INDIVIDUALITY IN APPROACHES TO EMOTIONALLY DEMANDING WORK AND

COPING AMONG EXPERIENCED BRITISH COLUMBIA SOCIAL WORKERS

by

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Abstract

Many social workers experience high levels of emotional exhaustion (Kim, Ji, & Kao, 2011), directly contributing to poor professional retention, with numbers of social workers leaving the field between 20 and 40% annually in some sectors (Font, 2012). Additionally, social work is a highly gendered field (Sloan, 2012), and expectations of social workers' emotional labour as well as their prospects for influence and advancement reflect this (Lane & Flowers, 2015). Rather than examining the struggles social workers face (the subject of numerous studies already), this qualitative study examines the experiences of six female social workers, who self-identified as being emotionally healthy, thriving in their job, and who intended to continue as social workers. Each participant had a minimum of five years' experience following completion of their BSW or MSW. The participants' perceptions of social work, experience of emotional demands in the field, and knowledge of emotional supports for social workers were examined. Additionally, participants' self-assessments of their personality and qualities of personal hardiness or resilience were examined, based on the literature review findings that suggested relationships between these factors and emotional coping. The research was informed by critical theory on structural social work, and a thematic analysis was performed on the qualitative interviews to draw out shared thematic elements. Successful social work is a complex accomplishment: professionalism intersects with informal client-focused work, and emotionally demanding labour intersects gendered stereotypes on appropriate emotional expression. This research found that successful social workers considered their personality and approach to be instrumental in their success. Though individual interpretations differed, participants shared beliefs that they were personally suited for social work. In other words, the people who thrive as social workers are as complex, nuanced and interesting as the work itself.

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Chapter One: Introduction

As a member of a society with strongly gendered perceptions on emotional expression and labour, it did not surprise me to encounter numerous academic works on the social perception that women typically engage in professions that require more emotional and expressive engagement (excluding anger, which is seen as more masculine). Additionally, women are often considered more inherently suited to such emotional and caring work (Sloan, 2012) solely because of their gender. These gender stereotypes are imposed and enforced by society, with harsh social consequences for women who do not align with the stereotype. Brown, Olkhov, Bailey and Daniels in their 2015 study found that people generally believe women experience and express emotions more often (compared to men) and will hold women to a fixed and socially mandated standard of what is considered appropriate emotional expression. If a woman is for some reason perceived as less emotionally expressive women are judged more harshly, and perceived as more deviant from what is appropriate than men are in the same situation (Brown et al., 2015). In relation to studying social work, Sloan (2012) found that:

> [C]onsistent with gendered beliefs about emotion, women are often working in jobs in which they must perform emotional labour, emotion management and display as a part of the job. Women are seen as naturally nurturing and caring and more suited than men for jobs that require such skills. (p. 373)

This gendered belief may be one of the reasons that women are overrepresented in jobs that require emotional labour, because people are socialized to believe that women are more inherently comfortable and competent in expressing and managing emotions. Anger and aggression are exceptions to this view, being considered socially appropriate for men (Sloan, 2012; Brown et al., 2015). Brown et al. found in their 2015 research on gender differences in emotional affect in the workplace, that these social standards for acceptable emotional expression are enforced by others in the workplace. This enforcement has a distinctly gendered

style; while men may not be censured for a lack of emotional expression, women who show less emotional response or a different emotional response than expected are faced with a higher social cost. This expectation means that women experience social pressure to engage with the 'correct' emotional responses in the workplace and women who are not able or willing to emotionally engage might suffer social and even professional consequences (Brown et al., 2015).

Social work in particular faces an interesting intersection of gender and emotional labour, partly due to the field being populated primarily with women (see Chapter Two) and also because of the necessary expectations of social workers to handle both professional and emotional demands as a part of their profession. I chose this research out of an interest in illuminating the unique and individual abilities of social workers who thrive in this work environment.

Though my Bachelor's degree is in Psychology, not social work, a persistent interest in the field and prior research experience in the social services led me to focus on the experiences of social workers for my Master's Thesis. Within social work perspectives, I most strongly identify with structural social work (see Theoretical Basis, p.10) which overlaps significantly with my feminist approach to research methodologies. This informed my interest in how the complex demands of a mainly female profession (which, by its nature, requires emotional labour of its workers- see Chapter Two) is interpreted on an individual level by the different people who thrive in it. I was curious about what drew people to social work, what kept them in the job, and what challenged them. I also wondered what social work gave back to individuals who spent their careers doing it, and whether they would think that training or inherent personal qualities best equipped them to deal with the demands of the field. Finally, I wanted to ask how they as individuals coped; whether the prescribed supports provided by employers were found useful,

and whether there was any pattern in the combinations of methods that individuals used to cope

that could be useful if shared with those new to the field.

Rationale

This study was created based on several assumptions developed throughout the literature

review. One such assumption was that the specific combinations of coping behaviors that have

been effective for seasoned social workers would be more easily adopted by other social workers

than coping methods chosen at random. Secondly, I judged it safe to assume that generally social

workers are aware of many formal coping methods as they would be taught these during their

education in order to teach them to clients, or make use of them in their own life. Therefore, if

seasoned and successful social workers who enjoy their work are using specific methods or

activities which allow them to avoid burning out, it is not likely to be a formal method which

would be known to everyone else with the same social work education. If this were the case, then

any social worker who acted on that education could potentially avoid burnout, and the numbers

of those leaving the profession because of burnout would greatly diminish.

My tentative thesis suggested that seasoned social workers may have developed their own

informal methods, or combination of methods that work effectively for them. By examining the

experiences of several seasoned social workers through qualitative interviews, I hoped to find

themes and similarities (or at least a variety of options in informal coping) which may be of use

to other social workers.

After I completed a quantitative research study on the relationship between emotional

labour and social work (Fraser, 2016), the feedback of the participants indicated that there were

additional questions on the topic which could not be answered through quantitative research

designs. This quantitative study, along with other studies on the topic, guided the development of the nuanced qualitative research needed to answer some of those additional questions.

Previous research (see Chapter Two) established multiple elements such as personality, methods, and hardiness which might contribute to a social worker's ability to cope with the emotional demands of the field. However, there is as yet no 'one-size-fits-all' universal answer for what makes the difference between social workers struggling and burning out, or staying and thriving. Research focusing on effective methods for emotional coping is relatively common, as researchers work to find methods that will be successful for workers who might be struggling. However, in depth research looking at the methods and practices of successful, thriving workers is scarce, and it is by looking at this niche that I hoped to uncover some new insights that might be of use to others in the field.

This research examined the multiple different individual combinations of methods, as well as the background and reasoning, which participants gave for their decisions not only to enter social work, but also to stay. In exploring these strategies through the qualitative interviews, I made every effort to preserve the individual voices of participants and share the experiences in their words which shaped their time as social workers and influenced their decision to stay or go. In sifting through these experiences I felt uniquely privileged to have been present for these interviews, which once completed, seemed only to capture the briefest glimpse of the complexity behind the choices and challenges that face social workers. Though each participant's interview contributed to the assessment of themes as a whole, individual elements which were distinctive to each interview are also included, demonstrating the diversity of successful approaches.

Theoretical Basis

This study was developed with a feminist research perspective as well as social constructionist theory. In addition, the methodologies I chose were influenced by feminist research ideologies which acknowledge different levels of knowing and are grounded in an appreciation of the lens which context and individuality bring to qualitatively acquired knowledge. I also made use of psychological personality theories which suggest that an individual's personality or individual traits may make them inherently more skilled at certain types of work.

A feminist research perspective as I use it refers to an approach which acknowledges that all people exist in an intersection of many different factors. The intersection of these factors, (which include race, class, gender, and education among others), creates for every person a unique life experience on which they are the sole expert. I also employed what is termed the "muddy boots" approach in putting together this research (Coddington, 2015), which refers to the fact as a researcher, I have acknowledged that I could not wholly remove myself from the process of research. Instead of attempting to present this study as an unbiased and completely objective work (something I believe is impossible), I strove for accountability and honesty. This overt effort to make my role and my approach visible is intended to allow the reader to incorporate the perspective I held into their assessment of the finished product. To do this I actively minimized my presence in the research process as much as possible, while simultaneously working to be transparent about the research process in order to expose the subjectivity I may have unknowingly brought to the work.

This paper is grounded in social constructionist theory which asserts that society is not a pre-existing realm but a creation of human interactions where such interactions "become

externalized, objectified and then internalized" (Houston, 2001, p.846). The significance of this approach in social work is that social constructionist theory posits that the present framework for understanding the world is historically and culturally informed, and the structures upon which society places significance are in a large part arbitrary. Individual people within the framework develop subjective meanings for their experience, none of which are any more or less valid than others (Creswell, 2014). For social workers, this means that clients are the best authorities on their own experiences. Similarly, in the proposed research, experienced social workers are considered the best authorities on their experiences of coping, and the subjective meaning they attach to their coping methods is a necessary context for understanding the success of their coping (Cameron, Lindquist, & Gray, 2015).

The methodologies of the study were also developed with the use of feminist ideologies, in terms of an emphasis on respecting voices of the individuals participating, and acknowledging the validity of multiple 'truths' and ways of knowing (Ardovini, 2015). This emphasis guided the use of a demographic statement by which participants could self-select themselves for inclusion in the study which deferred the judgement of success and effective coping in the field to the workers themselves rather than an external measure. Feminist perspectives also guided the choice of qualitative interview methodology as a way of preserving the context and individuality of the participants in the study. These perspectives also contributed to the analysis in its emphasis on acknowledgement of all elements which emerge rather than pre-formed expectations of which results will be important.

Finally, the study is also grounded in psychological personality theories which assert that an individual's personality traits can influence their reaction to stress (Aronson, Wilson, Akert & Fehr, 2010) and that coping styles can have a direct influence on a person's success in an

emotionally demanding field (Gellis, 2002). Secondly, the theory that although significant research has taken place into ways to alleviate emotional stress on people in general and social workers in particular (Alford, Malouff & Osland, 2005; Pugliesi, 1999; Wharton & Erikson, 1995), strategies which have combined to make individual social workers successful may well be those which take place informally and without significant cost of time or money.

Research Question and Objectives

This research examines the individual informal coping methods used by professional social workers who have successfully functioned for five or more years in their field, defined both by the workers' self-identification as such and their continued presence in the field. Qualitative interview questions include personality description and identification of whether workers believe they possess inherent hardiness or resilience (personality traits listed above which may be connected to coping abilities). Methods which are informal (as defined in Chapter Two) are of particular interest because they are born of the experience of practitioners, and practices which have arisen from experience are the major source of knowledge for this study. The specific research question of this study is: What do experienced social workers who successfully cope with emotional stress consider to be important and relevant to their coping abilities?

Limitations

Delimitations. The term 'delimitations' refers to the parameters which the researcher imposes on the study (Mauch & Park, 2003). The delimitations I chose for this study are firstly, recruiting social workers within Northern British Columbia, who have access to either public areas of Prince George, the UNBC campus, or are reachable electronically by social services

organizations in the Northern BC area. Secondly, I limited participation to workers who held a

BSW (or MSW) as well as five or more years of experience practicing as a social worker. I chose

this delimitation specifically to provide a standardized measure of the education participants had

on formal methods. Thirdly, the participants had to intend to continue as a social worker for the

foreseeable future. Finally, because the interviews were held in-person, participation was limited

to those people who were able to come to the UNBC campus for an interview.

  Context and scope. This research examines the experiences of a small group of six (6)

social workers who fit the description laid out in the Participant Demographic section, from the

population of northern BC. Conditions may exist which affect this population that do not affect

people who have some similarities (i.e., perform social service work) but not others (i.e.,

practicing in an urban setting). Because of this, the results of this research must be considered in

context and are not meant to be used for broad statements about social workers' experience, but

to represent the unique knowledge and meaning derived from the experiences of this particular

group of people, and highlight themes which might warrant exploration in future research.

  Financial considerations. Key to the survival of social service organizations is the

ability to acquire funding (Hodge & Piccolo, 2005). Funding figures into all aspects of

management and maintenance of the organization since how an organization uses funds directly

correlates to its ability to acquire future funds (Silverman & Patterson, 2011). Most non-profit

organizations rely to some degree on donations, but the amount in donations can change by up to

50% from one year to the next so it is impossible to rely solely on donated funds (Hodge &

Piccolo, 2005). This means the addition of any new coping methods for workers will be most

successful if they do not require any funding and thus do not require a change to future contracts.

An additional financial benefit is that retaining experienced staff saves employers money which would otherwise be spent on advertising, hiring and training new staff.

Contract funding is likely to encourage competition, which could be detrimental to cooperation between organizations (especially in smaller communities). In addition, the actions of government agencies intended to shift the responsibilities for social services to community-based non-profits have the potential to overload organizations which are successful in their bid for contracts (Hodge & Piccolo, 2005). This is a no-win situation for non-profit agencies, whose employees are at risk of becoming overworked by an influx of new work, and thus subject to increased mental health risks and burnout. Agencies' ability to share resources to support the mental health and wellness of staff is less likely to be encouraged when they are placed in competition for funding (Shier & Handy, 2015). In addition, the likelihood of funding being allocated to new programs which support workers' well-being is limited when the success of proposed contracts can be dependent on the popularity of specific issues, the political climate and other factors (Silverman & Patterson, 2011) rather than the direct needs of the field.

Thesis Overview and Organization

I have organized this thesis into five chapters. Chapter One introduced the research, including the rationale and theoretical basis; Chapter Two is the literature review and gives background on the history of social work, significance of empathy and emotional labour, and the definitions for terms used in the research. Chapter Three details the research methodologies and the development of the study; Chapter Four presents the findings of the qualitative interviews, highlighting themes which emerged through the analysis. Finally, Chapter Five encompasses the discussion section, reviewing the results and detailing implications for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature review

The term social work can be applied to a number of different positions and duties, ranging from long term, hands-on daily care (Pines & Kafry, 1978) to brief holistic assessments of a person's ability to function within society (Brieland, 1977). Social workers are defined by *The Social Work Dictionary* as "graduates of schools of social work...who use their knowledge and skills to provide social services for clients" (Barker, 2014, p. 405). Some of these skills are facilitating interactions between people, and helping individuals improve their problem solving and coping abilities.

Because social work can be so broadly defined, the literature review examines a variety of emotional labour and tasks in order to illustrate the breadth of work social workers can encounter in their profession. These tasks may not be performed by all registered/licensed social workers. I have included a brief history of social work in Canada to show the experiences of people who performed jobs now done by social workers before any such profession, title or registration was available. However, this does not mean that the field now is homogenous or bound to any sole professional definition. Danto (2008) noted that one of the hallmarks of social work is its inclusive nature as a field, holding within its ranks "a vast circuitry of volunteers, grassroots community organizers, para-professional therapists" among others. For clarity, after this point any occupation which fits under the description of 'social worker' as outlined in the previous sections will be referred to as 'social work', and the people who do it as 'workers'. When it is important to identify the specific scope of research referenced, more exact terms (i.e., 'group home worker' or 'front line worker') will be used to indicate specific worker roles.

Gender in Social Work

Though the definition of social worker for this study did not include gender, it must be acknowledged that this is a gendered field. Though women compose the majority of social workers, male social workers disproportionately occupy senior positions. This means while there are more women overall working in the field, the men who are present are likely to earn more and have more influence (Lane & Flowers, 2015). Women's careers tend to be "stable" with women staying in one position longer than men would; men's careers tend to include a greater variety of jobs, as well as faster advancement.

Gender is a factor which could influence how social work is practiced and experienced. Yet in social work "gender has what sociologists sometimes call a 'seen-but-unnoticed' quality" (Hicks, 2015, p.471). This means that gender is often overlooked as a factor in social work experiences, and that when it is acknowledged it is often in a limited way. An example of this is referring to social work as a female-dominated field, because female social workers outnumber men. The complex relationship between gender and job roles, advancement and influence means that in reality the presence of a female majority in the field does not necessarily translate to dominating the profession (Hicks, 2015). Because gender encompasses such a complex set of social and cultural roles which can influence social work practice, it can be difficult to effectively address in research unless it is the specific focus of the study. Social work as previously mentioned encompasses such a broad range of services, and there are numerous factors which could affect worker experiences and inequality (Dahlkild-Öhman & Eriksson, 2013) including race, age, education, and of course gender.

In this research I have endeavoured to discuss perspectives on gender in social work without over-emphasizing my own views on gender. I have addressed the subject of gender in

previous sections and positioned it relative to the other subjects of the research. Throughout the paper, gender is discussed where it is relevant to do so, and I encourage readers to keep the gendered nature of the field at the forefront of their minds throughout the work. Although gender may frequently be rendered invisible within social work-related literature, it is a very real, relevant and inextricable part of how the field and workers are treated.

Social Work

In her 2012 article on the history of social work, Karen Healy stated that it is difficult to know when social work began as a field because the role and responsibility of social workers has changed so much throughout the years since it began. At the point where individual people began to be referred to as social workers, Healy suggests (arguably) that the lack of any kind of professional certification or training meant these people could not be considered "social workers" despite their similar work.

Early efforts to standardize and professionalize social work in Canada had a somewhat similar view of social work. The 1926 establishment of the Association of Canadian Social Workers included an announcement stating that while social work had arisen out of an organic need to address inequality, the creation of the association marked the establishment of it as a "New Profession" (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 30). This meant social work would be "A profession with a technique all its own, demanding a [sic] rigorous training, and a code of ethics and standards to be lived up to" (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p.30). During this period, as social work grew as a profession, women dominated its ranks in numbers but not in influence: the managerial and administrative positions which held the power in the field routinely went to men (Struthers, 1983). Furthermore, these men were typically less experienced and less qualified than

the numerous women professionals they worked alongside. Perhaps unsurprisingly, women social workers were paid less than similarly qualified men, and subject to sexist expectations of their gender which privileged their 'feminine qualities' and 'maternal instincts' over their hard-won education and training (Struthers, 1983).

It should be noted that this early society did not initially require a social work degree or education as part of its membership criteria, asking instead that potential members have worked in the field and conform to its expectations of professional behaviour. However, within 4 years, in March 1930, membership requirements were amended to include (among other things) a minimum of 2 years social work education for both regular and associate members (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 32). As will be discussed in a later section on 'Professionalism in Social Work (p.28)', there has long been tension between definitions of the professional worker. Some definitions include only workers professionally educated in social work, and other definitions acknowledge workers whose experience and hands-on learning comprise their qualifications. In the promotion of this study, I was met with several emails citing this very problem for participation: social workers who had ample relevant experience but lacked the required degree to participate. The reasons for requiring participants to have a degree and the challenges it presented are discussed in the 'Limitations' section (p. 12).

Healy's (2012) view represents a perspective on social work which considers social work relatively new as a profession, gaining professional status only when it had fulfilled a "number of discrete and identifiable traits, such as foundation on a service mission, a specific and definable body of knowledge, and the regulation of entry by a self-governing body" (Leung, 2010, p. 476). This approach emphasizes scientific and empirical knowledge, and considers 'legitimate' social work to be characterized by specifically acquired skills rather than experience or knowledge.

This perspective is not new, as it is present in the 1930 guidelines for membership in the Association of Canadian Social Workers (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Other views which prioritize the emotional labour and experiential knowledge inherent in the practice of social work would be more likely to consider these early workers 'social workers'. This view was also present in the objections of some social workers in 1926 who wanted the criteria for professional membership and recognition in the Association to be open to anyone employed in the work of social welfare (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 31).

One benefit of the former definition of social work is that it does allow the beginnings of social work as a regulated profession to be roughly tracked as it arose from informal beginnings on the East Coast of Canada. In the early 1880s, concern for the social inequities resulting from the family and work restructuring due to the rise of industrial capitalism led to the creation of the Society for the Protection of Women and Children in Toronto in 1881. Ten years later the first Children's Aid Society was created (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Following this, similar developments took place in other provinces, though the locus of responsibility for these programs varied, sometimes falling on the municipality, the province, or religious groups.

These societies were heavily informed by the approach used by European colonizers, especially the English practice of performing informal charity and settlement work. This was accomplished by placing people with 'social capital' (resources of finance and knowledge) in charge of services for 'less fortunate' people out of morally driven intentions to improve the quality of life of the latter (Hugman, 2009). This early social work was sometimes politically controversial because many of the movements required a structural understanding of social issues as well as the goal of social change (Hugman, 2009; Jennissen & Lundy, 2008), elements central to modern social work practice. The industrial revolution created large urban centres

where large populations of socioeconomically challenged people gravitated to for work (Collier, 2006). In Canada the social work established to meet this need was quickly tested by the even greater needs driven by unemployment and poverty attendant to World War I and the resulting economic conditions (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Presently in Canada, contributions to what Collier (2006) calls the 'creation of need' (the socioeconomic and cultural factors affecting social wellness) have diversified and include many factors though urbanization may still be one of them. Similarly, post-modern and structural social work models have emerged (Weinberg, 2008) both of which acknowledge clients to be facing an intersection of social and institutional struggles unique to them. And rather than viewing social workers as keepers of the 'legitimate' knowledge on struggles clients face, in these models social workers are positioned as resources to be used by clients who hold the legitimate knowledge of their own experiences (George, Coleman, & Barnoff, 2007; Leung, 2010).

