Partnerships for Children and Families Project

SOCIAL WORK

Getting Over the Magical Hump: Placement Decisions and Emotional Survival for Child Welfare Workers

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Getting Over the "Magical Hump": Placement Decisions and Emotional Survival for Child Welfare Workers

The removal of a child from a family due to abuse or neglect is the most intrusive intervention used by child welfare workers (Wiehe, 1996). Child welfare work often requires difficult, emotionally laden decisions about permanently severing relationships between children and birth parents. Investigations of the placement process are limited due to the inherent perturbations for mother and child. Most research has focused on the immediate and long term effects of separation and loss for the child when placement occurs (Kufeldt, Vachon, Simard, Baker & Andrews 2000; Palmer, 1995; Steinhauer, 1984). There is, however, an absence of attention to the emotional impact of permanent placement decisions on child welfare workers, although worker dissatisfaction, employee turnover and burnout persist in systems of child protection (Cameron, Freymond, Cornfield, & Palmer, 2001; Daley, 1979; Teram, 1988). This research explores the child welfare worker's experience of the process of permanent placement and how, through the construction of particular identities, they are able to survive the emotional strains of this work.

Methods

To understand the experience of child welfare workers, comprehensive, individual interviews, two to three hours in length, were conducted with six workers from Ontario's child protection system. Three of the workers were supervisors of staff who provide ongoing services to families and children where child protection concerns exist. Two workers provided ongoing services to families and children, and one was employed as an investigator of child abuse allegations. One of the participants had worked in child welfare for less than one year. The others had a minimum of five years of experience.

All of the interviews used the same strategy, beginning with what Spradley (1979) refers to as a grand tour question, namely, 'tell me your experience of crown wardship decision making'. The interview allowed for flexibility so that the respondents could organize their account in a manner consistent with their own conceptualizations of this experience. Each of the interviewed workers was subsequently involved in a group discussion where further reflections on the experience of the placement process were elicited and preliminary research findings were discussed. One group involved the supervisors and the second group involved the front line staff. This separation occurred at the request of the front line workers.

Two analytic strategies were selected to accomplish this investigation. Narrative analysis is concerned with seeing the world from the perspective of the interviewee by analyzing how stories are told (Riessman, 1993). The relationship between child welfare culture and the structure of the worker stories was instructive in developing an understanding of the placement process from the perspective of the worker and the contexts in which the permanent placement process unfolds. Grounded theory focuses on social processes and fosters the identification of connections among events (Charmaz, 2000; Ryan & Bernard, 2000; Strauss and Corbin, 1990, 1998). This analytic strategy was instructive in developing an understanding of the emotional coping processes of workers. The narrative approach provided a broader lens through which the context for the worker's experience of the placement process could be understood , while the grounded theory approach provided insights into the individual processes in which worker's engage in order to cope with the strains of their work.
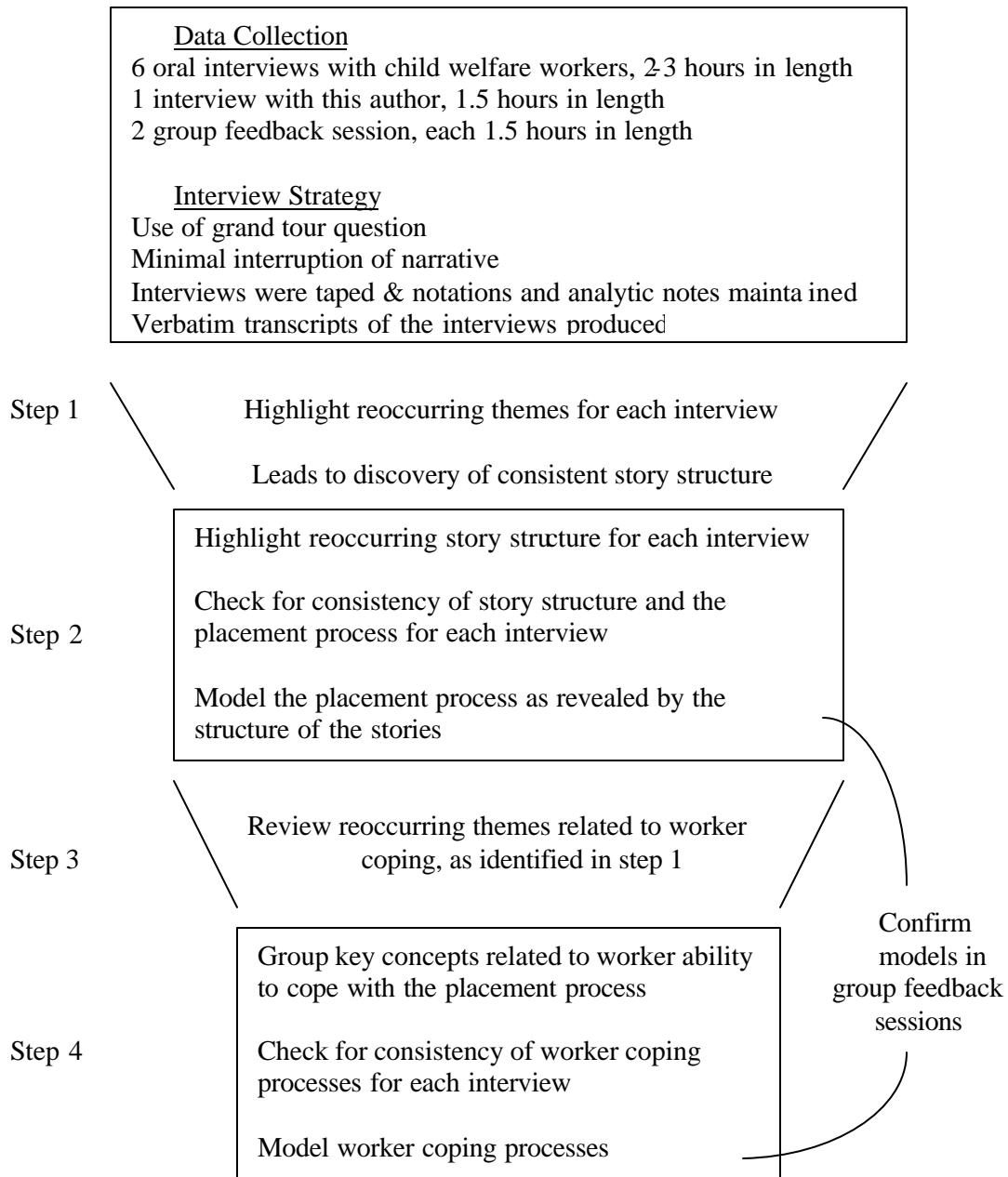
Consistent themes about the placement process and how child welfare workers cope emerged in the interviews and group discussions. Workers recounted their experiences by

