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Our Sun Porch

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Introduction

My concern about power and oppression began as an undergrad at my rather atypical summer job. I was an Immigration Officer at a land crossing in Canada. I am unfamiliar with how immigration law in Canada looks in this post 9/11 state of the world. However, during my tenure as an Officer between 1997 and 2001 there was a particular proviso in the regulations that allowed an officer to permit an individual entry into Canada despite their proven inadmissibility. An individual may be inadmissible because of a necessary but missing document, typically a visitor visa, or even a minor criminal conviction, such as a drinking and driving conviction. I cannot recall the specific title of the regulation, but it was always referred to as 'discretion' or 'discretionary entry.' If the aforementioned visitor was deemed 'low risk' to over-stay their admission limit or to commit crimes in Canada, and are otherwise admissible, for \$200 a document could be created that formally superseded the missing documentation. When I was first introduced to the practice I shrugged it off as some sort of logical and well planned bureaucratic strategy meant to protect our country from high risk undesirables. Right. Naiveté was a rather strong theme in my life back in those days, and I missed the glaringly racist nature of that thought process. Admittedly, I also assumed that the Officers situated in Consular General's offices, Embassies, and High Commission's, would have greater access to international criminal databases and public information resources. I imagined that with this access to information, Officers had more comprehensively investigated the nature and the extent of risk that an individual may or may not have posed. I was eventually informed that this information may or may not be available, and many times a document is issued based on the verbal declarations of the client; something any Officer at any office can 'judge.'

I started to query the process of assessing risk and granting 'discretionary entry' because different senior officers were more or less likely to offer this option to tourists. There seemed to be a mythology about who (read: race, ethnicity, country of origin) was most likely to present themselves for admission to Canada lacking the requisite material, and then who among this group was to be at greater risk of 'exploiting' this as an opportunity to stay in Canada as an illegal immigrant. A Senior Officer helped grind home the bleak reality of this practice one day when she equated the practice of 'discretionary entry' to a policy of bribery. I was both stunned and inspired. She very critically exposed the hypocrisy of a country whose citizens would likely be outraged at the thought of visiting outside of Canada, and only permitted entry if they bribed officials of another nation. The Senior Officer worried aloud that she was being perceived as manipulative and that the request for money in exchange for excusing a tourist's documentary or criminal faux pas was to her *personal* benefit, rather than an expression of formal policy. As such she went to great ends to explain the nature of her decision making when she was offering this service.

This experience resonated with me for a number of reasons. I was beginning my bachelor of social work degree around the time that this exchange took place, and I had been working at the port of entry for several summers. I was able to reflect on a number of previous scenarios that suddenly felt extremely oppressive to the visitors I had been serving. Strangely, I suddenly realized the depth of what the 'discretionary entry' really meant. It was not isolated to excusing visitors' without visitor's visas or those with drunk-driving convictions that had not yet been granted Immigration Canada's version of a pardon. This impacted every exchange and decision I was making throughout my day. I felt like the folks on an old cereal commercial that were asked 'what do you think *Rice Crispies* are made of?' The name branding of that food had become so entrenched that folks shrugged or sometimes guessed oats or wheat. *Rice Crispies?! Discretionary Entry?!*

What I had seen up to that moment with the Senior Officer was the 'name branding' of that procedure of offering and processing a permit to enter, a *discretionary* permit to enter. I was just beginning to recognize that this was most importantly *a process* of making a discretionary decision. I additionally began to then realize the depth of breadth or implications of this practice. And just as effectively, the institutionalization of oppression had become so entrenched and embedded in our understanding and expression of policy and decision making that it was masked by the political goals, and the 'good intentions' of policy makers, agencies, and practitioners.

Following completion of my bachelor of social work degree I, like so many new grads in Ontario, struck out into the working world as a child protection worker. I brought with me my experiences and understanding of politically and heavily policy driven decision-making. I also brought a keen interest in continuing to unpack my positionality as a white woman working with incredible power, and in service to folks who are minoritized by larger Canadian society and then again by me and the structure that I worked within. I was always curious to find creative approaches to service that best met client needs and, additionally, challenged oppressive structures. I looked to management, administration, frontline staff, and clients for ideas, clues, and inspiration. This was a process I undertook to challenge a culture of direct practice I saw as oppressive. Folks around me often took a 'tell me when you find the answer' attitude.

I remained curious to find the places of discretionary power that I might wield in order to uphold the mandate and responsibility of the agency, respected the dignity and self determination of the families I served, and structure novel and effective service approaches that might better meet service needs. I soon discovered that the work in social service agencies is structured by a web of

complimentary and competing policies and service agendas that leave little space for the type of creative and discretionary decision making that I saw as integral to honouring clients' strengths and needs. Changing the structure of the work of child protection seemed frustrating, large, daunting, and even impossible at times. I searched for political allies, theoretical allies, and spaces of safety where this work of change and resistance could be discussed and organized.

For the purposes of this thesis I interviewed four women. The interviews sought to uncover how these women experienced discretionary decision-making and whether it was a vehicle for novel and emancipatory work. I also asked what and how did the competing policies structure their work and decision-making? What has been their experience and their power in the change making process? Where are some of the locations of change as they experience and understand it? Where do they see change necessary in the structure of these policies?

These four women worked in two different child welfare agencies. Each of the two agencies has been in service to their respective communities for over 100 years. The first has nearly 200 employees with several service branches including satellite entrenched units within higher needs areas of the city, as well as a largely stand alone unit that exclusively serves first nations families. The community is large, with both urban and rural families. The second Children's Aid Society is approximately 50% larger; however the community being served is approximately 400% larger. It boasts a largely urban population, as well as rural communities that surround the city centre. Both communities claim to have an extremely religiously, racially, ethnically, linguistically, and economically diverse community and service population. The aforementioned data was gleaned from websites for each agency; however, neither agency made claims regarding the diversity of their employees, particularly *Child Protection Workers* (CPW) and other frontline service personnel.

The larger of the two agencies has recently undertaken an anti-racism education and organizational change initiative, securing funding from both the federal *Department of Heritage* and the *Trillium Foundation*. This initiative has a number of target areas including Data Collection and Information Systems; Human Resources; Training; Services and Programs; and Communications and Community Linkages. There have been two separate individuals employed as 'Coordinators of Organizational Change.' The first brought to this position a doctoral degree, extremely valuable skills and experience in anti-racist education, as well as multiple publications to his credit. Unfortunately, he left the agency after completing a number of goals within the plan. The second coordinator has brought a keen interest to her position, but is decidedly less experienced. As the women will discuss throughout this thesis, this new coordinator has entered a rather complicated and tenuous environment in which she is to carry out the goals of anti-racist and anti-oppressive training and change.

Although the smaller agency cannot boast of such a headline making broad-based initiative, their policy change process also reflects anti-oppressive initiatives. They have an exclusively First Nations' branch within their agency that is both staffed by and serves the local First Nation community. It has recently relocated from the central agency offices to an on reserve location, and was established to provide culturally appropriate intervention services to the community. Additionally, concerned citizens have recently formed a coalition organized around criticisms and frustrations regarding child welfare in their particular community. The CAS in this community has done some work to honour these concerns and bring the voices and message of this group to the board of directors and the agency at large.

Of these four women, three women described themselves as white, and one woman self-described as a member of a racialized population and an immigrant to Canada. Two of the white women are first generation Canadians as their parents are naturalized Canadian citizens of western European decent. The women were recruited in a purposive sample (Strauss & Corbin 1998, Luborsky & Rubinstein 1995) in an effort to speak with women whom I or others were aware to be engaging actively in anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice, or working within the organization on formal and informal change initiatives aimed at improving practice for workers and clients.

My goal is to honour the dedicated work of child protection agencies, and particularly the voices of the women who are engaging in that work and change. This work is critical to maintaining or establishing healthy communities. The experience and energies of practitioners must be examined and positively utilized as generators of practical assessments and solutions regarding systemic and practical problems. This experience must also be employed as a vehicle for political change both at the frontline and throughout the policy making process.

Methods

Sossin (1993) proposed that discretionary opportunities provide agents of authority the power to choose an intervention based upon present circumstances, rather than circumscribed responses to generalized situations. Recognition of the expertise of both professionals and clients can provide opportunities for practical consensus making. Unfortunately discretion is ultimately the responsibility of the practitioner. Therefore inclusion or exclusion of the client in the decision making process remains a choice which is ultimately governed by the individual practitioner, as well as patterns of professional behaviour within an agency or a particular area of service. As such, a power imbalance suggests this relationship of participatory action may be sullied and ultimately exercised in the favour of the practitioner and the organization rather than the client.

Lipsky (1980) examined the existence of discretionary decision making patterns among frontline workers. He suggested that, rather than it necessarily being a means to inclusive delivery of service it was more often resistance against corrupted organizational structures and scarce resource availability (Lipsky 1980, Evans & Harris 2004). He called this frontline organizing 'street level bureaucracy' and described it as follows:

At best, street level bureaucrats invent benign modes of mass processing that more or less permit them to deal with the public fairly, appropriately, and successfully. At worst, they give in to favoritism, stereotyping, and routinizing- all of which serve private or agency purposes. (Lipsky, 1980)

It is here that I wish to readdress my thesis question. How do discretionary authority and legislation act as a platform for emancipatory resistance against oppressive structures within a practical social work setting? While Lipsky has clearly presented the oppressive nature that discretionary decision making can exemplify, I am also interested in the possibilities it presents for individual and collective resistance.

I am most interested in examining discretionary decision making at work in the context of child welfare in Southern Ontario. The extent to which child welfare case workers fail to uphold values of anti-oppressive practice has come under much scrutiny (Regehr et. at. 2002, Buckley 2000, Ericsson 2000, and others) as has the competing agendas of client focused work and managerial directives of accountability (Carpenter & Golden 1997). Social work in the child welfare setting is experiencing unprecedented growth, and the system has been unable to maintain sufficient rates of staff recruitment and retention to meet the growing need for services (Regehr et. at. 2002). Additionally, many of those currently working on the frontlines have less experience than their older child welfare sisters. Child welfare has become a professional entry point for new

social workers. This then places a great burden upon both the families that are served who become frustrated watching their newly graduated workers learn the system, and supervisors who must spend a great deal of time mentoring their new charges.

A climate of rapid-fire decision making has been created based on standardized responses that meet basic service delivery needs. This occurred in an attempt to both find a balance among the demands of a challenging workload, and to negotiate a complicated recording system directed at increasing accountability and standardizing service response times. Unfortunately, without time or energy devoted to *ensuring* that these decisions are made with respect to equity and anti-oppression, it is this system of pressures and demands that pushes in discretionary practices to act as a vehicle for oppressive values. Similarly, the ever tightening network of policy objectives guiding decision making has acted to curb discretionary decision making in favour of anti-oppressive value sets, and to continue to function to ensure that decision making shall remain strictly controlled. My research attempts to fit into this uncharted domain of study. I want to promote the understanding that discretionary powers can be meted out in a fashion that gives voice to clients and meets goals of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) while emphasizing that the current climate and structural forces in child welfare make this nearly impossible. The pressures of timelines and meeting accounting measures are seen as incongruent with AOP, and therefore little space for AOP is accommodated. In this study I explored not only factors limiting progressive uses of discretion, I also examined the small spaces of resistance that exist and documented the strategies and spaces in which anti-oppressive practice can be successfully engaged and oppressive structures and practices can be challenged and changed.