Gender in Social Work

As recently as 2015 and as early as the 1920s (Struthers, 1983), researchers have noted that while the majority of social workers are women, men disproportionately occupy more senior roles (Hicks, 2015). This inequality means that despite the smaller number of men in social work, men have access to greater institutional power, a factor which could influence what concerns are given weight and how changes are made in the field. In addition, men in positions of power in social work have been known to doubt the skills of the professional women social workers and focused instead on gendered stereotypes in what they believed women brought to the work (Struthers, 1983).

In addition, in numerous fields comprised mainly of women (including social work), there are still gendered pay gaps and slower advancement of women compared to men (Hicks, 2015). Lane and Flowers found in their 2015 study that since the 1960s there has been a consistent gap between the pay of men and women in social work. This is strongly linked to the tendency for men to advance faster and hold more senior positions as compared to women. Therefore, working in a field which has a majority of women workers is not a guarantee or even a predictor of gender equity.

The problem of emotional coping and the various ways workers could be supported in social work do not appear to have any explicit links to gender. However, it is likely that access to managerial and administrative positions, greater control over changes in the workplace or field, and compensation fairness are all factors which could affect coping and support. Gender interacts with these factors because of the tendency for male gendered people to have more senior positions, more influence, and more pay (Lane & Flowers, 2015). As illustrated in later sections, the perspectives of management/administration, perception of personal control over work outcomes, and compensation amounts (which facilitate the ability to take time off work), all influence workers' experiences of emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Women and Caring Professions. Although the experiences of women within the same profession are not equivalent, a 2014 study on gender in the workplace (Bryson, Wilson, Plimmer, Blumenfeld, Donnelly, Ku & Ryan, 2014) found that it can be assumed that the general experiences of women within a specific profession differ from the general experiences of men in that profession in similar and specific ways. For this reason, it can be useful to make limited generalizations on that basis. One reason for this is that the stereotypical expectations put on women solely because of their gender are likely to be the same for different women in the field.

For women in social work, the most relevant of these expectations are that women are inherently caring and nurturing and thus suited to care work (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010). This means that when women perform care work it is often expected because of their gender, and can even become 'invisible' work as it is noticed, congratulated and rewarded less than the same kind of behaviour in men.

Upper class women who comprised much of the early 'charity workers' in social work (Collier, 2006; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011) may have exploited this stereotype to allow them access to work in the public sphere and more freedom than they otherwise would have had. Early charity organizations like the Women's Temperance Union often relied heavily on the idea that women were naturally caregivers and thus had superior morals to men (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). This kind of stereotyping may also influence perspectives on emotional labour by suggesting that women are naturally inclined to emotional labour and would perform that type of labour regardless of compensation (providing an incentive to not compensate that kind of labour). Conversely, this stereotype could also influence perspectives by suggesting it is women workers who are to blame for emotional exhaustion and burnout. The socially accepted views that women are inherently emotional and caring (Brown et al., 2015; Kosny & MacEachen, 2010; Sloan, 2012) could be used to suggest that women bring emotional labour to the field regardless of whether it is asked of them.

Men in social work. One factor affecting the levels of men in social work may be that the field represents a relatively low salary for a man compared to the pay he might make elsewhere. Social work is also a job associated with traditionally 'feminine' qualities such as nurturing; some researchers have suggested that men who choose it as a profession may be seen as emasculated or have their heterosexuality called into question (Crabtree & Parker, 2014). This

may make it more difficult for men to choose social work as an option, and men who do go into

it may suffer social backlash for choosing work traditionally associated with women.

These factors may have contributed to research findings that men tend not to choose

social work as an occupation, and instead may 'drift' into it as an option when more traditional

or profitable avenues have not proved viable (Crabtree & Parker, 2014). However, the fact that

the stereotypes about men (such as independent, decisive and capable) are associated with

leadership and managerial styles (Bryson et al., 2014) means that men who enter the field as a

second choice are more likely to advance and hold top positions than women who enter the field

as a first choice.

There is not enough existing research to explore the implications of non-binary genders

in social work; however, as demonstrated above, people of male and female binary gender

identities are likely to have distinctly different experiences of social work, each with their own

challenges.

Emotional Labour in Social Work

What is common to the various positions and duties of social work is an expectation of

emotional labour, as workers help to improve mental, emotional and social aspects of their

clients' lives (Henderson & Forbat, 2002). Emotional labour is defined by Kosny and

MacEachen (2010) as the "management of client emotions and workers' own emotions in the

process of working with clients and delivering care under conditions of scarcity and contraction"

(p. 359). Another word used to describe this type of work is 'caring', a word Baines, Evans and

Neysmith (1992) stated was more broadly "used to capture the mental, emotional, and physical

effort that is involved in looking after, responding to, and supporting others" (p. 22). The authors

state, however, that the word's own informal feeling, evocative of home and family, can obscure

the very real work, costs and organizational efforts involved. In order to avoid evoking this type

of informal feeling that I feel implies this type of work is 'effortless' or 'natural', an especially

gendered idea (Baines et al., 1992), I specifically chose to use the word 'emotional labour' in this

research. My intention is to both underline its relationship to the workplace in the mind of the

reader, and to help to separate it from broader definitions such as 'caring' which include the

mental and physical efforts which are excluded from the scope of this study.

Effects of emotional labour on social workers. This can extend to a variety of tasks

ranging from dealing with clients' distress over personal issues, to managing job commitments

when they run over the working hours. All of these emotional labours can be considered an

implicit part of a social worker's job though they are unseen and uncompensated (Gregor, 2010).

Because it cannot be measured and quantified, it is unclear exactly what toll emotional labour

takes on the lives of social workers both inside and outside their work hours. Fair compensation

for emotional labour as part of social service work remains relatively unstudied, as most of the

research focuses on establishing the existence of the emotional labour rather than how to decide

how much it is worth in monetary terms.

Workers engaged in emotionally taxing work in social services indicate they "genuinely

cared for clients and their wellbeing" (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010, p. 368) and accordingly

offered caring, compassionate service. However, the same study found that jobs which included

emotional labour could be exhausting on occasions where workers felt compelled to stay after

hours and work for free because there was no way to ask a client to delay their crisis until the

worker's next available work shift. While unpaid overtime and crises requiring immediate

attention may not always overlap, participants in Kosny and MacEachen's 2010 study appear to

have found these two elements together to be particularly compelling. This emotional labour also

is not confined to the physical circumstance of supporting a client in need; in practice, the

ongoing concern and management of clients under a worker's care could create hours of work

which are 'invisible' because they take place as intrusive thoughts (Fraser, 2016) during time off,

or simply because they incorporate many informal aspects of work which go generally

unappreciated (Baines et al, 1992).

In addition to the time and emotional exhaustion which could potentially result from

emotional labour, workers' emotional investment in their clients' well-being could cause them

distress when they witness decisions within their workplace and the broader social services

context "about the quality of life of others that reflect the interpretation of social care as a

commodity" (Gorman, 2000, p. 152).

Administrative/managerial influence. The position of workers in relation to emotional

labour is complex. Emotional labour is an integral part of social work and even expected on an

individual level (Henderson & Forbat, 2002). However, the "managerial and administrative

control of care services" (Gorman, 2000, p. 149) is not always staffed from the social work

sector, and may have different expectations of workers. According to Gorman's 2000 article on

emotional labour and care management, management "[remains] the point at which welfare

objectives and resource constraints are closest together" (p.150). This means that much of the

internal interpretation of what should constitute 'paid care' is influenced by the budget of the

agency and the social and political environment in which it is operating. Managers and political

officials not directly connected to front-line work are more likely to see social workers as a finite

resource to be carefully allocated to the maximum amount of clients (Gorman, 2000). Similarly,

administrative or funding control which pushes maximization of resource is likely to devalue

emotional labour even if individual management levels are aware of its value.

Because of the opposing tensions of objectives of care and the scarcity of care resources, pressure could be created between front-line views of the work and outside influences on it. Workers' personal ideological investment in increasing clients' quality of life (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010) may come into conflict with often politically charged views of their field which see care as a product which should be maximized for the sake of budgets. In vulnerable workers this could affect the workers' self-conception as a positive influence on their clients' lives, and could contribute to mental health problems (Ashman & Gibson, 2011).

Employees in senior or management positions are also subject to pressure to maximize the success of their agency from a political and monetary perspective. It is likely the value placed on tangible work (rather than intangible emotional labour) is emphasized to a greater degree in upper management. This could decrease those individuals' appreciation and support for the emotional labour which forms a greater proportion of front-line workers' duties.

Empathy and Social Work

Empathy is a concept which is consistently used in reference to caring work and has accordingly acquired a wide range of definitions, with some disagreement over the "relative primacy of the emotional/affective elements of empathy and the expressed/cognitive elements" (Gerdes & Segal, 2011a, p.141).

One formal definition of empathy (Gerdes & Segal, 2011b) is the extent to which one person identifies with the emotions of another person. The idea one person can experience sadness in response to another person's sadness is an example of this type of empathy, and focuses on the 'emotional/affective' elements. Some social workers may disagree with this type of empathy as it can engage the workers' emotions in a way which may not be beneficial to their

ability to effectively practice. The fact that this 'emotional/affective' aspect is the part most often referenced in descriptions of empathy associated with burnout in the articles I reviewed for this research suggests there may be some truth to this. The 'expressed/cognitive' aspect of empathy focuses on perspective-taking and an ability to separate one's feelings from the feelings of others (Funk, Fox, Chan, & Curtiss, 2008; Gerdes & Segal, 2011a). However, it is generally accepted at present by most social work educators that some form of empathy is necessary for good social work practice (Gerdes & Segal, 2011a). Most definitions of empathy include both the 'emotional/affective' and 'expressed/cognitive' elements.

According to the findings of Murphy, Duggan and Joseph (2013), most social workers believe that "therapeutic relationship conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and genuineness" (p. 704) are essential to quality social work practice. In addition, empathy could play a vital role in improving outcomes for clients and allowing social workers to be more effective in their work overall (Gerdes & Segal, 2011a). However, it is unclear whether these outcomes outweigh the potential dangers for workers when highly empathetic workers are more at risk for burnout and emotional exhaustion.

Research suggests that people who are highly empathetic in the emotional/affective sense would connect well with clients. However, these workers would also be more vulnerable to emotional burnout and likelier to leave social work as a result of burnout (Barford & Whelton, 2010). Attempts to regulate or minimize empathetic responses may not be effective in this, however. Two findings suggest that attempts by regulatory bodies or management to minimize empathetic responses would not an effective long term solution.

Firstly, workers continue to view emotional labour as vital to their role (Henderson & Forbat, 2002; Kosny & MacEachen, 2010; Pottage & Huxley, 1996), which could create conflict

for them when faced with policies which encourage workers to limit their emotional labour. Secondly, burnout and emotional exhaustion and resulting turnover continue to be a cause of concern in social work (Kim, Ji, & Kao, 2011). This suggests that despite research findings and cautions that empathetic workers are at a higher risk of burnout, a large number of workers are likely continuing to engage in emotional labour which may contribute to these outcomes. Or, alternatively, this might show that empathy and emotional labour are not the most significant factors in burnout.

Professionalism in Social Work

Social workers have had their professionalism questioned since the inception of the field, due in part to their commitment to social justice as an ideology (Hugman, 2009) and the legacy of informal, experiential skills which dominated the early profession in lieu of 'professional' qualifications and university education (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Specifically, social work has been subject to changes in recent years where the relationship-building (historically considered essential by workers) is sidelined in favor of paperwork, improved capacity and financial considerations (Gorman, 2000) by political and administrative sectors. The development of social work as a profession is relatively recent (Austin, 1997; Collier, 2006; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Leung, 2010) and has in Canada since the mid-1950s become tied to the development of institutional accreditation such as university degrees and membership in professional organizations (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Before this, social work had been comprised of all types of workers who had acquired their skills from a variety of areas. The primary source of skills was work experience rather than professional

education, and this grassroots form was mainly driven by the front-line needs of its client base (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Over the years, shifts have taken place around social work as a profession to place increased emphasis on knowledge controlled by institutions and governing bodies, which is transmitted through education (Fook, 2000; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011) as opposed to acquired only through experience. However, social work retains an experiential focus within its education with the inclusion of practicum and skills-based classes. This combination of priorities is also influenced by the emotional connection, prioritization of experiential knowledge and respect for clients' individual needs which have been established in previous sections as characteristic of social workers' own view of their work (Gerdes & Segal, 2011b).

The references in this research to 'professionalism' refer to the prioritization of institutional knowledge over the other important aspects of both education and practice of social work. This viewpoint, which characterizes formal scientific knowledge, empiricism and detached reason as superior aspects of social work (Leung, 2010), can lead to pressures on the field to value only certain parts of social work knowledge and abilities.

There can be pressure in social service work to behave in an objective, detached and 'professional' manner (Leung, 2010). Due to this, social workers may look for "reliable and legitimate procedures and guidance" (Gorman, 2000, p.11) to be sure their behaviour is meeting the expected standard. However, Munro (2011) stated when procedures are present, no matter how thorough, they cannot effectively predict and inform the range of subjective decisions social workers will face. However, when decisions are left to workers' individual judgement rather than an employer's guidelines, any repercussions for those decisions can more easily fall on the worker than the employer. Munro (2011) states that since it is impossible to cover with

guidelines all of the decisions workers must face, it must be acknowledged that workers on a regular basis make 'grey area' decisions which likely are a source of emotional labour.

This subjective analysis of professional guidelines is also influenced by the emotional labour which is considered an integral part of the job (Gerdes & Segal, 2011b) but by nature does not adhere to standardized rules. Workers, for example, have been cautioned to avoid blurring the lines of the professional relationship (Dybicz, 2012), which can be difficult when faced, for example, with a small community where there is likely to be significant overlap between a worker's client base and other relationships (Collier, 2006).

As mentioned, professionalism in modern social work often relies on guidelines dictating how social workers should conduct themselves in their work environment. This comes from the idea of professionalism as individuals dispensing knowledge, and controlling this specialized knowledge from a position of superiority to the client (Randall, & Kindiak, 2008). Under this model expressions of emotion or vulnerability to the client could potentially be viewed as undermining this superior role of the 'professional'. Some workplaces may ask that workers conceal their genuine emotions for other reasons (such as keeping focus on clients' emotions).

While this model comes from professionalization as it is understood in many fields including healthcare, it has been met with resistance within social work. This may be due to competing views within social work, including structuralism, which place the social worker in an equal rather than superior position to the client (George, Coleman, & Barnoff, 2007). The latter views have elicited concerns from some in the field that the professionalism of social work is on a 'decline' (Randall & Kindiak, 2008) because of guidelines which allow more informal behaviour. Because of the disconnect between the idea of professionalism and the ideologies of

their work often held by social workers (Hugman, 2009) workers are unlikely to have a universal experience of acceptable emotional expression on the job, emotional labour, and professionalism.

'Professional' guidelines which dictate the appropriate application of empirical theories and acceptable language for paperwork may gain some traction in social work. However, guidelines which expect social workers to manage their emotions so that their 'genuine feelings' (Gorman, 2000) remain hidden at work are unlikely to be applied universally. This is partly due to the numerous ideological views of social work which include more expressive behaviour that might be considered 'unprofessional' elsewhere.

This means that the experiences of workers likely vary in the field, though workers faced with environments that do not support their emotional expression will be under more pressure to develop their own coping methods. Additionally, even in an environment supportive of expression, Kosny and MacEachen (2010) found social workers sometimes perceived their exhibitions of genuine emotion to be detrimental to the client and to their own ability to effectively function as a social worker, such as when a social worker being shouted at by a client became angry and shouted back (p. 371). Though Kosny and MacEachen (2010) found that these outbursts did sometimes have negative effects on clients and other workers (p.371), there is no evidence that every outburst had a negative effect, or that the negative effects were severe enough to warrant the individual doubting their abilities as a social worker. This feeling of failure as a social worker after an emotional outburst could also contribute to pressures workers impose on themselves, or feel are imposed on them, to maintain a certain professional exterior.

Risk of Burnout in Social Work

Burnout can be defined as a state in which an individual is not only emotionally

exhausted, but also loses their sense of self and any sense of accomplishment which they would

otherwise derive from their work or activities (Barford & Whelton, 2010). Burnout has been

identified as a major concern in the human services industry as it has been linked to numerous

physical and psychological symptoms, as well as high rates of absenteeism and turnover. This

makes burnout a significant concern for social work, as any time put into education and training

is of no use if workers end up leaving the field.

A secondary factor which may contribute to burnout for social service work is gender: the

majority of social workers are female. In a 2005 study by Rupert and Morgan which measured

subjective reports of emotional exhaustion, women reported significantly higher levels of

emotional exhaustion than men did. This was especially true in situations where the individual

had little control over outcomes (though it is also possible that social expectations of men such as

equating emotion with weakness, could lead men to underreport experiences of emotional

exhaustion). In social service work it is common to encounter circumstances where the worker

has limited control, due to a variety of factors including the professional expectations placed on

the worker (Ingram, 2013).

Coping Methods

Coping methods are any method a person uses to deal with a stressful event (Aronson,

Wilson, Akert & Fehr, 2010). Though most people would be familiar with a few common coping

methods (e.g., seeking social support) the process of developing coping methods is highly

individual and the style any one person uses can be affected by factors like occupation and

gender (Aronson et al., 2010). The process of coping can be defined as "managing in difficult circumstances which includes developing strategies to deal with both internal and external stress" (Matsumoto, 2009, p. 134). This process also includes evaluating the stressful events in one's life and ranking them in importance to deal with the most stressful and pressing first and maximize the effort expended on coping.

Coping methods are influenced by a number of factors including personality, the nature of the stressful events, and the resources the person has at their disposal (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). This means that each individual has their own style of coping and it is unlikely that a convenient "one size fits all" method will ever be discovered. However, similarities in the personality and ideology of people who become social workers (Gorman, 2000), as well as the similar nature of the stressful events they face suggests coping strategies shared between peers would be likelier to be effective than methods found effective in other ways.

Influences on Coping Methods

Personality. Individual differences in personality can have an effect on how a person interprets stressful events (Aronson, Wilson, Akert & Fehr, 2010). Optimistic people, for example, react better to stress and are typically healthier than pessimistic people (Carver & Scheier, 1981). Research findings of social workers suggest that many hold an optimistic perspective on social conditions, believing the conditions of those who require their help can and will be improved (Levinson, 2005). This correlates with the optimistic personality where people tend to expect positive rather than negative outcomes (Matsumoto, 2009).

For these reasons, personality could play a role in the coping methods which work for a social worker. In spite of the small sample size necessitated by qualitative research, all of the

participants shared traits in their interviews that they believe have contributed to their success and it is important to acknowledge personality as a possible influence on coping success. These findings suggest possible strategies and perspectives that beginning, or even experienced workers could consider adding to their coping methods.

Of the personality traits which can influence coping methods, hardiness and resilience are the most likely to result in positive outcomes for social workers (Kapoulitsas & Corcoran, 2015). Hardiness is defined as a "combination of self-esteem and a sense of control that helps people interpret and deal with stressful events in a positive, effective manner" (Aronson et al., 2010, p. 458). Hardiness could be learned by watching others, and used as a coping method itself or contribute to the ability of a person to use other identified coping methods on an ongoing basis (Aronson et al., 2010). If hardiness is acquired by a particular method such as modelling (observing others who make effective use of a desirable trait or practice) than that method could be considered the coping method.

Resilience is defined as the ability to rebound from stressful events and adapt to the demands of ongoing stress (Aronson et al., 2010). People with high resilience scores still experience negative emotions in response to stressful events, but they also experience more positive emotions which can protect against long term mental health issues such as depression (Aronson et al., 2010). Again, resilience can be its own form of coping, or the method by which it is acquired (e.g., modelling) could be considered the coping method itself (Matsumoto, 2009).

Nature of stressful events. Stressful events can become more difficult to cope with when the person responding has or perceives that they have limited control over the event (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). This can be especially difficult for social workers, who work within a system

where the outcomes for clients are not always within their control (Gorman, 2000). While social

workers do have influence, client outcomes are also subject to the greater social and economic

context as well as the client's own actions. However, some social workers choose to work long

hours (Fraser, 2016; Gorman, 2000), perhaps because they believe extra hours or effort might be

able to improve client outcomes.