telling stories of their involvements with parents whose children eventually became permanent wards. Riessman (1993), suggests that people are likely to tell narratives about the experiences in their lives, particularly if there has been a "breach between ideal and real" (p. 3); in this study, between ideals about saving children through placement and the actual work of doing so. Reoccurring themes clustered at various junctures of the stories, revealing a consistent story structure.

Examples from the transcripts of workers' statements about emotional coping were identified, a process referred to as "open coding" by grounded theorists (Ryan & Bernard, 2000). Key concepts from these statements were categorized and the themes that emerged were compared across the interviews. Relationships among these concepts were noted through additional coding and links to a substantive model about coping processes developed. Figure 1 details the data collection strategies and the methods used in this analysis.

I approached the data with a certain pre-understanding that originated from personal experiences as a front line child welfare worker. Given that all research can be seen as a fundamentally interpretative activity (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000), I acknowledge that my assumptions and notions have had an inevitable impact on the data analysis. In order to clarify and to reflect on my own experiences with the placement of children, I was interviewed by a child welfare worker who did not participate in this study, but is familiar with the topic area. This record of personal experience was then subjected to the same analytic processes as the other interviews. None of the quotations cited in this paper are drawn from this interview. Rather, the personal interview helped to identify my biases, and provided a backdrop against which the voices of others could be considered.

Figure 1: Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Data Collection
6 oral interviews with child welfare workers, 2-3 hours in length
1 interview with this author, 1.5 hours in length
2 group feedback session, each 1.5 hours in length

Interview Strategy
Use of grand tour question
Minimal interruption of narrative
Interviews were taped & notations and analytic notes maintained
Verbatim transcripts of the interviews produced

Step 1   Highlight reoccurring themes for each interview

Leads to discovery of consistent story structure

Highlight reoccurring story structure for each interview

Check for consistency of story structure and the
placement process for each interview

Step 2

Model the placement process as revealed by the
structure of the stories

Review reoccurring themes related to worker
coping, as identified in step 1

Step 3

Confirm
models in
group feedback
sessions

Group key concepts related to worker ability
to cope with the placement process

Check for consistency of worker coping
processes for each interview

Step 4

Model worker coping processes
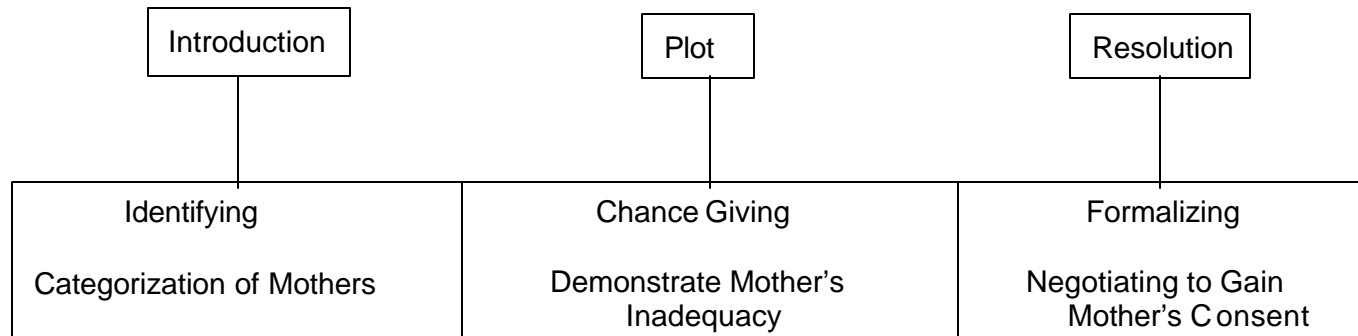
Organization of the Paper