Methodology

Design: An exploratory method is being employed, examining experiences of discretion across different areas of frontline child welfare service delivery. In-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with individuals from a two sites. The interviews were taped, and the principal researcher obtained consent from each of the respondent to participate in both the initial interview, and follow-up interviews as needed preceding or during data analysis. Follow-up discussions included an opportunity for member checking at which time respondents were provided with transcripts so that they might add, change, or remove statements as they deemed necessary. Initial interviews took place at sites of the participant's choice. Participants were encouraged to communicate with the principal researcher as necessary over the phone and by email. (Neuman 1997 & Neysmith 1995)

Sampling: I have employed a purposive sampling technique (Strauss & Corbin 1998, Luborsky & Rubinstein 1995) both because of the specificity of the

thesis question I am examining, and so that I might ensure a depth of distribution of individuals that represent various service areas as well as populations of individuals including women and practitioners from racialized populations. As previously mentioned, child welfare agencies in Ontario are struggling with recruitment and retention resulting in rapid turnover. A study aimed at unpack the methods of resistance needs to target individuals with an established platform of experience in the agency. Additionally, individuals who have an understanding and practical knowledge base of AOP were recruited. Given the increasing breadth of professional qualifications present in the child welfare workforce, individuals with neither social work nor social service work educational credentials are often employed and often lack an AOP perspective or skill set. Finally, I wished to ensure that the participants are working directly with legislative procedures, or are employed as an individual whose task is structural reform of legislation and agency procedures. As such, all had a clear understanding of legislative directives, agency procedures, and the contradictions between and among these bodies as well as their anti-oppressive values.

Instrumentation: I employed a qualitative interview guide that has been attached and marked Appendix 'A'. I have outlined a number of questions in an attempt to unpack themes of oppression as well as themes of resistance within agency procedures, agency structures, and individual practical responses. Additionally, the guide has been further enhanced by a number of prompts that are intended to further illicit thoughtful examination of respondents' work within the structure of a highly stressful area of service provision. This interview guide was made available to respondents several days preceding interviews, so that they might familiarize themselves with the content and expectations, and begin preparing some salient points that they might feel safe and confident reporting. Additionally, I had hoped that the respondents' examination of their work within agency procedures and structures might serve to highlight the positive work they are engaging in so that they might feel empowered by their efforts and encouraged to bring to light spaces of resistance and good work that might begin to take root throughout the agency (Finch 1991).

I felt cautious interviewing individuals who have similar or higher academic and professional qualifications than I, however as a white woman intending to interview individuals who are members of racialized populations, I was also cognizant of the specificity of experience they have as practitioners in this setting (Finch 1991). I was, however, confident in the knowledge that oppressive values and structures are at work in child welfare practice, and therefore prepared to unpack and explore the experiences of the research respondents (Finch 1991).

Ethical considerations: In examining one's experiences as a practitioner in social service agencies, particularly agencies that service a high risk population

and/or are organized in such a fashion that places the employees in highly stressful experiences and situations, the process of speaking about these situations may prove to be stressful or upsetting (Kayser-Jones 1994). As such, concerns could have arisen within or following the interviews with respect to the performance of coworkers and other professionals, the impact upon clients served, and the resulting responsibilities of practitioners within their professional structures. Respondents were informed that they could stop the interview at any time if they were unable or unwilling to continue. Additionally, respondents understood that they had the right to refuse to answer any questions or omit any responses from the final project. This issue was negotiated at the time of recruitment, and repeated at both the interview and follow-up member check. Individuals could experience stress or concern with respect to having their identity and/or participation in this project revealed. All efforts were made to conceal the identity of participants, statements, position, and agency identifiers were omitted or changed, with approval, in order to ensure confidentiality (Kayser-Jones 1994). Benefits of the interview included an opportunity to unpack practitioners understanding of the strengths and limits of the legislation, agency structures, and personal skills and experiences. This may lend to a better understanding of the strengths and limitations of service within practice settings governed by discretionary powers.

This study received ethical approval through the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Please see the attached ethics certificate marked Appendix 'B'.

Analysis & Theoretical Framework: The analysis of the data collection was framed by critical theory (Morrow, 1994) with the intention of placing the practical tools of resistance within a structural and political framework. Research design and analysis took take a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998). Mauthner and Doucet (1998) argue that data analysis involved a process of reflecting upon the researcher's social and theoretical position as well as the data. Data analysis also involved actively examining potential factors and obstacles within the research relationship I shared with my respondents, my research supervisor, and my colleagues (Mauthner & Doucet 1998). Consistently readdressing this relationship was essential throughout the process of data analysis as it continued to inform the import of various aspects of the data sets (Mauthner & Doucet 1998.)

Limitations The small sample of four (4) women with whom I gathered the data contained herein suggests that although broadly applicable, is not generalizable. This study represents a particularized and specific examination of the experiences of frontline child welfare workers in Ontario, and their efforts of resistance and creative practical service throughout the many facets of their roles as child protection workers. It does not reflect the work of the many other service areas nor the supervisory or management structure. Additionally, the

diversity of those sampled is limited; therefore there remains an unexamined multiplicity of experience that is informed by sex, gender, sexual orientation, religiosity, race, ethnicity, ability, and so on. I have shared both personal and professional relationships with several of the women, and as such I was able to share confidences that otherwise might not have been accessible with women with whom I did not share a personal relationship. Additionally, these relationships offer some challenges with respect to honouring their friendship as well as their personal and professional lives when collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data. (Ryan, academic paper 2005)

Oppression

The process and interview schedule (see attached) which I used to frame the interviews loosely structured to inspire a systems analysis of the oppression and resistance each women experienced as a participant, victim, and observer. As well, we engaged in discussions of change, as they are occurring for good or for bad, and how the research participants hope they would evolve for the benefit of clients, professionals, and the structure of the child welfare system. In the following sections, oppression within each organization will be organized under the following themes: oppression within the structure of decision-making; oppression as it frames case management; and finally oppression as it frames the spirit of the work environment.

Bond (1998) speaks to multiple realities among participants in working groups. Individuals may all be women, or employees, or concerned citizens; but they may also experience various vulnerabilities as imposed upon them by dominant groups. She suggests that organizers of working groups must be cognizant to approach member identities with respect to a both/and ideal rather than an either/or ideal. Individuals are not group members, or concerned employees, to the exclusion of all other identities such as woman, lesbian, etcetera. As such, a group organizer must recognize that agenda setting may suffer in a group with a mixed membership that includes individuals working at various bureaucratic levels in an agency and as members of dominant or minoritized demographic groups. Voices of some individuals or groups may be more heavily represented in this agenda at the exception of others.

Elsass and Graves (1997) examined the experiences of minoritized individuals in demographically diverse working groups. They too note the problematic and dysfunctional outcomes of these groups, particularly if the group is predominantly homogeneous with a small number or single individual identified as a member of (a) minoritized group(s). They propose that organizational and social structures are shaped by white male dominance, and that the resulting bureaucratic hierarchy reflects this power distribution (Ibarra 1993, Ridgeway 1991, Pettigrew & Martin 1987.) Role expectation among group members can thus be framed by the existence of oppressive values as asserted by the socially dominant members of a working group and as forced upon and internalized by the minoritized members of the group. Categorization of group members as being members of this or that demographic group, and resulting role positioning based upon their gender or racioethnicity is clearly not inevitable, however, in an organization with demonstrable systemic and overt oppression, this scenario is more likely (Elsass & Graves 1997.) Therefore, mixed demographic working groups, although superficially desirable in hopes of presenting the image of an anti-oppressive, multicultural, or inclusive agency, may well continue to serve the needs of already dominant stakeholders, and

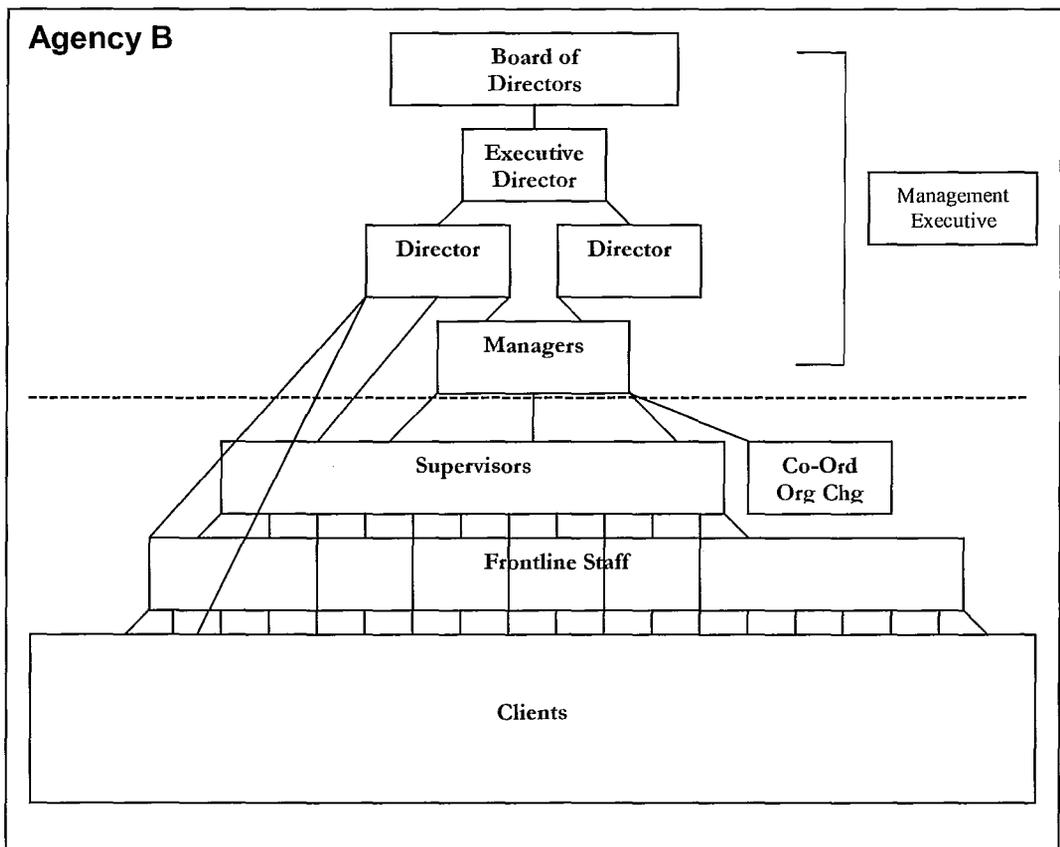
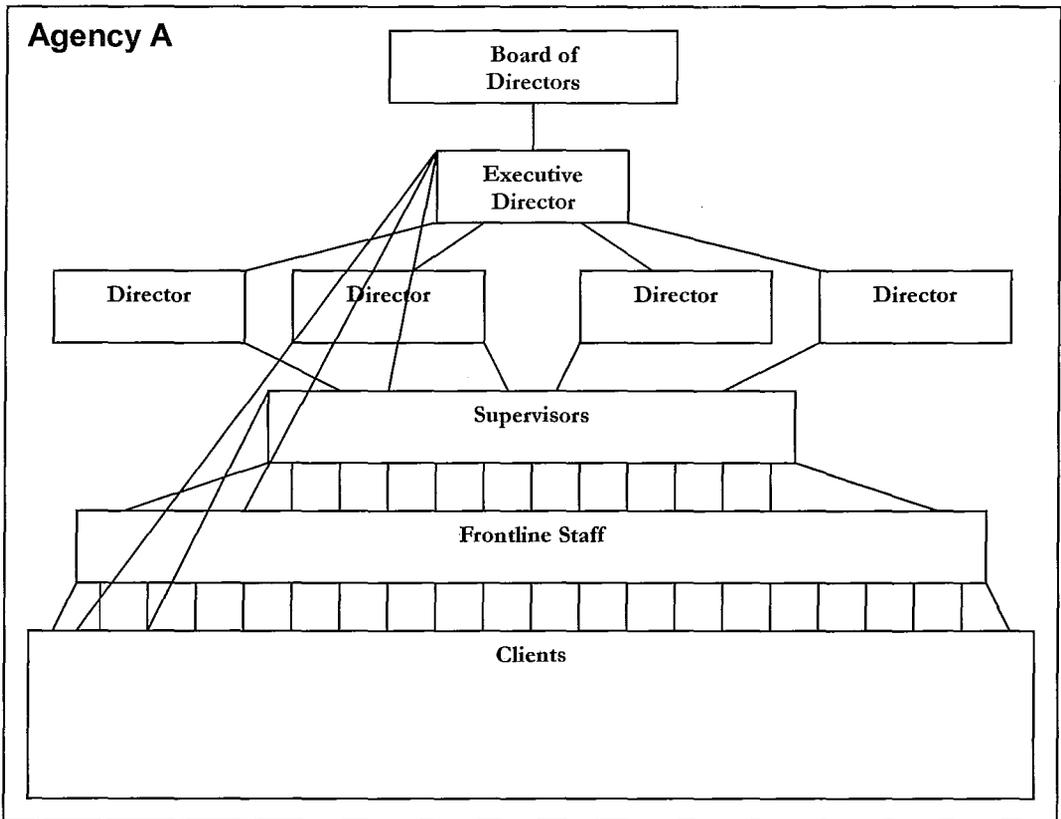
continue or further isolate, oppress, or at worst victimize already minoritized individuals.

