

Maintaining Workers Resolve:
Examining Influential Factors and Supports Leading to Long-Term Worker Permanence
in Child Welfare

By

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Retention of experienced workers is an ongoing challenge in child protection social work. The purpose of this study is to understand more about the permanence of frontline child protection workers, where permanence is defined as ten or more consecutive years of frontline practice. Using a qualitative narrative methodology, supported by anti-oppressive theory, conversational interviews were conducted with experienced frontline child protection workers. Through narrative analysis of these interviews, I uncover some of the impacts and influence on worker permanence.

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Chapter One

Introduction

Social work, although a rewarding profession, is a difficult one. Many day to day factors that impact upon all of us as individuals can compound upon professional social workers, who are committed to empower, motivate, lead, support, or even help protect those they work for. Social workers on the frontline of child welfare are faced with an increasingly difficult task of helping parents and caregivers to protect some of those most vulnerable in society, our children. Frontline child protection workers are expected to help families protect children, but are expected as well to build positive working relationships with parents, families and communities, while managing what seems an ever-increasing caseload. Yet, despite these demanding expectations, there are frontline child welfare workers who have maintained their professional position, day to day, for many years.

The purpose of this research is to understand more about the influential factors or supports that impact front-line child welfare workers in ways that help to maintain their permanence in the field, where “permanence” is defined as working in front line practice for a consecutive period of at least ten years. As well, I was interested in worker narratives about their permanence. Narrative research can often work to uncover meanings shared by participants in a group. Like other qualitative methodologies, it has the potential as Hesse-Biber, Leavy and Yaiser describe, to “disrupt dominant ways of knowing to create rich new meanings” (2004, p. 3). This

research began as my interest to know more about permanence and to better understand it, and to explore what knowledge long-term frontline child protection workers may have that could help us to learn more about factors that impact and influence permanence. Although there are many research studies available reviewing frontline child welfare practice, few contemporary studies exist within Canada where frontline worker permanence was a specific concern. Fewer yet, are Ontario studies concentrating on frontline child welfare worker experience where frontline workers had a voice, through the creation of worker narratives, as a means to better understand the impacts and influence on worker permanence.

Although social workers as a population are not marginalized with respect to socio-economic and other factors often discussed in anti-oppressive research, frontline child welfare workers lack a forum in which to discuss and reflect on their individual experiences. Although there are many contemporary studies of child protection as a macro social service system (see, for example Heino, 2012; Hearn, Poso, Smith, White & Korpinen, 2004; Garbarino, 1977), the stories of individual front line child protection workers are often lost. Many times through the literature review, I was able to locate and review studies discussing macro system issues with respect to child welfare service, for example: funding cutbacks and shortages, amalgamation directives, changes in service provision, provincial practice directives, caseload requirements and ongoing training standards. Much less was located that specifically discussed or studied individual frontline worker experience, and fewer studies yet that sought to examine worker narratives. Although certainly frontline workers are present in the day to day work with families and children, much of the literature related to child welfare dealt with macro

system related issues. My research provided a space for some frontline workers to share their stories and narrate their experiences, with the intention that this practice knowledge could be shared widely amongst other child welfare workers, and professionals within the field. My ultimate hope for this research is that it will benefit the lives of families involved with child protection services, who are predominantly some of the most marginalized members of society.

Of the many definitions of social work practice in circulation, perhaps my favourite is this: “practice is always shaped by the needs of the times, the problems they present, the fears they generate, the solutions that appeal, and the knowledge and skill available” (Greene, 2010, p. 1). As a practicing social worker myself, this particular definition of social work practice appeals to me for several reasons. I believe the definition is fluid and can moderate itself to the changing needs of the worker, client and society as we each acknowledge our social locations and other critical factors of who we are and what we bring to our work. Secondly, this definition specifically mentions the knowledge and skill available, and I believe honours social workers in acknowledging our ongoing commitment to learning. From an anti-oppressive perspective, not only is our commitment to learning acknowledged, but so is our commitment and determination to criticize and challenge the dominant discourses through which we understand our lives and the lives of those we serve.

Child welfare provided me an opportunity for stable, full-time work following my completion of my initial degree in Social Development Studies at the University of Waterloo. However, over the next ten years while I continued to work within the field, raise a family, and pursue my commitment to education, I lost many valuable peers and

colleagues through different forms of attrition. I began to notice that my professional peers in frontline child protection work seemed to leave the profession at a much higher rate than those in other professional social work roles in our community. This was the beginning of my interest to understand more about this phenomenon.

As I continued through my late twenties and early thirties with my social work education, first a BSW from the University of Victoria, and later my graduate work at this same university, I began to appreciate and understand more about anti-oppressive practice, and its application in various contexts, including child welfare. The Ontario Child Welfare Anti-Oppressive Roundtable describes anti-oppression as engaging in work that critically examines how social structures and social institutions work to create and perpetuate the oppression and marginalization of those who have been identified as not belonging to the dominant group (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, 2009). As I moved forward in my development and understanding of anti-oppressive theory and made a commitment to be critical of the power and privilege that can manifest itself as a result the oppression and "Othering" of clients, I gained an appreciation for the critical nature of anti-oppressive theory and how it can be applied in order to understand narratives of lived experience.

Anti-oppressive practice and narrative theory together seem to reflect my values in day to day practice with child welfare clients, children and families, such as my efforts to be compassionate, reflective and critical. I sought to apply these same values in my research. The narratives shared by participants speak to the impacts and influences on worker permanence. They were stories that I was interested to hear, as I too am a child welfare worker, having worked on the front lines of child welfare in Ontario over the last

decade. In the next chapter, I examine the literature about frontline child protection, with an emphasis on literature related to permanence. In Chapter Three, I explain my approach to research, including the methodology used and the rationale for choosing narrative methodology. Chapter Four details the ethical and political considerations in my research. In Chapter Five, I present my analysis of the interview data. The final chapter summarizes my findings, sets them within the literature, and makes some tentative recommendations.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

While completing the literature review, in helping to narrow the main questions of this research project, several themes seemed to evolve. Specific themes identified included: system issues and caseloads; worker burnout and critical incident stressors; the absence of worker voice, and worker retention. While each seem to have a possible impact on frontline child welfare social workers, little research could be found where frontline social workers themselves were able to give specific knowledge of their experiences in the field, and share their insights into what factors or supports influenced their permanence in the field, or how they perceive their experiences of permanence. In this chapter, I review and summarise the literature related to each of the identified themes, what is missing from the literature, as well as what could be further explored with additional research.

(i) System Issues and Caseloads

A number of researchers identified system issues and caseload size as significant impacts on worker permanence and worker retention in child welfare. In 2009, Yamatani et al. discussed how child welfare agencies are consistently plagued with high workloads. They reported that “high workloads contributed to inadequate investigations and inconsistent case monitoring” (361) within the child welfare system. Important to the purpose of my research interest however, was a secondary finding from Yamatani et al. that “excessive workloads and caseloads were commonly noted factors

related to stress, job burnout, job dissatisfaction, and turnover of child welfare workers” (p. 361). Lonne et al. note in a similar vein that when one reviews child welfare, “Perhaps it is not surprising that it is a worldwide phenomenon that front-line workers in child welfare are increasingly hard to recruit, resign quickly and burn out at a rapid rate” (2008, p. 123).

Although worker burnout and emotional exhaustion are central to understanding negative worker permanence in frontline child welfare work, other system issues also have significant impacts. For example, Williams, Nicholas, Kirk and Wilson (2010, p. 157) note that “Role overload, reasonable workload ... organizational commitment and valuing employees” influence permanence. The same study concluded that there was an urgent need for policy change in caseload size, as well as workload configuration, in order to support workers in achieving permanence within the field. Williams et al. note that, in addition to the actual number of children and families, or “working files,” in child welfare caseloads, other factors were cumulative in overall workload, including community advocacy work, committee work, and other social work functions, over and above the role of frontline child protection.

These same issues with respect to worker retention occur across the globe. It appears that high caseloads are an expectation of working within social services and specifically within child welfare. A recent Swedish study outlined several factors that impacted worker permanence within the field and higher burnout rates among social work staff including “high caseloads, demanding tasks, overwhelming job demands and difficult work situations” amongst other variables (Tham, 2007, p. 1231).

As discussed by Tham, difficult work situations can have a significant impact on permanence. Perhaps one of the most difficult work situations for child welfare workers occur when a child, known to the worker, has died. In 2008, Mennill and Strong-Boag completed a detailed review of legal findings and opinions of federal court justices with respect to child deaths in Canada. Within their work, *“Interventions and judgements: the response of child welfare authorities and their families,”* they write about how the judge in one case “vilified the social workers,” who were working with the family in attempts to lessen the risk to children in family care, while maintaining the family unit. The article goes on to review how the judge pointed blame while he “admonished the medical professionals and police, and criticized Ontario’s management of child welfare cases and reporting mistreatment” (p. 324). Although specifically in this case the judge cursorily implicated the “system” of child welfare, the majority of the blame and the major failure noted in the review of this child death were tied to the individual social worker involved. In discussing Ontario’s management of child welfare cases, while the judge began to shine light into the macro issue of system caseloads, and the lack of supports and services available to support and protect children in family care; the face of blame was assigned to the individual worker.

In another recent Canadian child death inquiry, the inquiry judge (Ted Hughes) tasked with reviewing the death of Phoenix Sinclair in Manitoba commented, “By not accessing and acting on the information it had, and by not following the roadmaps offered by clear-thinking workers, the child-welfare system failed to protect Phoenix and support her family” (Puxley, 2014, p. 1). Interestingly however, in as much as it appears that the judge may have been sympathetic to individual workers with his initial

comments in the review, the media coverage has since been skeptical of addressing the system issues, and instead looks again to blame and vilify individual child welfare workers. Following the judge's initial comments, additional releases featured the judge discussing workers' intentions and outcomes: "...they wanted to protect children, but their actions and resulting failures so often did not reflect those good intentions," reproduced in headlines as "Social Workers' Failures Singled Out in Phoenix Sinclair Report" (Schroeder, Forlanski & McNabb, p. 1, 2014). Despite the judge's earlier citations of system flaws that seem to be implicated in the child's death, his later comments seemed to contradict these early messages. For example, Hughes commented that "I do not find evidence that these organizational challenges had a direct impact on the services that were, or were not, delivered to Phoenix and her family" (Schroeder, Forlanski & McNabb, p. 1, 2014). As a result, report readers seeking to look critically into the cause of the child's death, and looking to attribute blame are repeatedly directed towards the individual workers, and the ways in which they practiced.

Many of the media reports do not address another remarkable fact of the Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry, which was addressed by Judge Hughes several times: the crippling effects of poverty and barriers to service for Indigenous people within Canada. "The Phoenix Sinclair report rightly identifies where improvements can be made to policies and programs, but it also acknowledges the deeply structural issues that can lead to such tragic outcomes, but are more difficult and costly to address" (MacKinnon, 2014, p. 1). MacKinnon discusses the situation further in summarizing:

While the recommendations outlined in the report are comprehensive in response to the complexity of the challenges facing vulnerable children and families, it is deeply concerning that the immediate public reaction has focused almost solely on fixing the child welfare system and its social workers (2014, p. 1).

Similarly, there have been other high-profile child death review cases, most recently in Ontario, and Alberta for Indigenous children, which begin to shed some light into the systems issues within child welfare. Within these reports, there is some acknowledgment of caseload demands, as well as other system issues faced by workers who work with families who are predominately some of the most marginalized families in society. In a recent report, the pediatric death review committee, tasked with reviewing the starvation death of Jeffrey Baldwin in Ontario, highlighted that “it was only after Jeffrey's death that the CCAS discovered in its own files that both Bottineau and her husband, Norman Kidman, had previous convictions for child abuse” (Jones, p. 1, 2014). The review identified specific concern with record keeping practices, which were generally identified as cumbersome and rarely used. Specifically, there was concern that the child welfare internal records system was kept in a way that prevented workers from easily accessing file record information.