This paper presents an analysis of the process of permanently removing children from mothers who are identified by child welfare workers as incapable of properly parenting children.   It explores how child welfare workers cope with the emotional strain, inherent in the work of severing relationships between mother and child. The first section of this paper discusses the various stages of the permanent placement process. This is followed by an exploration of how workers cope with the emotional strain, inherent in the work of severing relationships between mother and child. The next section consists of my personal reflections, which represent an attempt to reconcile my child welfare experiences with the new understandings that have emerged for me as a result of this research. This paper concludes with questions that arise about the nature of this work and the implications for children and families.

Figure 2 provides an overview of the conceptual model that emerged for this analysis. This model provides a structure for the discussions in the first section of the paper by illustrating the relationships between the formal structure of the child welfare system, the structure of the worker stories, and the phases of the permanent placement process within the child welfare context. Figure 2 provides a structure for the second section of the paper by illustrating the processes that enable workers to accept the system in which they work, and to cope with the emotional demands of the permanent placement process.
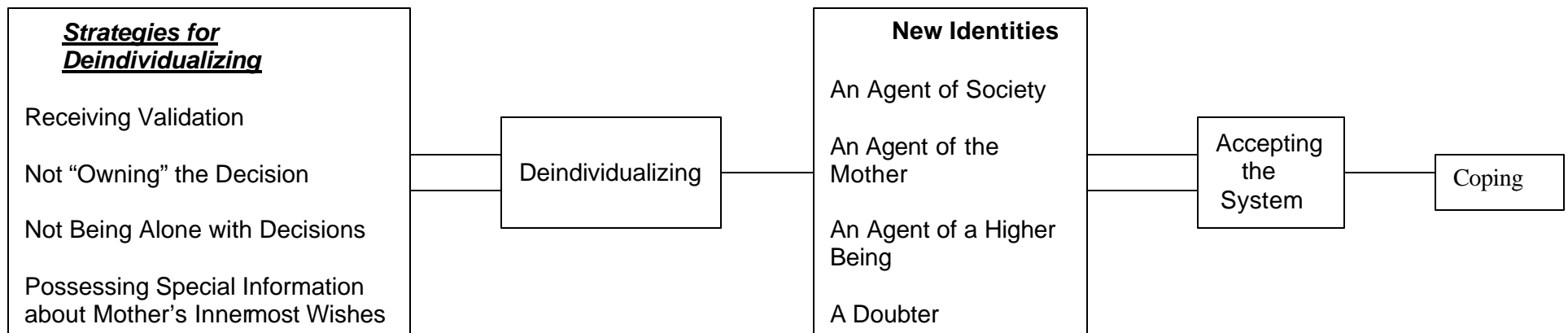
Figure 2: Relationships between narrative structure, the phases of the permanent placement process and worker coping

Legislative/Legal Requirements & Organizational Structure/Procedures

The Process of Permanent Placement

Introduction	Plot	Resolution

Identifying Categorization of Mothers	Chance Giving Demonstrate Mother's Inadequacy	Formalizing Negotiating to Gain Mother's Consent

How Workers Cope: New Identities For Managing the Permanent Placement Process

Strategies for Deindividualizing

Receiving Validation

Not "Owning" the Decision

Not Being Alone with Decisions

Possessing Special Information about Mother's Innermost Wishes

Deindividualizing

New Identities

An Agent of Society

An Agent of the Mother

An Agent of a Higher Being

A Doubter

Accepting the System

Coping

The Process of Permanent Placement

Permanent placement is understood as a process that occurs between a child welfare worker and a client. Analysis of the structure of the stories shows that themes that categorize the mothers, cluster at the introduction to the worker stories. The story opens with certain descriptions of the mother, such as immature or addicted, which function to categorize and to signal the potential for a permanent placement outcome. Identifying is the first phase of the permanent placement process (see Figure 2).

The second phase of the permanent placement process is chance-giving, which corresponds to the plot of the story (see Figure 2). Reissman (1993) refers to the plot as the section of the story that details the unexpected twists or complicating actions in the story. The plots of the worker stories were rich with themes detailing the emotional discomfort for workers involved in the process of demonstrating the mother's inadequacy.