Proudford and Smith (2003) also attended to unpacking oppression as it frames the dynamics of professional relationships. More specifically, they examine how conflict is negotiated in demographically mixed groups. Like Bond, they suggest that the perceived saliency of identities or categorizations of group members serves to influence role identity. They argue that role identity is fluid even within a single group because role identities are based upon both social and organizational demographics, and these identities are salient within the minds of individual group members rather than as principally extent factors. Oppressive attitudes among dominant group members serve to isolate minoritized individuals, and conflict becomes attributable to their, the minoritized individuals', difference. Proudford and Smith also suggest that the extent to which 'difference' can feed or inform conflict depends upon the extent to which alliances exist among group members, and the nature of these alliances. For example, a triad in which all members share animosity for one another likely experience a generally balanced power differential compared to a triad in which there exists both alliances and animosity among dyads within the group.

Oppression within the Structure of Decision Making

Oppression was experienced by the research participants in a number of ways throughout the organizational structure. Oppression, in this context, is typically exhibited in case management decisions, and therefore largely impacts the families that are served in child welfare, rather than on other players such as workers or administrators. The distribution of power and labour, as well as the legislation with which child protection is governed is tarnished by systemic influences that neither speak to the intentions and goals of the agency or those within it, nor the inevitability of the victimization of vulnerable families who are dependant upon this policy to structure the interventions upon which their safety and growth depends. There are sound case management decisions being formed and executed within each of these agencies everyday; however, the likelihood that particular families and workers will be exploited by these policies is far greater than necessary, and it is the inherent, and resolvable, oppression within the framework of this structure which can be linked to their experiences.

The structure of decision-making power is loosely as follows. The executive director (ED) is responsible to the *Board of Directors*, for this body of community members has the authority to hire and terminate the ED's employment, as well as make a number of agency policy decisions. The ED has responsibility over the remainder of the agency, however her/his directives are typically shared via the chain-of-command through each of the bureaucratic tiers. At times this can occur in a very bureaucratic fashion, insofar as a message is relayed to a director from the executive director, then unto each of the tiers



systematically by the level above. And thus, a tone is set that suggests the very linear decision making process that the women involved in this study illustrate through the stories they share later in this thesis.

Agency 'A' illustrates open communication between the ED and all layers of the structure. As will be discussed further, he has made efforts to communicate directly with parents and community groups, meets annually with new staff in the agency, as well he has recently worked frontline in the intake department in an effort to engender a better sense of the challenges that frontline personnel are experiencing. Missing from both diagrams is the relationship between each agency and their community contacts and partners. These are fundamentally important relationships that provide support such as shared resources and greater lobbying leverage.

The pressure of managerialism within the agency 'B' has left the division of bureaucracy and policy defining labour very stark (Lawler 2000). There is a clear delineation of power, and the power, opportunity, and pressure to develop and institute formal intra-agency policy reform clearly increases as one shifts from layer to layer from clients towards the board of directors. The ability to make policy-changing decisions lies within every layer of the organization and the most powerful and pivotal point of change is arguably within the sphere of the frontline personnel (Lipsky 1980, Evans & Harris 2004). However the ability to translate this 'street level bureaucracy' (Lipsky 1980) into *formal* policy remains unlikely at this level, as it is largely controlled by the bureaucratic structures above. This can only be disrupted if leverage can be garnered at the bottom of the structure.

Respondent 'A' of agency 'B' spoke about a recent initiative in her agency intended to serve as a debriefing group for workers. She proudly told me that this was an idea of her own that was taken on by management and ultimately a single supervisor took control of the idea developing a 'peer support team.' The team is organized with a chairperson who acts as a first contact. Once they are notified of a critical incident, they dispatch team members to the location of the workers who need debriefing. The team is available at all times, and for any type of work related trauma, including death of a team member that may unrelated to job demands.

So the actual model is supposed to be only peers, but of course we have supervisors who head, run it, and are on it. A little bit of a contentious issue for me...[Supervisor 'A' who is widely disliked and feared by frontline staff] is the head of it... Don't approach her, question her. [supervisor 'B'] is on it. [supervisor 'C'] is now that head, [now] that [supervisor 'A'] is gone [from the agency.] Supervisor 'E' is on it. Like it's almost half and half. Everything behind [having management on the team] is 'what if the supervisor

needs a debriefing?' It's not appropriate for, say me, frontline, to debrief something? I don't know why because we're all people, but yet they feel that somebody on their level should do it.

The respondent in this situation is justifiably critical of the organization of the team. She later stated that it is predicated on a non-hierarchical model proposing consensus making and group decisions; however this model has been co-opted by a managerial style of organization. An additional concern rotates on the unfortunate reality that the supervisor placed on this team is broadly feared by frontline personnel. This has the potential to undermine the effectiveness of the trauma debriefing process, as well as the ability for the team to flatten the dominant hierarchy or even be comfortable negotiating changes within the structure. Although the structure was initially presented as non-hierarchical with the position of chairperson rotating month by month, it has thus far not been functioning in this manner.

Respondent 'D' also spoke of a similarly structured team that was recruited for raising excitement and awareness regarding an impending site-move for the entire agency. She spoke of a group that was gathered from many of the service areas and bureaucratic levels in the agency. Their purpose was to organize some social events and public awareness of the benefits of this move, and in an effort to curb anxieties and drum up excitement in light of the additional work it would pose. For staff would soon be facing covering their regular duties as well ensuring that they fulfilled all necessary packing and moving responsibilities. The goals of this 'social committee,' loosely coordinated by management representatives, were then co-opted by a fund raising advisor. The group was then coached on selling a new fund raising initiative that proposed deducting a percentage of an employees salary towards a per annum donation to the agency. Respondent 'D' felt extremely uncomfortable with the fund raising task she was subsequently expected to undertake, as well as the method with which the organizer of this committee chose to shift the agenda. Most importantly, because of the demographic mix in this group she reported that she and other group members felt unsafe challenging the shift in the agenda because both the ED and supervisors on the team endorsed the new direction.

Structural Oppression and Organizational Change

Respondent 'C' spoke of a number of examples of oppression within the agency structure, and was most concerned about the current coordinator of organizational change, and her white manager. The organizational change initiative is managed and supervised by a white female manager. Any and all decisions of the coordinator of organizational change are subject to the approval of this manager, and at times the management executive which is a group comprised of both men and women, but all members of the executive team are white. This respondent was clearly skeptical of the ability for this initiative to

meet its goals without a person from a racialized population in control of the decisions and changes, and speaks openly in the spirit of Marx (1845) and Freire (1970) of the need for emancipation for and *by* oppressed populations.

...[W]hen you are practicing in agencies, antioppression or antiracism approach, you should be aware that you cannot be in charge as a white person, or take over that committee... You have to give the power to the people who know what they are doing; we can take care of it. You should not...White person in charge of anti-racist approach or antioppressive approach, and it's not working. Sorry, and they feel that something like that paying pity, this is just a pity they are paying to us, and smile and say 'good morning!' okay, that's fine 'good morning.' What else [are your going to do?] I don't have hope, Laura. Unfortunately I don't have hope it's gonna change.

I can do the workshop and work that she [the coordinator of organizational change] does but they [management] needed to have somebody who is experienced, who has the skills, [and] who professionally has done this job, to come. And they didn't want that. They wanted somebody who would be submissive, and this person is submissive to the management following what the white people are telling her to do.

And we don't have one single manager who's a minority, and all of us [frontline minoritized/racialized workers] have masters [degrees]. We can't even dare to go and apply because I don't feel like they would take me.

It remains the managers and directors who have ultimate veto power in any policy making, including any and all recommendations by the coordinator. The previous coordinator at this agency was engaged in a number of projects including organizing and chairing policy working groups in each service area, including human resources, legal services, and frontline client services. These working groups were comprised of directors through to frontline personnel as well as some community partners, and their task was to assess the existing policy in an effort to reframe it through an antiracist/antioppressive lens, and ultimately rewrite and add to antiquated policy where necessary. The groups were quite diverse, depending upon the service area. However, the challenges suggested by Bond (1998) as well as Elsass and Graves (1997) were tempered by the chairing of the group by the former coordinator of organizational change who is also an antiracist educator. Ultimately all policy changes were subject to the veto power of the entirely white upper management team, including the manager of the organizational change coordinator that respondent 'C' was speaking about.

The success of the antiracist/antioppressive organizational change initiative in agency 'B' is decidedly poor according to the respondents. The aforementioned policy analysis initiative does not appear to have come to any substantive ends and there was no evidence of this process continuing at the time of the interviews. The original coordinator left the agency and therefore it seems that the above initiative, although positive in its ambition and intended outcomes, impotent in its impact because of the lack of authority and agency in the position of 'coordinator of organizational change.' The initial coordinator's successor was chastised by both respondents 'A' and 'C' as being decidedly more impotent because she is without a clear vision or agenda towards antiracist change.

Respondent 'A' spoke abrasively and succinctly about her frustrations regarding the current coordinator and a recent initiative that did not reflect an antioppressive or antiracist *change* agenda:

Even with the person who is at the agency now, I like, I have no clue other than we're going to have a cultural food sampling...

Respondent 'C' was also angered at the clearly multicultural and decidedly social goals of the same event, and was extremely resentful of the position it was putting already racialized and minoritized staff in:

You know what they do? They do cooking and bringing food to this agency and that's multicultural day. Like, [a] social committee member [has] proposed this too. Yes, let's have a party, a multicultural party. But that has nothing to do with racism... Like, we have to cook and provide for you, these white people? Of course, who doesn't like entertainment? Who doesn't like it, tell me? She's not doing her job, not doing her job. [The coordinator of organizational change]

The frustration of each of the respondents is clearly evident. Each is extremely critical of the antioppressive change initiative, however for rather disparate reasons. Respondent 'A' suggests that the initiative is largely unnecessary and has *created* feelings of oppression among minoritized populations and anger among employees in dominant populations.