The assigned blame that is levied toward individual frontline workers within the system of child welfare is an example of an experience that participants discussed. The narrative of their experiences may lead to a better understanding of the ways workers experience the negatively held perceptions of frontline workers within the macro child welfare system. I suspect that if social workers continue to be blamed as individuals,

little attention will continue to be paid toward crises within national social systems, provincial restructuring or cut backs to frontline services, or other factors that have led to extremely high caseloads in child welfare. Instead, individual workers will continue to be held accountable for system failures. Specifically with respect to child death inquiries, workers are silenced in their ability to release any information, opinion or statement to media, even if that statement is one of apology or sorrow. Instead they are without a voice to respond to consistently negative media headlines, which work to stage their failure on the front line.

My research centered the voices of workers, creating an opportunity for individuals to participate in research leading to literature in their area of practice. More specifically, using workers' narratives, it helped to identify worker perceptions of their permanence within the field as professionals. When individual worker voices are absent from the literature, there are missed opportunities to better understand the factors and supports that lead to long term worker permanence within child welfare.

(ii) Worker Burnout and Critical Incident Stressors

Burnout and mental distress have been identified many times in social science literature as expected outcomes leading from frontline social work careers within the social services field (Smith & Nursten, 1998; Stanley, Manthrope, & White, 2007; Goldstein, 2002). Burnout has been defined as a process that occurs when workers have been subjected to "protracted and unresolved stress" (Smith & Nursten, 1998). Within the child welfare system, frontline child protection worker turnover, and the rate

of “burn out,” appears to be significant and steadily increasing. A Canadian study chronicles that “As a result of ongoing and chronic stressors, researchers have cited a two-year turnover rate of 46 percent to 90 percent in child welfare practice” (Regehr, Leslie, Howe & Chau, 2000, p. 3). This study also demonstrated that, when using a similar scale of measurement, the level of stress experienced by child welfare social workers was greater than levels of stress experienced by ambulance drivers or firefighters. This level of critical stress, leading to higher rates of burnout, was particularly high for intake (investigation) and ongoing family service social workers in the field of child welfare (Regehr, Leslie, Howe & Chau, 2000, p. 10).

Studies have examined organizational trauma (Hollingshead, 2012), workplace critical incidents (Antai-Otong, 2001, 2002, Horwitz, 2006), worker burnout (Hodgkin, 2002) as well as the negative constructions and concepts of child welfare workers found within dominant discourse. One study attempts to create space to understand more about the context of the daily life of social workers employed in child welfare. For child welfare workers:

Other professionals are often critical of their work and clients at times threaten and assault them. In return for this exposure to deprivation and violence, these workers receive moderate pay, work in overburdened settings and are often blamed for the very problems they are trying to address (Horwitz, 2006, 2).

Learning to cope with negative critical incidents and situations, as are often encountered in child welfare work, is critical to longevity in child welfare practice.

Without supports, worker permanence cannot be managed. As Antai-Otong notes in her work, “Ordinarily, critical incidents are so emotionally overwhelming that the person has difficulty functioning and often resorts to distorted thinking and coping” (2001, 127).

Critical incidents can be interpreted in different ways, both by those who are involved within the incident itself, and as well by others who may be part of a larger group or community in which the incident occurs. Michelle Reid researches and writes about the consistent struggle of Indigenous women somehow involved, or employed within the child welfare system, and talks about critical incidents and stressors that are ongoing today. “Within the child welfare arena the struggle continues to be for the right to be ourselves as distinct cultural people who have inherent rights to have our traditional lands, identities, cultural ways and practices respected and protected” (2005, p. 22).

The interpretation of critical incidents can be specific to individual persons, but can also be shared by members of the same race or cultural group. The interpretation can be particularly challenging for Indigenous workers, given the role that child welfare played historically in genocide of Indigenous peoples, and the role it continues to play in decimating Indigenous communities. “The generational traumatic impact of the residential schools is overwhelming and has marginalized generations of Aboriginal Peoples, both from the Canadian mainstream and within their own home environments” (Henry & Tator, 2010 as cited in Pon, Gosine & Phillips, 2011, p. 389). Indigenous women employed as child welfare workers are emotionally torn by competing demands, between their cultures, their employment, their understanding of the history of child welfare and the cultural genocide of Indigenous people via its laws and policies. These

same Indigenous women who are committed to empowering and helping to protect their people, continue to feel the stress of “dual accountability” as they “experience patriarchy ...colonialism and racism that is perpetuated through current CFS laws, policies, and practices” (Reid, 2005, p. 23). As Indigenous women continue their “walk between two worlds” (Reid, 2005, p. 30), they can experience intense stress, individual to their culture; an experience that can trigger, and or continue to be, a perpetuating factor of emotional fatigue and eventually burnout.

Despite the fact that there is increasing knowledge available that discusses the genocidal devastation of Indigenous communities through child welfare laws, as well as the continuing vastly disproportionate over-representation of Indigenous children in care, specific research discussing Indigenous child welfare worker narratives is rather thin. During this literature review I was able to locate current statistics with respect to Indigenous children within the child welfare system. Ball (2013, p. 1) cites Statistics Canada data which “reveals that a staggering half of all kids in foster care - 14,225 - are Aboriginal.” She also notes that “One in every 25 Native children is taken from their families... That is 13 times more than the non-Aboriginal apprehension rate, despite Natives making up just a fraction of the general population.” However, what I could not locate in the available literature, were statistics that outline the number of Indigenous child welfare workers, specifically in Ontario, nor further yet, research (aside from Reid’s work) specifically including worker narratives of their experience as Indigenous workers within the current child welfare system.

Social workers who continue to practice in the role of frontline child protection, but who do so from a racialized positionality, encounter realities of the current child

welfare state that likely lead to increased internal stress. Dixon-Judah notes that “Despite the growing diversity within our Canadian society, the field of social work remains firmly biased towards the ideology of the white majority ... clients and racialized workers are negatively impacted by this unchanging reality” (2009, p. 1). This is further discussed by Gosine and Pon where they outline the social construction of race: “...when someone is understood by society to be non-White, they can be said to be a racialized person. In other words they can be socially constructed as belonging to a racial group” (Pon & Gosine, 2011, p. 136). Statistics experienced concretely on the job likely elicit increased emotional response, for example that “children of colour remain in foster care longer and are reunified less often than white children” (Derezotes, 2000 as cited in Woldegiorguis, 2002, p.274). This increased internal stress for racialized workers is experienced in addition to, or combined with other secondary factors that can lead to worker burnout.

Often, according to Yamatani et al. (2009), job burnout in frontline child protection workers can be “characterized by emotional exhaustion, client depersonalization and feelings of diminished personal accomplishment” (p. 361). Each of these factors can lead to secondary impacts within the child welfare system. For example, secondary to the impact upon frontline workers, is the impact that worker burnout has upon child welfare clients, who are inevitably serviced by a consistently revolving workforce. These impacts to client service are noted by Boverhof: “The enormously high turn-over rate of child protection workers is seriously impacting the client worker relationship, case decisions and time management” (2007, p. 3). The relationship between client and worker can be a taxing one in any specialized social

service field, but perhaps more so in the realm of child welfare. Child welfare clients experience increased tension even prior to the social work relationship beginning, given the intersections of life's complicating socio-economic factors in most clients' lives. The tension elevates again, given the imbalance of power that is perceived (and often experienced) by clients with respect to the "power over" relationship with child welfare workers when this working relationship begins (Dumbrill, 2010).

Often times, the client-worker relationship is taxed to the point of violence acted out toward and upon workers. Rey notes that "In the past decade violence perpetrated against social workers and other helping professionals has increased" to the point that, at times, client violence towards workers is considered, as Rey describes it, as "part of the territory" (1996, p. 33). When professional social workers who are employed within the child welfare system understand that violence may indeed be considered a tolerable situation, one must consider the types of supports, or influences upon workers that have helped to support their permanence within a field where knowledge of such violent possibilities abound. Given that some senior workers have been employed for numerous years in frontline child welfare service, despite this persistent threat of violence, it is important to consider the permanence and retention, and their impact upon client service.

(iii) Exploration of the Benefits of Permanence

In exploring the benefits of permanence and worker retention in child welfare, it seemed clear in major studies that there is a direct correlation between retention of senior child welfare workers and good client service, where "the ability of child welfare

agencies to meet the needs of children and families they serve depends on a competent and stable workforce” (Shim, 2010, p. 847). Conversely, other findings suggest that “employees who intend to leave are directly affecting client service quality and organizational effectiveness as a result of their probable unwillingness to invest their time and energy in providing quality service for clients” (Shim, 2010, p. 848).

Within child welfare practice, safe and permanent family-centered outcomes for children are cited as major goals for Ontario Children’s Aid Societies (OACAS, 2010). However, in reviewing the literature, it would appear that worker turnover and lack of retention is often an impediment to family-centered outcomes. Smith and Clark (2011) note that the Government Accountability Office has cited “turnover as a barrier to successful outcomes in meeting permanency goals” (p. 1951), highlighting one possible benefit of having experienced social workers providing service in child welfare. Similar results were found by Hodgkin (2002), who notes that Auditor General Reports in Victoria (Australia) highlighted “that turnover statewide was running at 30% for the previous two years and that 55% of all workers had less than two years’ experience” (p. 195). Further, her research noted that the media had been quick to illustrate that inexperience in the child welfare workforce had contributed to the perceived mistakes in high profile child protection cases, where children were harmed or killed while known to child protection authorities. Similarly, Burns and Christie note that “The stability of workforce in any social service agency is important, but perhaps even more so in child welfare and protection agencies, where workforce instability has been linked directly to failures to protect children...” (2013, p. 340).

In the US, the Child Welfare Workforce Development and Workplace Enhancement Institute drew similar conclusions regarding the importance of retention of front line workers. In their final report, they propose that, “If the child welfare field is to be responsible for providing the safety, permanency and well-being of children and families...it is critical to establish strategies for optimizing, professionalizing, and stabilizing the existing child welfare workforce” (2006, p. 9). In another American study looking at factors influencing retention in public child welfare, outcomes of higher worker retention were discussed as optimal in that “Children and their families will be the major benefactors of such knowledge as the consistency and quality of services will be enhanced” (Williams, Nichols, Kirk & Wilson, 2010, p. 157). A study conducted by Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook and Dews (2007) notes that while child welfare desperately needs experienced workers who have a commitment to ongoing work with children and families; lack of retention impairs adequate client service. They point out that it typically “takes about 2 years for new child welfare employees to learn what needs to be done in their jobs and to develop the knowledge, skills, abilities and dispositions to work independently” (Ellet et al., 2007, p. 265). Understanding this “two year mark” brings into sharp focus the need for increased long-term retention of child welfare social workers, if the goal of strengthening children and their families is to be met.

Similarly, an Ontario study acknowledged that “More experienced workers may be able to discuss a client’s problems more effectively and be more adept at goal formulation, two practice skills that were also found to be related to engagement,” where positive client engagement in child welfare practice led to better outcomes for children and families, serviced by more experienced workers (Gladstone, Dumbrill, Leslie,

Koster, Young & Ismaila, 2011, p. 6). In their discussion of inexperienced workers, DePanfilis and Zlotnik similarly note that “workforce problems negatively affect outcomes for children and families because staff turnover and high caseloads result in insufficient relationships between worker and families, a limited focus on child safety, and affect timeliness of decisions about safe and stable placements” (2008, p. 995).

Staff turnover has been identified in a U.S. longitudinal study to be among the root causes for concern with respect to front line child welfare staff who have not received appropriate training. The problem of staff turnover “can significantly undermine efforts to improve child welfare practice and promote positive outcomes for children and families, regarding safety, permanence and wellbeing” (Curry, McCarragher, Dellman-Jenkins, 2005, p. 932). Within this study, benefits of staff retention are inferred from the negative outcomes discussed as a result of high turnover rates in child welfare practice. The researchers discuss their belief that should staff turnover increase within the sphere of business or economics, job loss or loss of dollars would most certainly be the outcome. In the field of child welfare, increased turnover and therefore lack of retention of senior, trained child welfare workers “...may lead to increased risk of harm or death to children and sometimes child welfare personnel” (Curry et al. 2005, p. 934).

In another study of more than 350 frontline child welfare workers, researchers isolated determinants leading to the exceedingly high attrition rate of child welfare staff, specifically that “The negative public perception of the environment in which child welfare staff work, the complex nature of work in child welfare, large and often unmanageable caseloads, years of low pay, lack of public and administrative support” (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook & Dews, 2007, p. 265) had consistently contributed to turn-over.

