

The Coping Skills of Child Protection Workers Exposed to Primary and Secondary Trauma in the Workplace

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Statement of the Research Problem

Throughout North America there has been difficulty for decades in recruiting and retaining competent child protection workers (Balfour & Neff, 1993; Brode, 1990; Daley, 1979; Jayaratne & Chess, 1985; Kermish & Kushin, 1969; Reagh, 1994).

The Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) created a recruitment and retention task force in 1988 (Zlotnik, 1996) and hosts an annual conference to address the issue. As well, many states continue to wrestle with the issue of recruitment and retention. The turnover rates for child protection investigators in the state of Arizona for the fiscal years 2001, 2000 and 1999 were 21.58 percent, 22.23 percent and 22.76 percent respectively (State of Arizona, 2002). In Georgia Governor Barnes appointed a Child Protective Services Task Force in January 2000 to address the high rate of attrition in child protection workers (Barton Child Law & Policy Clinic, 2001):

With so many vacancies in these critical positions, children are not adequately protected. Until there are enough people and enough tools to appropriately protect children, abused and neglected children in Georgia will continue to suffer and be further victimized by the System (Barton Child Law & Policy Clinic, 2001). In addition, service to clients is disrupted when workers leave (Anderson, 2000):

By leaving their jobs, social workers can compound feelings of insignificance and rejection in kids already hurting from abuse and neglect...Miscommunication and mistakes can occur when a child's Case is "handed off" to a new person (Jordan Institute for Families, 1999).

A number of quantitative studies have investigated why child protection workers leave (Brode, 1990; Daley, 1979; Ellett, 2001, Ewalt, 1991, Helfgott, 1991) but the problem remains.

Given the above there was a need for an exploratory qualitative research design and approach which was warranted by the lack of research specifically focusing on coping skills. It was important to discover the workers' subjective interpretations and perspectives about the work and organizational contexts. Specifically the aim was to explore how workers who managed to cope in child protection on a long-term basis and managed to do so despite the direct and indirect trauma inherent in the job.

Research Background and Hypotheses

Background questions I had as I was developing the research strategy:

- What attracts individuals to child protection work?
- What helps to keep them in the field?
- What policies or practices of the agency; if any helped/hindered workers' coping skills?
- Would the coping strategies of workers in the American sample differ from those of Canadian workers?
- Would the results of the research be consistent with Rycraft's findings regarding the four factors she identified in determining whether child welfare workers remained: employee mission, goodness of fit of the job, supervisory relationship and employee investments (professional, peer relationships, and in benefits)?

Methodology

The philosophical framework of this study was phenomenology. Phenomenology is concerned with exploring the lived experience of individuals about a concept or phenomena by having them reflect upon their experiences and consciously describe them (Creswell, 1998; Moustakas, 1994). Interpreting the participants' reflections and formulating theory requires extensive knowledge on the part of the researcher of the phenomenon being studied so as not to overlook any key aspects (Brode, 1990). The researcher's 22 years of child protection experience from front line work to management was therefore useful. While a review of the child protection literature may give an individual a sense of what the work is like, there are certain subtleties omitted. For instance, it would be difficult for an individual with no child protection background to understand how a child protection investigation worker could combine the authoritarian role of investigating a child's situation under child protection legislation while simultaneously wearing the helping "hat" in offering services to the family.

The specific type of phenomenology utilized in this study was Schutz' social phenomenology. Social phenomenology is a descriptive method which focuses on understanding, not on causality (Aho, 1998; Berger & Luckmann, 1966). A key concept in social phenomenology is that of the in-group, defined as:

...every social group, be it ever so small (if not, every individual, has its own private code, understandable only by those who have

participated in the common past experiences in which it took rise or in the tradition connected with them (Wagner, 1970, p. 97).