How people feel within the agency, I don't think it happens out there [in the community]... [because racism happens in the community] doesn't mean that our agency and people within our agency need to be educated on it because we aren't the people that are doing that oppressing. I just, I think the [two day antiracism education] training made me get my back up because I'm a white person and I oppress people. There is no room for discussion in there [the training/agency] other than I'm white, I oppress, I need to know that, and that's just the way it is; bottom line...

And then when issues have come up, it's always up to that white person to extend that olive branch.

Respondent 'A' is unsure about the racism or oppression that this initiative is intended to eradicate. She is most critical of the process because she perceives the problem as less salient or dire than other issues in the agency. Racism and oppression are issues that seem more atypical than typical, and therefore allocating energies seems wasted, and in her experience, leads to greater discomfort and problems than solutions. Organizational change literature would suggest that her experiences are typical.

Agocs (1997) offers a useful definition and limitation to resistance within organizational change.

Resistance is understood to be a process of refusal by decision makers to be influenced or affected by the views, concerns or evidence presented to them by those who advocate change in established practices, routines, goals or norms within the organization. Resistance entails a range of behaviours: refusal to engage in joint problem-solving, refusal to seek common ground, silencing of advocates for change, sabotage, the use of sanctions and other repressive acts. It should be clear from this definition that debate, criticism, or disagreements do not contribute resistance. On the contrary, rigorous critique intended to produce better understanding and solutions is a valuable contribution to analysis and action towards change in an organization. (Agocs, 1997)

Agocs criticizes the typical organizational change strategy, used in agency 'B', which places the change agent in the service of the organizational leadership. This suggests at least two potentially problematic outcomes: the change agent who has a critical reform agenda is consistently vetoed; or the change agent ultimately sacrifices their critical agenda for one which is more palatable to the organizational management team. Agocs is critical of change initiatives that seek incremental change in individual policies because they do not address directly and consistently the systemic oppression that informs the antiquated system.

The initial vision of change within agency 'B' began with a two day seminar aimed at examining and unpacking systemic oppression. It is this that Respondent 'A' felt was unfairly and unilaterally holding white employees accountable for existing oppression and the responsibility to change it. Agocs suggests that denial of the need for change and denying the credibility of experts are again, typical strategies of resistance to change. Even more troubling is her suggestion that even in the face of damning evidence that oppression is occurring, the stakeholders of organizational change will continue to deny the existence of systemic oppression. Respondent 'C' shared a harrowing experience of racism.

So it became so bad, he told me one day 'would you do the amount of work you do with this family with a white family?' And I asked him 'why would you ask this?' 'Because you put so much' he said, 'that I think you have your biases, and you took care of this family so much I don't see you have done for other families.'... It has nothing to do with bias!... I said 'how come you don't ask this question from the white workers?'

The respondent explained that this particular family was attempting to gain refugee status in Canada and she had gone to great lengths to assist them in this process. She was insulted at the suggestion that she gave any of her families any less than they deserved or needed, and that her efforts were interpreted as culturally biased.

I just went to my doctor; I had to take time off. I was off for a month, and after I came back I got more interviewed and like interrogation by him again. So it was really going back to a point that I couldn't function on that unit anymore, I just wanted to leave. And I found that he was not going to give me a good reference because after all these years working with families [both at this agency and at least one other child welfare agency in a distant district] he didn't find me competent, he thought I wasn't competent enough.

In her attempt to find support and justice for her transfer and letter of endorsement from the supervisor, his racist treatment of her came to the attention of the agency management and an investigation ensued. Several members of the unit brought a number of complaints about the supervisor that all reflected oppressive and racist practice and attitudes that were negatively impacting the members of the team and the families that were being served.

But you know what happened? They never disciplined him. They never labeled that this was racism. They said 'oh, this is management skills. That's not racism.' And they minimized what happened to me from him, by him, so it was just disregarded.

He even cried when we mentioned this issue. He said 'no, how could you feel that it's management skills.' But I cry too. So his cry was more valuable to you than me, and you believed him and not us.

And I had, they just told me 'oh, you can just change our unit if you want or we can give you another position... And they told the others [on the unit who had also made complaints] 'so you wanna move? You can move tomorrow... That's all we can do.' The rest decide to stay because they didn't want to go to somewhere new and then all

are going somewhere new at the same time; they felt everybody will know.

Unless a systems analysis based in antiracist/antioppressive structural change is entrenched in the decision making structures, issues of this type will continue to erupt and undermine the stability of the organization. (Kossek et. al. 2002) Agocs suggests, and this example illustrates, that advocates for change run the risk of being interpreted as self interested by their concerns regarding racist or oppressive practices, minoritized groups become 'defined as perpetrators of unfairness and portrayed as self interested and vindictive, while those in positions of power are transformed into victims and helpless individuals.' (Agocs, 1997) By labeling this supervisors' practice as 'management style' versus racism, he is not impugned by the behaviour but rather it appears to be shrugged off as something benign and easily remedied. What is the cure for 'management style?'

Additionally troubling is the decision to provide transfers to all team members. This effectively places the onus upon them to improve the situation, rather than addressing this decidedly *poor* management style. It also protects the image of the supervisor by masking the nature of the problem on the unit for those within and outside it. The victims are placed in a position to explain the seeming mass dissent, following an investigation that left them feeling powerless to convince members of the organization that they have been mistreated. They, a group of several minoritized individuals to be pushed out of the unit en masse, yet again unfairly racialized and isolated their needs from those of the white supervisor and the white investigation team.

The existence of oppression is unsurprising, however the nature of oppression always seems to surprise individuals with dominant demographic characteristics; whites, Christians, men, etcetera. Peggy McIntosh (1990) unpacked what she termed 'The Invisible Knapsack' of white privilege, and it is a knapsack carried dearly, but largely unnoticed by most folks. Respondent 'B' argued that there is a race based privilege within the management of this organization. The executive are entirely white and investigated racism between another white-member of the management team against at least four individuals from several different racialized groups. The power to label the racism as 'management style' protects and maintains the integrity of the management team and therefore the privileges inherent within the stability of and membership in that unit. The protection of this group, however, clearly exploited the lack of power and voice among the victims of that supervisor's racist behaviour. The vulnerability of these workers as frontline staff was acknowledged as was their vulnerability as members of populations that are racialized within this organization. It remains a privilege of whiteness to ignore the power that defaults into ones' favour in these circumstances.

Oppression within the Case Management Decision Making Process

Both agencies are practicing with families and treating peers with oppressive value sets. Case management decisions are occurring based upon a number of competing agendas, and central to this are the protection of personal and agency resources, despite clear risk to and need demonstrated of families. Respondent 'A' shares her concerns:

Um, so for example two months ago [the] numbers in intake were really, really low. Everybody was worried that people on the bottom rungs of the totem pole were gonna be let go because there wasn't enough cases coming in... So during that time we were taking cases and opening files that we normally would not be opening...Um, right now, the cases that we would have opened two months ago we're not opening or we're deviating for weeks and weeks and weeks...because we're too busy right now...So, the question for me becomes, well if we can deviate a file for three weeks, then the child is obviously, we feel the child is safe for those three weeks, then what are we gonna do three weeks later?... 'About that fight you had with your husband a month ago? It's really bad. You can't do that anymore because it harms your kid.' The mom's gonna go 'well, obviously not enough that you weren't here the next day.' And she has a point.

The suggestion appears that 'just in time' (Lewchuk & Robertson 1997) service provision is being forced upon agencies, and if there are not enough clients to justify the available staff, one of the numbers needs to change. To the agencies credit, the management has chosen a tactic that seeks to maintain the compliment of staff when the current need might not immediately justify it. Unfortunately, the availability or allocation of funds has left families at risk in times of increasing demand (Aronson & Sammon, 2000). As well, the agency has seemingly drawn some families into service for reasons and risk that might have been left with limited or even no service had they come to the attention of the agency during a time that there was a dearth is resources. This suggests a certain level of exploitation if families are being serviced in an effort to meet an additional agency agenda, namely ensuring staff compliment for future periods of high service demand.

Ultimately, family crisis has been symbolized at the institutional level by dollars and level of staffing compliment, and thus the energy to find this balance is reinforcing existing managerialist norms and economic structuring (Wardagh & Wilding 1993). These decisions are hinging upon the discretion to 'deviate' the CAS's response time to families in crisis and children at risk. Risk is not necessarily being invented to make work, nor are *high* risk and *high* needs children and families necessarily being ignored or un-serviced. However, at times the energy assigned to a family is a function of the present agency resources, rather than a function of their crisis.

Respondent 'C' spoke about a number of oppressive case management decisions, and was particularly outraged by one family whose child was apprehended from the hospital at birth. It was their family's first child, and although the father had been involved with a child abuse case in the past as a perpetrator, his communications with a CAS was minimal as he was not a caregiver. His role in the abuse was largely handled by the police and criminal proceedings, rather than CAS and family court proceedings. This was an immigrant family to Canada who also happened to be Muslim, and they appeared to have very limited understanding of the Canadian child welfare system and their role within it.

The worker went [to the hospital] and apprehended the kid. She didn't even give them the option [to present a plan to care for the child in a safe place away from the father], explain to them the policy [that workers are obliged to seek and consider community placements before placing the child in foster care], and their rights they have... Even the doctor called and complained...the doctor said 'what the hell are you guys doing?!...Couldn't you leave the kid with mom and grandparents and have dad...' So I went and told this to my supervisor. Do you know what he said? 'We cannot work fast enough to satisfy you [.]' Satisfy me?! I said 'it's not satisfaction of me!' I was fighting. 'It's the satisfaction for the best thing for the child. Do you get that? Can we consult?' I said. 'No, we don't need to consult. We can go to CAST [child abuse support team- intra-agency case management team] and it will be the same.'

Later she had an opportunity to discuss the case management decision with the worker who had carriage of the family file. The worker indicated that she was disgusted by the fact that the family was Muslim, and made partial justification for the decision to apprehend the child by stating 'Muslim's lie.' As well, she told respondent 'C' the following:

'The Muslim religion, the Muslim religion is a very patriarchal religion.' [and respondent 'C' replied] But yet any other religions are not! 'And women are submissive in that religion so she will lie. How do I know he [the father of the child] cannot go in there because it's, first of all she's submissive, she has to listen to the father, and she has to listen to the father's family, and the father's family [with whom the doctor was suggesting an alternative placement for the child] are for sure protecting their son because he's a man...'

Ultimately, Respondent 'C' feared that these statements reflected the framework used to plan for and carry out case management decisions for this family. It is unabashedly oppressive to fail to inform a client of their rights and the workers responsibilities. Additionally, and most obviously, her statements regarding the

parents and grandparents motivations to protect the safety of the child and the integrity for the family unit are undoubtedly racist.

Oppression as it frames the Spirit of the Working Environment

The personal is political and the political is personal and these and other professional and personal interactions are rife with individual and systemic oppression which reinforce one another. So, I will draw this discussion together with a few examples of personal interactions within each of the agencies that reflect the existence of personally held oppressive value sets that serve to reinforce and mask systemic oppression, as well as reinforce and mask privilege.

It's a cover your ass system. We all know it. We talk about it all the time. It's no secret, but there's no other way. You can't, with a caseload of 24 you can't. There isn't 24 work days in a month. You can't see those families when you're supposed to... [once per month] and seeing them once a month is pathetic... I can go back to my ongoing caseload of a year ago and every single one that I left there are still open... How can 18 families be properly service in a whole year...? [H]ow could not one of them have improved in a *year*?!

I mean, there were things that I heard, like, a coworker of mine who is gay told me that another one of his coworkers had said, basically do to her religious beliefs she's homophobic. And she said 'he's a nice guy, but too bad he's going to hell because he's gay.'