The researchers note the increasingly complex context of child welfare work, where child protection social workers work to strengthen families and protect children within matrices of social problems that resist quick solutions. Specifically, they named multi-generational mental illness, violence, substance abuse and poverty, among other socio-economic factors, as routinely impacting child welfare clients.

It would appear that many researchers articulate a strong correlation between worker permanence in child welfare and good client service. Conversely then, we can be reasonably sure that inexperienced workers have significant negative impacts on child welfare clients and families. Although in many studies there are generalizations made about poor client service outcomes with inexperienced workers, Westbrook, Ellis and Ellet provide specific and detailed examples about what impact a lack of permanent workforce can have upon child welfare families. They write, “As clients are shifted from worker to worker, understanding of clients’ unique situations, rapport and trust deteriorate (APHSA, 2005; Powell & York, 1992), and important case decisions may be delayed as new workers attempt to sift the details of complex cases...” (2006, p. 39). Other specific impacts include “rates of foster child reunification...case continuity and thus ... basic safety and permanency needs of clients” (Clark, Smith, & Uota, 2013, p. 1687).

Much of the social work literature on the perceptions of child welfare clients focus on their experiences, the subjective nature of experience, multiple truths, and pluralistic reality. Yet the same is arguably absent with respect to the perspectives of frontline workers on factors that may be impacting their retention in the field and their work with clients. It appears there is an absence of insight into factors that may be impactful on

workers, and their retention within the child welfare. The goal of my research was to form a better understanding of the frontline social worker experience, including their perceptions of the factors or supports that have impacted their ability to remain within the field, while also contributing to our understanding about the discourses used by workers to understand their long-term experience in child welfare.

(iv) Absence of Worker Voice

Although there are many research studies available reviewing frontline child welfare practice, few contemporary studies exist within Canada where frontline worker permanence was a specific concern. Fewer yet, are Ontario studies concentrating on frontline child welfare worker experience, where frontline workers had a voice, through the creation of worker narratives, as a means to better understand the impacts and influence on worker permanence.

Much of the literature reporting on the child welfare system discusses client observations of the child welfare system, client attempts to navigate the system, and client opinion with respect to their negatively held perceptions of child welfare workers (Swift, 1994, Smith, 2006, Mennill & Strong-Boag 2008). However, little Canadian research has been located that works to promote the voices of frontline child protection workers and their individual, or narrated experience of the child welfare system in which they work.

In Swift's landmark research study "Manufacturing Bad Mothers," she discusses the need for compassion for frontline social workers within the child welfare system.

Specifically she writes “about the complexity of the work and the dilemmas faced by those who are employed to identify and act on cases of neglect – child welfare workers,” and their tremendous emotional burden (1994, p. 3). In later chapters of the book there is much discussion of the child welfare system, the construction and identification of the child welfare client, and insight into client perceptions of each of the above. However, what seem to be absent are the voices of frontline child protection workers themselves. Inasmuch as Swift is able to identify a need for a voice to be created for frontline child protection workers, and expresses empathy for their difficult position, she does not provide an avenue to correct this dilemma.

Smith also completed research with respect to client perceptions of the child welfare system. In her 2006 work, she posed the question “What are the perceptions and experiences of mothers in family reunification programs?” (p. 449). Smith writes at length about the extreme levels of resistance of mother clients in the child welfare system. Much of this she equates to how clients feel they are perceived, judged, and written about (labelled) by child protection workers. Specifically, Smith talks about resistance to the “unfit” mother label as assigned by workers: “the label and its implications regarding treatment and service experiences were not positive and did not appear to be empowering” (p. 445). However, during her detailed review of language, tone, and report writing of frontline child protection workers, Smith did not speak to the workers themselves. This limitation was recognized by Smith as beyond the scope of this particular study.

There have been studies researching the idea of worker identity as perceived by frontline child protection workers themselves (Littlechild 2002, 2003, 2005). It seems

there are consistent reminders about negative aspects of front line child protection work, which can work to barricade workers into a negative state of mind, and thereby negatively affect permanence. In my research, I was interested to understand how these roadblocks to positive worker retention are surmounted, and permanence within the field achieved. There is a gap in the literature which fails to center positive worker experience in frontline child welfare, or to identify factors that have influenced and continue to support this positive experience. For senior frontline child protection workers, what factors or supports within their daily work help to maintain their extended career within the child welfare field of social work practice?

Through review of the literature, it is clear that many books, articles, blogs and other contemporary media accounts are available to describe biographically and autobiographically clients' perceptions of the child welfare system, and their experience with child welfare workers. However, it was very difficult to locate and evaluate Canadian literature that gave a voice to frontline child protection workers themselves, biographically or autobiographically, or in research, where retention of workers was a major focus. In Ontario, Gabel and Koster discuss a possible cause to this phenomenon: "Until there is more public awareness and understanding of the work being done by Children's Aid Societies, it is not surprising that staff do not feel comfortable or are able to advocate for the protection profession" (2004, p. 3).

Chapter Three

Methodology

While the outcomes of my research derive from participant narratives, it is critical in responsible qualitative research that I clearly articulate the specific steps taken in selecting and working within an identified methodology. In this chapter, I will discuss in finer detail the methodology used to complete my research. Specifically I will review the theoretical orientation, epistemological influence and research design, detailed research activities, process of data collection, participant selection and steps used in the final data analysis.

My research moved forward using a qualitative narrative methodology, supported by anti-oppressive theory. Narrative methodology informed by anti-oppressive theory is a complementary relationship for research practice, because each values the participant's subjective understanding. As well, this complimentary process helped to acknowledge "Our collaborative meaning-making processes that are influenced by the perceived and exercised power that we each bring to the process" of research (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 273). A fundamental premise of anti-oppressive research that influenced my work, is the belief that "knowledge and the processes by which we come to know are situated in the experiences of those who make knowledge claims" (Brown & Strega, 2005, p. 13).

Although I have provided a review of some factors that may impact or influence child welfare worker retention within the field of social work practice, my research purpose was to learn directly from frontline child welfare workers which factors or

supports positively impacted their decision to remain in the field. It is my hope that through identifying long-term frontline child protection workers and the positive supports leading to their retention, my research will work to support other frontline child welfare workers. Secondly, in examining worker narratives and reporting on their experiences, I hope to give a voice to child welfare workers as individuals, separate from the macro system of child welfare, and critically reflect upon their experiences.

Carrying out research using an anti-oppressive lens encouraged me to support an agenda of social justice within my work. This meant having a critical understanding of my role as researcher in not just what data was gathered, but who it was gathered from, for what purpose, and how it was reported. Specifically for me within this research, as a child protection worker and social work student, I had to make consistent efforts to be conscious of the extent to which I considered my own complicity in the systems of domination and subordination that are common to the system of child welfare.

It was my intention in completing this research to bring into focus the long-term experience of child welfare social work professionals through narratives of their lived experience. I hope that through worker reflection, further work could be done to possibly reintroduce a counter discourse to those dominant discourses, that circulate negative representations of frontline child welfare social workers. Ultimately I hope to contribute to a better understanding of the impacts and influences on long-term worker permanence in child welfare.

(i) Theoretical Orientation

My guiding theoretical framework in completing this research is informed by anti-oppressive theory, which acknowledges knowledge as subjective, socially constructed, and fluid in person, time and place. In Hekman's words "truth is plural and relative, historical and particular" (1999, as cited by Strega, 2005, p. 231). As Moosa Mitha notes (2005, p. 66), "multiple ways of knowing and knowledges are acknowledged within anti-oppressive theories" ... [where knowledge] "is conceived of as situated and subjugated." Framed within this understanding, my research did not focus on seeking one particular truth. Instead, I sought to make meaning and possibly unearth new understandings that could serve as catalysts for provoking positive change, and resistance to dominant discourses. Resistance, as I understand it, very much complements anti-oppressive theories, as discussed by Moosa-Mitha, in that "anti-oppressive theories are distinguishable from others by being both difference-centered and critical in their orientation and thus perhaps particularly useful for emancipatory research endeavours" (2005, p. 13). As discussed, I hope to provoke positive change in resisting any singular claim to truth about frontline child welfare practice and "dismantle mainstream representations" (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 28) of frontline child protection workers, such as those that regularly appear in high-profile death reviews.

Further, an anti-oppressive approach promotes that research is about practice, and that the process itself, not just the outcome, should provide healing and meaning to the participants (Potts & Brown, 2005). Qualitative research methods attempt to "tap deeper meanings of particular human experiences and are intended to generate qualitative data: theoretically richer observations that are not easily reduced to numbers" (Rubin & Babbie, 2011, p. 437). Understanding this, it became imperative to

select a research methodology that allowed me to capture volumes of rich data, thus leading to narrative methodology being used.

(ii) Epistemological Influence and Research Design

My research used narrative analysis, as it was helpful to me in understanding more about how people made sense of, or made meaning of their personal experience. Narrative analysis values the contribution of individual experience and therefore promotes space for the individual story (Frank 2002). A commitment to social justice within research brings with it a commitment to be critical of the self, the questions asked of participants, the answers recorded, the reports generated, and the political nature of social science research with participants informing subsequent action. Frank discusses the political connection between participant stories and subsequent action when he writes, "This linkage of personal troubles with public issues, which is the foundation of politics, begins in the cultivation of personal stories" (Frank, 2002, p. 112).

It was imperative then, armed with this understanding, that I took pause to remember Fraser's caution where she warned that narrative researchers must "retain an awareness of social conditions as they consider how culture, and social structures, surface in the stories participants and researchers tell" (Lawler, 2002: Riessman, 1993, 2002, 2003 in Fraser, 2004, p. 182). Similarly, Kondrat discussed that "Those who advocate critical reflexivity as an approach to self-awareness would start with the assumption that no one and no institution escapes complicity in society and its structures" (1999, p. 468). It was critical then, in moving forward with my research, that I

acknowledged the multiple truths and fluid reality of individuals participating in the research. I endeavoured to have a consistent awareness of how the research process may have acted upon participants, and worked not to be complacent within my own biases during the interview processes.

The purposeful design of this research intended to give a voice to long-term child protection workers in a safe space where the stories of their experiences could promote learning, changes in thought, and develop hope. I also thought that senior child welfare worker narratives could uncover understandings of the factors which have impacted or influenced their permanence in the field. Social structures such as the child welfare system are not impermeable to change. As Mitchell and Egudo discuss “narrative can be used to gain insight into organizational change” (2003, p. 1), and with respect to organizational change, I hoped to gain insight through the experiences of professionals working within the system.

(iii) Research Activities

My early activities in the research process centered on seeking and obtaining approval from the Human Ethics Research Board at the University of Victoria, who permitted the research to move forward as per the research proposal submitted to my thesis committee. When permitted, I sent the formal invitation to participate in the research project (Participant Recruitment Flyer – Appendix 3) to known child protection working groups, with the goal to obtain consent from four to six long-term frontline child protection workers to participate in the research project. The participant recruitment

flyer, acting as invitation, was attached to an e-mail script that was sent to the social work groups. When possible participants were identified, I emailed each participant a copy of the “Tentative Interview Guide” (Appendix 5), prior to scheduling our face to face meeting on a date, time, and location that best suited their availability and level of comfort, in order to complete the formal interviews.

At the outset of each interview, I reviewed the research project with each participant, as well as their informed consent to participate (Letter of Information // Informed Consent – Appendix 4). When informed consent was reached with each participant, I then reviewed a copy of the proposed questions to be discussed during the interview (Tentative Interview Guide – Appendix 5). I reviewed the questions, prior to beginning each interview, in order for participants to have an opportunity to ensure clarity about the questions they were to be asked during the interview process itself.

