



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 21
Issue 3 *September*

Article 6

September 1994

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Rhonda Reagh

Montgomery County Childrens Services - Dayton, Ohio

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Recommended Citation

Reagh, Rhonda (1994) "Public Child Welfare Professionals - Those Who Stay," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 3 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol21/iss3/6>

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Public Child Welfare Professionals— Those Who Stay

RHONDA REAGH

Montgomery County Childrens Services
Dayton, Ohio

Public child welfare workers—especially those working in the “trenches”—are the life blood of child protection. Yet, the ever present challenge is keeping committed and talented professionals in the field. This article is based on a 1990 study which examined the phenomena of staying in the field through the eyes of the professionals who have done so. The study investigated the life histories and work experiences of 18 selected child welfare workers in a mid-western state through data gathered from in-depth written and oral life histories. Findings provide insight into the world of the child welfare worker.

Introduction

Over the last decade, the field of public child welfare has experienced a dramatic and simultaneous change in the scope of services delivered and the personnel delivering them. While the scope of services demands greater social work intervention, the field has experienced a decrease in employment opportunities and reclassification of positions to delete professionally desirable educational requirements for entry level positions (Kadushin, 1987). A 1988 study conducted by the National Child Welfare Resource Center on Management and Administration, University of Southern Maine, showed that only 28% of the child welfare staff sample had a BSW or MSW degree (Lieberman, Hornby and Russell 1988, p. 487).

While public child welfare professionals are concerned with maintaining professional credibility and proficient staff at this time of increased need, the “routine” demands of the job make it difficult to take vacations, “flex time” and time away for training. During the late 1970’s and early 1980’s focus on burnout

in human services, public child welfare received a great deal of attention for these reasons (Cherniss, 1980; Daley, 1979; Farber, 1983; Jayaratne and Chess, 1984; Maslach, 1982; Pines et al. 1981) and the concern continues today (NASW, 1989) as turnover rates reach crisis proportions as high as 40% in some states (PCSAO, 1990).

Yet even in combination with adverse working conditions, increasing liability and high caseloads—some practitioners do not leave the field. The University of Southern Maine study revealed that nearly half of the sample (N=2438; 46%) had worked at their current agency for 5 years. When the work experience at current and previous settings were combined, respondents had worked an average of 9.13 years with the median of 7.5 years (Lieberman, Hornby and Russell 1988, p. 487). Obviously some of them find satisfaction in what they do, make a career of it and find ways to cope. It is this group on which this study is focused.

Study Design and Participants

The study undertaken was a naturalistic study of public child welfare workers who chose to remain in the field. Several questions provided focus to the research. What led participants to public child welfare? What experiences have had an impact on their lives? How have the participants seen themselves in the organizational context? What is the relationship between burnout and staying? The research questions were designed to evoke the telling of life stories and work experiences of these professionals and, ultimately why child welfare workers stay in the field.

The naturalistic paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) was selected to answer the research questions, because it was important that the paradigm fit the humanness and sensitivity of the topic. Similarly, the flexibility of a human instrument (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Denzin, 1989) was needed to respond to and sense the many personal and environmental cues that came to light in the study.

The study employed a grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) because existing theory has only looked at

the "leaving" phenomena of public child welfare workers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that a distinction must be made between investigators who know by existent theory what they must find out (conventional research) and investigators who do not know by existent theory what they must find out (naturalistic research). The two situations require very distinctive forms of theory utilization and research design. There have been many attempts to look at the bureaucratic setting of public child welfare practice, burnout and the professional's exodus from the field. These have been quantitative encounters with the phenomena and lack the personal explanations that only individuals can give.

The participants in this study were recruited from a pool of child welfare practitioners actively working in public child welfare agencies in a midwestern state. The participants were identified through several methods: identification through a statewide network of Children Services administrators; a written request sent to agency executives; formal and informal networks available to the inquirer, and; "word-of-mouth" identification by other participants. Utilizing these different methods of identification, and a maximum variation sampling (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Bogdan and Biklen, 1982), where the inquirer expanded the sample until informational redundancy was reached. At this point, sampling was terminated.

The sample for this study consisted of eighteen child welfare professionals from across the state of Ohio. The participants were evenly distributed among metropolitan (n=5), mid-size (n=7) and rural counties (n=6). There were fifteen white females, one African American male, one African American female, and one Hispanic female. The mean age of the participants was 37 years (Brode, 1990).