[I]t was oppressive. I mean, how we treated our clients, our families... I mean, we were oppressed, and then we oppressed our clients. You know what I mean? It's a vicious cycle. We often felt just a frustrated as our clients.

I have a coworker who is white...still working here. She was racist. This worker from the beginning was giving racist comments to all of us... Our food was disgusting. The food I was eating was disgusting. Anything that we'd be eating 'all this was disgusting' and our culture was backward. Probably we couldn't have sexual activity properly because we are women from the Middle East.

I have included these examples to reinforce the message that antioppressive practice is not universally used or understood, and that it remains a goal. These comments both reflect the existence of oppression as experienced by all of the four women and the two agencies, and the expression of antioppression insofar as they are actively noting and resisting the oppressions within the system in which they work, and in the value sets of those around them. Therefore, these experiences reflect equally the pressure of oppressive and antioppressive practice in both agencies.

Resistance

For each of these women resistance is an essential aspect of their practice. Whether or not they ascribe to an antioppressive framework, each possesses critical analysis skills that are utilized in a number of ways to frame this resistance. It is used in a number of ways to instill balance in their work and home life, and in an effort to serve their clients as effectively as possible. To echo the areas of oppression that the women examined, their resistance included: resistance to the system and structure of decision making; resistance as it influences case management; and resistance in an effort to achieve balance and harmony within the spirit of the agency.

Carniol (1992) outlines a framework for a structural approach to social work intervention. He suggests, defense (advocating for basic rights and material resources), client-worker power (sharing decision making power and demystifying intervention strategies), unmasking structures (unpacking systems of oppression), personal change (client growth/change in recognition of complicity/complacency with oppressive systems), collective consciousness (engendering understanding, relationship and/or commitment to social movements), and political change (engaging in social justice process) as integral pieces of this framework. Although this framework is used to some extent by all of these women, each has described support along with fear, futility, resentment, and disinterest emanating from their respective employers and fellow workers. The following examples and experiences outline a number of situations in which expressions of critical approaches to social work practice are moments of resistance against the countervailing hegemony and culture of practice present at each of the agencies.

The best intentions of these women were overwhelmed by the organization and bureaucratization of the agency. Ng (1990) examined the impacts of economic restructuring in an agency traditionally organized as a collective, and then forced to bureaucratize because of a new funding framework. The results ultimately challenged and fundamentally undermined the ability of the agency to provide the type of grassroots advocacy work to the community it had historically offered. The restructuring of the agency inspired a deterioration and paradigm shift in the service provided. Ng's examination suggests that the microcosm of each family, each caseload, or even each unit may have little impact on the overall change or reform in the agency even if successful advocacy work is happening. Unless these interventions reflect systemic change, victories will be isolated.

Despite the fact that, at least in the case of agency 'B', these organizations outwardly suggest that they endorse, if not actively seek to achieve, a model of service provision that reflects an antioppressive approach, without a clear

commitment to challenging all of the systems that structure the agency, the workers will experience hypocrisy and struggle as they negotiate the organization and their work with their clients. Nybell and Grey (2004) suggest that an antiracist change agenda has thus far been a largely unreachable goal. “[O]rganizational change that involves redistribution of power is inherently conflictual and that creating a harmonious fit between diverse individual needs and the organization’s goals is difficult if not impossible.” (Chesler 1994) What Nybell and Grey concede, however, is that an antioppressive framework can be successfully implemented into an organization with consistent and strategic guidance through the organizational change process. This process, however, must include goal setting, knowledge building, and strategic engagement in surfacing and renegotiation of conflicts. (Nybell & Grey 2004) In the absence of this guidance, which seems to adequately describe both agency ‘A’ and ‘B’ at this time, such change will be problematic, if not simply unsuccessful.

Experiences of resistance were decidedly different among all four women. Their understanding of where spaces for resistance exist and what tools they utilize in these efforts were unique to each experience. Resistance by minoritized individuals remains problematic and the experience of the one racialized respondent was consistent with this suggestion (Agocs 1997, Kossek et al 2002, Bond 1999, Nybell & Grey 2004). Although she insists that resistance will remain an important aspect of her practice and her role in this agency, she admits that her experiences have also left her feeling as though she is a target of those around her, including her previous supervisor and the management.

Because it wasn’t confidential at all [the investigation regarding racism and her experience with union assistance] I felt it has been more difficult for me. And I’m feeling somehow, I don’t care if they fire me, but I’m fearing that might happen too. Because they’re waiting; they’re waiting now for any mistake that one of us makes to throw us out. This is how I feel. This is how I feel but worse, worse. Respondent ‘C’

The other three respondents had some mixed experiences with respect to their resistance work, but they largely felt at ease bringing up suggestions and concerns with supervisors and management.

So, depending on how I felt about the case in the first place, I’d try to fight it, if I think [a particular decision should be made]

[With respect to the fruitfulness of offering novel interpretations or interventions] I think it probably depends who’s listening... well, I mean it makes me feel better that I’ve at least voiced something so it’s fruitful in the sense that I feel like I’ve said my piece. You’re [supervisor/manager/director] making the decision. Respondent ‘A’

Ultimately, sometimes the women were supported in their efforts, and sometimes they were not, but typically they felt safe to bring up concerns and criticize the decision making process and the interventions that they were asked to undertake. Ultimately, although these women clearly noted a number of concerns with respect to the decision making structure and systems of the agency, none had particularly salient points regarding their attempts or success intervening in or influencing this process.

Drawing back to the organizational flowchart in the preceding chapter, I would like to note the dotted line separating the top of agency 'B' from the bottom. This line illustrates a structural bifurcation separating the agency into a clear executive management team that includes managers and directors, from both middle management and frontline staff. The interpretations of this structure according to the women from agency 'B' suggests that the executive management team works both in concert with and in isolation from the middle management, but policy making appears to be largely driven from the executive. Although information flows through this line from top to bottom and vice versa, ultimately serving to inform the policy making process, power, particularly policy making power, lay primarily within this small group.

Minoritized workers have access to working groups within these agencies that are working towards policy recommendations and ultimately policy change. Respondent 'C', the only women from a minoritized population among the four respondents, also has the highest level of education reflecting a larger trend for racialized workers in the field (see Baines, under review.) Despite these facts and despite the efforts that she admits to engaging in to initiate change in the agency, she has felt largely silenced. She has not felt a part of the policy making process; although she has offered ideas they have not become integrated into policy changes.

And also, it made us more vulnerable because we work here and are a minority; more vulnerable because not any action we do, basically it is wrong and they only criticize us. And more risk having things exposed, because we are speaking. I spoke. I spoke about my feelings and my ideas. This is a political way I am thinking and personal is political and I believe in that but now I am exposed! I am out there, vulnerable to any attack. I am a target. I am a target every day. This is how I feel every day. I feel to come to work I have a headache. I'm stressed. I don't wanna come to work.

Respondent 'C'

Speaking out to a management that has already illustrated their inability or unwillingness to recognize and respond to racism, leaving staff to be further victimized and traumatized seems at its least to be fruitless. For this woman, the

racism that she experienced at the hands of her supervisor suggested that she was incompetent. The escalating nature of the racism that she described, in addition to the unwillingness of the management to label it as such and then demonstrate a commitment to resolve the behaviour, has left her feeling unable to protect herself professionally, emotionally, or physically.

Feelings from the women involved in this study typically suggested futility or fear with regards to initiating or challenging the structure of decision making in the agency (see also Baines, under review). Each agreed that client voices bear little weight or no weight in policy making processes. None could provide an example of client voices being sought in an effort to inform this type of process. The only example provided reflected the ability for clients to participate in the complaints procedure at each agency, but this does not reflect policy making process specifically.

There was, however, a single example of a firm and legitimate effort to influence the policy making process at the level of legislative change, that further reflects the futility of intervening in the policy making process. Respondent 'A' spoke about a union initiative in response to planned legislative changes revealed at a recent union convention. What she described, in essence, was a shift in what constitutes a child protection risk. This shift echoes an old joke about reducing the number of families on income assistance by lowering the poverty line. In effect, the provincial child welfare authorities are making the same suggestion insofar as they shall raise the level at which the risk to a child justifies child welfare intervention so that they might reduce the number of families requiring service, thereby reducing costs. If the risk to the child falls below the level of intervention, the proposal suggests alternate community resources will need to step in to mitigate risk to children, where once it was the responsibility of child welfare services. The policy change was brought to the union members out of concern for the safety of children and families, out of concern for the scant resources already struggling to meet the overwhelming demands of their community, and finally out of concern for the jobs of all union members should this legislation begin to lower child protection demand thereby necessitating a reduction in child protection workers across agency 'B'.

And [they] took it back to our union, and our union of- how many people work there, 300... 400? And we have like 12, 20 people coming out to our union meetings? Umm, and [they] took it back to [the union,] you know, 'we need to be aware that this is what they're planning,' and everybody goes 'no, they have this huge new building. They're never going to get rid of us.' Respondent 'A'

Not only is the policy making process and structure of decision making difficult to influence, it appears that rallying support for an intervention among colleagues and union brothers and sisters is equally problematic.

With respect to case management and micro level decision making, the research participants seemed to recognize some personal agency in these decision making moments. In agency 'B' there is a *Workload Review Committee* that meets periodically to review procedures and policy that may be redundant, antiquated, or just illogical or unnecessary. This committee consists of representatives across the bureaucratic hierarchy and service areas, and, as reported by one of the women, has succeeded in streamlining some procedural tasks. Minutes or hours may be saved in a month, but again, these changes do not speak to a systems analysis of the problems inherent in the structure of child protection work. The example provided spoke to subsequent investigations of child risk or abuse upon children whose family is already receiving service from the Society. Although it is provincial policy to complete an entire investigative procedure including many hours of updated forms and assessments for subsequent investigations, agency 'B' has circumvented this process by only requiring this procedure for subsequent investigations of child protection risks *unrelated* the present reasons for service to the family. The change does not challenge the systems that are leading to an overburdening of accountability and redundancy, it merely side-steps them.

Respondent 'B' spoke of a client-led initiative in her community that attempted to inspire and initiate case management changes. Although it was not particularly successful, it did garner local media attention, the attention for the agency and ED, as well as a local MPP.

There was a whole organization. This um, petition was being circulated throughout the community, the protest outside the MPP's office... articles in the local newspaper by the group. So, certainly... there was a whole group of people who felt that they had something to say and wanted to say it. And they were offered opportunities to meet with our executive director but they turned those down. [At least one of the group members was also invited to join the board of directors, which he also turned down.] They chose to meet with the MPP and wanted him to address the issues.
Respondent 'B'

The respondent indicated that the group was largely discredited by agency personnel. It appears by her suggestions that the group was initiated as a grassroots effort to expose the seemingly sweeping power that child protection agencies have upon the children and families whom they serve. There was 'kidnapping' rhetoric used to describe the apprehension and fostering of children in need of protection, and the workers throughout the agency responded to this

with disinterest, pity, or derision. Outwardly, the Society, at least the ED, made some attempts to understand their position but ultimately invited them to join the Society by offering membership to the board of directors, rather than actively endorsing, and supporting a grass roots coalition. Resolving unrest seems to manifest as placating, or considering the legitimate power that the CAS has in Ontario, largely ignoring the concerns of critics.

The response of the ED in agency 'A' to this social movement is much like respondent 'D's statement regarding client participation.