The decision to allow participants some time to contemplate and review the questions, ahead of the formal interview, was a conscious decision intending to produce richer narratives from participants. Richness is critical in narrative research, as discussed by Tracy (2010) who explains that “descriptions and explanations” need to be rich and “bountifully supplied” (p. 841). Semi-structured interviews were used to engage workers in producing conversational narratives (texts) that were subjected to narrative analysis. “Approaching texts as narrative has a great deal to offer social work, showing how knowledge is constructed in everyday life through ordinary communicative action” (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 395). I also endeavoured to understand more about the dominant narratives in the thoughts, beliefs, and language used by workers to understand their long-term experience in child welfare. In a goodness of fit test, in

choice of methodology, I considered Fraser's words when she wrote "With the capacity to recognize people's strengths and engage people in active, meaning-making dialogue, narrative approaches may help social workers move beyond a strict problem focus to more generally explore social phenomena," (2004, p. 181).

During the interview processes, prior to interviewing each participant, I used a research journal to record my reflections of self. Following each of the interviews, I recorded in this journal any thoughts I had that were not expressed to the participant in the interview, as well as any reflections or emotions needing to be cleared away. These efforts helped with my ongoing self-reflection while completing the research work. Upon completing the required number of interviews with participants, my research journal, and the reflections recorded in it, helped to frame the data analysis. My research journal was also an attempt to situate my research within transparent practices consistent with anti-oppressive theory and critical consciousness.

Fraser talks in her article "Doing Narrative Research" about the positives of narrative methodology in qualitative research with human participants. She writes that "with the capacity to recognize people's strengths and engage people in active, meaning-making dialogue, narrative approaches – notably those informed by critical ideas – may help social workers move beyond a strict problem focus to more generally explore social phenomena" (2004, p. 181). Ultimately I looked to understand more about the experiences of frontline child protection workers and the relationships they have with their work, or the "stuff" that forms the day to day of social work (Reissman & Quinney, 2005, p. 392). One of my commitments to social justice was to centralize the often marginalized or absent voice of the individual frontline child welfare worker.

As expected, using semi-structured interviews to create conversational narratives produced an exceptional quantity of raw data, and “because line-by-line narrative analysis produces such fine-grained ‘data’, and is so labour intensive” (Fraser, 2004, p. 186), it is rarely used with large participant groups, making it a good fit for my research group of six participants. The participants were further limited in number in order to allow for a comprehensive quality review of the raw data, in an effort to understand more about the specific research topic.

My initial goal of recruiting six to eight research participants was in fact achieved. In total, six research participants completed interviews. Each research participant shared approximately 1.5 to 2 hours of his or her time. This period of time included a review of the informed consent and agreement to participate with the research study, which was signed by each participant prior to the onset of each interview, in addition to answering any questions each participant had, while building a conversational rapport.

Participants were chosen to participate in the research study on a first-come, first-participate basis, as they identified their ability to meet the main research criteria, specifically that they self-identified as front-line child protection workers with at least ten years of front line child protection work experience. The main goals of the research project dealt with worker retention and worker permanence in the field, on the front line. Accordingly, extended time in the field of child welfare was critical for participants, to give rise to conversational narratives that provided the rich detail required in narrative analysis. Inducements for participation were not offered, aside from the offer of a shared learning opportunity through later reviewing the completed thesis. The purpose of the study was reviewed with participants in an effort to promote an understanding of peer-

assistance and support within the field of child welfare practice, where documented narratives of frontline worker experience or at least a qualitative analysis of these narratives are not readily available to support new professionals to the practice.

(iv) Data Collection

The specific data collection method of semi-structured interviews was selected, as this method is congruent with the narrative methodology, and allowed participants to narrate and create meaning within their story as they told it. The difficulty in locating a sample size of four to six long term frontline child protection workers, willing to participate in the research project, had been considered when possible methods of data collection and sampling were reviewed. As I discussed in the literature review, rate of burnout of frontline child protection workers is very high, making long term child protection workers (as a sub-population) harder to locate; they may be what Heckathorn considered to be a “hidden population”. Hidden populations occur “when the population is small relative to the general population...and when population membership involves stigma, or the group has networks that are difficult for outsiders to penetrate” (2001, 1). In consideration of these factors, I used snowball sampling as a method to identify possible research participants, who then identified other research participants.

Using a snowball sampling technique, participants were initially recruited using a recruitment poster supplied to known child protection working groups. The recruitment poster was emailed to previous colleagues and working groups where senior child protection workers were known to be located and participating within community social

work groups. Although there was a previous collegial relationship with many of the participants of the research study, as I had been absent from this field of work (working in another community) for a period of three years, there was little ongoing personal or day-to-day working relationship with any of the individual participants.

The semi-structured interview questions framed the general topic area, but as well created a space to acknowledge stories that presented within the narratives of participants. Using a general interview guide ensured “that the same general areas of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting information from the interviewee” (McNamara, 2009 in Turner, 2010, p. 755). Initial quantitative demographic information was gathered at the onset of interviews using specific questions. The narrative process of the interviews followed along three major questions, each asked of all participants:

- What do you understand to be “long-term” worker permanence in child welfare?
- Tell me the story about how you’ve remained practicing in child welfare so long.
- What do you think has supported your permanence in child welfare?

Interviews were audio recorded, and subsequently transcribed personally by me. As Clandinin and Connelly discuss throughout their work, narrative inquiry can also use field texts, such as stories, autobiography, journals, field notes, letters, conversations, interviews, family stories, and life experience, as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives as narratives (2000). In addition to my transcription of interviews, and review of my field journal, I was prepared

to catalogue and review any other notes, drawings, or references provided by participants. However these additions were not necessary as none were provided.

(v) Participant Selection

Following a six week waiting period after the initial email script and recruitment poster was emailed to working groups, eleven possible participants emailed me indicating their availability to participate in the research. A twelfth possible participant had self-identified however later was unavailable for interview, given working commitments and availability. The selection of participants focused primarily on the number of years of service, with priority of participation granted to those who had the most years of front line child welfare service. Given the “long-term” qualification of ten or more years of front line child welfare service, five potential participants did not move forward with the research and interview process because although they possessed many years of social work experience, they did not possess the requisite number of years of front line child welfare experience.

Given the need for a representative participant group, specific effort was made to reach out to organizations or segments of organizations where marginalized workers were identified. For example, I contacted Mohawk Family Services, a sub-group of child protection workers who provide non-mandated child protection service to the Mohawk of the Bay of Quinte Indigenous population, in concert with mandated child protective services. Although initial contact with this group progressed slowly, one Mohawk worker contacted me. After 11 weeks, and a rearrangement of both the research schedule, and

the participant's work schedule, I was able to include the voice of an Indigenous worker with thirty years of social work experience, including twenty-one years of front line Indigenous child welfare experience.

During initial rapport building with participants, each was asked to choose a pseudonym that would appear in the thesis. Many participants chose a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality. As well, to further participant confidentiality and anonymity, names of the agencies, and the geographical locations of the agencies where workers practiced, were omitted. These efforts to maintain anonymity and confidentiality were offered to all research participants; however two participants waived anonymity and confidentiality, with each citing they wanted to share their story, using their own voice, including identifying themselves. These two participants, (Greg and Rochelle), were both clear that their many years of personal history shared in the interview, was "their story to share" their choice to identify themselves. Greg discussed this process as gifting his story to the research.

(vi) Data Analysis

Narrative analysis and storytelling are discovery focused with the aim to establish patterns and connections among elements of raw data that is drawn from participant interviews (Thomas, 2005).

Each interview was audio taped, with the permission of each participant. When all 6 interviews were completed, I personally created a verbatim transcript of each of the

interviews. Following this, I cursorily reviewed the transcripts so that I could produce for participants who had requested it a one-page summary of the interviews. By “summary” I mean a brief description of demographic information, as well as a brief outline of the major thoughts that seemed to be present within the stories on first review.

Transcribing each interview allowed me to begin to make sense of the way in which each story was told. During transcription, I kept in mind Fraser’s questions: “What are the common themes of each transcript? What vocalizations or non-verbal gestures are present? Are there main points that you can decipher from particular stories?” (2004, p. 190).

I then read and re-read the interviews, coding line-by-line for themes as they presented within each individual narrative or as themes across the multiple stories. Themes did not need to be shared by multiple participants to be recognized as a theme. As I read, and re-read the transcripts I identified and began to name categories of data (stories or narratives) that seemed to be important for the participants. Responses given by participants were first coded in sequence in the order of questions asked, as per the tentative interview guide. I then used a singular “line by line” coding method to analyse the data for stories related to the factors that have influenced or impacted upon the workers permanence or retention within the field of child welfare. I noted recurring ideas or feelings. In sorting the narratives into identifiable genres, or themes, I used colours to shade areas of similar ideas, feelings, or repeated comments by the participants. I allocated a number each time a theme was shared by a participant for ease of reference in later data analysis, and in writing up the findings.

I followed the seven phases of narrative analysis as discussed by Fraser (2004): (1) hearing the stories [experiencing each other's emotions]; (2) transcribing the material; (3) interpreting individual transcripts; (4) scanning across different domains of experience; (5) linking the personal with the political; (6) looking for commonalities and differences among participants; and (7) writing academic narratives about personal stories (p. 185-196). I complimented this analysis by relying on Riessman and Quinney's five suggested standards for good narrative research: (1) work from detailed transcripts; (2) focus on language and contexts of production of stories; (3) attend to the structural features of discourse; (4) acknowledge the dialogical nature of narrative; and, (5) where appropriate use a comparative approach, interpreting the similarities and differences among participants' stories (2005, p. 398). As I passed through the phases of narrative analysis, I kept a research journal. As discussed in the methodology chapter, I used my research journal to record my self-reflections, prior to beginning each of the interviews. Following each of the interviews, I recorded any thoughts I had that were not expressed in the interview, as well as any reflections, observations of the participant or emotions I encountered to support my efforts of ongoing self-reflection.

My research journal became an essential tool in completing my data analysis, as I used the recordings in my journal in a cross-referencing or "double check" system. Specifically, I printed each transcript, assigned a sequential number to each line and when reviewing each transcript for themes which may emerge in the stories, or how the stories are told by participants, I cross referenced my journal notes for my own comments or observations of the participant during each section of the interview. As Fraser discusses, this double-check system helps to ensure that the written analysis

produced is coherent and credible because it “corresponds to the stories told” (2004, p. 192).

In analyzing the interviews, it was important to review any observations I had made of “how the participants are using the interview, or how they present the impactful factors” (May, 2012). It was important during my analysis that the full participant story was reviewed, as opposed to just “snippets of talk – mostly non-narrative stripped of sequence and consequence” (Riessman & Quinney, 2005, p. 397).

The purposeful expression of the story, the sequence of events, the language used, the repetition of language or specific words or thoughts, the emotion shown or observed during the interview, and the way in which the story is told by the participant each become of paramount consideration in the overall experience of making sense of the participants’ narrative. In her lecture, May (2010) suggests that the narrative analyst focus on “both form and content”; both what is being told and how it is being told.

While moving forward with the final stage of the research process, “writing academic narratives about personal stories” (Fraser, 2004, p. 195), in attempting to weave together the stories of participants, I employed the “double check” technique as discussed in my methodology to “keep checking that the written analyses (I am) producing correspond to the stories told, as well as to the objectives of the research” (p. 196). In doing so I was also considerate of Fraser’s cautions “Are your analyses relevant to your research questions? Are the interpretations that you have made fair? Do your analyses maintain a respectful tone towards participants?” (2004, p. 196).

In communicating the findings of my research, also in an effort to be further transparent in my research practice, all participants were made aware that they would have access to the fully completed thesis. Following oral defence and final submission, each participant will be sent a link to the completed thesis document.

Ethical and Political Considerations

(vii) Understanding Significance in Making Claims

It was invaluable to understand, that narratives are always open to interpretations. Qualitative researchers must be accountable to their own biases, acknowledge what these biases are, and understand that as individual researchers, that we too can have impact upon each the participant, the interview process, and the data collected as a result. As I continued in my research, during both the interview and analysis periods, a commitment to critical self-reflection was needed as qualitative research involves the subjective experiences and understandings of individuals, in addition to how I as an individual may have impact upon a participant's story.