Personal Resources. The financial, emotional or physical resources an individual has at

their disposal, all potentially affect their ability to cope (Brandell, 1997). A worker who is

feeling emotionally exhausted and who can afford to take time off and spend time on self-care is

actively using financial resources to facilitate coping. A worker with a strong social support

network can emotionally unburden themselves to a friend or family member on a regular basis or

rely on shared physical burdens around the home. While these resources are for the most part

dependant on a person's greater socioeconomic context, they play a significant role in coping

abilities (Brandell, 1997).

Traditional Coping Methods

In social work, a field which experiences widespread emotional stress and burnout, there

are many methods nominated to help workers cope, from relaxation training to therapy (Alford,

Malouff & Osland, 2005). Not all of these methods limit themselves to the workplace alone; a

1995 study (Wharton & Erickson) found an interaction between emotional states at home and at

work, which suggested that effective coping strategies had to consider both. Many of the

methods do not involve direct time or energy expended on the part of the employer, worker or

other parties (e.g., funding for programs); Pugliesi (1999) stated the simple expedient of not

asking workers to conceal their genuine feelings could reduce emotional stress.

A 2005 study by Alford, Malouff and Osland found workers react positively to stress reduction interventions, but recent meta-analyses had not found any definitive type of stress reduction activity 'most effective'. Meta-analyses examined also did not consider the costs of the method and whether employees considered the method appropriate.

One method commonly considered to be effective in reducing emotional stress is emotional disclosure, whether in-person or via private journaling. Problem-focused emotional coping has been found to be useful in dealing with occupational stress in social workers (Gellis, 2002). This may not transfer effectively to emotional stress because emotional stress could include an awareness of circumstances outside the worker's influence. Emotional stress relating to feelings of powerlessness may need to be dealt with on an institutional rather than individual level.

Echoing the tactile nature of written emotional disclosure, drawing one holistic sketch of the issues facing one is also a method offered to help workers cope and self-regulate stress (Huss, 2012). Similar to disclosure, this requires workers to focus on something outside of themselves. Other coping methods encouraged in workers are physical exercise, social support, and religion (Ting, Jacobsen & Sanders, 2008); these methods are less specifically marketed as 'emotional coping methods'. I will refer to practices used by emotionally well-adjusted people to cope which are not identified with formal coping programs as 'informal' coping.

Formal vs. Informal Coping Methods

Coping methods refer to the many different ways people handle stressful events (Aronson et al., 2010) from therapy with licensed professionals to social activities with friends and family. 'Formal' coping methods are defined for the purposes of this research as any program certified

by a recognized institution (e.g., the American Psychological Association) and taught by a person with professional credentials such as a degree in social work, psychology, or psychiatry. Formal coping methods must be identified as a mental health resource by the program creator and intentionally taught and practiced.

 'Informal' coping methods are defined as practices known to be beneficial to mental health which are not formally taught and used as such: for example, debriefing (which is a meeting to discuss an important event or experience). Debriefing may be done for educational or informational purposes (Matsumoto, 2009) but can also alleviate emotional distress. Though it can be taught as a formal coping method, debriefing is also done informally, for example by chatting with peers. In chatting, coping might be incidental to a goal such as co-worker input on a work issue. Though debriefing may be supported or facilitated by the employer, the employer is not always doing so specifically to help employees cope.

Informal methods are specifically defined for the purposes of this research as methods which do not require (but may benefit from) support from employers or outside resources. People typically engage in informal coping methods for reasons other than explicitly to cope with stress, such as regularly spending time with family members.

This research examines the experiences of seasoned social workers coping with emotional stress, with a particular interest in informal methods. This is because coping methods that are formally identified and professionally taught are already known to be of use and if these methods are not accessible to social workers it is likely because time, money or some other factor presents a barrier to their use. The purpose of this research is not to find more time or money for social workers, though that would likely enable many formal coping methods to be more widely adopted. The purpose of this research is to examine the experiences of seasoned

social workers for trends within their behaviour which may be helping them to cope or protecting them from additional emotional stress. Although formal coping methods may be among these behaviours, if a formal coping program were the single uniting factor in social worker success, it would likely already be known.

Informal Coping Methods

Though innumerable activities could be considered informal coping methods to different people, it is impossible to list them all. However, there are two broadly defined informal coping methods: self-care and social support. Both self-care and social support can be interpreted in different ways depending on individual needs, but numerous studies have found that these two methods are effective for most people coping with emotional labour or stress (Alexander, 2000; Aronson et al., 2010; Godfrey, Harrison, Lysaght, Lamb, Graham & Oakley, 2011; Rogers, 1990).

Self-care. Though it seems basic, self-care can be unusually daunting for social workers as they typically think of others' needs before their own (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010). Self-care has been defined many ways, but most definitions include an aspect of physical care for your own body such as sufficient sleep or taking time off when overburdened. Actions which fall under self-care are highly individual; anything workers do in "promoting their own health, preventing their own disease, limiting their own illness, and restoring their own health" (Godfrey et al., 2011, p. 8). Though these activities are usually undertaken in pursuit of overall personal wellness, they can also help create an emotional state conducive to better coping.

Some authors identify this care in a very literal physical way; Rogers (1990) advises carers to exercise regularly and eat a healthy diet containing whole grains, fresh vegetables and

fish. However, many authors present methods as universally applicable, which is problematic. While exercise comes with undeniable health benefits, unilaterally promoting exercise could be detrimental to people who use other self-care methods. Self-care is highly personal, but it is acknowledged within the realm of mental health services as both a protective factor and a method of coping with mentally, physically and emotionally taxing jobs (Godfrey et al., 2011).

Though self-care activities can for the most part take place on a worker's own time, the tendency of social workers to perform overtime (Fraser, 2016; Levinson, 2005) means they might have difficulty finding time for self-care. If the employer offered explicit approval for this use of their time (ensuring workers knew self-care would not be perceived as detracting from their duties) this might increase the likelihood of workers engaging in self-care. Self-care is an example of an informal coping method which could be more effective with employer support, for example: time off, extra breaks in workdays, or activities designed to foster a culture of self-care.

Social support in the workplace. Though social support can be considered part of self-care, I have chosen to include it as a distinct informal coping method because regardless of individual methods, use of some form of social support will almost certainly improve mental health (Aronson et al., 2010). Alexander (2000) found cultural differences and social preferences affect the form and amount of social support which is individually effective. Regardless of the form, social support contributes to feelings of belonging, empathy and meaning. For social workers, social support is likely to boost positive feelings overall while potentially increasing their job commitment and motivation (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010).

Social support is used informally to enhance enjoyment of life and create connections with other people (Alexander, 2000). Therefore, intentionally incorporating it into the workplace would likely create a more collaborative and cooperative environment. Social support can also be

an informal coping method used outside of work; however, to make use of it to improve

workplace relations requires relatively minimal contribution of time or money from employers.

Common activities such as paperwork done in pairs or small groups rather than

individually could encourage sharing expertise and building social bonds, and potentially help

workers by providing built in support when they face problems. In this way, activities undertaken

because they benefit the workplace can also support emotional coping.

Overlap of Formal and Informal Methods

Informal coping methods have been defined for this research as activities or behaviours

beneficial to coping though not taught as such, which do not require support from employers

though this can be beneficial. However, this does not mean that informal coping methods are

never incorporated into professional coping programs. Informal methods can be easily

discovered and unintentionally employed without professional programs, through modelled

learning and dispositional tendencies (Frydenberg, 2004). Informal sources may also be

something formal programs intentionally draw on. A few examples of informal coping methods

which may be taught in formal coping programs are provided below.

Detachment and acceptance. The issues that social workers face are not short-term

problems that will be 'solved': their ideologies and motivation are likely to be tested every day

by circumstances that are to some extent beyond their control (Ingram, 2013). Therefore,

detaching from the emotional stress of facing unsolvable issues can help create an objective

perspective and reduce emotional investment (Lynn, O'Donohue & Lilienfield, 2015).

Detachment is seen as the emotional equivalent of 'dropping the rope' in a game of tug-of-war;

the person dropping the rope neither wins nor loses, but gains space and perspective. Acceptance

helps to hold on to the detached behaviour, by recognizing the unchangeable nature of the situation from a safe emotional distance. It is important to note, detachment is not a lack or suppression of emotions, but acknowledgement of emotions from a calculated distance.

      Validating emotions and genuine expression. As mentioned previously, workers may feel they sometimes have to suppress their emotions in order to serve their clients' emotional needs. Though it may seem like a small thing, suppressing emotions can potentially lead to creating a work persona and feeling disconnected from one's genuine self (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010). This could affect relationships with clients, who may be able to tell that the worker is not being genuine (Collier, 2006) without knowing the reasons for it.

      Locus of control and intrinsic motivation. As discussed in previous sections, social workers often encounter situations at work that are beyond their control. Feeling that situations are out of one's control (also known as external locus of control) can be demoralizing and cause a person to lose interest in their job (Ng, Ke & Raymond, 2014). Locus of control can extend to different areas of life, meaning that if an individual feels powerless at work they may feel that way at home or in recreation activities as well. Conversely, internal locus of control makes a person "[M]ore assertive, confident and active in seeking out information that will benefit them in pursuit of their objectives and achievements. They tend to view work related challenges as opportunities to learn or advance" (Haybatollahi & Gyekye, 2014, p. 812).

      People who feel they have control experience less workplace stress and have better mental health than people who perceive outcomes to be out of their control (Ntoumanis, Edmunds & Duda, 2009). These positive benefits occur even if the person does not actually have control- as long as they believe that their actions make a difference, they will benefit.

Time Concerns Facing Social Workers

In social service work, as discussed in previous sections, agencies and providers are often caught between the care they strive to provide and limitations on the funding which would make it possible (Gorman, 2000). A 2013 study by MacIntyre and Paul found lack of time was a major concern for social workers right from their start in the field.

Time is also a factor in balancing work and life commitments, and social workers face the challenge of both work and family life requiring emotional effort (Kalliath, Hughes & Newcombe, 2012). Time conflict can occur when either work or family take away from the time needed for the other. Many social workers devote additional time to work outside their regularly scheduled hours (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010). This means that for some workers, their work-life balance may be already skewed towards work, and work hours that are emotionally taxing work this could additionally detract from their ability to cope with the emotional demands of home (Gorman, 2000). Any coping methods which require workers to devote time outside of regular work hours are thus unlikely to appeal to social workers, for a variety of reasons.

Evaluating Successful Coping

The success of coping methods can be measured by the presence of positive emotions such as happiness or pride, as successfully overcoming stressful events typically gives a sense of accomplishment (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). This could be an especially positive perception for social workers and other professionals who routinely face stressful events (Gorman, 2000) and would benefit from 'balancing things out' with positive emotions following resolutions.

Successful coping can also be measured by the resolution of the stressful event; even if the resolution is not necessarily positive, there is a sense of relief from the event being over

(Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Spiritual or emotional growth or the acquisition of new skills, are also signs of successful coping. Finally, coping can be measured by lower distress and lower rates of burnout (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000) and increased feelings of control and self-efficacy (Aronson et al., 2010).

Summary

In order to look for effective informal coping methods for social workers, it is necessary to examine the experiences of successful social workers. In a field where emotional stress and burnout are common, the workers who maintain their emotional health while staying in the field represent coping success. Through examination of people who have developed successful informal methods of coping, it may be possible to identify methods which could be adopted by others without significant time or money expended. This study aimed to draw out those methods without separating them from the individual voices who contributed them, and to create a thesis which presents their contributions in a way that respects and honors their experience.

Chapter Three: Research Design and Methodology

This chapter reviews the research design used in the study, including the reasons why a qualitative approach was chosen, the recruitment process, methodological tools, and concerns of validity.

Qualitative Research Approach

Many existing studies have examined coping methods using both quantitative (Alford, Malouff & Osland, 2005; Font, 2012; Pakenham, Chiu, Burnsall, & Cannon, 2007; Sidle, 2008) and qualitative methods (Kosny & MacEachen, 2010; Lynn, O'Donahue & Lilienfield (Eds.), 2015; Rogers, 1990; Schroeder & Frana, 2009; Singer & Powers (Eds.), 1993). These studies provided excellent support and background in the development of this study, by documenting multiple effective approaches to coping and establishing the lack of a sole method or combination of methods for universally effective coping.

In response to this, this study was designed with the assumption that the methods or combinations of methods used by successful social workers (as defined by the research criteria) must be highly individual. If these individual approaches were examined with a quantitative research design, actions which contribute to participants' success might be lost due to the inability of the researcher to anticipate their existence and measure them. Additionally, thoughts and significance attached by workers to the methods they practice would be lost. I chose to use qualitative methods in order to privilege the detail and complexity of a small number of lived experiences over quantifiable statistical data trends.

Qualitative research is based on a holistic perspective of the lived experience. This suggests that elements of the lived experience (such as those that comprise quantitative data responses) cannot be interpreted without the greater context. Isolating elements of the individual

experience strips the resulting data of the ways in which the understanding and experience of the individuals constructed those elements to begin with. While quantitative data can show trends and similarities in peoples' experiences, qualitative research shows the "subjective understanding" (Seidman, 2006, p.11) of individuals - what each person makes of their experience. The qualitative interview format was thus chosen for this research to minimize the presence of the researcher and facilitate the individual reflections, significance and actions of participants taking precedence in the research.

Restrictions on Participant Demographic

For the purpose of this study, social workers were defined as individuals with at least a Bachelor's Degree in Social Work (BSW), who have worked as a social worker (after obtaining their BSW) for a period of five years or more. Experience in the field before and after obtaining a BSW was of particular interest, as it could potentially provide insight into whether a BSW contributed significantly to coping methods later used by these workers.

In addition to the above definition of 'social worker', participants in the study also had to self-select themselves on the basis of agreeing with the following statements: "During my time as a social worker, I have learned or developed my own methods of coping with the emotional demands of the work. I feel that I have found a way to be successful as a social worker without compromising my emotional health. I enjoy my job and am proficient at it, and intend to continue as a social worker for the foreseeable future."

Development of demographic statements of agreement. I developed these statements based on the research objectives (to examine the individual informal coping methods used by professional social workers who have successfully functioned for five or more years in their field

-see Research Question and Objectives, p.12). The statements were intended to ensure that participants completely understood the group the study would examine (see above) and identified as being a member of that group. The use of multiple statements was to ensure that the concepts described (e.g., success as a social worker) were as clear as possible by stating them in different ways. The first statement was intended to ensure that prospective participants were aware enough of their own methods of coping with emotional demands as a social worker that they could articulate them in the interviews. Additionally, this statement clearly showed that the methods the research aimed to examine were not part of any particular approach. The second statement clarified that participants must identify as successful as well as emotionally healthy. I included this because some people might feel they coped well with particular issues or problems but (for a variety of reasons) not identify as emotionally healthy overall. The study was designed to examine the experiences of people who successfully coped with emotional demands overall rather than in particular conditions. It was my hope that the second statement disambiguated any assumption about 'coping methods' referring to any particular area rather than the general emotional coping the study intended to examine.

Finally, the third statement was included to ensure that prospective participants did not intend to leave the field. This had two purposes: firstly, it provided another measure of successful coping as the presence of positive emotions (happiness or pride) as well as a sense of accomplishment in their job, are a measure of successful emotional coping (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2000). Secondly, including only people who intended to stay as social workers ensured that the coping methods these people used were sustainable, and compatible with continued social work. Coping methods used by any person intending to leave social work would

be less useful for suggesting research on coping methods for use by practicing social workers.

Overall, these statements served both to ensure prospective participants fully understood what

group the study was examining and could place themselves as either a member of the group or

recognize that they did not meet the criteria for participation.

Recruitment

At the start of this research it was my goal to recruit between five and eight (5-8)

individuals who met the study criteria to participate in the interviews. The number of participants

was deliberately kept small to allow me to fully explore the content of the qualitative interviews

for this thesis. The qualitative interview was chosen for the purpose of examining both the lived

experience of the subject, and the significance they attach to their experiences (Seidman, 2006).

Because the results of the study are intended to illuminate unique individual experiences, rather

than draw conclusions about a population, it was not necessary to have a large number of

participants. A smaller number of participants were most appropriate to the study method since it

allowed each interview to be given the respect and attention it deserved.

Participants were recruited by posters placed on the University of Northern British

Columbia (UNBC) campus as well as in social service agencies in downtown Prince George.

Posters were also emailed to a variety of social service providers within British Columbia (as

well as professional associations such as the BC Association of Social Workers) and posted in

online forums such as the Facebook page for the BC Association of Social Workers. The poster

content was the same across these different methods of contact (See Appendix C), with

appropriate salutations added for emails. Content was paraphrased if necessary (e.g., the original

content exceeding the character allowance of a Facebook post) but details were unchanged.

For the electronic promotion of the study, at each point of contact a snowball sampling method was used, where the agency or organization was asked to pass the information for the study on to their workers. In the case of posters, each agency or business was asked if extra posters could be left which their members could post in areas of that agency or other agencies they knew of which employed people who might be eligible for the study. Those who qualified according to the information above then had the option of contacting me, at which point I would brief them on the study and read the statement of criteria on the phone or send the statement by email. If the individual self-identified as fulfilling the study criteria, I then worked with prospective participants to arrange a time for the interview. Before ending the call or email, I apprised potential participants of what to expect at the meeting time. I checked to ensure they understood that they would have opportunities at the meeting to again review the study information (and complete a consent form indicating they had done so). Finally, I gave a rundown of how the time would be spent; that they would be asked demographic questions and then proceed to the qualitative interview. Emphasis was placed in this conversation on informed consent, particularly on how participants were free to withdraw from the research at any time before, after and during the proposed meeting.

Qualitative Research Tools

In conducting this research, I used both a brief demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) and a nominally guided qualitative interview (Appendix D).

Demographic questionnaire. The purpose of the demographic questionnaire was simply to establish the characteristics of the participant population, some of which could potentially contribute to their experiences as a social worker. For example, a male worker might have

different emotional coping methods than a female worker, due to the gendered expectations of

caring behaviour (See Chapter Two). Examination of the demographic information as well as the

qualitative interview material was done to allow any demographic influence on the themes or

trends of the interview to be acknowledged and incorporated into analysis.

Qualitative interview. The qualitative interview as used in this research was a semi-

structured dialogue. The interview was nominally guided by the interviewer, but allowed the

participant to tell their story however they saw fit within the guiding questions. If done correctly,

a qualitative interview should unfold in a way that feels natural and organic. Qualitative

interviews focus on "meaning over measurement" (Holloway & Biley, 2011, p. 969) as it draws

on the participants' feelings and the emotional weight of the subject as well as details such as

time and place. This made it ideal for the research goals of uncovering the personal significance

participants placed on the topics explored within the research question.

The qualitative interview was preceded by a discussion of the research and its purpose,

and I gave each participant two copies of the Statement of Research Purpose, Participant Rights

and Consent (Appendix B). I reviewed this document with each participant and invited them to

ask any questions they might have about it. If they consented to continue, they signed both

copies of the form, returned one to me to be kept as a record of consent, and retained one for

their own records. The audio recorder was turned on at this point, and the participant was asked

the demographic questions (See Appendix A) before starting the interview.

Though it is the interviewer who technically controls and shapes the broader direction of

the interview, the area of interest in a qualitative interview is the stories and details which occur

between these questions (Ezzy, 2010). Rather than dictating a series of answers, my guidance

was focused on eliciting responses. My main participation occurred when the participant came to

a natural pause or ended their current dialogue and required a prompt or question to start them off again. I would also ask for clarification as needed. This was intended to minimize the effects of my own preconceptions about the subject. The participants could shape their response to the question in whatever way they believed truly answered it, whether or not this appeared to be an answer that I (the interviewer) anticipated (Ezzy, 2010). For this purpose, I also strove to keep my tone and facial expressions neutral but engaged, showing interest (and encouragement where necessary to stimulate elaboration) while avoiding any expressions of emotion, such as approval or disapproval to an answer. This was because an expression of emotion or approval might lead the interviewee to offer an answer they believed I was looking for, or conversely to avoid sharing an answer they felt I would react negatively to. In keeping my face and tone neutral but engaged, I strove to avoid conveying my own biases which could potentially skew the responses of participants. The main job of the interviewer in the qualitative interview is to allow the participant space to speak.

For this study, the interview was based on a pre-determined series of guiding questions which were used to initiate topics (see Appendix D), and then the participant was able guide the process based on their individual experience. Additions to the guiding questions were limited to clarifying questions (asking what a word or expression meant), expansion questions (e.g., can you tell me more about that?) and detail-eliciting questions (e.g., did that happen before or after you obtained your BSW?). I occasionally engaged in small talk to put the participant at ease (Hollaway & Biley, 2011), but the above questions were the only addition on any topic related to the research and field. I made a conscious effort to allow the participants' responses to flow naturally and to use these additional questions only when needed. This could also lead to details

shared which might have been forgotten if I had used closed-ended questions or moved briskly (Ezzy, 2010).