As shown in Figure 2, the final phase of the permanent placement process is the formalizing phase, which corresponds to the resolution of the story. During this phase, workers attempt through negotiation to secure the consent of the client to the legal request for permanent placement. Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations, the stories all have the same resolution. Themes centre on how the mother demonstrated some parenting abilities, but not enough to secure the return of her children. There is a judicial ruling granting the permanent placement order and the worker angst, which occupies the story's plot, gives way to reliance on administrative and legal procedure. Each of the phases of the permanent placement process and the corresponding story section is presented in greater detail in the following sections.

Identifying

The introduction of each of the stories consists of statements containing two main points that identify the parents whose children eventually became permanent wards. The first identifying point distinguishes the parents along gender lines. The parents who are central to the stories are mothers. Three fathers are mentioned. One has been incarcerated for a murder conviction; the other two are described as physically abusive. No father is considered central to the parenting issue in question. The most involved father participated with the mother in counselling and in attending access visits. The worker described the relationship between these parents as one where:

there was some mutual violence but clearly he was the one that had the

power in the relationship. He was released from jail. She [meaning the

mother] initially agreed that she would not allow him to move back into the

home but turns out she did. At that particular point in time, I considered taking

it to court.

The focus of this worker's evaluation is on the mother's action of letting him back into the home and not on the father's violence, despite the acknowledgement of the power imbalance.

Ensuring the well being of children has historically been the responsibility of mothers. Although the interviewees made continual references to their work as involving the assessment of 'parenting', and although 'parenting' generally is a term that is applied in reference to both fathers and mothers, the permanent placement process was focussed primarily on the evaluation of mother-child relationships. This is consistent with literature that identifies a primary focus on mothers in the child welfare system (Callahan, 1993; Miller, 1991; Roberts, 1999; Swift, 1995; Swift, 1998). Fathers tend to be mentioned in relation to the mother and, more specifically, to demonstrate the mother's inadequacy around

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choosing a suitable partner (Polansky, Chalmers, Buttenweiser, & Williams, 1981) or around curbing male violence (Frost and Stein, 1989).

The second component of the identifying stage consists of statements that categorize the mother's particular deficits. According to Swift (1995), clients are processed in the child welfare system according to their particular categorization. Implicit in this type of categorization are values about parenting which underlie the rationale for child welfare involvement. Examples include statements such as: "she functioned around a 6 year old level so there was no question that she could really handle the child" or "she was alcoholic and there was domestic violence" or "mom tried a lot of different things. She tried to change her lifestyle. She tried to get rid of her addiction habits. She tried to stop engaging some of her activity". A history of child welfare involvement is an identifying category that causes concern. Workers often used adjectives like "terrible" or "bad" in relation to this history. And finally, the mental illness of the mother is another categorization that was routinely mentioned during the interviews. One worker describes mental illness as a category that is often a more "clear cut" example of the necessity of permanent placement, particularly when the illness is chronic in nature.

Permanent placement is underway at the identifying stage of the process. Workers use language such as "the writing was on the wall" or "having a sense" from the beginning about the permanent placement outcome. One worker says "sometimes it's quite clear, especially in the beginning because the mom has the history she has, or the baby is born with drugs in her system". The categorization that occurs at the outset sets the tone for the nature of the child welfare involvement, and shapes the outcome for involved families.

Chance-giving

The plots of the worker's stories consist of description of the second phase of the permanent placement process, where mothers are given chances to prove parenting ability (see Figure 1). For workers, one of the chief tasks of the chance-giving stage is the observation of the mother's ability to comply with terms, which have been proposed by the worker and are often legally formalized with a supervision order. During chance-giving, workers describe an emotional response that often produces internal conflict.

The proposed terms often require mothers to attend therapies relevant to their categorization, such as counselling, addictions treatment or parenting classes. They are expected to participate in regular, often supervised, visits with children who may be in foster care. If addiction is an issue, parents may be required to submit to regular drug screens. One worker speaks of the prospect of an identified permanent placement mother attending parenting courses:

> "we have to demonstrate that we offered it to her ? . we as an agency
>
> are supposed to offer people parenting courses etcetera to help them, to
>
> assist them, to a point where they would actually be able to parent so ?
>
> I filled out the form"

She continues with description of the futility of the action: "she had been to every parenting course that had happened here. She had been to mother-child things … she made no progress whatsoever."

Chance-giving is not always a mandatory step. It may be bypassed, generally in situations where the mother has been categorized as having a "terrible history". It is from this history that evidence is drawn for the legal proceedings. One worker speaks of the

struggle of complying with an agency decision to draft an immediate permanent placement application:

> "she had never been evaluated as a parent. We had never had any
>
> contact with her while she was in charge of children. So we were
>
> really basing this on history, on who she had been historically as
>
> opposed to who she was as a parent …. we were making a huge leap ?
>
> that was difficult."