Aluwihare-Samaranayake writes "Perhaps learning critical consciousness requires a marriage of a multitude of philosophical orientations, and a continuously flowing and permeable multiple resource mechanism that also includes a willingness and openness to participate in listening, questioning, reflexivity, and dialogue" (2012, p. 76). This commitment to critical self-reflection and self-consciousness is key in anti-oppressive research (Moosa-Mitha, 2005; Fine et al., 2003). Therefore it remained critical to be mindful that the "self" is firmly rooted within complex systems of socio-

economic power, and political structures that play out upon the person (Foucault, 1997). Although these matrices of intersecting locations may not have been immediately visible, it is critical when guided by anti-oppressive theory that I remained aware of my own and participants' locations via critical self-reflection and awareness.

Fraser discusses this when she writes "Narrative researchers are aware that in the process of pulling together threads of other' stories, we will be telling stories of our own" (2004, p. 195). Understanding this potential for the re-telling of stories having the capacity to change the participants' intended representation of their experience, during my data analysis I remained committed to Frasers' suggestion that "narrative analysts may want to keep checking that the written analyses they are producing correspond to the stories told, as well as to the objectives of the research" (2004, p. 196).

Narration in the telling of others' stories can also be interpreted as a political act. For example, Frank writes "Narratability means that events and lives are affirmed as being worth telling and thus worth living. Being narratable implies value and attributes reality" (2004, p. 111). Qualitative narrative researchers can act as social change agents in the political arena when they draw attention to collective experiences and narratives making them more visible.

(viii) Research Relationships with Participants

As a frontline child protection worker myself, I remained committed to highlighting this positionality and mindful of any impact that positionality may have had throughout my research processes. I remained mindful of Strega's contention that "the

measurement of reflexivity lies in the extent to which I have considered my assumptions, laid out my processes of inquiry, and considered my 'effect' on the research" (2012, p. 3). Her thoughts are similar to those of psychologist Jerome Bruner who writes that "to narrate' derives from both 'telling' (narrare) and 'knowing in some particular way' (gnarus) - the two tangled beyond sorting" (2002, p. 27). These authors remind me to be mindful of how I am hearing, and the effect this may have on my research.

Of course, during the research process, a relationship is formed between research participants and the researcher. The depth of this relationship can be influenced by many factors; it can be very slight, or more thoroughly involved. But, as Potts and Brown note "...no research is without relationships" (2006, p. 263). In moving forward with the idea of researcher reflexivity, I am guided by ideas presented by Aluwihare-Samaranayake, when he outlines "...the need for researchers to develop an ethical research vocabulary at the inception of their research...to adhere to the principles of respect, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice in a way that is mutually beneficial to the participant and the researcher" (2012, p. 64).

Specifically at the onset of each participant interview, the concept of beneficence and respect for self-care and support was reviewed with each participant. I asked each participant to identify for me a support person who would be immediately available to support them should they experience any stress, fatigue, or discomfort. Although the participant story is valuable, respect for participants as individuals is paramount. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) identify the concept of "relational responsibility which is an effort to capture an ethical principle in narrative research" whereby qualitative

researchers prioritize “honourable human interactions and relations above research aims” (Vaught, 2008, p. 568). My responsibilities as a researcher were highlighted with participants at the onset of each of the interviews.

Chapter Four

The Findings

In this chapter, I review the findings of my narrative analysis. Segments of text have been taken from each of the narratives in an effort to ensure that the participants' voices are clearly heard. As I have discussed, it is rare that frontline child protection workers feel they have a safe space to discuss or reflect upon their personal experiences. Each of the workers acknowledged during their interviews that it was very rare to have time or space to think critically about factors that have impacted their permanence. It was my intention in this research to bring into focus the long-term experience of child welfare social work professionals using narratives of their lived experience. As well, I hope that through sharing worker reflections, a counter discourse to dominant negative representations of frontline child welfare social workers could be introduced. I attempted to uncover how these worker narratives worked to contribute to or to challenge the often negative image of their role. I made particular efforts to explore the major factors in education, experience, or exposure to societal factors and popular discourses that had impacted the workers' understanding of the permanence of their career. Ultimately I hope to establish a better understanding of the impacts and influences on long-term worker permanence in child welfare.

Many of the participants (four of six) outlined that they had routinely observed examples in their daily work of individuals who were not doing well professionally, burning out, or leaving the workplace on extended leaves of absence. However, little space had been made available for them to really think about the impacts or influence

on their own permanence within their roles. Each of the research participants, reflected on which aspects of themselves they bring to their roles, sharing with me the person doing the work. Each participant appeared to be deeply impacted by their experiences, though in varying ways.

(i) Participant Profiles

The research participants were a varied group of social work professionals. Their years of frontline child welfare experience ranged from ten to twenty-one years. In addition, some had other professional career experiences. The participants ranged in age between thirty-three and fifty-nine, while the average age among participants was forty-three. Each of the participants identified as being heterosexual. Five women and one man participated in the study. Three participants held Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degrees from Canadian Universities, three participants held undergraduate degrees in other disciplines, specifically; criminology, psychology, and sociology. None of the participants had a graduate degree. Four participants identified as White (Caucasian), one identified as of mixed race; one participant was Brazilian; and one participant was Indigenous, a member of the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte.

As discussed in the methodology chapter, during the initial rapport building with interview participants, each was asked for a pseudonym to be used for the purposes of the formal thesis rapport. Four of the participants chose their pseudonym in making efforts to protect their confidentiality. Offers of anonymity and confidentiality were waived by two participants, with each citing they wanted to share their story using their

own voice, as well as their identity, to produce their story for others. I have honoured the wishes of both Rochelle and Greg, using their given names throughout the remaining chapters. All other names are pseudonyms.

Anne is currently employed in frontline child protection work in Ontario, specifically as a family services worker, and she has been working in this role over the last ten years. She previously worked in similar child protection roles in the Northwest Territories and Manitoba. Anne describes that she “fell into the role” when she worked in the North with Indigenous populations and subsequently in Ontario, where she currently practices. With a total of seventeen years of frontline child welfare experience, Anne’s participation brought experiences from more than one geographic region, with varying modalities of practice, and with different populations.

Bean is also employed as a frontline child protection worker in Ontario, where she has maintained this role over the last ten years. Previously, Bean was a foster parent for a number of years and therefore brought with her a combined experience of roles both as a worker and as a caregiver to children in the care of the child welfare system.

Greg is currently employed as a frontline child protection worker in Ontario for a non-mandated child and family services agency that partners with the local mandated child protection agency when providing child welfare services to members of the Indigenous community of which he is a part. Greg has worked as a child protection worker over the last twenty-one years, and previously held roles for nine years supporting those with addictions and mental health.

Maddie is currently employed in Ontario as a frontline child protection worker, family services division, where her job duties mainly focus on the investigation of allegations of harm and or neglect toward children. In addition to eleven years in this role, Maddie also brought a year of experience as a social worker with Canadian Mental Health Services, supporting those in the community with acute mental illness to access services.

Rochelle is currently a frontline family services worker in Ontario, and she has maintained this position over the last thirteen years. She has years of work in both the long-term family service worker role, as well as the short-term investigator of allegations of harm and or neglect toward children. Rochelle also has years of experience working in a group home with troubled youth.

Zaza is currently an intake family services worker in Ontario, meaning that primarily her role is to investigate allegations of harm and/or neglect toward children. Zaza has maintained her role on the frontline of child protection work over the last twelve years. In addition to her current investigative role, Zaza has worked in the long-term ongoing family services worker role.

Each of the six participants completed a narrative interview. As discussed in the methodology chapter, I personally transcribed each of the interviews so as to ensure a thorough understanding of the stories shared by participants. This allowed me to be enveloped by their thoughts and alert to the changing nuances in the ways in which each of the stories were told.

Following data collection and transcription, I moved into Fraser's third phase of narrative analysis: interpreting the transcripts. My initial phase of interpretation involved reviewing the transcripts, line by line, to identify themes that occurred both as individual stories unto themselves, as well as stories across stories that are shared by more than one participant. A story or theme did not need to be shared by more than one participant; instead a theme could present itself as a recurring story shared by an individual participant. After initial review of the transcripts, I arrived at ten possible recurring themes:

- Survival – being able to “hack it” within the field (pink)
- Exploration and intrigue – wanting to know more about people (yellow)
- Not alone / supports identified within the field professionally (light blue)
- Professional isolation/external image (orange)
- Compensation / benefits (green)
- Supervisor (clinical) impacts (fuchsia)
- External support systems (brown)
- Helping people / working with (dark blue)
- Training / education / workshops (grey)
- Self-care (red)

In further review of the transcripts, distinctions were made while analyzing the language used by participants, the repetitive return to certain aspects of stories, the emotion conveyed in recurring stories, and the sequence of stories told, against those initial ten themes unearthed in analysis. It was discovered that some of the themes were

presented in very similar ways and therefore the themes were further consolidated into seven major aspects of story:

- Survival and self-care (pink and red combined)
- Exploration and intrigue / faith in humanity / working with (dark blue and yellow)
- Internal system supports / working against professional isolation / external image (light blue and orange)
- Compensation / benefits (green)
- Supervisor impact (fuchsia)
- External support system (brown)
- Training and education (grey)

In review of these seven themes against the transcripts, and in consideration of the underlying stories told by participants, while also considering the intent of the stories, I was led by Fraser's question "Are some arguments becoming repetitive? If so, how should they be edited out?" (2004, p. 196). Further, I was encouraged by my supervisory committee, in order to give a voice to participants, to assign names to themes using some of the actual phrases used by participants in the telling of their stories. In naming themes, consideration was given to what seemed to be important information shared by participant's given their repetitive comments, and or increased emotional affect. Given this guidance, and in attempts to honour the stories told by participants, as well as the sets of ideas laid out, four major themes were identified as stories across stories:

- “Believing There is a Light” (light blue)
- “Getting Through Day-by-Day” (pink)
- “You Can’t Do This Job by Yourself” (yellow)
- “Finding Different ways to do your Job and to do your Job Better” (green)

It is important to note that although rich segments of text have been taken from each of the narratives in an effort to have the participants’ voices heard, and to give detail and meaning to the stories told, complete dialogues of text are not included. I have endeavoured to strike a balance between sharing complete stories and providing what appeared to be the most illustrative ideas, wisdom and feelings of participants.

(ii) Believing there is a Light (Exploration and Intrigue of the Human Spirit)

Very early on in the process of analysis, it became clear that each of the participants felt as though people had an intrinsic value, and that their stories, not so much as clients, but as people, had value. Participants believed that there was much to be hopeful for in working with people, much to learn from and about them, and new opportunities to form working relationships, as illustrated in these excerpts:

Everybody, um, has a gift, and I believe that if I listened to whoever it was long enough, I would be able to walk away with something. And one of the things that I learned very early on is that if I listen to you, with respect, you started to feel better about yourself. And so, as I started to learn more, um, I was able to offer suggestions, but every suggestion I

ever had and still today, comes from my own experiences with people. (Greg)

I enjoy talking with the parents, and meeting so many different people. Everyone has a story of his or her own. They have lots of interesting information, like I've always been interested in other people, a bit nosy I guess. (Maddie)

Yeah, so I think that I'm very much someone who has always been interested in other people. If I can spend a day with Mohawk Family Services or go out to meet with someone who is completely different from me, or see something that is really neat, or something that really seems to work that I haven't been exposed to, or something that I can share, something that I can bring back to my work with other people, or colleagues or family members and stuff, I really like that. I think that's what keeps me sort of emotionally and positively invested to care about what I am doing and to continue on. That keeps me sort of motivated to continue to explore what other people are doing. (Bean)

I've never lost hope in people. I believe that everybody has, um, the ability to change, to have the kind of life they want to have, it's just that they need motivation, and um sometimes, just your smile is enough to motivate them; other times you have to have your hand under their arm to support them; and then sometimes you have to carry them for a little ways. That's my philosophy, and that's where I live, that's how I look at things and that's how I am overworked. (Greg)

I believe that you truly need to care about people. If you truly care about them, you will see their strengths. And I know that people are going to lie to me, they don't know me, they will lie to me and I know that. Trust is a process, it's a dance. It's like you and I meeting on the dance floor, I'm going to step on your feet and you're going to step on my feet, until we get to know how each other dances. (Greg)

So even though every day isn't sunflowers and roses, happy happy, I think that my life is enriched by my exposure to other cultures, other communities and positive things, when you can find them, that work positively for other people in their homes. (Bean)