We didn't have client groups. We invited them to meetings, but even then I don't know if they had a voice because the meetings were on our turf. I mean, [the meetings] had an agenda, and *our* agenda is clearly a power imbalance; I don't care what anybody says. Respondent 'D'

Although some workers are acknowledging the power imbalance, and readily admit that the child welfare system works against client agency, the workers also display complicity and futility with the systems as they exist. Neither the child protection workers nor the community group engaging in a social action seem able or willing to work with one another towards social change. Why can we not merge a framework of critical social work within the child welfare system, so that agents for change may begin an active dialogue in an effort to reform the system as a coalition or alliance? The voices of clients, the voices of frontline workers even the voices of middle managers are bound and silenced; excluded from the decision making process and only sought as informants to be accepted or vetoed at the discretion of managerial and legislative powers within the bureaucratic structure.

In the spirit of critical or feminist social work, client voices are sought out and encouraged (Mauthner & Doucet 1998, Neysmith 1995) Their experiences and positionality is unpacked and legitimized in the process of service so that their strengths and their needs may be honoured; all in an effort to work together as advocates for change (Moreau 1990.) The involuntary and nonvoluntary nature of families and children involved with child protection services sets up a clear power imbalance from the outset of any therapeutic intervention. This imbalance must be acknowledged, so that it does not preclude the negotiation of a productive relationship between workers and clients (Moreau 1990.) Additionally, the nature of the therapeutic relationship does not negate the opportunity to engage in advocacy in areas *seemingly* unrelated to the protection and welfare of children.

One woman spoke about assessing and advocating for families who were suffering in poverty and lacked knowledge of the child welfare system. She

acknowledged that doing so placed her at risk. This Society did not necessarily support such efforts, and indeed believed that at times they undermined the intervention and therapeutic process.

Nobody listened to me, nobody did anything so what I had to do, because I know they were leaving here, they were leaving this child [because he was in foster care and] because they did not know what to do. So I don't know if the family followed through, but I called them myself, out of the office [despite the fact that they were the clients of another worker.] I said 'you know what? They're not going to return your kid if you don't go and get a good lawyer.' ... So what they did, I told them 'go get a lawyer, this is the name of a lawyer. Go find as much information as you can to get your child back. And come and propose to [your worker a] plan...' I had to give them step by step what to say. I had to give them that information [because they were so unaware of the child protection system processes and the expectations.]

The respondent had indicated that the worker with carriage of this file refused to explain the process and expectations as a 'test' to gauge how committed the parents were to getting the child back into their care. The parents were immigrants to Canada with no experience with the child welfare system, and were completely overwhelmed by the experience of having their infant removed from their care, and little or no information or expectations laid before them so they might have some understanding of how to reduce the risk so that the child might be returned to their care.

Although these women spoke very passionately about resistance for the betterment of the agency and their clients, they also acknowledged the importance of resistance as an effort towards seeking balance and harmony within the spirit of the agency. Each addressed this need in different ways, and see paths to success from different and contradictory methods. Respondent 'A' noted a number of areas in which she engaged in efforts to improve her work, but remained most passionate and dedicated to the work of her union. Although she noted that it is presently particularly weak in the minds of the executive members, she believes that if there existed better participation and more energy, the union would pose a formidable force with respect to policy and structural reform at all levels in the agency.

If people thought they had a voice, which they do, and if people thought they were protected, which they are, we'd be a lot more effective at change. We'd say 'no, we want a cap on our caseload and we're only taking 18 [family files in ongoing services] and that's it!' And 18 compared to 24 is a huge difference...

What all four women acknowledged was that the most consistent platform for resistance and defiance of structural norms is through gossip. And, although this typically appeared to be the safest place to do so, it remained largely ineffective and at times problematic and damaging.

It's everyday. It's open. It happens while we're working. It happens after work. It happens at lunch. It happens at union meetings. It happens at unit meetings. It happens. It's constant, and I think it's, and it's not that effective, and I just think it's the only way people have to let out their anger at the fact that it's a joke... I think the majority is just venting. I don't know a whole lot of people that have a lot of ideas for change because I think it's that whole... it's too big. Like that's the thing I have that it's too big to change.

...and basically the same complaints were coming up every year [about problems around the agency according to frontline personnel.] 'We don't know anybody anymore. Communication is bad. Stress level is high...' [After completing an agency retreat day that attempted to address all of the aforementioned problems with a motivational speaker] It was frustrating because people were complaining and they actually didn't want to hear the answer.

We just bitched about it. And that's another issue, I guess. I mean to cope with what was going on you often just were consumed with work, and it wasn't, it didn't turn into positive ways of dealing with it. It was either out of frustration, anger, and ultimatums; as opposed to saying 'no, we should really do this,' or 'could we call a meeting?' or 'let's get the union involved.' It wasn't positive, at least in my experience it wasn't.

Unfortunately, according to Respondent 'C' for minoritized employees, using the social networks as a platform for resistance is at times far too frightening and traumatic. Instead they find very isolated groups in which to talk about experiences that include their own oppression and understandings of oppression.

It's a very tough decision to work and I know that some workers who are minorities are so depressed they have isolated themselves and they don't want to do anything with the Society. They don't want to be active. They don't want to talk about it. They just want to ignore because you see what happened? We spoke about it [racism/oppression] and they even praised the guy [who victimized his workers] 'oh no, poor guy. It's not racism.

Social connections are the most tangible and readily available sources for networking and spaces for resistance. The first respondent clearly stated that exploration and analysis of the work that these women do happens most readily

and consistently in these spaces, however every woman indicated that the work that happens here is largely negative and at times exhausting and even damaging. Indeed, each of the women noted the benefits of a social committee, and three of the respondents served on committees that targeted social agendas, but none suggested that the formalized, agency structured social committee as a likely platform for realizing systemic change in the agency. Each believed that money and energies targeted at these social agendas, although often enjoyable, were largely unappreciated because of the dire state that they perceive other areas of their work and the lives of their clients to be in. Ultimately, this made them largely resentful of agency organized events and the resentment further undermined their faith in the organization and managerial structure.

Resistance within these agencies occur everyday, to a number of ends. It is open and prideful at times, or secretive and guarded with fear and suspicion. These women all recognize various areas for change as well as powers within their positions and skill sets to resist the problematic structures and expectations in lieu of novel or subversive tactics, but each are unhappy with the work that they have done, and they have little faith in future agency reforms meeting the vast needs for systemic change.

Change

The women were not confident that marked, positive change was on the horizon. Each seemed overwhelmed by the problems as they had experienced them and understood them. Each continued to strive for the highest caliber of service that they could provide, and each remained dedicated to participating in working groups, organizations, and committees both within the organization and outside of the organization in efforts to seek the changes they deemed integral to the welfare of their communities. Despite their pessimism, each had some understanding of where change was necessary and how they were equipped to assist that process.

Baines (2004a) noted that practitioners working in highly bureaucratized agencies typically do not have salient understanding of the systems of change. The author notes that a vision for change or even a vision of high quality social work practice has been lost in an era of high workload demands and lean staffing. The women in this study echo these sentiments. They also lamented the vigor with which they entered into their roles as social service providers, since that vigor has been weakened by a system in which they feel that the needs of both practitioners and clients have been lost to goals of accounting and accountability (Baines, 2004a)

Baines (2004b) also notes that the skill set of minoritized or racialized workers are often higher than those of their white counterparts, however they experience a great deal more stress and lack of recognition in the workplace. Their roles as experts with other minoritized clients, whether imposed upon them or taken on by them, go largely under or unappreciated and typically serve their community beyond the realm of paid work and unto unpaid labour in their community. These practices are often a form of resistance to the norms of an agency and community. These practices often form the basis around which systemic change begins from the grassroots level.

The resistance work of minoritized women remains subversive to some extent in agency 'B' as noted by the single minoritized worker who participated in this study. As per Kossek et al (2002), Nybell & Grey (2004), Bond (1999) and others, this resistance work may have merit and legitimacy, and even represent the best practice available. However, achieving this legitimacy within an agency as a minoritized worker remains extremely difficult particularly in agencies dominated by white management like both of the agencies featured.

The participants in this study spoke of change in terms of how and where they see change and need for change emanating, as well as in terms of practical ideas for change. Typically their notions of change involved specific practical

goals rather than macro level systemic changes (Baines, 2004a). Each woman began their discussions of change with respect to their general feeling of futility.

...but it would take an awfully big stick to stick in the spokes to stop it [the present systemic and practical agendas.] Like, it's just this big rolling force that, and I don't know who's like working the wheels. Respondent 'A'

Not only is this participant overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problems and challenges facing child welfare reform, but she is unable to target an agent of change to which she might effectively direct her concerns and her efforts. This illustrates, to some extent, the lack of critical analysis skills among workers in these highly bureaucratized agencies. This participant can recognize poor service and disenfranchised workers and clients, but there is a disconnection between the symptoms and the cause. A lack of critical insight exists and despite a number of years of experience in an agency that openly uses rhetoric concerning change through antioppressive organizational initiatives and workload review committees, they are unable to foster basic skills of critical analysis among the potential agents of change. When asked specifically if the organization provided space and training for critical analysis the women unanimously stated that the agency did not provide this.

People didn't feel that the ability to even make change. You know what I mean? I didn't feel I had the power to make change because I was too exhausted." Respondent 'D'

Unfortunately I have no hope it's gonna change but I think people like us should still remain in this. I know some of our [minoritized] workers wanted to leave but I had to talk to them and really change their mind because I said 'just stay because we should be present. If I'm not here, you're not here tomorrow, who's gonna be here?'...But then we have to sacrifice so the next generation, I dunno, 10, 20 years from now, things might really change. Respondent 'C'

There were spaces to which each research participant was dedicated, or in which they were interested, or engaged in change. The seeming spurious nature of these various change pursuits might serve to inform just why the process seems so daunting. Each woman imagined change occurring from different platforms and on a different agenda, which speaks to the punctuated nature of change rather than the predictable and consistent process we might wish it to be (Gold, 1999).

The only way I could see change could start, which is why I'm in the union, and involved in the union, is because I think we need a stronger union. I think the, one of the major problems at CAS is people don't feel secure; people don't stand up for what's entitled

to them [or] what their rights are. Everybody's afraid of losing their job and don't realize there *is* actually security there... I think if we could get our ducks in a row and actually present as a unified front i.e. union, that might be good for change. Obviously that would be good for change. Respondent 'A'

[Staff planning day, which is organized and run by and for frontline staff] Every year people are on the committee and I did it one year. It's the opportunity for the whole agency to come together and to look at ways the agency is functioning well or not functioning well." Respondent 'B'

I think bringing in the issue of multiculturalism [antiracism] is a strength if we just work on it properly. And, we spend the energy we're supposed to, and they're not just up there, okay, 'we have something there [an impotent figurehead in an organizational change position], that's it.' And we have to take *everyday* work for everybody to change and learn. It won't change overnight, I know that, but we have to work every day on it and we haven't. We have only had one training; one people training, and the person who was doing the good training, he left! Respondent 'C'

I think, I certainly learned from a multidisciplinary team. I found that useful and I brought that with me when I did my work with families. I mean, look at CAAP [*Child Assessment and Advisory Program* at McMaster University Medical Centre] for example. They often support [the CAS] but the way they do business is very, very different. And, their understanding of the issues [of abused and neglected children] is very, very different. Respondent 'D'

Each participant understood the need for focused time in a safe and collegial space in which critical assessment and analysis of the various challenges facing child welfare could occur. Each of the quotes above provides some of the many pieces needed to develop a logical structure of change: a critical mass of individuals with consideration that this approach must be multidisciplinary in nature; regular dedicated space and time to engage in critical analysis; and finally a dedicated coordinator who can lead this work through a clear and consistent lens of antioppression.