The participants met several criteria. They had attained a BSW or related degree in the course of their career, or were license eligible in the State of Ohio. They had practiced in the field of public child welfare for a minimum of five years, having not practiced in an area outside of child welfare for a period exceeding two consecutive years. They currently performed some degree of direct service and had not returned to the field within the last year after practicing in another area of social work.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher adopted a primarily biographical inquiry for this study. The biographical method assumes that human behavior can be understood from the perspectives of the people involved. The researcher was also interested in looking at the relationship between the participants' personal experiences and the total child welfare experience. The participants' individual stories and interpretations were the central data for this study. The researcher collected data from participants in three different ways: a written, guided life history, completion of the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach, 1982), and a follow-up, audio-recorded interview. The written life history was used to guide the oral interview which followed and captured biographical data in five areas: general background information, self-description, relationships, education and professional experiences. The MBI was administered to supplement the life history data and measured three aspects of the burnout syndrome using the Emotional Exhaustion, Depersonalization and Personal Accomplishment scales. The oral interview data refined the life history information and explored the issues involved in the relationship between current employment and the life history. Transcripts of the interviews were used to corroborate and integrate the data for the final report.

The compiled data were reviewed using the constant comparative method until a pattern emerged. The findings were consistently checked against reality through consultation with a three member oversight committee, a panel of experts and the participants. Following the principles of grounded theory, data analysis really began while the data were being collected. Each participant's information was analyzed as it was returned and compared with each previous set of data to ascertain the existence of data patterns.

The final analysis addressed the "how" and "why" question of the staying phenomena. Meaningful "staying" experiences appeared to occur in epiphanies or turning point episodes. Personal and professional lives were shaped in these experiences.

The "turning point" model developed by Denzin (1989) was a useful analytic tool. There are basically four experiential

structures or epiphanies in the lives of individuals which can occur in times of crisis. They may be positive or negative, yet they will alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life. Meaning is only given to these turning points in retrospect. The life history questions in this study gathered retrospective data which focused on the participant reliving and re-experiencing selected life events which had affected them personally and professionally.

Findings

The participants characteristically came to the field directly from undergraduate school. For many this "first job" will be the job from which they will retire. One gets an overriding sense of altruism from these professionals. They describe themselves in terms of their personal need to be needed, to make a difference and to be quiet contributors. In a sense, working in public child welfare fulfills a psychological need for the participants.

All of the participants (n=18) in this study experienced crisis, or epiphany experiences, in their lives. Nearly all of the informants (n=17) experienced victimization, death, illness or physical disability that led them into the field (Brode, 1990). Participants felt that as child welfare workers, they could attempt to make it "better" or at least "different" for other children and families who have difficult experiences. In a sense, they see themselves as rescuers.

Study participants have incorporated the field of public child welfare into their personal identities. The connection between their work, their life histories and personal identities makes it problematic for these workers to leave the field. One participant explained leaving as a type of identity crisis.

Several participants came to the field as a result of a religious or spiritual calling (n=4) (Brode, 1990). These child welfare workers had pleasant childhoods in which they felt valued, supported and encouraged by strong parental and family figures. For them, religion and the organized "church" played a major role in shaping their lives. Grateful for all they had received, and propelled by religious values, they felt a need to carry out their spirituality through serving others.

Regardless of their experiences in childhood or their sense of calling or the need to be needed, these professionals clearly find meaning in their work. As indicated by their scores on the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Personal Accomplishment=35), they feel a strong sense of personal accomplishment in what they do. The successes, whether they are major or minor, outweigh the effects of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion resulting from the job. To the outside observer, the experiences the participants shared about their professional lives may seem overwhelmingly negative. But for the participants, the successes they experienced with extremely demanding cases, "made it all worthwhile."

Participants talked in detail about the difficulty in trying to balance the needs of the client(s) and the requirements of the organization. Increasingly, they are practicing in a system that exists on a dichotomous continuum that consists of bureaucratic values at one pole and social work values at the other. They report in order to maintain an equilibrium, they are constantly trying to balance the roles of caseworker and bureaucrat, while the environment around them is in a constant state of chaos. They feel the chaos is endemic to the field of public child welfare, which is always at risk of unplanned change through legislative mandate, public outcry or change in federal or state regulations.

It is pertinent to note here that the study participants, while definitely experiencing conflicts between the roles of bureaucrat and professional, have not chosen to leave the field as a way to cope with the frustration. On the contrary, they have chosen to cope within the system. Blau and Scott (1962) would characterize this selection as choosing the bureaucratic orientation over the professional. Indeed, the participants' remarks support this concept. They see themselves as getting their support from colleagues in the system, and seek to carry out their functions as creatively as the formal organization will allow them.