Each of the six interviews was scheduled for a maximum time of two hours. This was to allow adequate time for questions and give participants an idea of the time commitment expected of them when they became involved. Interviews took place in a pre-booked office space at the university which held only basic furniture and the research materials (e.g., recording equipment). Each interview was audio-recorded to be transcribed later (by the researcher). Transcriptions of the interviews were then examined for the themes and practices that emerged. Participants were assigned a code name chosen at random, to protect their identity while allowing their full voice and context to be attached to transcription excerpts. Coded names have no relationship to the actual names of participants. Any social service organization or business (or other employer) named by the participant was also redacted during transcription to avoid any possible repercussions to either the researcher or the participants (see Ethical Concerns, p.56)

Member-checking. Following the completion of the interviews, transcription and thematic analyses, each participant was provided with the transcription of their responses as well as an analysis of the themes drawn from their interview. This was for the sake of transparency, and to ensure that the participants agreed with the use and interpretation of their responses. To do this, I contacted participants through the secure UNBC email server using the email they had provided at the time of their interview. I emailed each participant a copy of the transcription of their interview, as well as the list of themes and an explanation of the process of theme analysis (see Appendix E). The participants then had two weeks to review the material and give feedback on the use of their contribution. This process of member-checking (ensuring that participants are able to give feedback and validate the use of their contribution), was an important contribution to

the accuracy and validity of the study. Member-checking was also chosen as essential to

maintaining the authentic voices of the participants and respecting their consent to the fullest

possible extent. Though the participants did not choose to contribute feedback, the process of

member-checking ensured the opportunity that any objections or discomfort with the use of their

data would be corrected.

      Organization. Before beginning thematic analysis, I first compiled and tabled the

demographic data. I then divided each transcript by basic headings marking the points at which I

had asked the qualitative interview guiding questions (see Appendix D). This provided a general

organizational format to the transcribed interviews and aided in the subsequent thematic analysis

by making some of the patterns easier to locate (as patterns often emerged in response to specific

questions). Each interview was also examined on the basis of the participant's demographic

information and any possible links between those factors and their responses.

      During this time, any interviews where the participant had given information that was

continually off-topic, noticeably inconsistent, or which in any other way stood out as having the

potential to not reflect success of the qualitative interview as a measurement tool would have

been flagged for review by the researcher and supervisor. If an interview were judged by both

parties to be inappropriate for inclusion in the study it would be removed from the study and all

data pertaining to it destroyed. This does not refer to any data which participants requested

during or after the interview to be removed from inclusion in the study; any such data would be

removed before beginning data analysis. None of the interviews were found to be off-topic or

inappropriate for inclusion.

Thematic Analysis

In order to minimize my influence on the themes which emerged from the data, I did not

begin thematic analysis with a list of themes or categories I expected to find. Instead I began data

analysis with an inductive approach, which I used to build themes before switching to a

deductive approach to find any additional evidence to support them.

Inductive Thematic Analysis. An inductive approach to data analysis starts with

identifying patterns within the data, and building categories and then themes from them.

Inductive thematic analysis can also be called a 'bottom up' approach because it builds themes

by first assembling data into "abstract units of information" (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). The

method I used to assemble these units was coding, which is labelling ('coding') topics, activities,

and other basic commonalities (such as the presence of religious beliefs) within transcripts (Van

Den Hoonaard, 2012) with a marker (e.g., '1a').

Coding. To start, I did a close reading of all of the transcripts and marked any and all

units which appeared, without knowing if these would be common to any or all of the other

transcripts. I then performed 'open coding' throughout several close readings, marking units

which were common to two or more transcripts. 'Open coding', the first step in coding,

indiscriminately labels all common units without attempting to look for specific themes among

them or choose units based on relevance to the research question (Van Den Hoonaard, 2012).

Following this, the coded units were organized within basic patterns, for example similar

responses to specific questions. Patterns within responses to specific questions were common,

and I created a table marking when this occurred, and additional patterns which appeared

unrelated to specific questions (see Appendix E).

Discovering patterns. Early patterns were numerous and varied; many appeared in as little as two transcripts, and the individual units which comprised the patterns sometimes overlapped. It was impossible to develop all of the patterns which emerged, and the next step in my analysis was another series of close readings which identified the patterns with the strongest support, and/or which appeared in the majority of the transcripts. Because of the highly individual nature of the qualitative interviews, there were some patterns which had strong support in only a few transcripts, as measured by how many times the pattern was mentioned and the significance the participant believed it held (illustrated through quotes). The qualitative approach I used (as well as the theoretical perspectives which shaped it) specifically privileges the meaning which the individual participants place on their experiences. For this reason, patterns (and later, themes) which had strong support in only a few transcripts were prioritized just as much as patterns which had milder but more consistent support throughout most or all of the transcripts. After sorting all of the units I had coded from the transcripts into patterns, I did another close reading to perform 'focused coding'. This involved re-reading the transcripts to look for any additional units which corresponded to the patterns (Van Den Hoonaard, 2012). Finally, I worked within the patterns to identify themes.

Theme development. From the patterns found in the transcripts, I identified seven different themes. The definition of themes I use for this is drawn from Braun and Clarke's 2006 article on thematic analysis, which states that:

> A theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research
> question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the
> data set. (p. 8)

These themes were comprised of patterns which offered a perspective or explanation to the research question. The patterns which formed them could also be thought of as sub-themes; the patterns comprised the nuanced perspectives of the overall themes and warranted recognition within them (See Chapter Four: Research Findings).

Deductive Thematic Analysis. Following the division into themes, I performed a final close reading of all of the transcripts to look for any additional units of support. This was especially important as the process of sorting the patterns into themes uncovered additional meaning within the entirety of the data. This deductive analysis helped me to strengthen and articulate the themes and examine the distinctions which individual participants made between different expressions of the same theme (Creswell, 2014). Having assembled the themes 'from the ground up' by inductive analysis, I now explicitly looked for and coded units as support for particular themes, as opposed to the undifferentiated 'open coding' and slightly guided 'focused coding'.

Use of themes. The prevalence of the themes across the transcripts and the strength of support for each are discussed in Chapters Four and Five. For examination in this thesis, I placed the individual themes into three broad categories based on their relationship to the research question: a fascination with social work, uniquely suited for social work, and perspectives on coping.

All themes identified were related to the demographic information as a whole in an effort to discover any relationships between the themes of the participants as a group and the demographic factors. I did not find any such themes. After all possible thematic analysis had been performed, participants' transcripts and a copy of the thematic analysis of their interview were sent to them for member-checking (see previous section).

Particular attention was paid to themes and information suggesting useful avenues for future research on the subject of emotional coping. A specific goal of the thesis was to preserve the integrity of the participants' individual voices and contribution within the findings as a whole. For this reason, direct quotes and participants' pseudonyms are used wherever possible, to allow the reader to follow the individual voices.

Ethical Concerns

Possibility of emotional distress. Despite the efforts of the interviewer to make the interviews as stress-free as possible, there was still a chance that a participant might find a question emotionally upsetting. For this reason, the contact information for local counseling services was listed on the Statement of Research Purpose, Participant Rights and Consent given to the participant at the start of the session. If a participant experienced any emotional distress as a result of the interview they had the option to arrange for appropriate services.

Appropriate use of data. In qualitative research there is also an ethical obligation to make use of participants' contributions appropriately, in context and with respect to the individual voice in which it was given. The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to access the stories and meaning behind the experiences of the people interviewed (Hollaway & Biley, 2011); for this reason, the analysis performed on the interview data worked to incorporate vignettes and quotes, preserving the individual voice of the participant wherever possible.

Possibility of professional repercussions. The qualitative interviews dealt to some extent with participants' experience of emotional stress in their job by asking how they had learned to cope with it; there were also several questions about what employers might do to help with this coping. If the data and themes resulting from the study found any deficiency or

negativity in employers' support for social workers' coping needs, the participants could

potentially have experienced backlash from their place of work believing that their contribution

to the study resulted in this negative reflection of their organization or ones like it.

To prevent participants being put on the spot or giving answers which portray employers

or related topics in a way which did not reflect their true impressions, any questions which were

or could be perceived to be employer related were phrased in a hypothetical way (e.g., "Is there

something employers could do to support the coping methods you use? What might be required

for employers to do this?"). The use of snowball sampling as well as public advertisement also

protected workers from their employers being aware of their research participation as the

diversity of recruitment methods prevented any individual participant's connection to the study

being tracked.

Because of the possibility of repercussions to participants if the themes of the study

included negative impressions of employers, the research question guiding the study deliberately

did not focus on current or previous conduct or contributions of employers. However, in

respecting the individual experiences and perspectives of participants, there was still a possibility

that participants might of their own volition mention a negative perception. This data could not

ethically be ignored or discarded if participants considered it important. Therefore, in addition to

the protections described above, participants are referred to in the study by randomly selected

code names which have no connection to their real name or any other personal information.

Qualitative Validity Concerns

Possibility of self-selection bias. Though this research used public advertising and snowball sampling of social service agencies to promote the study to social workers and create a diverse selection of possible participants reached, participants ultimately self-selected themselves to be part of the study (within the limitations set out by the researcher). This created the possibility for secondary factors such as a willingness to participate in research to potentially bias the study.

To minimize this possibility, the language of the promotional materials was written in non-academic language ("layman's terms"). The qualitative aspect of the methodology was emphasized in order to appeal to people who might be wary of participating in research because of the perceived disconnect between research and the population under study (Collier, 2006). Additionally, all possible participants had to have been students at a post-secondary institution at some point (to obtain their BSW or MSW) which meant that all prospective participants had at least some exposure to research. This familiarity functioned as a protective factor against the disinclination to participate in research which populations completely unfamiliar with research may have (Loseke, 2013).

Measurement validity. In the process of choosing qualitative interviewing as a research methodology, I considered all possible measurement tools that would best reflect the true experiences of the participants. I also wanted to use a method which respected individual voices, and suited the time commitment of the study. I found qualitative interviewing to be the best option for eliciting the experiences and knowledge the research question sought (Berg, 2001), and evaluated the questions used to guide it carefully for face validity. However, it is always

possible that despite my best efforts the interviews might not fully yield the information they are intended to measure.

Research in the social sciences is inherently complex because definitions and measurements in the field, and as used by the interviewer and participant, can vary (Loseke, 2013). For example, this could occur because the language used to describe social work has changed between the time in which a participant obtained their BSW and the time in which the interview was conducted- causing the two parties to potentially use different language for the same topics. To minimize the possibility of confusion during the interviews, the questions were structured using plain language. I made a conscious effort to use plain language in the interviews and asked the participants to do the same, to ensure that all parties understood what was meant by the language of both the questions and answers. To further minimize the possibility of miscommunication, I used clarifying questions to ensure that any expressions used or theories mentioned as part of the responses to the interview were fully explained. Finally, as previously mentioned, I employed member-checking (sending participants their interview transcriptions and thematic analyses for feedback) to ensure that the participants agreed with the use and interpretation of their responses (See 'Member-checking').

Possibility of self-serving bias. There is a possibility in all research that participants' responses might be influenced by their desire to positively portray themselves, or their field (in this case social work). This could mean responses about personal abilities are exaggerated to make the participant look better. In the case of the field, questions about social work which participants feel makes it look difficult or unrewarding (For example, "Do you find being a social worker is emotionally taxing?") might be answered incompletely or in ways which do not represent the participants' true perspective.

In order to guard against self-serving bias (a natural tendency of people to credit success to internal ability; Duval & Silvia, 2002) skewing participants' answers, the criteria for the study framed eligibility in a way which reflected positive adjustment and experience on the part of the workers (For example, agreement with the statement "I have learned or developed my own methods of coping with the emotional demands of the work") rather than intrinsic individual ability. This was done to minimize the tendency of participants to try and portray themselves more positively, as they would be aware that intrinsic abilities are explicitly not within the scope of the study. Additionally, the guiding questions for the qualitative interviews were designed to ensure participants first reported their subjective experiences (For example, "Do you find you think about, or experience emotions about, work issues when you are not at work?") before they offered any explanation as to why they believed their experiences had been what they were. This allowed me to distinguish, when reviewing the interviews, between the participants' report of their experiences and their explanations which might include an attribution of intrinsic ability. If the participant attributed an experience to the exercise of intrinsic ability, the statement could be examined within the context of their other responses to see if any significant exaggeration or inconsistency with other responses (including the first part of their answer to the related question) became visible.

To minimize the tendency of participants to try to avoid negative portrayals of social work or aspects of social work (which has been known to frequently occur when workers comment on their field; Berg, 2001), questions were phrased in a neutral way (such as "What emotions do you associate with your work?") and with direct use of personal pronouns to convey the fact that participant responses represented their opinions about their experiences and not an over-arching impression of the field.

Summary

The research methodologies were chosen specifically with regard to what would best represent the participants' experiences, and allow them to be conveyed within this thesis in their own words and with consideration of the context in which they were acquired.

Chapter Four: Research Findings

In this section, I present the results of my qualitative research study, which examined what social workers who thrive and maintain their emotional health in the field do to help them cope with the emotional demands of their job, through in-depth qualitative interviews.

Participants' transcripts have been edited for confidentiality (all names of people and employers removed; represented by '[redacted]') as well as for clarity (repeated words and fillers such as "um" removed; words inserted for clarity represented within squared parentheses).To avoid confusion between the distinct voices and beliefs of the participants, each of the six participants have been assigned a coded name. Though the study found complex themes contributed to by all or most of the participants, the participants' highly individual experiences of social work are equally important and it is my goal by using coded names to allow the reader to find and follow the unique voice of each participant within the overall analysis.

The research was built around the questions of what brings a person to social work (and keeps them in the field), what activities and traits are characteristic of them as people, and how they effectively cope with emotional stress. Accordingly, after a brief demographic section, the discussion of themes has been divided into sections titled 'A Fascination with Social Work', 'Uniquely Suited for Social Work' and 'Perspectives on Coping'.

Demographic Information

Of the six participants, ages ranged from 39 to 62 years with an average age of 50 years old. The years of experience ranged from 6 to 38, with an average of 19 years of practice, indicating that in general the participants far exceeded the minimum of 5 years of practice post-degree which was required for participation in the research.

All of the participants had graduated between 1978 and 2010, with an average of 20 years since degree completion. The majority of the participants graduated from a university within BC with the remaining two participants graduating from universities elsewhere in Canada.

All of the participants identified as female, and all were white Canadians of European descent. All interviews were limited to a maximum of two hours.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics (n=6)

Age	39	*Mean: 50 years*
	45	
	46	
	52	
	58	
	62	
Gender	Female	
Nationality	Caucasian (2)	*
	French/Irish	
	Canadian (3)	
Length of practice as social worker	6	*Mean: 19 years*
	15	
	15	
	17	
	24	
	38	
Degree (year of completion):	2010	*Mean # of Years Since*
	2001	*Degree Completion: 20*
	1998	
	1981	
	1978	
	2010	
Location of institution graduated from	Within BC (3)	
	Outside BC (2)	

* All Participants fit the category of White Canadians of European descent

Capturing Participant Voices

The qualitative interviews were conducted with the same questions, but intentionally structured to allow the participants to guide most of the content. Because I conducted each

interview with the intention of minimizing my own presence as much as possible, the participants' own style came to the forefront in the audio recordings I would later transcribe. I noticed within each interview that there was often similar information but the way in which the participant related it could range from emphatic to unconcerned.

In the interests of passing on some of the style and impression made on me, I have laid out below some details of each participant's speaking style. I hope this will help the reader to better understand the participants and hear them as I did in the interviews. I chose to describe speaking style because for this there was an objective witness available in the form of the audio recordings of the interviews. These recordings are the basis for the observations I have made about participants' voices, as I did not make any notes on the subject at the time of the interviews. It is important to acknowledge my role in the creation of these descriptions; as I greatly enjoyed each interview, I worked to draw on my impressions of participants to share the richness of this experience.

To create the observations, I both made notes during the course of transcriptions (when I listened to the recordings multiple times) but also after when I listened to each recording several more times to mark the vocal patterns and fluctuations in tone and pitch. I also listened for variations in the speed of participants' voices, for areas where a participant might speed up and elaborate in a way which seemed excited, or answer succinctly, leaving a long silence. I drew on my own memories of the interview and the unique rapport created with each participant. I have used my position as researcher to contribute to the research the unusual experience of hearing about social work described from different women, with different excitement, emphasis and reaction to the experience.

I have included some demographic details which may help contextualize the quotes drawn from each participant throughout. As indicated previously, each participant has been assigned a coded name, which has no relation to their actual name.

Angela, 58, was from the start of the interview very detailed in her feedback. One such instance of this was her immediate clarification of the fact she did not go directly into practice as a social worker after getting her BSW, going instead into some "small research jobs" after which she started a family. This attention to detail was present throughout Angela's interview, as she laid out a thorough and exacting account of her life including education, work and motivation. Though Angela's voice in the interview was initially soft and somewhat halting as she related her history, she became more animated, and exhibited a lot of passion and emphasis in both tone and language on particular topics, such as her Master's thesis. The way Angela formulated her answers seemed to be an interactive process, where she shared with me the process and reasoning behind the answers she gave in order to ensure I understood. It was this which gave her words a halting quality at times, as she checked to ensure that I was still with her on her answers- which were often formed from complex reasoning, and were rooted intimately in her approach and experience. Angela described herself as an "anxious on getting the detail right" type of person, which correlated with her style of speaking.

Terri, 52, had a casual and relaxed tone from the start of the interview, though her wording conveyed a distinct impression of certainty and conviction. Terri rarely hesitated with the answer to a question, though she did often pause- apparently in order to gather her thoughts, as the pauses were typically followed by clarification or elaboration. This was consistent with her description of herself as enthusiastic and confident. Though Terri did not skirt the issue of the negative side of social work such as witnessing abuse, her statements that she knew where

her limits were and when she had 'done what she could' were confident and emphatic in tone.

Throughout all of her interview, Terri displayed with her language a self-assured and well-

developed philosophy towards her job based around her own understanding of her role and a

confident ability to fulfill it, an approach developed in her youth when she had done what she

could to report a case of abuse and let go her attachment to the situation with that. While Terri

sometimes worked to find the right words to convey her meaning, she rarely wavered in what

that meaning was, and her casual, confident tone in the interview conveyed that. From the start, I

felt that Terri knew what she had come in to say and was prepared to say it.

      Jill, 45, began the interview with a reflective and conversational tone, with a rising

inflection which characterized points of emphasis. While relating her work and education

history, this inflection marked the sharing of goals and challenges in working with people. A

rising inflection seemed to accompany positivity and excitement, while a lower tone marked

narratives where Jill conveyed her thoughts at the time of a situation or exchanges with other

workers. This was most noticeable in the frequently shared snapshots of conversation she had

had with past coworkers or managers, in which her animated tone conveyed a sense of cynicism

or thoughtfulness to scenes relayed. This up and down style of speaking extended to the

emotional significance Jill added to her answers, stating in clear language the concerns she found

inherent to social work. Jill's answers to questions would begin steady and reflective,

establishing information, and then became animated in the details and stories illustrating the

answer, punctuated by exclamations and inflection that painted a vivid picture of the situations

she had faced and her own dynamic thought process.

      In contrast to Jill's animated style, Ellen, 62, spoke in a notably steady and even tone,

with relatively similar speed and cadence throughout the interview regardless of topic. In relating

the details of her life and the early challenges that had faced her (such as a heavy workload and the loss of a parent), her tone never wavered from its calm and steady inflection. This ability to calmly relate the details of significant challenges gave an impression of quiet confidence. In describing a range of things from personal trials to work success, Ellen's voice remained soft and steady. Ellen described herself as enjoying a balance in her life, which correlated with her balanced tone and the measured words she used to describe her experiences. Never rushing her words, Ellen's speaking style seemed to give her room for thought. As opposed to other interviews where participants might state their first thoughts to answer and then clarify their statement, Ellen's answers appeared to be the result of prior thought and her answers seemed to reflect that, being rarely extreme and typically offering a balanced dissection of the possible factors in the response. During her interview Ellen described herself as resilient, a quality that appeared to me to be consistent with her measured and calm reflections on the challenges that she had faced.

Alice, 46, responded to questions with a matter-of-fact tone and language from the start. Though relaxed enough to be called conversational, the tone Alice used was consistently firm, with a slight emphasis on some words and statements. Though throughout the interview Alice often mused out loud considerations of some questions, the final statements in which she provided her answers were decisively worded. During those statements where she had mused aloud about other considerations or reasons that could contribute to the answer, her voice picked up speed and a very slight rising inflection as she reached a conclusion (sometimes reiterating a previous point), which suggested to me a sense of confidence in her answer. Alice described herself as oriented towards facts and tasks, a personality description which I thought correlated to her matter-of-fact style of speaking.