At the chance-giving stage, the worker knows the mother's categorization and is anticipating the outcome; as one worker says "we're building our case right from the beginning". The worker's stories indicate that the outcome for the family depends on the identifying category. One worker speaks of an exception where the permanent placement plan was abandoned. This seasoned worker, based on her own observations of the family, and a thorough reading of the file, presented a case for misidentification that culminated in her colleagues acknowledging that they had mistakenly "just got on a roll with what the other worker was saying about adoption and went with it". In order to thwart the established permanent placement plan, the worker had to overturn the mother's original categorization.

The workers frequently mentioned the emotional strain associated with the contradictions that arise during the chance-giving stage. Child welfare workers are confronted with the difficulties of balancing the needs of the identified family, the child welfare bureaucracy, and the legislative system. In reference to the impossibility of achieving a balance that meets the needs of the various parties to the process, one worker describes this position as a "thoroughly no win situation". On

one level, workers consider the needs of the family and wrestle with the questions

that arise. One worker asks:

> "should we give her [meaning the mother] one more chance? How
>
> many chances do you give? What is right for the children? That's
>
> one part of the struggle ?   you know she's a good mom when she's
>
> clean ? . Should this child have to say goodbye to this person they
>
> have lived with all their lives?"

The intensity of the emotional struggle varies. A worker speaks of situations where:

> "you know that this is what you absolutely have to do. There is no
>
> choice. This child needs to be made a crown [meaning permanent]
>
> ward. There are no relatives. This mom absolutely can't do it. So
>
> it's more clear-cut. Others are much more of a struggle, when you
>
> have a mother that you really like, when you see her with her children
>
> and you really, really know she cares."

 On another level, child welfare organizations are also large bureaucracies with

certain expectations of workers that regulate their conduct around the permanent

placement process. When a parent is identified as a permanent placement client,

there is an internal expectation that workers will adhere to the procedures that are

understood as appropriate for the categorization. One worker speaks of how she feels

"furious" when the procedures are not followed:

> "I just really think that if the family service worker doesn't agree
>
> with the [permanent placement] decision we need to contain that
>
> within our walls. We can't allow that discrepancy to be seen by the
>
> client or by the community ?   [she] made us look like fools in the

community and has told mom that maybe there is a chance that we are

backing off here ? . She was a new worker. She had only been here for

5 weeks and really felt badly for mom, as did everybody else."

This worker continued by describing how agreement about the permanent placement

categorization was achieved, by holding a meeting for the purposes of bringing the worker

"on board" with the plan.

Chance-giving appears to be primarily a process of collecting evidence, in situations

where there is an insufficient historical account, for the purpose of satisfying legal

requirements. The emotional contradictions for workers are heightened, as they are required

to give chances to the mother and simulta neously deny that the purpose of the chance-giving

is to satisfy legal requirements for the demonstration of parental failure. The worker who

filled out the parenting form provides one of the many examples from the stories of how

workers struggle with finding balances that satisfy needs at the legislative level. She speaks

of her failure to respond to the legal needs saying:

"At the beginning I didn't know what I was doing. I got onto a moving

train. Even the part about offering them parenting courses, I didn't know

that, and I should have known that. I didn't know what permanent placement

really meant."

The confusion arises for the worker who knows that insisting on another parenting course for

the mother is a questionable intervention. As chance-giving is often a vehicle for the legal

demonstration of parental failure, the needs of the identified family may be secondary in this

process.

And finally, workers must also find ways to reconcile discrepancies that may arise

regarding their knowledge of human nature and the expectations for change during the

chance-giving stage of the permanent placement process. In questioning the expectations for change placed on the mothers, one participant says:

"We expect a lot. Take a mom with 4 kids who is alone and has to meet

all of the demands of the kids and all of the demands of the CAS … now

add depression to the mix and it is just so hard …. Could I really be a client

and do it? The answer is probably not."

Despite these rather profound doubts, the child welfare worker must find ways to cope with the emotional demands of their position; in essence, to know where the permanent placement process is leading, but simultaneously to deny this knowledge while the chance-giving stage unfolds.

Negotiating

The resolution of the story is when, after a period of negotiation, judicial assent is obtained. Negotiating is the attempt to strike an agreement whereby the mother consents to the legal application for permanent placement . Negotiation may be motivated by the belief that proceeding with the mother's consent is preferable to a conflict that may culminate in a lengthy and stressful trial.

The stories contain many references to a negotiating phase.   At the point of negotiation, the worker is clear, usually in writing, about the intention to request permanent wardship and as one worker says "the lines are drawn". The negotiation phase is described in various ways. One worker says:

"As the family service worker, it is that worker's responsibility to start

speaking with the mom about what are the plans – what is it that is the

Children's Aid's view of the situation and um ? try to negotiate or deal

with her about what it is that we have planned and the gulf, the vast gulf

that is in between the mom and the Children's Aid."