In discussing a worker's ability to achieve positive outcomes with families, Greg talked much about the intrigue of working with people, while maintaining a positive life outlook, including the hope for change, and goodness within people. With respect to longevity in career in relation to these beliefs, Greg comments:

The people who truly care, they're going to be the lifers. Whether they work in an organization like the CAS or Mohawk Family Services, or on their own, the ones who truly care are the ones who can see the light, and they will guide others to it. The ones who are in it for the money don't care – they're the ones that people talk about – and not well. (Greg)

Maddie presents a similar line of thought, in her interview, where she sees the validity in meeting a "real person", complete with "real information" that at times is not attractive. However being able to work through situations with people in a constructive way, can locate needed supports for the family:

It makes you want to be able to look for that (support for people), or see if there is any way that you could support the families that you are working with to be able to have that. I enjoy talking with the parents, and meeting so many different

people. Everyone has a story of their own. They have lots of interesting information. When you're hearing people's stories and going into people's homes you're hearing a lot of different information. Some isn't so attractive, but the reality is that everybody is a real person, and just because they are involved with CAS doesn't mean that they're horrible. You actually get to meet a lot of really neat people. That's the one thing I do enjoy. (Maddie)

Both Rochelle and Zaza comment about to the need to separate the family one is working with, the social work role, and an ability to see them as an individual of value and interest; outside of, or external to, the system of child welfare:

I enjoy ninety percent of the time, working with families. There are so many different facets to the job. It's very ...what's the word I'm looking for? It's not boring, it's never boring, it's challenging. It keeps me going that way. People have so much to offer. I like working with the people, it's the structure and function, maybe not even just our agency, but the whole system of child welfare that doesn't always seem to work right. (Rochelle)

At the end of the day I do like my job...being able to do a variety of things with families, working with families, there is an aspect to working with families that is, what is the word I am looking for? Rewarding. And even though people say that everyone hates CAS, which is probably true, ah, or CAS workers, maybe ninety –five percent true, but at the end of the day there are families that are open to CAS. Being involved with them and advocating for them, and helping them through some process. (Zaza)

Within this same theme of intrigue and belief of light in the human spirit, workers shared their love of people, and what bringing this love to the work could impact, in a positive way:

People. I love people. I think that the more pain you're in, the stronger your journey. When I came into my sobriety, I always knew that I had that respect for women, and um somewhere deep deep down inside of me there was that known fact that women were the givers of life and they were held closest to the creator. Now don't ask me where that came from because I never had any of my traditional teachings while I was raised, I was never taught any of my cultural awareness, and I never knew any of my songs, but

somewhere in there, it was there. And so, when I sobered up, that started to manifest itself into respect, little by little, for everything and everybody. And that everybody, um, has a gift, and I believe that if I listen to anyone long enough, I would be able to walk away with something. (Greg)

I have had different experiences, in different places, so that has kind of helped a little bit, um, different parts of the country, so I have been able to, um, learn from different cultures, different demographics. Working in the North is far different from working in the South, that's for sure. But the difference in people, working with that difference, that's been a good part, that's kept it from getting stagnant. Here I am sitting in this job for the last ten years, and I am able to learn something new, every day. (Anne)

Anne and Greg each talked about needing to “see a light in people”, while acknowledging their intrinsic ability to make positive changes in their own lives, while also thinking about our impact as social workers, within that change process. Having the professionalism to take people at face value without judgement, and lend ourselves to the helping process in any way that is possible for the family was also brought out:

People will make decisions that you don't think are right, but you know, then you advocate, you advocate like hell, and you do your job, and you try your best, and you make sure kids are safe. Um, but ultimately I like working with the families. Working the frontline families and seeing people reunited you know and seeing positive changes. (Anne)

What happens in doing this kind of work, in shutting yourself off from your clients, it's like throwing a life preserver to a drowning victim and throwing the end you're supposed to be holding in after it. So you can say I helped, but not really. I mean you'll keep them afloat, but you won't help them to safety. You see that's the difference. So long-term workers are two categories as far as I'm concerned: there are the ones who are invested, and really care, and who are able to see um the light and the ones who are burned out who don't believe there ever really was a light. (Greg)

(iii) Getting through Day-by-Day (Survival)

An interesting concept that was unearthed in terms of what it meant for participants to be long-term workers, was their assignment of a "sentence" to long-term workers. Specifically, it was interesting to hear from workers about how they viewed

other long-term workers at their agency, and the thought processes that they considered to be intrinsic to a long-term worker:

Someone who is crazy enough to do this job for a long period of time. That's a long-term worker. Um...it's hard to believe that some people actually make a career of frontline work, but I guess we do. (Anne)

Long term is what we call a lifer. You start being a social worker and you're there for the next thirty years until you retire. In general I think after five years, you know. Five years is when you hit the emotional wall and it gets to be too much, and some people seek other jobs outside of child welfare. (Zaza)

Anybody I think who, um, passes that three year threshold or milestone in my mind I automatically stamp with you're here forever because you haven't left yet. In my own experience at my home agency, is that if it's not a right fit for you, or you can't hack it, then you've left before three years because it takes roughly two years to get comfortable in knowing the job, and if you're still here a year after you get to know it, in my mind, then you're a lifer. Because you've survived, but

too because then after you've made the conscious decision to stay. (Bean)

When asked to tell about her story of any specific factors that had impacted her ability to remain employed long-term as a child protection worker, Anne discussed one specific experience she thought valuable to what she called her "survival within the work":

I was very fortunate to have good union representation. Um, I did get sick, um, and my body gave out, um it was hard, definitely hard to do the job. I was very fortunate to have very good union representation. I think that was a very big piece because I, once I got sick, you know, I gave my heart and soul to this agency, and I felt that you know unfortunately it didn't reciprocate once you got sick. Things are better now, but that would be because I really had good support from the union. (Anne)

Rochelle and Bean both talked of the need for reflective space in order to be successful at surviving the job.

I try to separate work from home, and leave it at that. At the beginning I noticed a lot of people, a lot of people, when I first started continued their work into their home life, or after work life, and they were very stressed, so I made a rule for myself early, that my day ends when I leave and I don't bring my work home. I think that helps a lot. It makes getting through to the next day easier. I have a lot of hobbies that distract me from work, so I think I have a good work home life balance. (Rochelle)

I think this job requires a lot of reflection, to look at your own personal deficits and stuff. Child welfare, working in it is a journey; you need to be able to think about that path. Being able to think about that, to reflect, is definitely part of my journey in child welfare, of keeping me there and keeping me not burnt out, of not quitting, or not going on short-term, and like all of those things that plague people, workers, all of the time. (Bean)

Three of the participants described similar stories of “survival” where their work was being impacted by their supervisor, or their assigned team:

Having coworkers and managers who are really there to help you to continue growing, and challenge you, and continue to support you, and you know presenting new ideas and different ideas and different points of views, all those things keep you alive and going and I am able to do the work on a daily basis. I don't think you can do it if you're working by yourself all the time. I think if you are just doing your own thing the whole time; you're not going to survive in this job. (Zaza)

I'm not sure how I survived the first five years that I had with the managerial staff that I had, though I think it was making me stronger I guess. Unfortunately, you see, at times we are not very AOPish, we are not very politically correct, but sometimes that's how we get through, day by day. By being able to vent to somebody that this is how I am feeling, you know and it "f*in" sucks, it might not be the person, but the decision that they are making. (Maddie)

Supervisors can be key to survival, in the past they have been able to I don't know, like change a case, or take a stressful thing away, problem solve so it's not so stressful, and share tasks, or delegate different things if they are

overwhelming. Because in stressful situations, cause when you're not feeling like you're being heard, that's when people retreat into themselves, when they start looking for other jobs, or the environment becomes very negative. (Rochelle)

During her interview, Zaza repeatedly introduced humour. Specifically, when asked about her ability to have maintained her long-term career in child welfare, she commented:

I enjoy my role as a child welfare worker, ah...there are days that I would take those words back, there are definitely days that I just want to run away, but it's not most of the days. You need to know those days will happen, and have a plan...or you ... will... run ... away. (Zaza)

(iv) You can't do this Job by Yourself (Working your way out of Isolation)

During different phases of the interviews, participants often returned to the theme of locating and maintaining positive supports, specifically in most cases within the child welfare field, in order to remain present and emotionally available to do the work:

Well, I'm fortunate enough to work in a sub-office, which has truly been my God-send. The girls that I work with have been

phenomenal, where are more of a family than anything.

(Anne)

So I think that knowing you're not alone and that people across the entire agency, or the entire province for that matter, are experiencing the exact same stuff that you are, um I think that's good. So I think that's where I gather my support from. (Bean)

Well the majority of the time, the people I work with, the immediate people I work with are people I've connected with that are positive, so that is nice. It's nice to be able to go to work and have people that you get along with and no matter what in the job is happening, or what the environment is like at the job, there's people you can lean on and you feel comfortable, cause if you move on to another job, you don't know if that is going to be the same. (Rochelle)

You have to talk to your team mates, cause like right now I have a really good team, so we help one another, so that is a great benefit. But our team is quite consistent, so we don't have a high turnover so that's reflected in how we get along with one another. But there have been times when that

support hasn't been offered, and you can see within the agency that everyone is feeling overwhelmed. So when there is support offered from levels other than just your own, that helps to maintain me, even when the work is really too much.

(Rochelle)

Three of the participants talked openly about not having any reasonable or helpful supports outside of the child welfare field, linking this with the idea that those outside of the field, even other professionals, do not understand or may not appreciate the work. Again it would appear that this leant itself to the over-arching theme of needing to connect with internal supports to prevent professional isolation:

So I would say that support externally – no. That has not been my experience at all, like from anybody. You tell a person that you work for CAS and they'll be like oh that's great, but if they are saying it's great, that's really because they have no knowledge or insight into what you actually do. Then the people who do know what CAS is, it's because they know someone who was wronged by CAS, or the CAS came and did something to them, so it's not good, so you don't want to mention it, because all of a sudden it can be heated.

(Bean)

It is critical to form a support group, um not necessarily with that name, but have friends within your job, within the job that you do within child welfare, so you can rely on them, and they can rely on you; so you can have that emotionally, because there is no one else to talk to. It's not something that you can go home and talk to your partner or your kids, your mom, dad, whoever it is. Nobody else understands what the job is like outside of child welfare. Even with other professional social workers, they don't do the same kind of thing. So, having that support, people around you, ah and having that consistency, and always having somebody to talk to is what has kept me pretty much grounded in the job.

(Zaza)

Um, sometimes we see some very bad things, and then, we go home. Um...sometimes having a shoulder to cry on, and that would be a co-worker, because it's stuff that you cannot take home. Even though your partner might understand, or might not, it's still not stuff that you can openly talk about right? Having that safe place to go to, whether it's a co-worker, manager, director, or the driver, somebody that is listening, having just that person to go to. (Maddie)

(v) Finding Different ways to do your Job and do your Job Better (Training and Education)

When I asked workers to identify any factors or supports that had impacted their permanence in the field, three participants very quickly identified training and education as a necessity. As well, training was a way of feeling movement within the work, to not feel “stuck” in the inertia of ongoing day to day work that is always present:

I think education, um, ongoing training, is always helpful and that kind of keeps you motivated to find different ways to do your job, and to do your job better. So I think that's helped me along the way, um, just not to be stagnant. Learning is moving forward, even if um, nothing else is accomplished that day, you have moved forward and don't feel stuck.

(Anne)

Knowledge can help me learn more skills. Knowledge to support me in doing my role, whether it's them needing to support me in freshening my skills, or acquiring more skills.

(Bean)

Training never ends, no it doesn't. It doesn't. It's like a ladder out of a hole. I mean you can stop at any time and sit on the step, and be satisfied about where you're at, or you can see

where the next step brings you, and for me, it's always been about seeing where the next step takes me to. (Greg)

Although the analysis of the participant interviews unearthed four major themes (stories across stories) as discussed above, it additionally uncovered specific themes within three of the stories of individual participants, which were unique in the way in which each was told. The purposeful expression of the individual story, the sequence of events, the anguish in expression of emotion, the language used, the repetition of language and specific words, the emotion observed during the interview, and the way in which stories were told were all considered in reviewing the transcripts for the individual stories told by participants. Such was done in an effort to ensure Fraser's methods, specifically in reviewing "What words are chosen? How are they emphasized? What contradictions emerge?" (2004, p. 187). As a result, three narratives emerged which presented specific and significant stories: "Working With" – Anne, "Give it Away" – Greg, and "Team Player" – Maddie.