The final participant was Lisa, 39, whose slightly husky voice ranged from strongly audible to soft and thoughtful throughout her interview. With straightforward answers, Lisa used short and to the point phrases. Lisa's vocal style was reflective to the point that she appeared to be thinking out loud quite often, doubling back in her sentences on many occasions to clarify or correct a point. Her relatively quiet speaking voice rose occasionally in emphasis of points, such as parts of the job she enjoyed (getting youth outdoors) or disliked (politics). Though Lisa verbally thought through her answers to some questions she appeared not to have previously considered, she was matter-of-fact and confident on points relating to her philosophy and approach. One such point was the prioritization of self-care, where she sometimes exclaimed or raised her inflection when referring to the firm rules and boundaries she had for herself. Lisa described herself as "assertive, with excellent boundaries" a description that seemed apt in reference to her responses which were succinct and to the point, and often required little in clarification or illustration.

Each participant shared in their qualitative interview a unique and rich account of the reasons that had brought them to social work and why they stayed in a job which for many workers created emotional stress and burnout. As a researcher, the qualitative interviews were an eye-opening experience that showed the nuance and subtlety of each social worker that was not captured in the words of any article I read in my review of the literature. Though I have done my best to preserve their voices here, I recognize that the cadence and rhythm of each participant's speaking style provided a level of meaning that I cannot convey in writing.

Themes

A Fascination with Social Work

When thinking of the typical professions- doctor, lawyer, teacher- that children might list as their desired profession, 'social worker' is not one which immediately came to mind for me. So when participants mentioned an early fascination with the field, and an almost irresistible attraction to it as their job, this interest stood out to me as something these particular individuals had identified with from an early age that other people might not. For many participants the attraction was the caring aspect of the field, which they narrowed in on from the time they started college or university as a definite requirement of a future job. Jill described her interest as being "a guided map"- having formerly been in care as a child, she knew that her future job would be within social work. Challenges, on the other hand, were often referred to by participants as an interesting and attractive part of the field, and a keen interest in the problem-solving aspect of social work was described by several participants as a reason to stay in the field.

Most participants identified the rules, regulations and hierarchy (often described as 'politics' of the job) endemic to social work as the most stressful part of the job or even a reason they might leave. Though none of the social workers seriously considered leaving social work, some participants mentioned that they might consider a break- usually with the purpose of acquiring new skills to bring back to social work. For Alice, even her volunteer work was related to her job, a fact which had significance for her as she believed it demonstrated how genuine her interest in social work was. This focus on improving the field (rather than mentioning training in order to acquire better positions or benefits) was especially interesting in connection to the passionate, vocational connections participants displayed towards social work.

An early and sustained interest. When asked why they entered social work, participants unanimously stated that they had had an interest in caring for others. All six of the participants had been interested in some the caring professions since college at the latest, and half of them had been interested in them since a much younger age. Ellen stated that as a young girl she became fascinated with an acquaintance's job:

> [S]he was a social worker in some really needy spot in New York, I don't know [where], I was only 9 or 10 when I heard about this. And I was so fascinated by what she did for a living that it kind of stuck with me.

Similar to Jill's 'guided map' the idea of the caring for people as a job stuck with Ellen for years afterward. Though each participant took a different path through education and entering the field, all of them saw the helping profession, and eventually social work, as their goal. Interest, was the only answer given to the question 'Why did you choose to enter social work?' All of the participants had other options open to them, and none gave reasons such as money or prestige for their choice to pursue social work. Lisa stated it was one of the only education options open to her that she really felt she could do, and she never looked back. For Terri, like Ellen, her interest came long before she would enter formal social work education; early on she knew she cared for people and wanted to help them, an interest that was "always kind of there".

Among a more general interest in social work, half of the participants had a specific area in mind that they were determined to work in. Alice began her career in Psychology, but throughout her work experience, social work education and subsequent return to the field as a full social worker, she was "Always very focused…[a]lways knew I wanted to work with seniors in some way. Just took me a while to figure out how to do it."

Alice returned to geriatrics right after finishing her social work degree, and her social work career has focused on seniors ever since. Angela, similarly, knew from the start of her

interest in social work that she wanted to work in a healthcare setting. Despite starting her interest in the caring fields as a nursing student, Angela said that as her training moved to the hospital setting, she found herself drawn to the social worker.

> I kept looking at the social worker, and I was more interested in what the social worker was doing in the hall, and then I became more and more disenchanted about the nursing program. I didn't feel, the way the program was structured, I didn't feel like I was getting enough opportunity to get practice experience that made me feel competent in that role. And with those things I decided to make a switch, actually, and I- it took me probably a year and a half of having to pick up some extra courses, and apply to the social work program, and then I transferred over.

Jill, who wanted to work with children and youth, eventually switched to working with parents as the best way to affect change in the lives of children and youth. Whether in a specific area, or just as a social worker in general, none of the women I interviewed seriously considered leaving social work. Ellen stated "[I]t was my field as far as I was concerned. Because even when I'd consider another job, it was always a job in- that like were so similar to social work. It was social work that was really my passion."

This passion extended to an interest in improving the field; many of the participants mentioned aspirations to training and education that would allow them to bring new skills back to their job. This was surprising to me, as the training in some cases- such as Alice, who said she would like to get her PhD and then return to work as a social worker- involved years of effort that could potentially open new career paths. However, participants never mentioned gaining education in order to find a different job. Instead, they wanted to better their ability to do the work they were already doing. To me, this inclination conveyed a significant commitment both to the field, and also to the goals of the field. As Lisa put it, "I think its valuable work…and I believe this profession really does make a difference."

In keeping with entering the field because of a personal interest in it, the participants unanimously stated that they stayed in social work because they enjoyed it. Jill said she found it exciting to help families past their challenges and to always have fresh issues to work on, while for Angela and Alice the relationship and connection had special significance that kept them around. Angela said of her choice to stay in social work:

> Why did I like that work? I liked it because I could meet people where they were at, I could engage with them, it was interesting to hear their stories, the stories were fascinating. And I've always, I think, the approach I took to working with people was 'I can't do the work for you, but I can be here to walk by your side', you know.

Ellen stated simply that "When it came right down to it, I was always doing what I liked to do", referring to her long-term interest in basic social work practice, regardless of the particular position. Consistent in all of the answers was a genuine enjoyment of not the day to day tasks of social work necessarily but the more meaningful task of helping people to better their lives. Terri stated this most succinctly in her interview, saying "[I]t's very rewarding…when you can help people, you know, and help them get the services that they need in order to overcome their issues or their battles. And just really be helpful to people."

Along with the particular interest in the job that the participants had, this rewarding aspect of the work made intuitive sense as to why they had stayed in the field, and often worked hard and acquired specific training to be working directly with the population that they found most rewarding. Despite this enjoyment of the job, the participants were also largely clear that this was not an easy job - which for Alice, was part of what made it rewarding,

> I love my work, I really really do. And I feel very blessed, because I know there's not a lot of people who can say that. But I just really do. And it's not easy work, at all. And it's certainly challenging. And I think maybe that's what I like about it, is the challenge.

Enjoying the challenge. All of the participants mentioned aspects of their job being complex and challenging, with political, emotional and professional nuance. And as described above, all of them stated that they enjoyed, and none had any solid plans to leave social work. Additionally, over half of the participants interviewed (Angela, Alice, Terri and Jill) clearly identified the particular challenges of the job as part of what made it so enjoyable for them. The remaining participants did not explicitly state this. However, it might be inferred from their combined views of social work as both demanding and enjoyable, that if the challenges were not the specifically appealing, they at least did not cause any dislike for the work.

As the participants came from different areas of social work, the three participants who identified challenges as an enjoyable part of the job each related different challenging situations. Terri described being faced with mandates from her employer to have the clients make certain changes in their lives. While it was possible to use an authoritarian approach and force the issue, Terri's beliefs led her to approach the situation as simply a challenge to find a way to make the changes while preserving the dignity and respect of the clients,

> [I]f you can do it [make changes] with respect and dignity as two people, then, that works a lot better than authoritatively forcing people to do something. So I guess when people are ready for change, and they work with me and I can see that it's a joyous change, that means a lot to me… I try to avoid [the authoritarian approach]. But you still have to find that balance, like I say, for your agency, right? Like if you're mandated to get a parent to find alternative strategies for parenting, like that's the goal, and you have to follow it. But you can do it kindly or you can do it forcibly, and I choose not to do it forcibly.

The duality of respecting the client while achieving the agency's goals was not easy to accomplish, a point that is emphasized when Terri later refers to working with people as "the hardest job in the world." Terri's statement that she will "not do it forcibly" comes across as a casual and simple statement of approach. However, it is clear from the rest of her interview that

this was a more difficult task than she makes it seem. Later in her interview, Terri says that she

could end her day simply exhausted, but she emphasizes that it is a "good feeling" coming from

the mental and physical effort of having worked hard and found it rewarding.

Angela sought out challenges in her own way, by working a variety of different positions

in social work and eventually rising to a provincial position where she had a significant effect on

policy. In her integration of the law, managerial styles and the interpersonal needs of the social

workers she worked among as peers and oversaw as a manager, Angela found that seeking the

challenges of different positions meant she was able to gain not only a well-rounded perspective

but the influence to affect more widespread change. Her numerous moves within the field may

have been prompted by a need for new challenges, but also allowed her to find the best use of her

skill set. Similarly, Alice said that she liked the challenges her job gave her, and had acquired

specific skills such as knowledge of the law in the process of her work in order to be more

effective. The complexity came from the overlapping elements facing her work with seniors:

> [T]he work is always very complex, because it's always about balancing risk, and
> autonomy, and trying to work within the confines of the law. And your ethics
> piece, right? So it's always complex from that perspective and that makes it
> challenging. Because none of the cases are easy to figure out. But it's also
> challenging because it's all bad stuff, right. As most social work cases it's all bad
> stuff, and so processing it is sometimes challenging.

Of all of the social workers who stated that the challenges were part of what they enjoyed

about the job, Jill most baldly stated the contrast she found between challenge and boredom in

her work environment:

> [I]n my caseload, when things start to get smooth, and everyone's functioning
> fine, I get bored. And I think oh, there's the cue, they need to move on in their
> world and we need to separate. And then when I get that really complicated case
> it's like 'ooh, cool! I need to build rapport, and shift their thinking, and get them
> to a place where they're willing and able [to make change]' and it's just so
> exciting, that time. So yeah, that's why.

Jill found the shifts and changes she was able to witness in people a powerful part of her job, and an exciting thing to support. Echoing the reasons for Angela's frequent moves within the field, Jill said once the clients had reached a point where no more crises and challenges arose, her job was done and it was time to move on. These participants found social work particularly well suited for them because the challenge kept them interested. Terri mentions that she would be "bored out of her mind" if she didn't have the stimulation of working with people. "I've always been this way…I couldn't do something that I didn't get fulfillment out of."

The most difficult part of social work. In each interview, when I asked the participant "What is the most difficult part of your job?" no one identified an element of the day to day work, such as dealing with clients. Instead, participants consistently offered responses related to barriers to effectively performing their work. Within these, two distinct sub-themes emerged: facing the limitations of social work, and dealing with politics. The first was in some ways anticipated by some of the research I had done on social work; also by the fact that social workers interact with extremely vulnerable and marginalized populations. The second theme (of politics within the field comprising a significant challenge) came as a surprise to me. This was not because I was unaware of the idea that social workers might struggle with the politics both within their organizations and on a broader scale. Rather, it was because with all of the literature review and research I had done on the mental and emotional challenges of social work, I expected that frustration with politics would come secondary to the numerous other challenges. Therefore, having participants consistently cite politics as one of the most significant challenges of their job had a significant impact regarding my expectations of the interviews. It was also notable that these two themes are closely related: one of the ways participants mentioned they faced limitations was in the conflict between managers and decision makers' priorities and front

line workers' priorities, which some participants stated clashed over the issues of limiting how much and what type of aid could be given to clients in need.

Limitations of social work. Given the content of the literature review and the emotional labour involved in working with people, day after day, people who were facing difficult circumstances, it was not wholly unexpected to hear participants talk about the difficulty of seeing families or children in dire straits that they could do nothing to alleviate. Terri said that she often suspected or even knew that children were going back into abusive environments, but constrained by her role, she could not remove them without the proper documentation and proof. Facing that dilemma was the most difficult part of her career,

> Looking in the eyes of a child, and knowing that they are being abused, or that things aren't right, and sending them back home [is hard]. Like, sending them back into the environment is very difficult for me… that's the hardest part, is knowing that somebody's being neglected, abused, and letting them go back, stay in that environment.

Terri was one of the five participants who identified the limitations of their job (being constrained from helping people known to be in distress) as an actively difficult part of being a social worker. These limitations were not just painful in a personal sense, of not being able to help an individual; they could also prompt backlash from peers and community members who similarly witnessed the individual in distress and wondered why social workers were not helping. Alice described her frustration at the lack of general understanding about her role, in which respecting the autonomy of her elderly clients often meant her hands were tied:

> I think, for me, the hardest part is people. The general public, and many colleagues [and] professional peers don't understand the complexity and the intricacies of the work. And so [they] are very quick to judge…when they feel like we're 'not doing anything'. So as an example, I'm dealing with elderly abuse cases and so I get calls all the time that 'So-and-so is being abused', and we do our investigation, and find that So-and-so is a capable adult, and entitled to live in the situation, and we can't force her out of anything or make any changes. And

we can't report back to the reporter what we've uncovered in our investigation. So ultimately it looks like a report has been made, and we've done nothing.

Alice noticed that especially in her role, people equated her job as a social worker dealing with elderly adults to the conduct of social workers working in Child Protection; as someone who was supposed to swoop in and "rescue" the client. This outcome, as other participants would mention, was difficult enough to achieve in child protection when parental rights and the need for adequate proof of abuse could result in an inability to 'rescue' children even when abuse was suspected or known. Alice, in upholding the ethics of working with older adults where respecting the autonomy and independence of clients was crucial, was faced with situations where the individual could not or did not want to be rescued. This situation, she said, often drew the criticism of other social workers as well. Over her career she became well-practiced in explaining how the challenges of supporting an older adult were every bit as intricate as supporting a minor or child.

For Jill, being overburdened with clients meant that the limitations she identified within her job did not come from what they were allowed to do to help clients. For her, the issue was the limit of what she and her co-workers were physically capable of doing due to the inadequate amount of time they had. This problem was compounded by the emergencies and crises that consistently arose and prevented social workers spending time on the cases which were not in immediate crisis. Jill described the ways this situation impacted her practice:

> Basically, because you didn't have the time that you needed to build the rapport and the relationship [with clients]….we didn't have time to see all the kids. It was just devastating to know. I remember a foster parent saying, 'It's been a month and a half and we haven't even met you'. And I was like: I have 7 kids from one family that just went into care. I'm just scrambling to just make sure this is all lined up, and dealing with all of these little pieces, and court, and I just felt absolutely horrible [about not meeting the foster parents]. I mean, once I was able to get things down to a point where I could start focusing, the foster parents had a

great relationship with me and everything. It was just so sad. And you got to a point where as a team of social workers, you would take turns, if one of you were going to a group home, you would just go and physically say hi to all the kids that were in your team that were at that group home. And look in their rooms and then come back. Because we had, there was obviously [with] every crisis that happens, in the [redacted] it gets an immediate demand, it's like 'this is what you need to do from now on, and you need so see them once a month'. And I know that sounds minimal, but…And now it's like, this is horrible, because I'm going to a group home to see this youth, and I'm gonna say hi to another youth that doesn't know me, look in his room and see what he's doing, look in the bathroom and kitchen to make sure [the] group homes were treating them well. It's just, that's not who I am, and that's not how I build relationships in their lives. You're shorting people, and I didn't have a choice at that time. And I remember near the end, I remember meeting with a family, and starting to develop a family plan, and they said 'You know, we've had 3 different social workers'. And I said, well, I can't make any promises, but I'm here. And I left 3 months later, and I felt horrible. Because that is a reality for them. So that's the discrepancy, that you're not practicing [as you want to], or you don't have the time to spend with that person on the phone like you want to.

Jill did not believe that this lack of time to see all their clients was in any way a result of social workers' misconduct, but rather (as demonstrated in participants' commentary below) because of a system in which politics kept social workers from having adequate time to attend to their clients by overburdening them with too many cases.

Dealing with politics. From the very first interview, participants mentioned politics as a frustrating and unappealing part of social work. Five out of the six participants explicitly mentioned politics at various levels as a difficulty which prevented them doing their job. In some cases, this provided sufficient reasons to switch positions or move within the field when they otherwise would have stayed in a position. Angela stated that she had heard from other people in the caring profession "[who] said to me 'It isn't the people, who make me tired and unhappy. It's the system', right?" A system of organization that dictated everything from budgets to protocol. Instead of finding it useful, the majority of the social workers I interviewed found it a major

barrier to accomplishing their work. I wasn't the only one to find this odd; when I asked about

the most difficult part of her job, Ellen stated that her expectations had been subverted:

> You know, it's been really funny. Because when I graduated, in social work, I
> always thought it would be the issues of the clients. But it never was. It was issues
> with managers, and with supervisors… [and] Victoria making a change and not
> understanding the North. The needs of the North. Managers not being really
> supportive, or not having the same perspective I had. Like my perspective was
> always, we have to do what is best for the people, and the children. And some of
> the managers I worked with were more focused on the system.

Ellen was not the only participant to identify that there were multiple managerial and

administrative levels, from the local to the provincial, where the approach to social work did not

reflect the needs and wishes of those actually working in the field. Interestingly, all but one of

the six participants were at a management level at some point in their career, perhaps in order to

directly affect the politics they faced. Angela in particular repeatedly mentioned in her interview

that she had advanced through the ranks to management precisely in order to affect the politics

that so profoundly influenced the field and individual social workers. She mentioned in particular

how frustrating it could be in the caring profession when your job required you to spend time in

political advocacy in order to get clients access to services they needed:

> It's the blocks and the barriers that make people frustrated. There's lots of
> requirements in our care system, you see. Documentation, dual needs to comply
> with Work Safe rules, because you can't actually put workers in unsafe situations,
> and of course you have to demonstrate that you have to do so, so there's all kind
> of policies and procedures around that that people find…annoying [both laughs].
> It probably goes from annoying to infuriating, you know. Nurses and social
> workers talk a lot about how frustrated they are when they're trying to advocate
> for services for their clients...And usually they find that exhausting. And it's just,
> it's a system thing. I'm going to go back to the system thing; it's the way we're
> set up structurally in the system. You might have government sector here, whose
> mandate is to deliver services to this pocket of clients. And in healthcare, we
> have, you know, a program here and the mandate is to deliver services to- [only]
> to that pocket of clients. Now, we all have rules, and if this sector starts saying,
> 'no, we don't do that, [or] they don't meet that type of criteria' then you know,
> then there's an argument, or a conflict, and they would get bad relationships

[which] develop between programs. And so, it's the conflict, within the system, I think that is the most exhausting thing. It never goes away.

Though social workers advocate as a natural part of their job in order to get clients what they need, some political situations participants faced struck me as uniquely counterproductive on different levels within the system. The small-scale example of this is managers navigating their upward climb rather than the needs of the clients. On a broad scale, this was represented by workers having to be concerned with political changes at the provincial or national level which could potentially affect their ability to even meet with all of their clients in a given month. In no way did I expect to interview social workers and have the participants say they did not advocate as part of their job. However, having to advocate for issues as basic as having the ability to do their job, or for the chance to have a manageable number of clients struck me as excessive.

Social workers simply having to advocate for themselves and their field, rather than being able to focus on advocating for their clients, represented to me, the pinnacle of the challenges social workers faced in balancing multiple goals (which were mentioned throughout all of the interviews). By the end of the interview, this idea would become very familiar to me: that social workers not only had to do social work, but teach it, advance it, defend it, advocate for it, prevent it being pushed to extinction. Firefighters, for example, may negotiate for what they feel is adequate resources to fight forest fire, but they are not tasked with proving that forest fires exist. Whereas social workers, while meeting the needs of clients, also had to prove that those needs were there; then, that they met the criteria for certain areas that only addressed certain needs, that these needs continued to be visible to government. Finally, there was a huge discrepancy, as Jill stated, between the need and the number of workers allocated to meet it. To extend the firefighting metaphor, this is akin to firefighters spending part of their professional career

proving that fire exists, that it is really a problem, and that a house burning in front of their eyes did in fact need more water to put it out.