This worker repeatedly applied the phrase "chipping away at the gulf" to conferences where professionals would meet with the mother in a show of public support for the permanent placement plan. Another worker referred to a script she follows:

"The way I do it is to start very early. I guess I normalize a lot of things

and then it's a matter of playing it out. Often I have to send the child home

because I know I don't have enough to prevent the child from going home ?

and then eventually the kid acts out enough that they [meaning the parents]

say OK its fine? that's what I mean about the script. I have to sort

of [pause] well I'm leading them with some things."

Another worker is much more blatant about the negotiating tactics:

"It [referring to a permanent wardship application] was a bargaining chip

with this young woman .? It was easier to say to her 'if you sign you still

get to see [name of mother's olde st son]. And your other child, well, she's

younger and we're doing her a big favour by making it possible for her to

be adopted."

Obtaining judicial assent formalizes the permanent placement process. The worker stories contained very limited references to court with the exception of the newest worker who had applied for permanent wardship based on the mother's 'terrible history'. She speaks to her beginning experience with the family court system:

"I wish she [referring to the mother] had a lawyer that was fifteen times

better than our lawyer; that would give us a run for our money; that would

make us look under every rock and stone and make sure beyond a shadow of

a doubt that this is the right decision? I wish I could say prove me wrong.

I want to be proven wrong but I know he can't. After I left court the last time

I couldn't come back into the office. I went home and cried for three hours

because I felt terrible."

The process unfolds for workers amidst extreme emotional pressures and in the absence of

mechanisms for proving "beyond a shadow of a doubt" that the correct decisions have been

made, even though the formal procedures may have been followed flawlessly.

New workers are presented with a number of statements that can be embraced as tools

for managing emotions associated with the work of separating children from their mothers.

The degree to which workers are able to integrate these statements into their own belief

system impacts their ability to remain within the child welfare system. As one worker says

of the permanent placement process:

"The whole thing is sad. It's not that you become jaded or hard, but after

a while you develop ways to protect yourself. Its something that has to

be done so you have to be strong, not just for yourself but for the mother

too … at the beginning it [is] more emotional. At the beginning it takes hours of

your time."

The worker, who is new to the field of child welfare, reflects on her only experience:

"I wanted to work for an agency that had some power to get these kids out

of these horrific situations. This is the place to do it, but I never dreamt it

would be like this. I never dreamt it would be such a draining experience. I

thought I would feel good about it. I thought I would feel like I had rescued

someone .? I keep thinking there's some magical hump I need to get over

where I say: ok, I'm not new anymore. I know what I'm doing. Now I like

the job."

This worker expresses her longing for a way to think about her work that distances her from the emotional strain and gets her to a place where she likes the job.

How Workers Cope: New Identities for Getting Over the "Magical Hump"

In order to cope with the responsibility for the permanent placement process, which was repeatedly referred to as "playing God", workers cannot think of themselves as the sole decision maker. An important strategy for workers is to assign responsibility for permanent placement decisions to another source, a process that de-individualizes and distances workers emotionally from responsibility for the outcome.   As workers shed the identity of an autonomous decision maker, space is created for the establishment of new identities and, conversely, as new identities gain ground, workers become increasingly de-individualized (see Figure 2). Workers become agents of a source to which responsibility for the permanent placement event can be attributed.

An Agent of Society

Child welfare workers frequently use the term "the society" in reference to the decision maker. This term is ambiguous. In Ontario, it may refer to the name of the child welfare authority (i.e. The Children's Aid Society), or it may refer, more generally, to a broader society. The newest worker recounts her reaction to a supervisor's advice about de-individualizing:

> "My supervisor says don't say 'I', say 'the society'. Ok, 'the society'
> doesn't think you can parent and she hears, 'I' don't think you can parent.
> What a message to give to a first time mother ? . You know, there is so
> much talk around here about [how] you don't own the decision. The society
> owns the decision. That's a bunch of bunk. It is. I own the decision."

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Conversely a supervisor with several years of experience says, "you work with the worker so everyone validates what you are doing all the way along. You're never really alone with it. It just sometimes feels like you're all alone with it. But you're not. There's always some collaboration." And another supervisor says: "if the bureaucracy is really working, then it is a decision that is not left for one person. It is a decision that is shared by the agency. And for the most part, it is my experience that that works very well."

An Agent of the Client

Sometimes, workers think of themselves as accomplices with the mother in facilitating the permanent placement process. In these situations, the worker believes that some mothers inwardly desire the removal of their children. An accomplice interprets certain behaviors as signals that permanent placement is the mother's secret desire. One worker says, "sometimes it comes right down to the wire and then there is a slip up. Its almost like they let us know on purpose? I do think slip-ups are on purpose…." Another says, "the writing is on the wall again because I get a sense. You learn what the parents want. They sort of know too. I feel that they often already know what's going to happen." Another says, in reference to apprehending a baby who eventually became a permanent ward, "it was probably one of the easiest apprehensions I ever did because mom actually was crying and upset but did get the baby ready, and I could see that she really wanted this." Acting with the understanding that permanent placement is what a mother truly wants provides emotional reassurance for the worker in the face of a mother's actions that might indicate the contrary.