Even without consistent and dedicated time, space, and structure, there were many, many thoughts for reform found in the data. Each participant shared a number of disparate concerns and ideas, although they all agreed on the need for better recruitment and retention strategies. The stress and demands of child protection work have been well documented (Regehr et al 2002, Nybell and Grey 2004 and others). It would appear that this increasingly stressful and demanding work is leading to challenges with respect to recruitment and retention of

frontline child protection workers (Anderson & Gobeil 2002). The women involved in this study noted clear concerns with respect to the quality of new hires as well as the training available to a workforce that has an extremely high number of 'newly-minted' social workers and social service workers, often times in their first position following graduation (Regehr et al 2002). There was a sense that the workers who are clearly displaying weakness are not provided with enough training or support to remedy their challenges.

With respect to simple recruitment the women shared the following concerns:

...I think recruitment is so tough as it is, like I think most parts, like probably 90% of the time they were picking good people and 10% of the time, like all of us were looking at each other saying 'how did this person get in here?'

I think recruitment strategies, I don't know how you, well I know how you change them; don't hire fucking idiots...There's a lot of people who have gotten hired who are dumb or inappropriate.

I'm a firm believer in raising the bar of who we hire on. I do believe it's important work... [W]e can't do this, we can't do that, we'll just hire whoever, fresh grads, and we'll call it social work, and it's not social work, but I don't think you need to *be* a social worker to do [this] job.

Despite the fact that the words of these respondents are rather harsh and unequivocal, in consideration of the aforementioned stress and demanding workload, depending upon existing employers to mentor new workers becomes burdensome in an already over burdened workplace. Again, all participants not only carried a full caseload of families, each one also engaged in additional union and/or committee work. Expectations that workers will also take on the responsibility of ad hoc support and training of new workers, while in addition to receiving little or no support and assistance in return, it is not surprising that bitterness and resentment regarding hiring and retention erupts. Considering the rapid growth that child protection agencies in Ontario have experienced since 2000, keeping up with the demands of recruitment can be daunting (Anderson & Gobeil 2002).

The women had the following concerns with respect to retention:

...[S]he [came from] the training unit? Fell asleep during all her training; was complained about consistently to [her supervisor] before her six month probation was up. They hired her. ...take that six month probation and use it! We're so damned concerned about liability...

But I also believe we have unqualified people doing the most important work. And that's because we can't, you know, staff retention. What we've done is lowered the bar in the way we do business [with respect to both recruitment and retention.]

Unqualified workers, in an environment with high workload demands servicing vulnerable children and families living in high risk situations, is a frightening prospect for all of the individuals involved. Maintaining these individuals on the staff puts not only the clients of the problematic worker at risk, but the workers around her and the families that she may work with ad hoc in periods of crisis.

[I]t would be the best thing [to be more vigilant about terminating employment during the six month probationary period if the worker is displaying significant weaknesses and challenges in the position] but then they won't know it because they'll never have to work at the CAS and they'll have to go find something else, which I know will be good and it won't hurt the agency and piss people off because all that bad workers do is piss people off because we're always covering for them and bitching about them because we just can't understand why they're there.

Recruitment and retention of staff are certainly not the most problematic issues facing child welfare; however they clearly pose a formidable force in the minds of all four of these women. The final staffing concern held by these women was that of skills and training, and each had a number of concerns and ideas.

The best worker finds it hard to deal with what's going on on their caseloads that I can't imagine a worker that struggles or maybe has only been there for two months but has a caseload of 24 or more. What they're not doing just for lack of not knowing how to cope... [the training] is just inconsistent, and I don't think, I don't think it needed to be longer than six months but then they need to take that six months and use it for what it's for; which is if at six months, if at *five* months we're not cutting it and they're not getting it, get rid of them [during the standard six month probationary period for new hires].

...they don't even have any experience and they just give them this power and they just put them out to swim in 24 cases...

I feel that we are more policing than social work-ing, and I don't think they [new graduates] are skillful to do this job, to be honest.

One of the respondents noted that at agency 'B', the six month probationary period meant for some new hires, some or all of that time placed on a training unit. The new workers had a caseload that was restricted in number to well below the agency average, and the unit had a number of seasoned staff members

acting as mentors for the new workers. This probationary time was focused on practical skills training on the job, as well as an opportunity to complete many of the training courses available during that time. This training included a provincially mandated training program that all new workers in the province were to complete. At the time of the interview (June, 2005) one respondent noted that this training had been reduced to a mere two weeks for most new hires, which, she felt was completely unreasonable given the demands and complexity of the position of frontline child protection worker.

The women all noted a number of positive and negative aspects to the training opportunities available through the two CAS agencies. They consistently praised many of these as wonderful learning experiences, as well as well earned opportunities to be away from the office and engaging in professional development. The women of agency 'B' were particularly critical of the anti-racist education provided, believing in large part that it has not been comprehensive enough or consistently applied across agency service areas and policy.

Child welfare legislation dramatically changed in 2000 in Ontario. According to the respondents child welfare should be prepared for another dramatic change. Agency 'B' has recently taken on a corporate sponsor, and the agency building has recently been dedicated to that organization.

They are making it kind of corporation style, I mean *corporate!* *The CAS! This is a human rights issue!* It's not a corporation but they are making it a business, like they want to make money out of it.

Additionally, this agency recently noted that they had reached the unprecedented number of seven hundred children in foster care, as well as a dramatic number of crown wards. Despite their best efforts as employees and advocates working within and against this structure, the research participants felt that systemic shifts represent deterioration rather than an improvement. These women believed that with *greater* discretion and power, acting through a framework of antioppression, they could work with their clients and with each other in a less oppressive and more emancipatory fashion,

To be honest, they create more management positions which is like, how many management do we need to have? Like I see so many layers of supervisors, managers, and then it is a hierarchical structure but then there is so many people on the top...I see that our frontline workers are stressed and are already burned out and we have less workers... [H]iring things has been frozen because our financial issues, but they [management executive] are already providing for themselves.

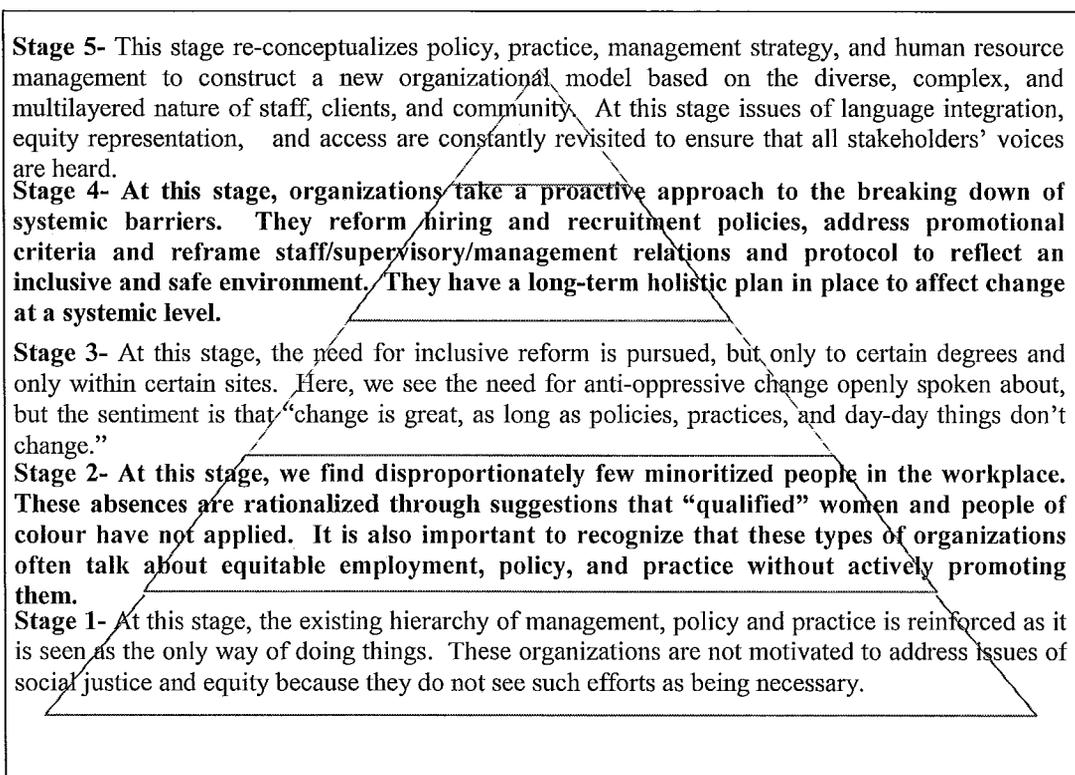
There is a sense here that in order to fully realize fundamental systemic change, the structure of the agency should reflect a power structure that better represents the skills and knowledge of the personnel. Additionally this structure needs to provide more agency and space to critically analyze the system for the largest populations within the agency and those served by the agency,

I wanna see them, I wanna see them go through with what they're working on; the antioppressive approach. And they're really helping our families. I want them to change the comprehensive assessment we are doing. Meet different families and different cultures and different religions, groups. I want those changes to be done. I want the workers and supervisors especially, management to be aware of this antioppressive approach and really start to change and believe into it, not just say it. I want them to change and see it through that window and practice through that window. That will help our community to be a safer place.

Analysis

Although discretionary decision making could clearly be a site for emancipatory work and a vehicle for antioppressive practice, the data demonstrate that it was not utilized as such to any great extent in the professional lives of these four women. A few examples of this exist in the data, such as discretion as a form of resistance to the practical framework of child welfare and child protection; unfortunately, there are a number of factors constricting the harnessing of these spaces for sites of innovative practice.

The women in this study spoke at length regarding the various sites of oppression within each agency and within the work that they do. They laid blame upon legislative restrictions and directives, as well as the culture of practice within each agency. They also took responsibility for their own limitations, many of which were seemingly caused by fear of reprisal and burdensome workloads. Not only are the spaces within and between policy directives a limiting force upon new and creative practice, but the space within professional domains has constricted the ability and opportunity of the women in this study to unpack and analyze existing practice so that new trends and ideas might emerge. The spaces that have been provided are fairly strictly governed by the agency and therefore the existing norms of practice that includes oppressive attitudes and interpretation including framing of strengths and needs of workers, clients, and systems.



Karumanchery (unpublished) has proposed a framework for undertaking organizational change and antioppressive education, in part based upon experiences coordinating antiracist/antioppressive practice initiative within child welfare settings. In the following illustration he outlines an *Equity Pyramid* with which to structure the paradigm shift across all practical and policy structures within an agency or organization.

Although all four respondents spoke about antioppressive practice and change as a regular aspect of the work in their agency, all also indicated that there are a significant number of barriers to practicing within this framework. In the example above, Karumanchery notes the various stages of integration that an organization experiences when engaging in AOP change. Despite the suggestion that agency 'B' in particular had taken on an antioppressive organizational change initiative, the workers from that agency indicated that the level of integration is far from complete. According to their impressions, attempting to frame an assessment of intervention through an antiracist or antioppressive lens has been met with a great deal of resistance. Interventions have been limited: by the legislation and informal policy and practices within the agency; the conditions in which these women work including extremely demanding workloads in a high stress work environment; and because of a seemingly endless stream of new and largely inexperienced employees entering the work environment. Finding skillful practitioners and parceling out the space and time to engage in critical policy analysis aimed at practice reform must seem largely impractical and exhausting given these conditions.