Though social work is not the only field where workers fight to get the resources they need, it did surprise me to hear multiple participants speak of their own actions in the field on multiple levels; as an advocate, a volunteer, as well as a social worker. It suggested to me a very personal investment in the field (something participants had already indicated they had) to care about their work not only in their own personal sphere but on multiple levels. Though I do not doubt that there are many people in many fields who do put this type of thought and care into the bigger picture of their work, it made a strong impression on me that out of my small sample of only six workers I encountered five who considered their role to be so enmeshed in the bigger picture that they could not ignore the politics of it.

The frustration with limitations and politics as the greatest difficulty of social work further supported the theme within the transcripts of participants' fascination with the field. The complex and nuanced challenges workers faced in the field they regarded as an interesting and even positive element; the emotionally distressing aspect of the work which so commonly arose in the literature review as a difficult part of the job was not mentioned. The things which participants found most difficult to deal with were not even really a part of their job, not in the sense that it would appear in a job description, but the structure they worked within which prevented them from effectively delivering the services that were in their job description. This was of great significance to me as a theme: that consistently across interviews participants cited as their greatest difficulty simply the barriers which prevented them effectively doing their job. This theme would surface again when participants related what would make them leave their job.

Reasons for leaving. When I asked participants whether they would ever consider leaving social work, only one participant answered that they had considered it. All the others would entertain the idea of a change in position, or perhaps a break to acquire more education, but not in any terms a permanent departure. As Ellen put it,

> [I]t was my field as far as I was concerned. Because even when I'd consider another job, it was always a job…similar to social work. It was social work that was really my passion.

The majority of the participants had made shifts within social work throughout their profession, so when they stated they would not leave social work, a number of them clarified that they meant the field, not the particular position. Angela, despite her long and varied career, had trouble even considering leaving the field to retire.

> Have I ever considered leaving social work…seriously. No… I mean, I think about leaving my role. Like, right now I'm thinking about leaving my role…But not necessarily social work…I'm toying with the idea of retiring, collecting my pension, and then going back and working as a casual social worker. Or more teaching, because I have been teaching, as well.

Lisa and Terri both stated unequivocally that if they left it would be because they disliked politics, and Ellen said she had considered leaving because of giving too much to her job, but on further consideration she had only needed a break. Jill, like Angela, had considered taking on management or teaching roles as a break from front-line work; and Alice would only consider a break in order to further her skills.

> [On whether she would consider leaving social work] Never. Never. I've thought about, you know, taking a break and maybe doing a PhD in Gerontology. And I've thought about Law for a little while. But there's no other profession I would take on. I've thought about a Law degree, because it would help in my social work, right?

On completing the interviews, it was powerful to be assessing the themes among responses and find such an unequivocal commitment to social work that the majority of

participants would not even consider leaving. It was even more intriguing to see that the

participants who considered a break would do so only to influence the field in other ways; to

share their expertise or bring new knowledge. Because of the literature review indicating high

levels of burnout in social work, I had an expectation that even among social workers who

identified as well-adjusted and who planned to stay in the field (statements agreed upon by all of

the participants), that at least half of those I interviewed would admit to having had doubts about

staying in a job typically regarded as high stress. Five out of the six participants said that they

considered social work emotionally taxing, and yet not one participant admitted to a serious plan

to leave at any point in their career. The fascination with social work that led even the mildest

considerations of leaving to have some level of contribution to the field, whether that was

teaching, new learning, or work in a tangential area of the caring professions made a deep

impression on me of the participants' genuine interest in the field.

Uniquely Suited for Social Work

When conducting the literature review for this research, I discovered a number of theories

of personality which suggested people who possessed particular traits might be better able to

cope with emotional stress. Because the participants self-selected themselves for the research

based on their ability to cope well, I included several questions about personality.

In the first question I asked participants to describe their personality to me, because I was

interested to explore without any prompting whether any of the personality traits identified in

previous studies were mentioned, or whether there would be any similarities between the

descriptions that had not arisen in previous studies. After participants had shared their

personality description (without any reference in that question to their ability to emotionally cope

or perform any other duties of social work), I asked if they believed their personality as a whole or any of the traits they had given, contributed to their ability to cope with emotional stress. Though the descriptions of personalities had overlapped in some ways, they were still highly individual; and yet every participant believed, most of them quite strongly, that their personality affected their ability to cope with emotional stress and that it made them more effective at coping than they would otherwise have been.

Though I did not ask participants if they thought their personality helped them to cope well, or effectively, this was probably implied due to the fact that they had already identified themselves for the study as someone who coped well. In addition, in the literature review I had come across some character traits which were considered unusually good protective factors for coping: hardiness, and resilience. Though participants did not bring these traits up independently in their description, they all agreed that they possessed them, and gave different reasons why.

These three questions, paired with the other mentions participants made throughout interviews of early fascination with social work (or unwillingness to do anything else) created a strong theme among the interviews of participants considering themselves, as people, to be particularly well-suited to social work.

Self-described personality traits. During the interviews, though some participants took time to describe their personality to me, no one had any particular difficulty finding words. Though there were similar traits described, the way in which participants believed their personality was useful for them varied.

Optimistic. Half of the participants (Ellen, Terri and Lisa) described themselves as optimistic or positive people, something which Ellen immediately identified as at odds with the public perception of social work.

> People told me - not people in the social work profession, but other people- have said that they would think that being a social worker, and the emotions that come around social work and the needs people come to you [with] around social work, they thought I'd be more jaded than I am.

Lisa also said that she thought that this aspect of her personality made her "not your average person that gets into this profession for sure." The idea that being positive was at odds with social work was interesting given that half of the participants associated this with themselves. Since the literature review established that optimism could be a protective factor against burnout (Levinson, 2005), it was interesting that two of the three people who identified it in themselves also explicitly mentioned that it was not in their experience common in their field. In addition, when asked which aspects of their personality helped them cope with emotional stress, none of the participants identified being optimistic as a helping factor.

Analytical. Three of the six participants (Alice, Angela and Jill) described themselves as analytical and problem focused. Alice described this as an alternative to being emotional, stating that it allowed her to be the one to "ask the hard questions, and make the hard decisions". She found that it also allowed her to hold her emotions at arm's length, thinking through the process rather than engaging with the emotions, and this helped her prevent emotional distress:

> Because when you analyze a situation, you tend to be less reactive I guess? So, instead of just immediately reacting or responding to a situation, if you analyze, you can process, and think 'Mm, normally that would bother me but you know, if I consider factors A, B, and C, then, you know, maybe I shouldn't overreact'.

For Jill, being analytical was tied to being emotional, and rather than putting her emotions on hold, she said she used this quality to sort through and identify her emotions:

> I'm able to think in a logical framework. It doesn't mean I'm not emotionally driven- I am. But I think that I'm able to implement a lot of the skills that we teach, which is great. I'm able to tap into those things, and I'm willing to, and when I get frustrated or quite lost I have to say: okay. I'm going to calm down. And then I sort of think myself through a process of 'What do I need right now.

What is bothering me the most. How do I deal with that'. Or you know, who do I want to be in this scenario. What would I be saying or doing if I want to be that person. So I sort of work myself through it in that way.

And in a third perspective on the same quality, Angela's use of analysis meant that she looked at situations from all sides and used it as a tool for problem solving and understanding others. All three participants said that being analytical helped them to manage emotional stress, and this was the only theme among personality traits that was also unanimously identified as a helping factor.

Confidence. Four out of the six participants said that being confident or assertive was one of their personality traits, and the manner in which this trait was mentioned was significant in its succinctness. Each mention was similar in how it was presented; unlike the mentions of being analytical which were accompanied by a description of what that meant, the straightforward statement each participant made of being confident or assertive seemed accompanied by an idea that this would not be misunderstood. Terri and Lisa both elaborated, however, in relating how their confidence or assertiveness helped them to cope. Terri found that she was confident enough to ask questions or seek help when it was needed, and stated that she thought people who lacked confidence might have trouble finding the support they needed in the workplace. While Lisa did not explicitly identify confidence as a helping factor in her emotional coping, she paired this quality with the ability to set "excellent boundaries" something which for her was distinctly helpful in emotional coping.

Self-awareness. Though this was not brought up specifically in response to being asked about their personalities, four out of the six participants (Alice, Angela, Ellen and Jill) also identified as being distinctly self-aware people, reflecting on their own lives regularly in a way

that had helped them in their career. Angela characterized the reflective quality of being self-aware as a kind of emotional intelligence,

> So, it's around that comfort with ambiguity, but it is also about your philosophy about what is realistic for you to do in your role as a social worker. But it takes some emotional intelligence to actually reflect and understand where your feelings are coming from, right. You know, and sometimes people take those emotions and go off and do something really constructive with them…Like when you go and you work with families that are in such despair, and you recognize that your role, as that individual, micro-level social worker does not have enough impact for the change that you want to see in the world, then [as] people look at other ways to influence the system, or our communities, or our politics, or our government, right?

For all four of the self-aware participants, their self-awareness helped them to identify limitations in their work and life, and create healthier outlooks. For Alice, that meant knowing what her mind and body needed to be able to fully engage in her work to the point where she said "I can literally see, in myself, if I have not had enough time to stretch or meditate or read or relax or sleep." Ellen, similarly, used her tendency to self-awareness for maintaining her emotional health, but by analyzing work situations for potential emotional distress and moving on when necessary. For Jill, this self-awareness was a way of incorporating what she learned by watching others into her own life:

> And I had small experiences, and some experiences, that provided me with the example I guess, and the role models, and I was able to pull from that. And I was able to consciously look at the scenario where I found myself and the places I could go, and think 'You know, I'm gonna die if I keep doing this'. Or 'This isn't a good choice anymore'. And be able to make decisions about what is a good choice and what is not.

Distinct for Jill was also a need to recognize that although she was able to be self-aware and reflect, other people might not have that ability. Interestingly however, though only four participants directly talked about it, all of the participants mentioned self-reflective actions throughout their interviews. These were characterized as instances where they had actively

drawn from their previous experiences and knowledge to shape more effective future

interactions. Because the questions about personality focused on self-identification of traits, I

chose not to characterize self-awareness as a personality theme which all participants possessed.

Additionally, a qualitative interview is by its nature self-reflective, as the participant is being

asked to reflect on their life, and so this could have drawn the tendency out in the two

participants who did not overtly identify it in themselves. However, the presence of possibly self-

reflective characteristics in the remaining two interviews suggests that this would be a strong

theme to explore in future research.

Personality as a factor in coping. The most interesting part of the participants' self-

described personality traits was the fact that there was little crossover between them, and few

themes. Participants related an average of three traits when describing their personality; some

gave few traits, while some gave elaborate descriptions. The ways in which participants used and

valued the traits differed, and the individual traits were highlighted as useful for emotional

coping also differed, with some describing aspects such as optimism that they associated strongly

with themselves but did not identify as useful in coping. However, no matter what their unique

combination of traits, all six participants unanimously said that their personality contributed to

their ability to cope. This indicated that no matter what the coping methods they used, as related

in later sections, all of the participants thought that coping ability was at least in part related to

simply who they were: their personality.

Hardiness and Resilience. Despite none of the participants having made direct reference

to hardiness or resilience in their initial description of their personality, when I directly asked if

they considered themselves inherently hardy or resilient the answer was a resounding yes,

unanimously. However, the reasons which they gave for their hardiness and resilience widely

varied, with one exception: they all related the acquisition of these traits to their lives outside of

their career, whether that was a specific event or simply life experience. For Jill, her resilience

was established as a young woman when she was a youth in care; going from a teen who was

failing school to a successful professional, based on her own determination. For Alice, resilience

was a trait that she believed from her own research stayed with you throughout your lifetime. For

Ellen and Angela, resilience was tied to an ability to start over in life after a huge shift or change.

Angela described this as a trait she discovered in herself not after a particular trauma, but rather

as part of a long and arduous process:

> You know, I'm not somebody who had a severely traumatic childhood or not, but
> I certainly had a midlife crisis where I recognized that some of my early choices
> as a young adult were really reflective of what I was trying to fix, what was an
> unmet need in my childhood, right…And I had to rebuild my life again. Who was
> I? What did this mean? I was still a mother, I still had had these relationships, but
> how was I going to rebuild my life in this different way because I had made such
> a radical departure. And I can remember being quite determined that- because
> sometimes I would think about the people that I knew, and [those] who had this
> horrible devastating experience and sort of turned into, what I would see as a
> bitter kind of person. And I really didn't want to feel like my life was over, now.
> After this crushing blow. But I wanted to grow from it, like I really, really wanted
> to grow from it. And I've never really used the word resilient. It's interesting to
> me, you know, but I think I demonstrated resilience, because I did rebuild my
> life… And I constantly feel grateful for that I was able to do that. So I think I am
> resilient.

 Similarly, Lisa said that she knew unequivocally that she was resilient because of her

ability to face a difficult situation and say "this really sucks and I don't like it, and then it's how

can I change my situation and make it better." A deceptively offhand sounding statement which

could have suggested that Lisa's life had been relatively simple, except for her equally offhanded

statement about what she had accomplished: as a teen mum, she had raised her children, gone

back to high school and gotten her degree. Despite clearly leading a complex life, Lisa's

hardiness and resilience were downplayed by how casually she referred to her accomplishments.

This was characteristic of all of the participants, who had not made any mention of their resilience until asked, and who had all faced significant personal challenges. When assessing hardiness and resilience as a theme, I repeatedly found it paired with this tendency for the participants to overlook the quality in themselves until openly asked about it. This might have been an effect of the traits themselves. The consistency of the participants' tendency to overlook their own strength suggested that being hardy or resilient was what led an individual to avoid dwelling on the difficult events they had faced.

Perspectives on Coping

The qualitative interview style was set up with the expectation that the participants' answers would be highly individual, most particularly in the methods they used to cope with emotional stress (because as previously mentioned, the widespread presence of burnout suggested that successful coping was not likely to be found through any one-size-fits-all method). However, the interviews also explored whether participants knew about peers' methods of coping with stress, and whether they believed their methods would be effective for their peers if adopted. The latter questions produced more homogenous themes, as participants fell either into feeling that their methods were fairly similar to others or not knowing what others did at all. The responses to whether their own methods would work for peers were also divided, between participants thinking their methods might work for people similar to them, and believing coping was too individual for methods to generalize.

Highly individual coping. When asked how they coped with emotional stress, participants gave answers covering a variety of methods, ranging from everyday activities like bubble baths to spiritual and religious practices. Noticeably missing, however, was any form of

coping formally offered through employers or health coverage: for example, counseling. This

significant omission supported the idea that people who identify as coping well, such as the

participants, find unique methods or combinations of methods rather than accessing the methods

generally offered for coping.

Self-Care. Half of the participants (Alice, Terri and Lisa) engaged in self-care,

identifying preferred activities that gave them joy or relaxation and allowed them to emotionally

decompress. For Terri, this was being with her pets or dancing to music, where Lisa indulged in

bubble baths. Alice took vacations and time away from work, and stated that her self-care was a

very intentional effort to relax and gain distance from work:

> Because I figure, if I'm going to go to Maui for seven days and stress, because
> I'm in Maui when I should be at home, working on my house and working at my
> job and 'I should be, I should be, I should be' then you've just spent a whole lot
> of money to just sit somewhere else and stress instead of [stressing] here- what's
> the point?

> For Terri self-care was also very intentional, in the sense of maintaining her good health

and preventing a need for coping. She saw her efforts to take time for herself and engage in

enjoyable activities as something necessary for balance in her life, which she prioritized

accordingly:

> Yeah, and I don't apologize for that, you know to anybody, and in fact I try to
> encourage my daughters to have those moments for themselves and it's not
> selfish, its holistic living, and we need that, and if we find we're lacking in
> emotional stuff then we need to make that up, we need to balance ourselves. So
> every day, you try to maintain balance…like do stuff every day for yourself
> because I learned a long time ago when my first baby was so young that if you
> just take a few moments, it provides you all the time in the world. Like, that
> sounds a bit weird, but- if you just take 15 minutes for yourself, the day will slow
> down a bit for you right and you'll gain time. But if you're always in an- off-
> kiltered, or always, you know "Go here! Do this! Do it!" and you're not taking
> that time, then you feel like time slips out of your hands, right?

Consistently, all of the participants who practiced self-care were willing to prioritize their own needs, not only in times of emotional distress but as a regular practice to maintain emotional health.

Spiritual or philosophical methods. In a slight overlap with the use of self-care, three participants (Alice, Terri and Angela) used either spiritual or philosophical methods as a way of coping with emotional stress. There was some overlap in the characterization of spiritual and philosophical methods, where Angela specifically identified spiritual methods, and Alice and Terri both made use of self-help philosophies which overlapped into spiritual beliefs in practices such as mindfulness, which Alice described as "paying attention in the moment". Alice's description of mindfulness bore some similarities to Angela's spiritual practices of staying in the present and banishing thoughts of the past. All of the spiritual and philosophical beliefs were highly individual, rather than adhering to a specific religion; for example, Angela expressed the development of her beliefs in opposition to her upbringing of organized religion:

> I had a very traditionally fundamentally religious childhood, and I was running away from that most of my adult life. There were a lot of negative associations [I had] with that. And while I would not describe myself in any way as someone who fits into a traditional religious ideology, I certainly was able to go back to the pieces that were of value to me in a belief in the importance of spirit, and the universe, and that there's mysteries that we don't all understand. And that you can be connected to it… in the last 7-10 years where [I've been] adopting some of the things that people disparagingly refer to as 'new age' therapies, you know, I've taken a mind-body integration course and I've learned some things there, and developed a practice of Tai Chi, and some energy work and all of those kinds of things. And even really learning to work on my own spiritual growth...sometimes-and I am not good at this- but sometimes it's literally envisioning the boundary around me, and saying, this thought can stay over there for now. It can come back later, but right now? Right now, when I'm in my Nia and my exercise class, I want you to be over there. And even as simple as that, even if it's only for 2 minutes or 5 minutes, it gives you a bit of a breathing room, right.

Though neither identified their spiritual interests strictly within the confines of it, both Angela and Terri related an interest in New Age spiritual practices, a definition which could also encompass some of Alice's practices such as meditation and yoga. Angela, however, stated that she was unlikely to talk about her New Age interests or her personal spirituality with peers since she felt there was a "stigma around talking about religion and spirituality in the workplace." The other two participants did not relate any specific feelings of stigma, though neither related their interests or beliefs in as much depth as Angela, for whom spiritual and philosophical beliefs were a major method of coping.

Other themes around coping. Including the personality traits which participants identified as helpful with emotional coping, there were only five themes which emerged around coping: a confident or assertive approach, an analytical approach, engaging in self-care, spiritual or philosophical methods, and an inherently suited personality. Of these themes, only a belief that one's personality helped with emotional coping was espoused by all of the participants. Of the other methods, the presence of confidence or assertiveness arose in four interviews while the other themes were found in three out of the six. The fact that there were no distinct traits or practices which all or most of the participants mentioned is in itself significant, especially in contrast to the other research findings. The participants had more overlap in their reasons for choosing social work, beliefs about the field, and views on their personality than in coping methods.

Similarities between participant coping and other social workers. Despite the fact that the coping styles were so individual, the majority of the participants thought that their methods of coping were at least somewhat similar to other social workers' methods. There were two exceptions to this, as Angela and Jill both stated that they simply did not know what other

social workers did to cope. Significantly, all four of the participants who thought their methods were similar to other social workers speculated to some degree; none of the participants had spoken to other social workers specifically about their methods in order to know for sure. Jill outright stated she didn't "have a clue what other people do." Angela, as previously mentioned, had reservations about how accepting peers might be of her coping methods, as she felt that discussion of spirituality and religion in the workplace carried some stigma.

Transferability of individual coping methods. In keeping with the theme of highly individual coping methods, it would be reasonable to expect that participants did not think their methods would generalize well to be used by others. And all six of the participants were in agreement that for the most part, coping was highly individual and this was a reason that their methods might not work for others. However, it was also a reason that all of the participants thought that their methods might be effective if adopted by people who were similar to them in personality and approach. Alice's workplace had recently had employees complete a personality inventory, and it was personality she immediately thought of when considering whether her methods would generalize well,

> Like, I tend to get charged and rested and relaxed when I go away…sort of withdraw, and have quiet time, and read books and be alone and think. Whereas my colleague…has to be stimulated all the time, has to have people around, has to have conversation, has to have music, has to have lights and whistles and bells and is exhausted if she is left alone, right? Whereas for me, that will energize and charge me, to get that rest. …It really depends on the personality. Because I think it[my approach] would be great for everybody but then I see my colleague, who cannot sit still, and cannot sit quietly- it's just not part of her personality, right?... It's [sitting still] counter-intuitive to what she needs to be rested and relaxed and charged and energized, and all those things.

> Alice saw coping as an individual practice, but linked enough to personality that

there might be value in sharing practices with people who had a similar approach. Jill

also stated that her methods might be of use to people who were similar, though she was

cautious about advising peers to use her methods, as it could come across as a 'one-size-

fits-all' approach.