(vi) "Working With" – Anne's Story

When I initially talked with Anne to discuss the research and her availability to participate, she offered her home as a location of our formal interview. Although I initially queried this location, I quickly silenced my internal questions, as I had after all asked participants to locate a place for formal interview where they felt most comfortable. During the interview, it quickly became clear that Anne, through the

process of telling me her story, was sharing a critical part of herself. Anne paused often in telling her story, advising that she wanted me to know what she really thought, and wanted to make herself clear. In her pauses, periods of quiet reflection, and careful consideration of her words, it was apparent to me that Anne was opening herself and her experience in a sensitive and tentative way. It was reasonable then, that Anne choose to complete her interview in a location that made her feel at ease and one that she shared had brought her strength while working in frontline child welfare.

Through the interview process, Anne often spoke in clichés as she detailed her experiences in frontline child welfare work but added humour to her stories when she became aware that she was doing this. Anne talked about “being in the trenches of frontline work” as:

I guess someone who is crazy enough to do this job for a long period of time” (while laughing). “Um, it’s hard to believe that some people actually, you know, make a career of frontline work, but I guess we do.

Anne spoke about her motivation to work frontline child welfare:

You do the job really because you love to do the work. I was talking to a friend of mine this morning actually and we were

talking about this, you know, I cannot see myself doing anything, anything, other than frontline. I couldn't see myself being a manager or a supervisor, um because I love to work with people. I love to work with.

The theme of “working with” was repeated throughout Anne’s story in relation to working with colleagues, working within the system of child welfare, and working with families/clients. Anne liked to “work with” families toward positive change, and this preference was challenged when her family moved into southern Ontario and she resumed child welfare work:

This was my first real stint in the south and working with a predominantly White demographic and, um, I learned a lot. It was very difficult, I found that a very difficult thing for me. I found it far more adversarial, working in the south, and so it was a really tough transition with me.

In speaking about her wish to “work with” people, she gave examples of her experience in working in Northern Ontario:

I found it much better because I was able to just work with a family, if there was an apprehension, or a need for one, we would go and we would work with the family, we didn't necessarily have to go to court, you could sit with them, talk, um, you could do plan of service with them, and work with them without it becoming adversarial.

Anne described her struggle when child welfare processes turned from working with families to alleviate protection concerns, to more adversarial processes:

The other thing that I found coming down here, it was a shock to me, was that we were in court for everything, and I really struggled with that. I don't know. There is a part of me that really believes that I don't think we should have to be in court with these people for child welfare. You know I understand that people have rights, everyone has rights, don't get me wrong, and I know that there are people on both sides who abuse the system, so I understand why there is court needed, obviously, but I think that um, if things were a little bit better, we would be able to work together with people and not need to be so adversarial.

In summing up her experience working with people and in discussing her motivation to continue the work, again the theme of “working with” emerged:

I like working with frontline families, having people reunited and seeing positive changes, and they don't happen all of the time, but when you can make a positive change in a family's life. You know I've had people call me, years after closing their file, and out of the blue they say Anne, we made the best decision that day and I am glad this happened, and thank you. To have someone thank you, three years after having worked with them, who doesn't want that kind of a job? When you can work with people and they're going to do something like that, that's... how can you not want to do a job like that?

(vii) “Give it Away” – Greg’s Story

Greg chose to complete his interview at his integrated community office, after hours, as it was a community office that was meant to engage the community, and he felt this research could become a part of that engagement through the sharing of knowledge. Prior to completing the interview questions, Greg very much centered his role within the research as a giver of his experience. He saw telling his story as a gift to both the researcher and the research itself. He hoped to challenge ideas, and shared

his story in an effort to promote others to redefine their roles with people who need their help:

You see, I've been working in this field long enough that I've heard things you know, I've heard people say, you know you can't trust them, they're always lying, um, they're never going to change, and I don't believe that. But, um, its knowledge that holds them back, motivation comes from fear – fear of not succeeding or failing, and acceptance, it doesn't matter if I do because nobody will notice. And if you can give them hope by letting them know that you care – you see that is the biggest fear of social workers, they don't want their clients to know that they care. Because then the clients will lie to them, or hurt them, or take them for granted, right, or take advantage of them. But you can't steal from someone who gives everything away. And that's what I do. I give them myself. I tell them my stories, and I let them know that I care.

In discussing the label “long-term” with respect to frontline child welfare workers and their years in this role, Greg chose not to define long-term with respect to length of time in a role, and instead chose to define this as what a worker was willing to bring to the role:

It's not time. It's investment. It's the ability to stay positive. I don't think, um, long-term...I couldn't even say young know. Because I've met those ones who have come right out of school who don't let nothing dash their hopes, their dreams, and that belief in human nature. They, you know, it's just like water off a ducks back, people lie to them – well yeah so what I expect them to, if they were well they wouldn't likely be one of my clients. They have that attitude and they move through it. They maintain a positive attitude and they keep giving people messages that no matter how many times you fuck up, you know I'll still be here when you're ready to come back. They give themselves to the work, that is long term, those will be who you see stick around.

Conversely, Greg contended some long-term child welfare workers remained in their role for the wrong reasons, and he felt these workers therefore worked very differently with people:

In the past, long-term workers were people who were in a rut. They are burnt out and stay in the position for the money, or they stay in the position because they believe that it gives them power and control. Very few long-term workers invest

themselves. Which means that they take that risk themselves – and they genuinely care. Those are the ones who don't get burnt out. Because it's not just the clients that they let give back to them, but it's that they surround themselves with supports. It's true in what they look for in other people as well, the people they work with. When you're working with families, the workers who are burnt out, they are looking for major changes; for workers who are invested, they look for little changes, and those little changes are hope, and they build, and that's the difference. So long-term workers are in two categories as far as I'm concerned: there are the ones who are invested, and really care, and who are able to see the light; and there are the ones who don't believe there ever really was a light.

(viii) “Team Player” – Maddie’s Story

When I had initially been contacted by Maddie to participate in the research study, and arrange a date, time and location for interview, we decided on a sub-office of her current Ontario child protection agency. When I asked Maddie about being close to the work and this affecting her ability to dedicate over an hour to the interview process, Maddie was clear in her response that the work would “always be there”: child welfare is a consistent and ongoing work process. Maddie took the time to relate that this idea

(there always being work to be done – never finished) in and of itself can be overwhelming, and therefore it was crucial for workers to build in times for themselves, other work or educational pursuits, and ensure supports were in place to balance the demands of ongoing child protection work.

The balance of Maddie's' interview centered on Maddie describing her efforts to build a team around her, who ultimately supported her in doing child protection work, and who she credited with her years of service:

I think it has to do with having support around you, um both family, friends outside of work, good co-workers, and good managers. My family, specifically my Mom, has always been very supportive, I know that I can always talk to her about how the day has gone, she's a really good listener, and that's important. My spouse is getting better at trying to understand. I have really good friends, and coworkers that I rely heavily on at work; that could be like using them to vent, to access private support, a shoulder to cry on at times. It's not a job that you can do independently; it's a team job where you need those people around you.

With much emotion, Maddie's presentation vacillated between frustration and sadness when discussing professional isolation. Maddie talked about the difficulties in

relating to others about the work, and how this can at times be isolating if a team (support) member is not immediately available in a time of need:

I think it's difficult sometimes for people to understand the kind of work we do, when they are not in it, because it's a difficult line of work. Because of the difficulties and intensity of the work, you can't do it by yourself. It's a difficult line of work, it's not appreciated, it's highly criticised and that at times is very discouraging for me.

When asked about her motivation to continue in a work-related role that clearly has brought some difficulty, Maddie comments that:

You actually get to meet a lot of really neat people. That's one thing I do enjoy. I like being able to help people and when I see that they are doing well, or they have overcome some obstacle, that certainly gives me the motivation to continue on. When you realize that you have had some sort of positive impact on people's lives, and that essentially is what I feel social work is. I want to be able to help people and

leave some lasting positive impact while I'm here, while I'm on this earth.

Maddie goes on to describe that at times her work with families is not appreciated, either by the family, or by the general population, and that child protection work is undervalued. She talked about how:

You need to have some conviction that what you're doing is in the right sense, and while people may not always agree with you or the decisions you make, that regardless of what the naysayers believe, I am making a difference in people's lives.

Maddie's comments related to the influential factors or supports that have impacted upon the permanence of her career in child welfare, and she again returned to her earlier established theme of team support.

Having the support of people around you, so that's your friends and family, people that you can vent to and check in with, because I don't know if I would be able to do this job if I was on my own, or isolated, or if I didn't have those supports because this is a very emotionally taxing job at times. To be

honest, it's a good feeling knowing that I have a job to come to everyday...I think just having the support of your team around you, that's what I think gives you the courage and strength to go on.

As discussed earlier, during the interview process each of the participants had acknowledged that it was very rare to have had the time, or space, to think critically about factors that have impacted their permanence over the span of their careers. The purpose in sharing these extensive pieces of the participant narratives is to give a voice to long-term workers, offering readers a window into worker experience.

Many of the workers discussed their goals to help others, and their efforts at making a difference, as well as achieving goals and working "with" people to achieve desired outcomes. It seems clear that each of the workers brought forward a detailed, emotional response in the interviews, resulting in the rich narratives shared through the findings. In the next chapter, I will discuss these findings with reference to the literature, and offer some tentative conclusions.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Conclusions

The research goal was to uncover insights into the factors and or supports that may impact the retention of frontline child protection workers in child welfare. As well, I hoped to develop a better understanding of the social worker experience, particularly their perceptions of the influential factors or supports that have impacted their ability to remain within the field. I also sought to better understand the discourses used by workers to understand their long-term experience in child welfare. This chapter will discuss the earlier literature review in relationship to the experiences shared by participants, as well as any new information that uncovered by the research. Overall, the four main themes to be discussed are: believing there is a light – exploration and intrigue of the human spirit; getting through day-by-day – survival; you can't do this job by yourself – working your way out of isolation; and finding different ways to do your job and do your job better – training and education.

The literature review suggested that without supports, worker permanence is negatively impacted by the emotional toll taken by the work. As Antai-Otong discussed, “Ordinarily, critical incidents are so emotionally overwhelming that the person has difficulty in functioning and often resorts to distorted thinking and coping” (2001, p. 127). Similarly, the research participants often discussed being sensitive to the deeply human impact of the work, in both professional and personal ways. Three of the participants specifically identified negative perceptions or thoughts cast upon them by others:

It's difficult sometimes for people to understand the kind of work we do...it's a difficult line of work...it's not appreciated... it's highly criticised and that at times is very discouraging. (Maddie)

So you definitely come across some families that you're like, wow, they hate me...even families that tell me to f-off and get off their doorstep. (Bean)

People say that everyone hates CAS, which is probably true, ah, or CAS workers, maybe ninety –five percent true... even with other professional social workers, they don't do the same kind of thing. (Zaza)

You tell a person that you work for CAS and they'll be like oh that's great, but if they are saying it's great, that's really because they have no knowledge or insight into what you actually do. Then the people who do know what CAS is, it's because they know someone who was wronged by CAS, or the CAS came and did something to them, so it's not good, so you don't want to mention it, because all of a sudden it can be heated. (Bean)

When speaking about the role of frontline CAS workers and public perception as discussed here, it would be prudent to remember the article written by Gabel and Koster, where they note that “Until there is more public awareness and understanding of the work being done by Children’s Aid Societies, it is not surprising that staff do not feel comfortable or are able to advocate for the protection profession” (2004, p. 3). It would appear that this is comparable to the research participants’ views, where they often feel uncomfortable or misunderstood when talking to others about their roles.