In-group in this study was defined as the team or unit to which the investigation worker was a member. Of course simultaneously, the participating workers were also members of other in-groups such as religious organizations and ethnic groups which at times can have contradictory beliefs. The following description of the in-group aptly describes the child protection investigation workers' in-groups:

Other key concepts in social phenomenology are:

- **Life world:** the whole sphere of everyday experiences, orientations, and actions. The life world (every-day life) existed before an individual's birth. The individual interprets the world through the stock of knowledge handed down by others (Walsh, et al., 1967, p. 106).
- **Everyday language:** Everyday language is essential to understanding everyday life. It is only by communicating, especially face-to-face, that an individual can begin to understand the other's points of view. Since in-groups tend to have a characteristic language (Aho, 1998; Berger & Luckmann, 1966), particular attention was paid to the language used by participants to describe their work.
- **Stock of knowledge:** Common-sense knowledge may range from near-expertness to extreme vagueness. What a person knows in total is his stock of knowledge (Wagner, 1970, p. 319). Child protection workers bring to their jobs their stocks of knowledge from their professional training in social work or related fields and their stocks of knowledge from their personal lives. Both stocks of knowledge can impact on both how and how well child protection workers deal with the various situations they encounter during the course of their jobs.
- **Biographically determined situation:** Because of individual's unique life experiences or histories they react in different ways to the same situation. In other words, individuals find themselves in biographically determined situations (Wagner, 1970). The investigation workers were exposed to similar stressors. How they were affected by them and negotiated them was, to some extent, dependent upon how their previous life experiences have impacted them. The participants' previous life experiences were not explored in depth. The relationship between the workers' previous life experiences and their coping with job stressors could have been a study in itself. The time constraints of this study precluded extensive exploration of this area.
- **Detached outsider:** The objective point of view, according to Schutz (Wagner, 1970), can only come from the detached observer: If detachment is characteristic of "the stranger," he becomes the one who, as observer, is able to offer an "objective" view of the host community: there is no objective meaning of group membership outside of that established by a person who views the cultural community from the outside (Wagner, p.14).

In the case of this study, the objective point of view came from the researcher.

While not a member of any of the child protection in-groups in the study, the researcher could only be considered a semi-detached outsider because of extensive child protection experience. These experiences sensitized the researcher to the participants' worldviews.

This was an international, purposive, non-probability sample (Aday, 1989; Rubin & Babbie, 2001). There was usable data for seven workers in the Eastern Canada sample and seven participants in the Southwestern U.S.A. sample.

With social phenomenology as the theoretical framework, the every-day work experience of child protection investigation workers were explored. Several data collection techniques were used in an effort to arrive at a deeper understanding of the lived experience of investigation workers. The use of several data collection techniques is comparable to the quantitative validation process (Creswell, 1998; Mason, 1997) and triangulation gives deeper understanding by providing a variety of perspectives of the same phenomenon.

The following are some of the qualitative techniques suggested by Creswell (1998) which were used in the study: bracketing, member checks, field notes, semi-structured interviews with an interview guide, as well as a research panel and debriefing.

Data Analysis Procedure

Elements of both the grounded research paradigm and a modification of the van Kaam phenomenological method of analysis (Moustakas, 1994) were utilized simultaneously to analyze the data. The two methods are not normally combined. The methodologies have similar coding techniques. Phenomenology's essence of the phenomenon and grounded theory's visual model/theory are similar (Creswell). The two methodologies were therefore considered to be compatible. Data analysis was done with the assistance of the NU*DIST [(non-numerical unstructured data indexing, searching, and theorizing) (Richards & Richards, 1994)] computer program.

Grounded Research Theory

Grounded research theory stresses open process rather than fixed methods and procedures, and that theory evolves from the data presented by the research participants. Theory is generated from interviewing and observation and is very concerned with context and social structure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The grounded research process is not linear – rather, data collection, coding and analysis occur simultaneously. The following are four essential steps in grounded research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Giorgi, 1985; Creswell, 1998) which were utilized in the study: overall sense, discrimination of meaning units, transformation of the participants' everyday language and synthesis of the transformed meaning units into a consistent statement.