> I think earlier in my career I was more likely to be like 'Oh! You could do it this way, because this is how this has happened for me' very early on, I sort of looked at it that way. But as I have grown, and had more experiences, I see things less and less in black and white. Things are more gray. And so, I don't really know. I don't really feel confident in saying 'this person could just talk'. 'Put their emotions aside and just be analytical and more emotionally strong, they'd maybe be able to see a way out of this'…And as I've had more education, and more experience, I find that life is a little bit more gray. And I don't tend to be as judgmental on certain things.

For Jill, giving advice about how to cope was a mistake made early in the field, and as

she had learned about more unique methods of coping, she saw social workers giving advice

about particular methods as a rookie mistake, something likely to mark someone as new to the

field. Terri was between Alice and Jill's viewpoints, as she agreed that her methods might not

work for everyone, but thought the field could benefit from putting people's individual methods

out there for social workers to try.

> I believe in, you know, releasing, like we talked about earlier, that you need to release stuff. So by me putting pen to paper, that helps me to release my emotions so I don't know why it wouldn't help other people. And perhaps we do need to look at alternative therapies, or alternative ways of healing, and give workshops on those to social workers. There's no reason why the BC College of Social Workers couldn't do that, or UNBC, you know. I know I'm in a class right now with one of the teachers, and it's on wellness, alternate approaches. And you know, I'm really pleased that I'm in it, because its opening up my kind of scope and realizing what place art, and you know, song, and meditation, and all of it has [in wellness], and how to use them with clients. It'd be good to use them as a group for social workers. I don't think that they do enough, to get social workers together and have- you know how teachers have pro-D days?

Terri's idea of bringing social workers together for some prescribed sharing of their

methods seemed to present a possible solution to the fact that all of the participants, though they

thought other people might be able to use their methods, did not actually know specifically how other people coped.

Use of formal methods in specific context. Another significant omission within the interviews was the fact that the formal coping methods often sanctioned and paid for by employers (such as counseling) were noticeably absent from the methods participants identified as using to cope with emotional distress. This was interesting because all six of the participants mentioned having accessed formal counseling through employer coverage (such as the Employee Assistance Program) at some point during their career. All of the participants identified counseling as something they accessed for immediate crises rather than as a long-term approach to coping; half of the participants said they had only accessed counseling for personal issues, never for anything related to their job. In addition, some participants had reasons to avoid counseling that were specifically due to being a member of the helping profession themselves.

Issues around familiarity with formal methods. While some of the participants said that they found it effective in the particular context of meeting an immediate need, three participants (Alice, Jill and Lisa) had the same very specific complaint about formal counseling: it was too similar to the approaches they used in their line of work. Alice said that this meant she would be distracted during a session by judging her counselor's methods:

> [H]onestly, I feel like it wasn't really great for me because I spend most of my time- analyzing my analyst?... You know what I mean? Like kind of thinking three steps [ahead] like 'Ooh, what is she going to say next? What is she going to ask me next? Ooh'. Criticizing… It's hard to shut it off, it really is. And then if you think they're not doing a good enough job, then you become critical. Then you walk away being more frustrated than when you walked in, right?

Alice, like the other two participants who cited this problem, didn't necessarily think that this meant counseling was of no use; it simply meant that the social worker had to put out a

particular effort to separate from their professional identity when they went to counseling, and

give up the role of counselor which they sometimes took on as a social worker- otherwise they

would end up comparing their counselor's conduct with what they might do in the same

situation.

> I have another girlfriend I went through the program with who also needed to see
> a therapist type person for some stuff she was dealing with, and same problem,
> right. Nobody could social work her the way that she could social work you. So it
> can be effective, but you just- I think you have to go in with a very open mind
> thinking 'in this moment, and for the next 50 minutes, I am not a social worker:
> I'm a daughter, or a sister or a mum or a friend' or whatever. I'm going in
> because I'm a client, not a social worker. So to shift gears and take that hat off,
> it's hard sometimes.

Dual roles: crossover between counseling and social work. Jill had the experience of

calling to arrange counseling, and realizing that she knew her prospective counselor.

> [T]here's that fear of someone knowing you in an intimate way that you're not
> prepared for. And the dual role, if that makes sense. Whether you're paying for
> that, or it's through a service, where you don't. Does that make sense? So there's
> a cost of the vulnerability. You [and the counselor] could end up at the same
> committee table the next day…It makes it uncomfortable for me. It might even for
> them [the counselor]- I don't know. For me it has. I mean, years and years and
> years ago, I went to counseling with someone wonderful, and then I ended up in a
> workshop with the exact same person. And I was just like- ooh. And then it was
> my first experience, coming into the field, of that. And that person was
> completely respectful, didn't walk right up and say hi, didn't shun me, just a
> perfect job, of how they should deal with it [dual role]. It was just for me, it was
> that 'eh, I don't think I want anyone to know my stuff'. Not unless I choose, right.

Despite the fact that her employer was willing to cover the cost of counseling, there was

no way for them to cover Jill for the fact that her counselor might show up in her life, or her

workplace. Even when she had that experience, above, and the counselor handled the situation

perfectly, she still did not feel comfortable disclosing personal feelings to someone she could

then encounter in a personal or professional context.

Summary

Though each interview presented a diverse and unique range of information, a number of themes emerged through analysis. Though a few of these themes touched on issues that had been to some degree expected (such as the self-identification with having hardiness and resilience), the overall picture from the interviews had a surprising focus: the most similarities were found in who the participants were as a person, rather than what methods they used to cope.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Analyzing the interviews of six experienced social workers was an extensive and nuanced process, one which incorporated the context and significance the individual workers placed on their experiences. This process uncovered a number of interesting and often unexpected themes; and interestingly, some themes which were expected based on the previous research in the area did not appear. In this chapter I review the findings and their relationship to the research question, including the suggestions the findings pose for future research.

Significance of Demographic Factors

Firstly, the gendered component which was anticipated by the literature review was clearly supported by the demographic outcomes: despite the fact that the participants were drawn from different and unrelated areas of social work, recruited through open advertising which made no mention of gender, all six of the participants were female. Secondly, though the required experience was relatively modest (only five years of work in the field) the outcome was a mean of 19 years of practice, indicating that the study more than adequately met its goal of recruiting experienced social workers. There was an average of 20 years between since degree completion; despite the fact that this could suggest that the theories and language used in the field had not changed enough to warrant any possible miscommunications, two of the interviews (where participants had acquired their degree in the late seventies and early eighties, respectively) made mention of the approaches and structure of the field having changed over the years. However, due perhaps to the plain language employed by myself and the participants, the clarifying questions used were not significantly more than the average for the other interviews and there was very little jargon used which I was not able to grasp due to the terms being unchanged. The participants were primarily from BC (though one participant raised in BC had left the province

for university) with only one participant coming from outside of BC. This indicated that not only

did the research represent the views of individuals who practiced in Northern BC; it also

primarily captured the experiences of individuals who had spent most of their lives here.

Despite the fact that the participants had demographic factors in common, these did not

link in any significant way to patterns in answers or themes, except in the obvious instances

where factors of demographic majority aligned with majority themes.

Significance of Themes

There were three categories of themes which emerged. One was an early and sustained

interest in social work. This was marked by a frustration with the limitations and politics which

could interfere in the work. The second theme was that participants believed themselves to be

uniquely well-suited for social work, crediting inherent factors such as personality for some

coping abilities. Thirdly, participants generally subscribed to the idea that coping is highly

individual, with a reliance on informal methods (such as self-care).

Meaningful interest. Regardless of what form their path to becoming a social worker

took, participants showed a strong and early interest in the caring field as a whole and often

social work in particular. This interest was maintained throughout their careers; despite

acknowledging that social work was not an easy field, none of the participants made concrete

plans to leave and the majority would only consider moving within the field. And if they did

leave for any reason, participants had a unique plan for their breaks or departures; they planned

to bring new knowledge to the field, gain education that could be used for social work, or teach

to pass on their experience. This was a theme which was from the start not wholly unexpected, as

it clearly showed that the participants subscribed to ideological beliefs about their field

(consistent with the findings of the literature review). Social work was not 'just a job' for any of

the participants; all of the people I interviewed enjoyed their work and were strongly committed to doing it effectively. This was further supported by the fact that contrary to the findings of previous research (see Chapter Two) -which suggested emotional labour would be a major issue-participants instead stated that politics and limitations (such as restrictive guidelines for who qualified for services) were the most frustrating part of their work. This was consistent with the ideological commitment they held to social work; limitations and politics both interfered in the participants' ability to do their job effectively. This strengthened the theme of overall commitment to social work; in addition to a longstanding fascination with what they were doing, the only drawbacks participating social workers found in their job were barriers to doing it well. This was underscored by the fact that every participant mentioned at least once how much they loved their job, and often that they couldn't imagine doing anything else.

Given that the literature review (Chapter Two) found high rates of emotional distress and burnout in social workers, it was surprising that not even one of the six participants had ever had a solid plan for leaving social work. Though participants had self-identified (as one of the qualifying statements for the study) that they planned to stay in social work for the foreseeable future, this did not necessarily exclude the possibility that during their time as a social worker participants might have considered leaving. Since this was so consistently paired with an early fascination with social work, one possible explanation is that for people who have a strong ideological commitment to social work and see it as more than a job, this very commitment functions as a protective factor. This could cause the negative effects of the work to be felt less due to an underlying feeling of meaning attached to the work.

Though it was impossible to generalize with such a small sample size, the possibility that a meaningful interest in social work increases commitment to the field in addition to reducing

negative effects in some way is intriguing. Social work was 'more than a job' to all of the participants, and this might have a connection to their ability to function well and avoid burnout and emotional distress. Alternatively, the outcomes of this research also suggest that there are no significant negative outcomes of being unusually committed to social work. This directly contradicts some elements of the existing research, such as studies on affective empathy which indicate that the overlap between workers who are high in ideological commitment and high in affective empathy results in many committed workers burning out. Another thing which these participants had in common was their certainty that they were well-suited for the job.

Vocational interest. Throughout the qualitative interviews, consistent statements came up from participants referring to their natural interest or inherent suitability for the job, and their unique enjoyment of the challenges and trials of the job which kept them coming back even when there were negative effects on their life as well. Ellen, 62, put it best:

> "[I]t was my field as far as I was concerned. Because even when I'd consider another job, it was always a job…similar to social work. It was social work that was really my passion."

For Ellen and the others, there was a certainty that they were well-suited for the work and that what they were doing was fulfilling for them. Given that participants had self-selected themselves for the study by indicating they agreed with statements such as "I enjoy my job and am proficient at it" this theme was not surprising, but it did show that participants believed that their job was vocational. Most participants mentioned something that 'called' to them from an early time in their life, and which their inherent abilities made them adept at.

Though there was a broad range of personality elements which arose when participants were asked to describe themselves, one consistent factor was that all of the participants believed that their personality helped them to cope with the emotional demands of the work. This was

interesting given that the overlap in coping methods was relatively small; no specific method was adopted by all of the participants, suggesting that their personalities did not lend themselves to similar methods of coping, though they all coped well. Elements of optimism, analysis, confidence and self-awareness came up, usually found in around half of the participants. So while there were similar elements of personality present in the participants, the overlap was relatively small with participants having traits in common with two or three other participants but rarely sharing more than one trait with one particular person. Unsurprisingly, the reasons which participants gave for why those traits helped them to cope well also varied widely, emphasizing the uniqueness of each person's approach even when starting in a similar place. Hardiness and resilience were the only two personality aspects claimed by all of the participants, though none offered them up in their initial self-assessment of their personality. Again, these traits were acquired and used differently depending on the person, though they all believed that hardiness and resilience made them better at their job.

Individual Coping Experiences

Though the goals of the study were to discover the unique perspectives individual experienced social workers brought to coping, I did expect some degree of overlap in methods used, some combination of methods which worked well. However, all of the methods were fascinatingly diverse. This section had some of the lower numbers in terms of how many transcripts the themes had been drawn from. Significant also was the emphasis placed on particular coping methods by the participants; spirituality, for example, was central to Angela's coping to the extent that I included it as a theme though it occurred to a much lesser degree in the other two transcripts I drew from. Similarly, though a number of participants used analytical thinking to cope with emotional stress, in Alice's transcript this method was almost omnipresent,

appearing in her approach to a number of things and acknowledged by herself to be her dominant personality trait.

Coping and personality. Noticeable overall in the descriptions of personality (both in response to the particular question, and throughout the transcripts) was that there was an abundance of it. Personality was not lacking in anyone's interview, both in their responses and my overall impression, as each participant left a vivid picture of themselves which I have tried to capture in my descriptions of their speaking style and use of vignettes. This meant that though there were not many strong themes (indicating similarities in personality), the traits claimed by individual participants were present quite strongly and might account for their unanimous insistence that personality accounted for some of their positive coping outcomes. Terri and Lisa had an almost overwhelming confidence in themselves, clearly visible in their answers and unwavering commitment to their particular approach to social work. Angela and Ellen both felt very strongly that they took the perspective of others and this helped them to manage emotional stress well, and approach things in a balanced way; and Alice and Jill both took an analytical approach to their problems, described differently but applied in both cases in a way that was very specific to their work. For Alice this was in being the 'problem-solver' no matter what the situation, and acquiring a second person to help manage the emotional commitments expected; for Jill, this meant setting her emotions aside in a vividly visualized sense until all of the information was present to effectively analyze them and sort through. Whatever the personality may be (analytical, optimistic, confident), and though they were not completely dissimilar, the participants' tendency to be dominated by a particular trait that they then applied to their work, perhaps specifically to coping. This suggests that any number of personality types might be

paired with this vocational commitment to social work. If a number of people interested in social work from an early time in life but with widely varying personalities can be successful, this suggests that something about the force of the personality traits or perhaps the belief that they are inherently well-suited to be applied to the job which results in workers who all function well but differently. This obviously provides strong support for the main research question, which postulated that workers who do well have unique and different approaches which get the same positive results.

Coping and implications for the field. In spite of the individual nature of the experiences shared, the information provided suggests some avenues of coping which social workers might adopt. Participants consistently suggested that despite their methods being (to their knowledge) unique to them, they thought their methods might work for people of similar personality. Paired with the fact that most participants could only speculate on what their peers did to cope, this suggests that an easy way to promote better coping would be to engage individuals who identify as coping well in sharing their methods; as things stand, for the participants (all of whom have significant experience as social workers) training on particular coping methods was not especially common, much less training in methods which already worked for individual people in the field. If workers gained education in coping methods it was often because they specifically enrolled to get it, or acquired it from life experience, reading or other forms of knowledge seeking. Few participants had gained particular methods from their social work education, supporting the idea (see Chapter Two) that if a generally effective coping method existed, and was taught in the BSW (or MSW) burnout would not be as widespread as it is. Therefore, small scale education from peer to peer on methods which have been effective for

them could help to engage workers in learning about methods in a way not currently in use, something that Terri actually suggested during her interview as a way of improving the field.

Absence of formal methods. It was very noticeable that in the responses about which coping methods were effective, none of the participants relied on a formal method such as counseling, which is commonly offered by employers. Most participants had accessed this method at some point for an emergency, but these were commonly non-work emergencies and participants uniformly stressed the immediate and short term nature of this method as a solution to emotional distress. Because of the pervasive nature of emotional challenges in social work, effective emotional coping is likely to be employed ongoing rather than simply when the status of emergency is reached, and this was supported by the fact that none of the participants listed counseling among their regularly relied-upon methods.

Another explanation for this was an unexpected theme: participants had some level of familiarity with formal coping methods like counseling, and did not find it appealing in general from the other side. Several participants said that in particular they judged the people they went to for support, because they were familiar with counseling approaches and did not always agree with what their therapist or counselor chose. This suggests that simply because of their background, social workers might favor informal methods, because their own pre-existing knowledge will not allow them to relax and access the formal methods. Alice in particular mentioned this problem, which she believed could be overcome, but not without effort- effort that might present too much of an obstacle given that someone seeking counseling is already presumably dealing with a lot. Though Jill suggested another reason: social workers can themselves be counselors, and might not like to access counseling services from someone they might later encounter professionally. Only one participant mentioned alternative counseling

methods: Lisa mentioned both phone and online counseling. Though Lisa stated that she thought telephone counseling could be helpful, such as a crisis line, she found online counseling "creepy" and said she would not consider it. Overall, Lisa stated that she and her colleagues who had discussed it preferred "face to face" counseling.

Absence of sharing coping practices. The fact that none of the participants mentioned any instances of intentionally sharing coping methods with their peers suggested that currently there might not be adequate space where social workers can connect on best practices (For example, BCASW meetings are a current space where this might occur). This is supported by the literature review findings that social workers occupy a number of disparate positions within the government and non-profit sector (and might not connect professionally with many other social workers). Additional support was present in participants' own mentions of the many different roles and positions they had held. Terri, when asked about whether her coping methods were similar to other social workers', said she had trouble answering that because she was the only social worker in her organization.

Researcher Experience and Perspective.

Though I attempted to minimize my expectations, especially in terms of the way they might make themselves visible in the qualitative interviews, the Literature Review and design of this research left me with at the very least a general idea of what social workers, even the well-adjusted ones, might be facing emotionally. The content of the interviews, though affirming in some ways, completely contradicted or reinterpreted my impressions overall. After performing a large amount of research on the emotional stress faced by social workers, I had expected that even if a worker was well-adjusted they would have negative experiences and perhaps second

thoughts about the field that occurred at some point during their adjustment. However, the most significant outcome of my experience was that the state of being well-adjusted did not appear to have been earned, though I have no doubt that the participants had all worked hard and learned a great deal in their time. The participants each had a strong sense of themselves as a social worker, and for whatever reason they enjoyed the field and wanted to be in it from before they had had the chance to form a strong negative or positive impression by working in it. This commitment did not waver but rather strengthened after time in the field, leaving each person with the impression that this was where they were meant to be. This meant another noticeable absence: there was in general no period of significant emotional strain or upset which preceded acquisition of the ability to cope well; though some strategies developed over the years, all of the participants had coped reasonably enough over the whole course of their career that they did not consider leaving it or even consider it a significant source of emotional stress.

This broad theme of being well-suited, well-adjusted people left a big impression on me. With each interview I would think I had gotten the hang of the content and feel I could anticipate some of the upcoming interview, only to be given a completely different account of a similarly successful person, with even the similar elements made over and valued differently. I gave up trying to have any expectations around the third interview, and instead began lamenting that I had to adhere to my qualitative questions. Though minimizing my presence in the interviews was easier than expected, with the strong personalities and highly detailed answers I received in each interview, the truly interesting part to me was the glimpses of each participant's rich and unique experience as a social worker. At some points in the analysis I was amazed that any themes had emerged at all, given the different types of work and background the participants had; and then once the themes emerged most made sense in a fundamental kind of way. Though the details

were different, the building blocks of their approaches were similar: each person knew they were

meant to be in social work, that they were suited to it, and could state with confidence the

individual approaches that they took and why. There was little uncertainty in the interview

content; for the most part this was probably because the questions were so basic, but even

responses which took time to generate were firm in their final form, with never a standing

answer of 'I don't know'.

Recommendations for Future Research

      Personality over method. The most significant outcome of this research is that the

participants fundamentally believed, each in their own way, that it was who they were rather than

what they chose to do that made them effective at coping. Developing the right method for their

own needs was a priority to several participants, and this was also represented in the belief that

their methods would work for other people with similar personalities. Though it is not a new idea

to examine the traits of an individual in order to determine their chances of being successful at

social work (or many other jobs), an in-depth, specific analysis of personality for a number of

workers as well as the significance they place on it (such as feeling they are likely to do well at

certain tasks) could help both to provide direction and to pair personality traits with specific

coping practices which might be more effective for the people who have these traits. This could

also give potential new social workers a chance to examine their personality, and make use of the

coping methods which have proved useful for experienced social workers who share those traits.

      Strong but different personalities. A positive theme suggested by this research is that

there is no one type of person who makes an effective and well-functioning social worker, but

rather a variety of personalities all applied differently. This is good news for recruitment to the

field, and also suggests that a fascination with social work might help an individual to mold whatever particular personality and skills they have into an effective approach, even so effective they might believe themselves naturally suited to it. Therefore, future research on social work might benefit from examining the ideologies which pair with a fascination in social work, and a way to encourage or support people with this interest to enter the field. Participants' focus on having an early and consistent interest in social work suggests that this factor might not be taught, but if present would increase the effectiveness of those skills taught by making the individual more likely to be a healthy long term asset to the field.