An Agent of a Higher Being

Acting as an agent of 'the society', or as an agent of the client, helps to disperse and deflect responsibility for the permanent placement process away from the worker, but the existential question of why we live in a society where permanent placement is required still

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remains. Some child welfare workers find answers by developing fatalistic beliefs. A fatalist believes that there is something, or someone, beyond the human realm, that sanctions the permanent placement process. As one worker says "its like there is something out there making sure that things happen the way they should". This worker seems to find comfort by the idea that permanent placement is a process that is ordained, and also controlled, by a higher power. Another says:

"I have decided to think of everything in terms of karma. You know, its

this child's karma ? the child didn't make a good decision prenatally to

choose these   people as parents ? I have to comfort myself in some way

but I'm uncomfortable and I don't know what the solution is."

Whether the child welfare worker is acting as an agent of 'the society', as an agent of the client, or as an agent of a higher being, she is never required to face any identified family as an individual. In the above quotations, strategies that encourage de-individualizing and the construction of new identities are suggested. Supervisors have a direct role in encouraging the development of new identities. They do so by suggesting that there is a separation between the 'making' and the 'owning' of decisions, which, in turn, assists workers with the acceptance of their work. There is repeated validation for workers that the permanent placement process is appropriate and an understanding that opinions to the contrary are not tolerated. Also, there is the reassurance that "you're never alone" with the decision, that you are supported by others who understand. And finally, when parental failure is established, it may be interpreted as an expression of the mother's innermost desire for permanent placement, rather than evidence of a child welfare failure. This interpretation is a technique that assures that workers continue to see themselves, not only as rescuers of children, but also as assisting the mothers to accomplish what they "really want".

The Identity of a Doubter

Even though child welfare workers develop new identities to assist them with the emotional strains of the permanent placement process, ironically, they continue to express considerable doubt about the work that they do. Child welfare workers are not oblivious to the criticism of their practices, nor are they unaware of the potential negative outcomes of foster placement. One worker speaks to the issue of negative outcomes for permanent wards:

"As good as a foster mom can be, we are still taking them away from

their parents. I think there is an inherent sense of belonging, even if it's

a dark hole of a relationship with the parents and, most of the kids, I find,

have insecure attachments."

The doubt about the appropriateness of their work is a persistent theme in the stories. Statements like "there isn't enough information out there to suggest that what we do is right", or "I want to be convinced that there is a best way, but I think that is a fantasy", express a common theme of doubt about the merits of permanent placement.

It is puzzling that workers, despite some incredibly strong expressions of doubt, spend years doing the work that involves separating children and mothers. Margolin (1997), in his critical examination of the social work profession, states that social workers are able to cure doubts about their practice by acknowledging the legitimacy of those very doubts. Child welfare workers can 'know and not know' simultaneously; that is, know enough about a mother's ability to permanently remove her child, while simultaneously remaining uncertain about the appropriateness of this intervention.

Towards Accepting the System

Almost all of the participants acknowledged that to remain in child welfare there must be a level of acceptance of the merits of the permanent placement process. Workers "have to come around because there is no choice? its acceptance of the system that we work in…there is a structure to follow", declares one of the supervisors. "Getting over the magical hump" or "coming around" is demonstrated by the willingness to follow the structure. The significance of adhering to the structure is verified by another worker who says, "if this system is working the way it should, this stuff [in reference to the permanent placement process] should be straightforward". "Getting over the magical hump" also requires belief. In reference to an older child's wishes about adoption, the worker says "they don't know what's in their best interest. They don't know yet. But we believe, somehow, that it will be ok, well, we have to believe that it will be." Acceptance of the system, as evidenced by adhering to the structure, and belief in an outcome that "will be ok", appear to be the necessary ingredients for workers to remain in the system and participate repeatedly in the permanent placement process.

Reflections

This research was motivated by a need to understand my experience of participating in making permanent placement decisions. At the beginning of my involvement in child welfare, I believed that the work of saving abused children, through placement in loving, nurturing environments, would be challenging, but ultimately satisfying. Instead, I discovered that the work of placing children in foster care was deeply troubling and the feelings associated with the process were confusing. This research is an attempt to make sense of this reaction by developing an increased understanding of the process by which

children become permanent wards of the state and by determining how workers find the necessary emotional comfort to routinely participate in the permanent placement process.

My observations and interpretations as a researcher, invariably, become blended with my own memories of child welfare work. This paper reflects a personal process of remembering and of assigning meaning to experiences. This paper also reflects an attempt to interpret and to respond to the stories of others who have shared similar experiences. Its effects have been validating, sometimes soothing and, sometimes, disturbing. In the context of my work, it has accomplished a deeper understanding of myself and a sense of continuity for my life that did not exist before.