The majority of the participants do not see themselves as risk takers, even though their jobs require that they make risky decisions every day. They do not perceive themselves as "stand outs" but rather describe themselves as "quiet doers." As such, they draw on the intrinsic rewards that come from working

with children and families. Some believe that remaining with the system will keep it honest. Others believe that longevity with the organization affords them expertise and vision. Even when extremely frustrated by the system, there is fulfillment and comfort in serving clients and using professional skills.

The experiences they have had and continue to have with clients point to the fact that their jobs will never be done. For many, this fact in and of itself, as well as the impact they can make on clients' lives, is enough to keep them in the field. As one participant indicated there is never going to be a point where the job is not there anymore because everyone is taken care of. There is always going to be something happening that should not have been happening.

Accepting change on a small scale, or incrementally over a period of years, is also important to these professionals. They do not need to see radical or dramatic changes to accept that their clients have done something positive. They believe a child welfare worker can make a difference in clients' lives in ways that are not especially recognizable or obvious to the rest of the world. Motivated by a desire to help children and understand family situations, they accept clients as they are, where they are. Over half of the participants (n=10) experienced the 1960's as part of the "front line troops" (Brode, 1990). In a sense, they will espouse the values of that era—peace, love, protection of human rights and service to fellow human beings. They describe themselves as people on a journey, sometimes at a crossroads in making meaning of their lives. They see themselves as constantly growing and learning. Although the government was viewed as the perpetuation of injustice during the 1960's, the participants in this study have chosen to carry out their journey within the system. They have chosen to carry out their callings in a setting where significant social problems converge and where they feel constantly challenged to make a contribution.

This research pointed out that there really is a very fine line between staying and burning out. The study participants all reported experiencing burnout at some level. They felt with maturity, coping has become easier, as had being in the system. The participants obviously get something for themselves from the work they do, yet they must remain ever vigilant lest they

lose sight of the meaning and significance in their work and tip the balance to the other side. For them, burning out is just one small step away from staying. Instead of being opposite, it is really only different in terms of the way the individual processes his/her daily experiences within the system. An experience that would burn a worker out one day, may be the very thing that would keep him/her in the field the next day.

Study Implications and Recommendations

The study participants had a great deal to say about what would make it easier and more attractive to stay in the field of public child welfare. The first and most obvious recommendation is for state and federal legislative and regulatory agencies to look at the impact of proposed policies and rules on the direct service function before they are mandated for implementation. Policy changes have appeared to be positive for children and families in this mid-western state but their implementation has created confusion for clients and has been overwhelming for practitioners.

On a similar note, public child welfare agency administrators must be challenged to create systems that balance "paperwork" with "peoplework", a balance that would appear to contribute to the retention of seasoned, committed professionals. Furthermore, agencies should have clear parameters for child welfare practice at the community level and provide the supervision and training to explain and reinforce the parameters. Staff members gain a feeling of support and guidance from agency policy that indicates to them, and to the community, what is expected as a standard for service.

The participants indicated a very strong need to feel valued, rewarded and appreciated in their positions. They felt this could be done in monetary and in more important intangible ways, such as creating new programs that use the workers' specialized knowledge, job rotation, and the provision of specialized learning opportunities. Participants felt this would give them an opportunity to feel success and achievement on a different level than service provision and would offer a welcome diversion from the daily trials of public child welfare. The participants

also indicated that direct line supervisors who encouraged and supported them in these efforts and maintained high standards of practice challenged them and gave them the incentive to achieve at a higher level.

The final area acknowledged by the participants as needing attention was recruitment/retention. The data suggest that agencies may be erroneously seeking out younger, less skilled workers to fill their child welfare positions. Although youthful energy and enthusiasm are desirable, a critical balance needs to be maintained between youth and maturity. Mature workers have accrued experience and wisdom that give them vision and perspective. These workers can serve as mentors and supports for the younger, more impressionable workers.

To further support staff, agencies need to start looking at ways to safeguard workers' mental health. Many of the study participants are responsible, in addition to their caseloads, for "after hours" duty without direct or indirect compensation. This addition to their already demanding caseloads encroaches on their personal lives which are a source of respite and revitalization to many workers. Administrators could head off burnout by looking at ways to compensate staff for their emergency duty time, either through paying them for it or through the use of an "after hours" staff. That feeling of protected time maintains staff stability.

Conclusion

Public child welfare has long been researched as a field of practice. Much has been studied and researched regarding how the system affects its clients. Information exists on the trials, the triumphs and the dysfunction of its services and its personnel. It is hoped that with studies such as this one, more energy will be put into examining the reality of the system from inside the system. More needs to be known about the daily experiences of child welfare social workers, how they make sense of their experiences and how they integrate their experiences into their personal functioning. This study offered the springboard for such research to occur, with emphasis being given to seeing the field through the eyes of its participants.

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