       Traits and transferability. Of all of the coping themes, it stood out that the only way participants believed they could share their methods was with people similar to them, while simultaneously admitting that they typically did not discuss their particular approaches to coping with peers. Professional organizations (such as the BC Association of Social Workers) do offer opportunities for social workers to connect and share knowledge. It would be relatively low in cost to create more spaces where social workers could share with their peers. Within these spaces, workers might benefit from being prompted to find peers whose personality and approaches were similar enough to offer some value in sharing their best practices. One way to do this would be the 'social worker pro-D days' which Terri suggested. Social workers are typically well-versed in formal methods, and this research demonstrated that at least on the scale in which they were examined, well-adjusted workers have a wealth of informal practices they use. This makes the best resources for social workers themselves and their peers, especially as the feedback participants gave on counseling suggests that social workers might be critical of attempts to teach them professional methods with which they are familiar.

Meaningful rewards. In addition to feeling innately suited for social work, many of the participants found deep, ideological meaning in their job. Though this might not be felt at all times, the success and enthusiasm the participants had for social work suggests the presence of meaning in one's job as a motivator might be both effective in stimulating enjoyment, and act as a protective factor against some of the negative effects of the job. Along with the particular interest in the job that the participants had, this rewarding aspect of the work made intuitive sense as to why they had stayed in the field, and often worked harder and acquired specific training to be working directly with the population that they found most rewarding. Though it may not be possible for prospective workers to anticipate the areas they will find most meaningful in a social work career, efforts could be made by employers or supervisors to highlight the meaningful effects of any position on an overall picture of meaningful success. One way to do this would be to share success stories of former clients who had had a variety of social services involved in their life, and have the former client share how particular services had affected them, even if it might not have been visible at the time.

A good direction for future research might be into the effects of agencies specifically following success stories rooted in their agency (though the process might be slow and take significant time) and disseminating these success stories to their workers. The nature of social work in addressing social and economic inequalities and issues such as poverty and abuse means that workers are exposed to negative circumstances as a matter of course. If a person is experiencing ongoing and repeated difficulties the social worker is likely to become familiar with them and encounter them repeatedly in the system. Conversely, if a client becomes successful they are removed from the social worker's realm of influence and individual workers are unlikely to have the time to follow these successful clients' activities. Therefore, engaging in

efforts to stay updated might help individual workers to acquire that sense of meaning and

interest in the outcomes of their work which was successful for participants. However, this might

prove difficult to do while maintaining the anonymity and confidentiality of clients.

Conclusion

All of the social workers I interviewed had their own uses for the same qualities: they

were hardy and resilient, well-suited to social work in various different ways and found

enjoyment in the challenging aspects which might have driven off other, less interested people. It

would be hard to ignore the fervent interest and unlearned, innate ability that these people had as

social workers. No one had entered the field because of gendered expectations, lack of choices,

or practical needs. Every participant was a social worker because they very much wanted to be,

and this was a simultaneously optimistic and inspiring experience to be part of.

The gendered expectations and abilities I had expected to find were not present: no one

stated they had entered social work because they were good at caring, or emotions, though the

skills they recognized as present in themselves (listening, analyzing, perspective taking, problem

solving) touched on these abilities. No one identified specifically caregiver qualities such as

those inherent in the emotional labour I had encountered so often in the previous research (see

Chapter Two). Though all of the participants worked hard to improve the quality of life in their

clients, often through a caring, trusting relationship, it wasn't the relationship itself in which the

assessment of abilities was typically focused. The location of value participants found in

themselves was in abilities such as effective management of highly nuanced situations, and it

does not seem like coincidence that all but one of the participants held either current or past

management or supervisory situations. This last qualification also confirmed what I already

knew: the participants I interviewed were all indisputably good at their jobs, and were good at their jobs without this coming at the cost of their own emotional health, something which the literature had linked for many social workers.

The results of the interviews were unexpected in their exclusion of any thoughts of leaving social work (excepting one participant who would consider it). Despite the fact that one of the qualifications for the study was that participants did not have any immediate plans to leave social work, the fact that no one had made any plans throughout their career (an average length of 19 years) surprised me. The literature review and the participants' own comments indicate that social work is a complicated and often difficult job, and it would not be surprising to hear that someone in a complicated and difficult job considered leaving. The participants' adamant denials of any thoughts of leaving, coupled with numerous statements about social work being the only job they would consider doing, left an impression of commitment to and enjoyment of this complicated and difficult work.

It might be fair, given the statements above, to expect that participants had fully engaged with the services offered by their employers or professional organizations to ensure their positive mental health and general well-being. It was surprising to find that none of the participants were really certain about all the services available to them, though some participants had accessed counseling (typically for personal rather than work reasons). Participants did not have a significant interest in using the services offered to them, though they had a general idea of what kind of support existed. This was surprising in another way: participants did not seem to have sought out services, and develop their own methods after they had exhausted what was available or found it inadequate. They had never had enough interest or need to seek services in the first place. Given my expectation that coping methods and formal services would be highly familiar

to social workers due to the emotionally taxing nature of their work, I was shocked to find that these services were barely mentioned in the interviews, and only in response to my questions. This added support to participants' assertions that they were well-suited to social work, and emphasized their self-identifications of positive mental health as something their inherent traits or perspective might be helping to promote.

This research was created with the intent of discovering informal coping methods, things which emotionally healthy social workers do in order to keep their emotional health. The personality factors were examined as an addition to this, because of research indicating that they might interact with coping, and the examination of the meaning and perspective social workers attached to their job was meant to provide context for the rest of the answers. Instead, personality and perspective showed up clearly in all of the interviews as a common factor in approaches to social work, positive mental health, coping, and job success. Personality and perspective themes arose both in answer to the guiding questions specifically about them, and within other answers and information shared throughout the interviews. Without the qualitative interview methodology, these themes might not have been discovered. The unexpected direction of the results of this research is excellent evidence for the necessity of qualitative methods, as well as quantitative, to discover information which researchers are unable to anticipate. In examining the themes, it became apparent that I had to some extent accomplished my goal of keeping my own expectations from unduly influencing the research, simply because the themes I expected to find did not surface, and a wholly unexpected set of themes were firmly communicated by my participants. Though I was unprepared for these results, it was validating to have my expectations shattered because it supported the idea that my methods had been successful in

reaching what information the participants believed was relevant to the topics I asked about, woven around the questions that tried to capture that information.

Conducting this research was a unique experience, where I expected to find coping practices and methods in common and instead encountered the likelihood that there are simply some people who are innately good at social work in a way that cannot be taught or artificially acquired. Though this does not lend itself well to the prediction or location of new methods which any social worker might use to better adapt, it is very encouraging to think that no matter how challenging the field of social work, there are people like these participants for whom it will always constitute the ideal work environment.

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Appendix A

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your age?

2. What is your gender?

3. What is your nationality?

4. How long have you been a social worker?

5. What year and from which institution did you receive your Bachelor of Social Work Degree?

Appendix B

Information Letter / Consent Form

Exploring Emotional Coping Methods Used by Experienced Social Workers

Project Lead: Ley D. Fraser, Student pursuing a Master of Arts in Gender Studies
University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9
bfraser@unbc.ca and/or (250) 981-0443

Purpose of Project

This study seeks to explore the experiences of experienced social workers who have completed a Bachelors of Social Work from an accredited institution and have at least 5 years of experience (post-BSW) working as a social worker. The study will examine what social workers who thrive and maintain their emotional health in the field do to help them cope with the emotional demands of their job, through in-depth qualitative interviews. The data from the interviews will be discussed in a thesis paper for my Master of Arts in Gender Studies

What will happen during the project?

You will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and then a qualitative interview (an interview guided by the researcher which seeks to draw out your personal experiences and their significance relative to the research goals). This interview will last a maximum of 2 hours. If at any point you wish to end the interview, or simply take a break, you can request this at any point during the interview. You will not be identified by name in the research or any papers published from it, instead being identified by a name, other than your own, chosen at random.

Risks or benefits to participating in the project

Participation in the project would mean that you will be making a valuable contribution to research on the emotional coping methods that are successful for social workers, and that the use of your experiences in research published from this study have the potential to help other social workers to identify coping methods that may be successful for them. In addition, this research could help to guide future research to find effective emotional coping methods for social workers and others.

In relating your experiences with emotional coping there is a chance that you could experience negative emotions or anxiety. If you feel in any way distressed during the completion of the qualitative interview you can withdraw from the study and you will not be penalized in any way. You will also be able to withdraw your responses by requesting that the researcher discard your

information and all records of your responses will be destroyed as outlined in the 'Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Storage' section.

If you do find that you experience any emotional distress as a result of your participation in this research, mental health services for the BC area can be found through the Northern Health website (northernhealth.ca). If you understand the above information and wish to participate in this interview, you are agreeing to the use of your responses in the research outlined above and any publications which come of it in the future. If you wish to stop the interview or take a short break simply inform the researcher. If you wish to withdraw your responses from use in the study after the interview is complete, you can inform the researcher upon the conclusion of your interview and your responses will be destroyed as outlined below.

Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Storage

During their use in the above study, your responses and any data derived from them will be stored in a secure, password-protected computer hard drive or a locked office space.

After a period of 5 years, all of the data collected will be destroyed. Printed records will be shredded, and records stored on a computer hard drive will be erased using commercial software applications designed to remove all data from the storage device.

The only exception to the above conditions of confidentiality is any responses that indicate criminal behaviour, which would be reported to the RCMP.

Study Results

After the period in which interviews are held, your interview will be transcribed by the researcher. This transcription, as well as an analysis of the themes drawn from your interview, will be made available to you in either a digital or hard copy. You will have a period of two weeks to review this and give feedback about the use and representation of your interview in the research. Following this, the researcher will seek to have the final paper published in a peer-reviewed journal or periodical.

Questions or Concerns about the project

If you have questions regarding this study, or would like to receive a copy of the results when the study is completed, please contact the researcher using the following information:

Graduate student researcher: Ley D. Fraser   bfraser@unbc.ca   250-981-0443

Supervisor & UNBC Associate Professor: Dawn Hemingway dawn.hemingway@unbc.ca 250-960-5694

If you have complaints or concerns about this study, please contact the UNBC Research Ethics Board:

UNBC - Office of Research   **(**250) 960-6735

3333 University Way   General E-mail: reb@unbc.ca

Prince George, BC V2N 4Z9 Canada

Participant Consent and Withdrawal

If you understand the above information and wish to complete the demographic questionnaire and participate in a one-on-one interview, you are agreeing to the use of your responses in the research outlined above and any publications which come of it in the future.

Your participation in the research is completely voluntary and you can choose to end your participation at any time, for any reason- simply inform the researcher you would like to end the interview. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer, without being penalized in any way. If you do not wish to answer a question simply inform the researcher, and the interview will continue with the researcher asking next question. Your responses to the questions you do answer will still remain in the study unless you ask for them to be removed.

If you wish to withdraw your responses from use in the study after the interview is completed, you can inform the researcher upon the conclusion of your interview and your responses will be destroyed as outlined in the 'Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Storage' section.

CONSENT

I have read or been described the information presented in the information letter about the project:

YES   NO

I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this project and to receive additional details I requested.

YES   NO

I understand that if I agree to participate in this project, I may withdraw from the project at any time up until the completion of my interview, with no consequences of any kind. I have been given a copy of this form.

YES   NO

I agree to be audio-recorded.

YES   NO

I understand that my name will not be used in the paper or any resulting use of the data, and that a pseudonym (a name other than my own) will be used to refer to any quotations or direct use of my interview material.

YES   NO

Follow-up information (e.g. transcription) can be sent to me at the following e-mail or mailing address (*if applicable*):

YES   NO

Email:

Mailing Address:

Please indicate which of the above methods is preferred.

Signature (**or note of verbal consent**): _____

Name of Participant (Printed): _____

Date: _____

Appendix C

Research Participation Poster: Text Content

INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Are you a Social Worker who has worked at least five (5) years in the field since obtaining their Bachelor's of Social Work? Do you feel proficient in your field, and successful at coping with the emotional demands of your work?

I am a graduate student doing research as part of a Master's Degree in Gender Studies at UNBC, supervised by Dawn Hemingway. For my thesis research, I am looking for practised social workers to share their experiences of successful emotional coping through a qualitative interview over less than two (2) hours. This interview will examine a series of questions about coping with emotional stress as a social worker, but the real value of your participation comes from the stories and details that are unique to your experience.

Your experiences could be a valuable contribution to research on emotional coping methods that are successful for social workers, and have the potential to guide future research, as well as help other social workers to identify coping methods that may be successful for them.

If you or someone you know would like to have an impact as part of this study, please contact Ley Fraser at bfraser@unbc.ca or (250) 981 0443 to arrange a time for an interview.

Appendix D

	Guiding Questions for Qualitative Interviews
1	How long have you been a social worker?
2a.	Why did you choose to enter social service work?
2b.	Why have you chosen to stay 5 (or more) years?
2c.	Have you ever considered leaving social work?
3a.	What is the most difficult part of your job?
3b.	What is the best part?
3c.	How has your approach to your work changed since you first began working as a social worker?
4a.	What emotions do you associate with your work?
4b.	How have these emotions changed over the time you have worked as a social worker?
4c.	Do you find you think about, or experience emotions about, work issues when you are not at work?
4d.	If so, how much and how often?
5a.	Do you find being a social worker is emotionally taxing?
5b.	If so, how so? Can you provide an example?
6a.	What are some things you do at work which make you feel positive emotions (i.e., love, joy, pride?)
6b.	What are some things you do outside of work which elicit these emotions?
7a.	What are the emotional coping supports that you know of, which are available for social workers?
7b.	Are these supports free?
7c.	How much time do they require?
8a.	Do you believe these supports are effective?
8b.	How would you measure their effectiveness?
9a.	Can you describe your personality?
9b.	Do you believe your personality as a whole (or any particular traits) contributes to your ability to cope with emotional stress?

9c.	Do you believe you are inherently hardy, or resilient?
10a.	What are the ways that you cope with emotional stress?
10b.	Do you know if these are similar, or different, than others in your profession?
11a.	Did you learn any of the ways you cope with stress while you were earning your BSW?
11b.	Can you think of any other significant experiences which have taught you new ways of coping?
12a.	Do you think your coping methods would work for other social workers?
12b.	Why or why not?
13a.	Is there something employers could do to support the coping methods you use?
13b.	What might be required for employers to do this?
14	Do you have anything you would like to add to the interview?

Appendix E

Initial Response Tabling and Themes

Understanding this document: Each transcript was read over for themes, first relating to the answers to specific questions, then for additional themes, and then finally for additional subjects of interest. The themes each correspond to a number (for the question) and sometimes additionally a letter (for the specific theme). Sentences or paragraphs which support the theme (either specifically named or in different words) are highlighted and a text box appears to the right with the theme or themes supported marked (for example, 3/3a).

Some information about the themes: If you see a theme in the document which does not appear marked in your transcript at all, that is just because there was no information in your transcript which contributed to that theme, indicating that was a theme that appeared in some or all of the other interviews. If this seems a bit exhaustive, it is because all possible themes are outlined and not all may make it into the final analysis; in addition, some may merge or be discussed together.

In addition, just because some areas are not marked with themes does not mean they won't appear in the paper or be used for context: many of the longer stories in interviews were especially unique and so did not correspond to others' experience necessarily, but are fascinating experiences I hope to explore to highlight the individual nature of each participant.

Some information about the transcripts: Written copies of interviews often sound a bit awkward, as they lack the nuance of the original communication. I have done my best to preserve speaking style as well as smaller elements such as partial sentences which might show thought process and better help to understand the statement. All of the transcripts were transcribed by myself, and will where appropriate incorporate an element of the spoken interview (i.e. conveying whether the participant spoke softly, emphatically). I am not a professional at transcribing, so please forgive any typos!

As mentioned in the consent sheet, no employers, agencies or individuals mentioned or referenced in the interviews (except in a very broad context i.e. to note that they exist or fund many agencies) are included in the transcripts, instead appearing as [redacted].

Qualitative Interview Guiding Questions- Response Themes

Questions (only questions for which there were themes within responses are included)	Markers of answer themes (match with associated transcripts- for example, a line will be highlighted

		and tagged with '3a' indicating that it supported theme 3a)
1	Why did you choose to enter social service work?	1 interest/passion reasons 1a sustained focus specifically on field or vocational goals
2	Why have you chosen to stay 5 (or more) years?	2 personally rewarding/meaningful
3	Have you ever considered leaving social work?	3 no/not really 3a would return/take break 3b shift within field 3c if left, bc of politics
4	What is the most difficult part of your job?	4 politics 4a limitations (i.e. witnessing negative circumstances without power to help)
5	What is the best part?	5 success/making a difference 5a being w/ clients
6	How has your approach to your work changed since you first began working as a social worker?	6 It has (various reasons) 6a It has not changed 6b Increased confidence/experience
7	What emotions do you associate with your work?	7 happy/proud 7a caring/empathy 7b frustration
8	Do you find you think about, or experience emotions about, work issues when you are not at work?	8 Yes 8a Sometimes 8b Don't consider it a problem 8c work/did work to manage 8d Nope
9	If so, how much and how often?	9 Infrequently 9a If serious issues going on 9b Often
10	Do you find being a social worker is emotionally taxing?	10 Yes 10a Because of politics

		10b No
		10c Not if boundary/distance from clients
11	What are some things you do at work which make you feel positive emotions (i.e., love, joy, pride?)	11 Peer support/interaction
		11a Success/solutions
		11b Autonomy/freedom
12	What are some things you do outside of work which elicit these emotions?	12 Family
		12a Friends
		12b Preferred activities
		12c Outdoors/Nature
13	What are the emotional coping supports that you know of, which are available for social workers?	13Official programs
		13a Informal supports (family or friends)
		13b Peers/management
		13c Counseling
14	Are these supports free?	14 Free
		14a Social cost (stigma/discomfort)
15	How much time do they require?	15 1 hr or less
16	Do you believe these supports are effective?	16 Resolved issue
		16a Venting
		16b for immediate crisis
		16c Depends (on counselor)
17	How would you measure their effectiveness?	17 Use of methods recommended
		17 Resolved issue (i.e. did not seek other methods after)
18	Can you describe your personality?	18 positive/optimistic
		18a analytical/problem focused
		18b confident/assertive
		18c caring/dedicated
19	Do you believe your personality as a whole (or any particular traits) contributes to your ability to cope with emotional stress?	19 Yes
		19b Analytical aspect has
20	Do you believe you are inherently hardy, or resilient?	20 Yes

		20a Developed unrelated to career/SW
21	What are the ways that you cope with emotional stress?	21 Family 21a Peers 21b Self-care (i.e. preferred activities) 21c Outdoors 21d Friends/social 21e analytical
22	Do you know if these are similar, or different, than others in your profession?	22Different 22a Do not know 22b Similar 22c Similar to people like me
23	Did you learn any of the ways you cope with stress while you were earning your BSW?	23 Yes 23a No 23b Some
24	Can you think of any other significant experiences which have taught you new ways of coping?	24 Yes (Varied reasons) 24a No 24b Field experience
25	Do you think your coping methods would work for other social workers?	25 Yes 25a No 25b Maybe
26	Why or why not?	26 If similar people 26a People are highly individual
27	Is there something employers could do to support the coping methods you use? What might be required for employers to do this?	27 Yes 27a Time 27b Money 27c training 27d Upper attitudes (positive/proactive)
28	Additional subjects of interest	28 Management/Supervisory Position Held by Participant 28a 'New Age'/Spiritual/Self Help

	28b [work] challenging in positive way
	28c Critical of Counselor bc of job similarities
	28d Counseling not used as a professional/used for non-work issues
	28e Self-Care/ Maintenance (preventive rather than treating emotional distress)
	28f Experience has mellowed/changed expectations
	28g Self-directed/self-aware

Themes Throughout (not limited to the responses to particular questions)

The themes listed are a condensed analysis of the answer/mentioned subjects themes above. They draw on one or more areas, or the presence and absence of certain things, or the combinations of answer themes.

1. Sustained Interest In Social Work (Considerations of Leaving Focus on Bringing Skills to Field, Contributing in Other Ways)(Problem Solving/resolution reasons for staying)(Interested from a young age) (Agency/Management Politics Main Issue in Field)
2. Participants Held Management/Supervisory roles Which May Influence Perspective
3. Passion/Vocational Commitment
4. Personal Hardiness/Resilience
5. Personality and Coping (or inherent suitability for Social Work)
6. Coping highly individual
7. EAP Awareness but only considered effective in limited context
8. Preventative Coping (not needing to access services i.e. counseling)
9. Creating (mental or physical) space from work
10. Lack of knowledge or effort to find out how others cope
11. Active advocacy for wellness
12. Being self-aware/self-directed
13. Critical of counseling, especially because of own experience with counseling
14. Analytical/problem focused; attempts to take multiple perspectives and problem solve issues
15. Peer support most important method of gaining experience and coping
16. Informal coping favored