This work of critical analysis is not covered under existing funding frameworks (Karumanchery, unpublished) nor is it quantifiable through current accountability measures, and thus it remains invisible work. In an era of *New Public Management* with the contracting out of services, lean service provision built upon principals of just-in-time production, it becomes increasingly difficult to justify these efforts of resistance and service reform. Unless the lack of an antioppressive framework can be linked to increased risk to children and families, and thus become a liability to the service providers, it seems unlikely that this reform will be effectively engaged and carried through to completion.

Karumanchery (personal correspondence) also noted a number of factors necessary for the effective execution of the position of coordinator of an organizational change process. Much like the concerns presented by the respondents, he noted demonstrable skill in antiracist/antioppressive education should be a key factor in selecting an AOP organizational change coordinator, as well as ensuring that the coordinator will have the executive authority to implement necessary policy changes. Agencies and their managerial executives must be prepared for the systemic overhaul that an antioppressive framework truly entails, and further, they must be prepared to be fully committed to the process of

change. Antioppression is a paradigm shift that requires an agency to lay bare their policy and practices, informal and formal, from the board of directors to the clients. All aspects of the functioning of an agency must be subject to reexamination and reinterpretation through an antioppressive lens, rather than adopting a piecemeal approach to change. The coordinator must have some agency over the process and over the agents of change, particularly at the managerial level, so that this process might be engaged fully, remain as transparent as possible, and so that no aspect of the agency and its actors may be above reproach.

As it stands, the punctuated nature of changes and the inconsistency of expectations results in confusion and animosity between those committed to change and those resistant to change. This animosity undercuts the ability to maintain a collegial environment, and coupled with pre-existing oppression that has not yet been adequately identified and challenged individuals have become targets of oppressive behaviour. This behaviour may put both their professional credibility and their position in the organization in jeopardy. Unless an organization can gather up and focus this type of initiative it can deteriorate in short order, and it is unclear what the impact of that will be. At the very least a vital service in the community will suffer the embarrassment of losing face, and clearly at its worst the impacts of this are to the lives and livelihoods of the practitioners and clients who continue to suffer the trauma and indignities of this oppressive treatment.

Without a deliberate and concerted effort that is consciously orchestrated, it would appear that there are many, many barriers to the effective implementation of an AOP paradigm shift. Included in this implementation must be a method of responding to oppressive behaviour in a manner that protects the victim while also hold individuals accountable, regardless of their position in the agency. Strategies must also be developed to address problematic and destructive behaviour through education or if necessary through demotion or termination of employment.

Something that remains unclear is a representation of how antioppressive practice and organizational change is measured. A respondent from each agency made reference to their respective organization's complaints procedure, and Respondent 'C' also noted the cultural liaison committee at agency 'B' as a potential avenue for complaints regarding cultural competency or racism as barriers to employment or service to families. Any discussions of these spaces for concerns noted the processes to be perfunctory at best, and the research participants implied that the processes were largely impotent. Without a complaints procedure that is equipped to adequately investigate and address concerns from any member of our community, within the agency or beyond the agency, change can suffer a prolonged and punctuated implementation process in

part due to a lack of impetus to adopt new skills and acknowledge the antiquated and problematic nature of previous practices.

If an agency is to realize long term substantive organizational change a number of factors must be addressed. A complete and systematic examination of the organization's policy and practice is necessary. The coordinator of the organizational change process must be afforded power equivalent to that of a member of the management executive so that they might have better agency with respect to organizing the change process and enacting necessary policy changes. There must be greater accountability to the process for all members of the organization, and a firm and demonstrable commitment to following through with the magnitude of the necessary changes.

Understanding and exploiting spaces between the policies and practicing as a frontline social worker in a subversive way does not seem to challenge the grander structures to the extent that real reform is a likely result. The research participants who undertake this strategy report being met with resistance from the structures above them and forced into submission by exhaustion or fear. Given the highly problematic issue of recruitment and retention, it seems progressive workers are often forced out of organizations either by leaving of their own volition to find employment that is a better fit, or being *forced* to leave, as respondent 'C' was so fearful of. With the help and support of a strong union, these workers may well have their positions protected despite their resistance to the norms and policies of the organization, but clearly it is not yet under the control of the union to protect them from the oppression and mistreatment of members of the organization; for this reason I believe that an exclusively grassroots effort is too traumatic to engage.

Conclusion

Emancipatory work is the opportunity of any social worker, but it is the goal and life work of very few. To the credit of the four respondents and the two agencies presented in this study, there appears to be interest in initiating substantive change, in the form of an anti-oppressive approach to child welfare practice. There are a number of barriers in place that must be deconstructed before these changes can be achieved. It seems that the agencies were ill prepared for the depth and breadth of impact that antioppressive practice has upon the policies and practice strategies of an organization. Regardless of the presence of a strategic mandate to implement a new practice framework, practitioners in both agencies found the ability to practice from an AOP perspective challenging at best, and traumatic at worst.

I commend agency 'B' for having undertaken a very public and challenging AOP organizational change project. This process has clearly challenged the culture of practice in that agency, and has opened up a dialogue within the organization that exposes and unpacks oppression. This requires structure and leadership so that all members of the organization and actors within this process are effectively and capably lead through a productive and positive experience. Equally important, other child welfare agencies should have an opportunity to collectively and strategically examine their policies and procedures; for all children in the province of Ontario are under the auspices of the same legislation and hold the same rights for safety. Unfortunately, because these organizational changes are not covered under the funding framework set down by the Ministry, the changes are likely to be piecemeal from worker to worker, unit to unit, and agency to agency.

A larger examination of creative and novel approaches to child welfare service provision is a clear beginning to better understanding places of resistance and emancipatory work. Four subjects and two agencies represent a very narrow example of practitioners, communities, and service needs. Given the volume of work and the size of the child welfare workforce, there is an immense resource from which ideas for change can be extracted and nurtured. It is unclear the impact that AOP education in post secondary institutions has had upon service delivery in child welfare, and what will be the ongoing implications. Additionally, money and effort allocated to encouraging and underwriting critical analysis training and work is also necessary to fostering ongoing investigation of problems and solutions, so additional resources in this area could enhance short term service provision and long term goals for change.

Further research is also necessary to better examine the role of organizational change initiatives in such highly bureaucratized and legislated organizations. It seems unlikely that the efforts of one agency can be complete

without the endorsement and commitment of the Ministry to examine the Act which governs the work of child welfare officials. One agency involved in this study seems to have the potential to create a policy framework that can map out broad based legislative change. Without the material and political support of the Ministry and a critical mass of agencies and practitioners, substantive change will be difficult to achieve.

It is also important to better understand the role of clients and families in a process such as this. The goals of any social service restructuring must include a commitment to improved, if not consistent service, and the impact upon clients within the AOP efforts of these agencies is unclear. Each practitioner involved in this study could speak about one or more instances in which their efforts of resistance positively impacted client service, but each also indicated that these moments typically remained unnoticed by the agency at large. Each practitioner could also speak of issues of oppression. However none spoke about a person or committee that was effective at responding to these issues and issuing directives to perpetrators or victims that might amend problems and ensure growth and change. Thus, individuals seeking change through strategies of resistance are taking risks that could impact their security as practitioners and/or as individuals working in spaces that fail to adequately address oppressive behaviour.

Whether at the frontlines, through union efforts, or via the work of agency organized initiatives, antioppressive change is necessary in child welfare reform. The instances of oppression outlined by the women respondents in this study illustrate a few occasions that, if extended to other child welfare agencies, represent a problem worthy of addressing on a grander scale. These women will likely continue their work, both legitimate and subversive, and it is with sincere thanks to them and agencies willing to put oppression on their agendas for change, that antioppressive practice is able to frame spaces of emancipatory work.

Interview Guide

Structural Discretion: Discretionary Decision Making in Social Services

Principal Researcher:

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Working Thesis Question:

Under what conditions are practitioners in child welfare able to use discretionary decision making in efforts to resist and emancipate rather than oppress or uphold problematic bureaucratic structures.

Section I: Positioning your role

Please describe your role or position in the agency.

- Current position in frontline or management
- Former experience in other positions in the agency
- Service upon working groups within the agency

Section II: Relationships among policy structures and objectives

Please talk about challenges and conflict between the CFSA, fiscal policy (funding framework), culture/expectations within the agency, agency norms for service provision, personal/professional values/ethics.

- Do the various service objectives compliment and/or compete with one another? Example...
- How do you respond if at all?
- At what areas within the agency are there competing agendas that undermine the efforts of the agency, the provision of service, the moral of workers, etcetera...? I.e. frontline, intra-agency, inter-agency...

Section III: Competing interpretations

How are policies and the legislation interpreted similarly or differently?

- Are there conflicting understandings of the spirit of policies and/or the legislation across this agency, in other agencies, or throughout the ministry?
- Is it *fruitful* to offer new or alternative interpretations of these policies and this legislation?
- Is it *safe* to offer new or alternative interpretations of these policies and this legislation?
- Who has a voice to suggest/inspire change?
- How is that fostered? I.e. working groups, unit meetings, ad hoc, not at all, independently...
- Who has the power to effect change to service provision, decision making, interpretation, policy; etcetera.

Section IV: Purpose for change

What benefits or detriments do you see in reinterpreting any agency or ministry policies and legislation?

- Is there any notable strength in the policies and legislation?
- Is there anything missing in the policies and legislation?
- What would you change/have you changed?
- How have you reinterpreted/reapplied agency policy/standards/expectations?
- What happened when you sought creative or novel solutions? Did you tell others what you did? Were the ideas/strategies well received? Were you praised/disciplined for your initiative?
- If you were disciplined, what was the justification for that?

Section V: Power for change

Are individuals in the agency generally equipped to interpret and apply the policies and legislation effectively and appropriately?

- Do employees generally enter the workplace with enough knowledge and experience to 'hit the ground running'?
- What types of internal or external training, if any, does the agency offer or under-write to strengthen practical skills?
- What types of internal or external training does the agency offer or underwrite to strengthen skills of critical analysis?
- How effective are anti-oppressive practice strategies both at the frontline and within the agency structure?
- How do folks talk about challenges and ideas for change/resistance? Openly, socially, at work groups, with supervisor/manager/director/clients?
- Who would/could you approach with novel ideas?
- Where are client voices in this process?
- What generally appears to be the impetus for change? I.e. worker moral, client demands, ministerial demands, efficiency/cost effectiveness, increase accountability, etcetera.

Section VI: Ideas for change

What changes would you like to see with respect to agency or ministry policies and legislation?

- Recruitment strategies
- Internal training strategies
- Changes to post secondary education programs
- Legislative or policy changes
- New service techniques
- Employee supports
- Other...

Section VII: Wrap-up

Is there anything you think I may have left out or you would like to add?

McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)
 c/o Office of Research Services, MREB Secretariat, GH 306K, x 23142, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca
CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH

APPLICATION STATUS: NEW: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> RENEWAL <input type="checkbox"/> ADDENDUM <input type="checkbox"/> REB# 2005 019				
TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT: Structural Discretion - Discretionary Decision Making in Social Services				
	NAME	DEPT./ADDRESS	# EXT	E - MAIL
Faculty Investigator(s)/Supervisor(s)	D. Baines	Social Work	:	b
Student Investigator(s)	L. Ryan	Social Work	:	li

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

- The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification.
- The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification.
- The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modifications as appended or identified below.

COMMENTS & CONDITIONS:

Reporting Frequency:	Annual Date:	Other:
DATE: March 21, 2005	Dr. D. Maurer, Chair, REB:	<i>Anthony Daur</i> <small>P:\ethics\reviewers\forms\certificatc.frm</small>

ACTING CHAIR

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