Results

The primary sources of support for most participating workers in both samples were spouses, family members and friends doing the same work or working in allied fields. All workers also cited current or previous supervisors or managers as having been good sources of support. In particular they appreciated supervisors who were very available, empathic and who helped them reframe situations. Not one worker in either sample had considered seeing a counselor should they become overwhelmed due to work related trauma. With persistent probing by the researcher about whether they would consider seeing a counselor in the future, it was surprising to hear the following comments from workers who make their living counseling children and families:

- ❖ I see it as a character weakness to let things get to the point where you have a breakdown and see a counselor.
- ❖ I don't trust counseling and question the effectiveness of counseling.

In retrospect, given the assertion of all workers that it would be difficult for outsiders to understand their work and what they go through emotionally, it should not have surprised me that they had not considered seeing counselors. A very realistic barrier to them seeing counselors with the numbers and variety of collateral contacts they have in the course of their work, it is often difficult to find a counselor, especially in rural areas, that they don't relate to professionally.

Most workers had positive comments about their immediate supervisor but had difficulty with some senior administrators at "head office". They appreciated it when superiors took the time to listen to them and who actually responded to concerns. In one agency, workers were appreciative of administrators installing a shower so that workers could jog at lunch time, take a shower and go back to work. Five of the seven Canadian workers had verbalized spontaneously that they had initiated temporary job rotations when they were beginning to feel overwhelmed by the nature of the work, which allowed them to return to investigation work refreshed. Since this issue did not come up in the U.S. sample it is unknown whether participating workers had initiated temporary job rotations.

Both samples used humor as a means of coping with the stressors of the job. Canadian workers used "every day" humor while U.S. workers specifically spoke of "gallows humor" directly related to the nature of the work. The difference may be attributable to cultural differences in the samples.

Another striking difference between the two samples were the reactions of the workers to tragedy or fatality with clients, especially death of children. Canadian workers responded emotionally with comments such as "maybe if I had made another home visit..." this wouldn't have happened. Or Coffee's poignant response:

I had been working with this little girl who was close in age with my own daughter. I had just seen the little girl on a Thursday or Friday and she passed away on a Sunday morning. The parents wanted my assistance and somehow the hospital managed to track me down at home and I went to be with the parents at the hospital. The next day I went to see my supervisor who was wonderful. We sat in her office that Monday morning and we just cried. You know, I think she had become so involved in that family..a family I spent a long time on, that I think we had become very attached to this little child, you know. And she (the supervisor had never met the family, but knowing what I was telling her about this little girl, it was very touching. And it is one of those cases that I will never forget.

I have to contrast these emotional responses with the responses of the U.S. sample which were all a variation of: if you've done all of the right things, then you were not responsible for the child's death. I have to admit that initially I was quite taken aback with this seemingly cold response. However, after some reflection, I've come to appreciate that this may be a cultural thing and it may be what it takes for these particular workers to handle the nature of their jobs.

Utility for Social Work Practice

Policy implications

- 1) Given workers' belief that only individuals doing the same or allied types of work can understand their daily work life, counselors very familiar with the day-to-day issues of child protection investigators, should be made available to the workers.
- 2) Agencies and universities need to collaborate in order to effect an attitudinal change in social workers in general and child protection workers in particular, regarding help-seeking. Specifically it is strongly suggested that students in BSW programs (since entry level for many child protection workers is at the BSW level) be required to undergo 20 hours of counseling with a licensed social worker as part of a credit course. The purpose is three-fold: to give students an appreciation of what it's like to be in the client role; to learn how counseling could be helpful to them should they exhibit signs of secondary trauma, and to de-stigmatize the counseling process.
- 3) It is strongly recommended that for every three years of child protection investigation work, the workers rotate to another job in the child welfare sector. Agencies should portray this as a preventive measure, not a punitive one, in order to allow workers to return to investigation work replenished.

Areas for Future Research

Given the resistance of most participants in both samples to seeing a counselor, and the pronounced indication that some of the men in the samples particularly felt the need “to be strong” for colleagues, research into help seeking of child protection investigation workers would be useful to practice. Questions such as how best to destigmatize seeing a counselor and whether a different approach to counseling is indicated for male workers.

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