At the outset of this research project, I was troubled by my own experiences with the permanent placement process, and confused and angered by workers who were able to remain in child welfare settings. As I listened and reflected on my own work, this confusion and anger seemed to give way to a new compassion. I began to see how child welfare workers are in a no-win situation, and how there is a prevailing need to find comfort when the work is emotionally exhausting and deeply troubling. I began to see how I too was caught in a web of intense contradiction. Like the workers that I interviewed, the child welfare identities that I constructed emerged in my stories about mothers and the permanent placement process. I can recall how these identities helped me to manage emotional conflicts, and how painful it was when the identities were not sustaining.

Now, as I position myself as an autonomous decision maker in relation to my experiences of the permanent placement process, dilemmas about how I managed the emotions of the work give way to concerns about how the child welfare system continues to create situations for workers where the pressures to conform are intense, and a shield of constructed identity is necessary for survival. I ask myself, what were the costs to the

mothers and to the children that were permanently removed from their care, when the processes of de-individualizing and constructing new identities were central to our relationship? How did these processes colour my understanding of their needs and impact my decisions?

Conclusions

The child welfare worker's experience of the permanent placement process reveals that workers must embrace a rather specific system of beliefs in order to manage their emotions in relation to the permanent placement process. Part of the socialization of new workers involves the development of a standardized set of beliefs about the permanent placement process. Workers who deviate from these beliefs are described by their peers as "new" or "immature" and are subjected to group pressures designed to "bring them on board with the plan", all of which are powerful messages about conforming. It seems untenable that a worker could maintain an individual identity as a decision maker in the context of the permanent placement process. I suspect that those who make such an attempt are forced by workplace pressure, and by emotional discomfort, to leave.

Many child welfare workers express deep dissatisfaction with their work. A recent study from one of Ontario's child welfare agencies shows that in 1999 and 2000 combined, 79% of family service workers transferred or terminated, as did 93% of intake workers. The authors suggest that these retention problems are not related to market influences, such as a strong economy and more mobile workforce, but rather to "specific stresses, expectations and job design of the protection positions" (Coulthard et al., 2001, p. 5). The result is not only struggles for affected workers, but also costs to child welfare organizations whose resources and energies are directed toward the problems of recruitment rather than toward

helping children and families. And there are costs to family members who are often required to form new relationships with inexperienced workers in the midst of their own crises.

Many workers cannot, or will not, modify their beliefs to manage the emotional pressures associated with the permanent placement process. Although these placements account for a small percentage of the overall workload of a child welfare worker, they do represent the most extreme example of the dilemmas that child welfare workers encounter in their daily work.   At the core of this work are fundamental contradictions between state authority and family privacy, between family support and child removal, and between formal procedures and genuine help to families.

The processes that workers undergo in order to cope emotionally with the contradictions of their work colour the relationships that workers are able to develop with families and children.   The needs of vulnerable families and children may become defined and shaped within a context of worker coping. Interventions with families and children may likewise, become coloured by the coping processes of workers. In order to keep the needs of families and of children central to the work of child welfare, workers must be able to hear and to respond creatively and flexibly to the needs of children and families. They require workplaces where they are encouraged to maintain their identity as individual decision makers, rather than being pressured to conform to standardized beliefs.

I believe that the work of child welfare contradicts many workers' personal and professional values, the effects of which workers attempt to ameliorate by de-individualizing. In order to begin to respond to this concern, child welfare systems require sustaining processes of communication where front line workers can share experiences and find emotional validation. Meaningful dialogue may lead to new understanding of worker experience and the profound dilemmas, which they are required to manage in their daily

practices. However, the solutions do not ultimately lie with helping workers to cope better, but rather with resolving the larger issues where the dilemmas that worker's experience originate.

In many non Anglo-American nations and first nations cultures, child welfare practices, and the nature of the relationships between workers and families that ensue, are different from what we find within our system. Workers are encouraged to use their professional talents in developing creative and proactive interventions in response to child maltreatment concerns (Cooper, Hetherington, Baistow, Pitts, & Spriggs, 1995; Hetherington, 1997; Marneffe & Broos, 1997).   Within these systems, relationships between child welfare workers and families do not appear to be intensely impacted by contradictions. Worker morale and turnover are not reported to be central issues. This suggests that viable alternatives to our current child welfare practices do exist.

Although particular methods may not be directly transportable across systems, cross-cultural comparisons are useful for stimulating awareness of alternate possibilities and for prompting the rethinking of emphases that currently dominate our system. The knowledge that child welfare workers in other systems can effectively respond to issues of child maltreatment within an emotionally sustainable work environment generates hope for a different future for our present system. The work of child welfare can and must be accomplished within morally and emotionally sustainable work environments where workers can respond flexibly to the needs of families and children.

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