What could be essential for other child protection workers and agencies to learn from these stories, are the ways in which workers cope with the stress of working within frontline child welfare in the absence of formalized public supports. None of the participants identified any professional support that they would use in times of need to help to cope with work-related stress or trauma, for example the use of a psychologist, mental health support, or family doctor, despite the workers being witness to, or involved in, exceptionally traumatic events. Instead, each of the participants identified informal supports within their working teams who had helped them to cope day by day, and considered this as a means of survival in the job:

Um, sometimes we see some very bad things, and then, we go home. Um...sometimes having a shoulder to cry on, and that would be a co-worker, because it’s stuff that you cannot take home. Even though your partner might understand, or might not, it’s still not stuff that you can openly talk about right? (Maddie)

It is critical to form a support group, um not necessarily with that name, but have friends within your job, within the job that you do within child welfare, so you can rely on them, and they can rely on you; so you can have that emotionally, because there is no one else to talk to. (Zaza)

You have to talk to your team mates, cause like right now I have a really good team, so we help one another, so that is a great benefit...Well the majority of the time, the people I work with, the immediate people I work with are people I've connected with that are positive, so that is nice. It's nice to be able to go to work and have people that you get along with and no matter what in the job is happening, or what the environment is like at the job, there's people you can lean on and you feel comfortable. (Rochelle)

So I would say that support externally – no. That has not been my experience at all, like from anybody. (Bean)

These feelings shared by participants could further lead to understanding more about what Heckathorn defined as a “hidden population” (2001, p. 1). Based on the

stories shared by participants, long-term survival within the field of frontline child welfare, demands that frontline workers locate an immediate group of internal team mates that they come to rely on for reciprocal emotional support, in order to prevent professional isolation. This positively impacts retention by increasing workers' ability to access support while working the frontline. It's not often that workers feel supported elsewhere.

With respect to worker burn-out and critical incidents, within the themes of stories told by participants, I am mindful of Horwitz' (2006) attempts to understanding about the context and day to day of social workers employed in child welfare. The themes of "survival", or "getting through day by day" speak to this. Horwitz describes the experiences of child welfare workers, where:

Other professionals are often critical of their work and clients at times threaten and assault them. In return for this exposure to deprivation and violence, these workers receive moderate pay, work in overburdened settings and are often blamed for the very problems they are trying to address" (2006, p. 2).

Similarly, Yamatani et al. (2009) discuss job burnout. Frontline child protection workers can be "characterized by emotional exhaustion, client depersonalization, and feelings of diminished personal accomplishment" (2009, p. 361). Within my research, although there was certainly a theme present of workers establishing supports, mastering resiliency and bolstering their retention in the field, there were examples too of these types of worker burn-out and lack of system empathy for individual workers.

Anne's story was especially moving, given her clearly emotional response I observed during the interview, both in her tears and tentative responses, in the recollection of her experience:

I did get sick, um, and my body gave out, um it was hard, definitely hard to do the job. I was very fortunate to have very good union representation. I think that was a very big piece because I, once I got sick, you know, I gave my heart and soul to this agency, and I felt that you know unfortunately it didn't reciprocate once you got sick. Things are better now, but that would be because I really had good support from the union. (Anne)

Other participants also talked about their frustrations or concerns with the "system" of child welfare:

So I think that knowing you're not alone and that people across the entire agency, or the entire province for that matter, are experiencing the exact same stuff that you are, um I think that's good. So I think that's where I gather my support from. (Bean)

I like working with the people, it's the structure and function, maybe not even just our agency, but the whole system of child welfare that doesn't always seem to work right. (Rochelle)

Child welfare, working in it is a journey; you need to be able to think about that path. Being able to think about that, to reflect, is definitely part of my journey in child welfare, of keeping me there and keeping me not burnt out, of not quitting, or not going on short-term, and like all of those things that plague people, workers, all of the time. (Bean)

In terms of resisting burnout and countering frustrations with the system, two strategies emerged: “finding different ways to do their job, and to do their job better” via training and education; and “believing there is a light”:

You do the job because you love to do the work. I sleep well when I know that I have helped families succeed. Having people reunited and seeing positive change, when you can help make a change in a family's life...wow. (Anne)

I mean they present gifts, oh my God. I believe you truly need to care about people. If you truly care, you will be able to see their strengths. What I tell people is that I am not smart. I don't have knowledge, and I certainly don't have anything that you don't have. But that I understand my role, in this life, as being the one that reminds you of what you already have, and how to use it. That's all. No more. No less. The workers who truly care can see the light, and they will guide others to it. (Greg)

Within the literature review, the benefits of long-term worker retention in child welfare were discussed in relationship to positive outcomes for children and families. Ellett et al. (2007) note the increasingly complex context of child welfare work, where child protection social workers have work to strengthen and help families, and protect children who are situated within matrices of social problems that cannot offer quick solutions (p. 265). Accordingly, they discussed the need for skilled social workers, who have experience within the mandated field of child welfare and a commitment to ongoing work with children and families. In relation to this, the research participants gave good examples, of the ways in which they had learned an acceptance of people, over time within their professional role, as well as their wish to "work with" families to help them to succeed. This developed over time as a learned skill in working with mandated families. This experiential knowledge was perhaps best discussed by Greg who said:

When you're working with families, the workers who are burnt out, they are looking for major changes; for workers who are invested, they look for little changes, and those little changes are hope, and they build, and that's the difference. (Greg)

The difference between workers who continue to cultivate hope within families, as opposed to workers who police demands for change, seemed distinct for Greg when he discussed impairments to family service, and achieving lasting outcomes with mandated families.

Implications for Practice

Social work practice in child welfare and its accompanying discourses are not impermeable to change. Instead, as discussed earlier, social work "practice is always shaped by the needs of the times, the problems they present, the fears they generate, the solutions that appeal, and the knowledge and skill available" (Greene, 2010, p. 1). When reviewing my findings and thinking critically about social work practice, I believe that there may be greater social justice initiatives possible with the use of a more established long-term work force in frontline child welfare practice.

A major role for social justice oriented social workers is to advocate on behalf of, or with clients, in an effort to create greater attention or awareness to the need for social

or practice reform. In light of the narratives shared by participants, it would seem that more experienced workers may be able to better negotiate social justice initiatives, as they are better able to engage with families while negotiating the community services that must be in place to serve and protect families and children.

Understanding the politically charged matrices of socially and culturally defined history in frontline child welfare practice with Indigenous populations, while working to give a voice to Indigenous people, is paramount to moving forward in future work with this specific population. The practice implications are many for White workers in a colonial country, when they work with Indigenous families and children. Indescribable acts of violence and cultural genocide were carried out on Indigenous children and families. For frontline child welfare workers who have knowledge of that history, particular dilemmas are posed.

Long term frontline workers may have developed an understanding or sensitivity to some degree for the needs of Indigenous families they work for, however in the absence of support and / or available resources; they can often feel trapped into removing Indigenous children from families, where they would have instead preferred to leave children and provide supports. Participants discussed wanting to help people, and to feel less adversarial in their role, advocating for their families and coaching them to do well. More than one participant cited an inability to freely “sit with people” from Indigenous communities and talk, to resolve issues, or to locate resources. Practice measures such as mandated family group conferences and discussions with Indigenous leaders prior to any more intrusive an act taking place involving an Indigenous child, need to be instituted. In Ontario, there needs to be a specific Indigenous office that

oversees the provision of child welfare services to Indigenous families and children. Practically speaking, this office would not only oversee the provision of service to Indigenous children and families, it should be available to ameliorate gaps in service, bringing immediate attention and advocacy to these issues.

Frontline child welfare services are often driven by the outcomes and recommendations of child death reviews, or provincial inquests, which guide policy development and reform. With respect to day-to-day practice, although service standards may be shaped by child death review recommendations, rarely is there a practice in place giving workers the space to pragmatically review the recommendations, critically assess their practice, and understand the need to adjust accordingly. Instead, workers are directed to immediately adjust their practice with children and families in response to mandated changes. Perhaps a more useful approach would be to give workers an opportunity to reflect on the recommendations from reviews of all child death reviews in Ontario, and discuss these within their teams, a place where research participants clearly articulated that they garner much of their support in their work.

Many of the research participants described their intentions to “work with” parents and families in meeting the needs of children, and in keeping children safe. It would be a benefit to frontline practice to review recommendations of child death inquires, which center the child in many recommendations, although working with parents is acknowledged. It seems a responsible addition to practice to ensure each worker has protected time to review any recommendations, to ensure they have the

skills and abilities to incorporate recommendations into practice, given participant comments suggesting such a strong desire to “work with” parents.

As has been clearly articulated in previous inquiries, “... it should be made clear to all Child Protection Workers and their Child Protection Supervisors that their client is the child in need of protection not the parent or the family” (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2001, p. 3). The expectation is clear: the child is the priority in the working relationship, where the rationale for such recommendations is cited “...evidence shows that the focus on this case was primarily on the mother and not on the child” (Ministry of the Solicitor General, 2001, p. 3). Although the recommendations in this case were made a decade ago, it seems the sentiment is revisited today in comments made during the Phoenix Sinclair inquiry in Manitoba, as well as the pediatric child death review in Ontario, investigating the death of Jeffery Baldwin. “Working with” parents may be a practice goal for social workers, as it was for research participants, but for frontline child protection workers, law and policy dictate that the child must remain the paramount focus. As such, with respect to practice implications, protected time must be afforded to frontline workers to ensure they are clear with recommendations from reviews that serve to inform, if not direct, their work with families.

It seems prudent to reinforce the positive factors that have helped to increase retention and permanence, as narrated in the experience of the research participants. Each of the participants discussed informal professional supports, within the field of child welfare, as having been significant positive factors impacting their permanence within the field. As such, ongoing efforts must be made by Ontario’s child welfare agencies to promote, encourage and give space to frontline workers to build these

informal networks of support within the system. Specifically, for example, this could include opportunities for inter-agency training, inter-departmental training, and sharing of roles within agencies to promote communication, information sharing and understanding of roles and responsibilities in helping to keep children safe within their families.

Implications for Policy

While research participants storied their experiences, I worked understand the impacts and influences on worker permanence that have helped to improve their retention within the field of child welfare. I also sought to better understanding how roadblocks to positive worker retention might be surmounted, and permanence within the field achieved. As discussed, findings and recommendations of child death inquiries significantly influence in child protection work. However, inasmuch as these recommendations may be released publically, their direct implication to local policy may remain unconnected.

Many child death reviews and inquiries, articulate the multiple risks associated with child protection families, who are some of the most marginalized families in society. However, what is often missing from these inquiries is a review of the social support systems specifically available, or markedly absent, from the lives of those children of which they write. For example, with respect to the pediatric death review of Jordon Heikamp in Ontario (2001), various recommendations discussed lack of stable housing, as well as the “shelter culture” that develops in housing shelters for youth. However,

what is markedly absent is a contemporary review, at the time of the inquiry, into what the housing crisis looked like within the social system of the day. For example, while as an infant Jordon was moved between multiple shelters, the “housing list” that was administered by the state to “deserving” low income families, had an approximate five year wait for safe, stable, and affordable housing.

Research participants clearly articulated that they feel at times that the multiple systems in place to protect children do not always function: “...it’s the structure and function, maybe not even just our agency, but the whole system of child welfare that doesn’t seem to work right” (Rochelle); “...knowing that you’re not alone and that people across the entire agency, or the entire province for that matter, are experiencing the exact same stuff that you are” (Bean), are examples of workers’ frustrations with the inefficient systems in place to protect children. As such, in implicating the numerous social systems that are supposed to promote the health and well-being of children and families in society, I recommend the inclusion of a mandatory review of the local and contemporary social systems immediately available for children who are the subject of a child death review. Specifically, for example, an inquiry judge making any recommendation with respect to housing, would need to outline the current administered wait list as part of the recommendation. This same policy would mandate that factors such as wait times, or costs associated with mental health programs, addictions programs, or parenting programs, plus a review of worker caseload size routinely take place.

These changes are crucial steps needed to make critical readers more aware of the multiple realities and truths lived by children and their families; and to directly

connect local practices and policy to the recommendations made in child death reviews. In doing so, it would not only hold the system of child welfare accountable, but each of the systems in place, or markedly absent, that are to work to promote safety and security for children and families in our communities.

Implications for Future Research

This research study made it possible for some frontline child protection workers to share their knowledge, and make it available to support other frontline child welfare social workers, which in turn may help to improve their long-term permanence. This experiential knowledge could also help to benefit client families served by the system of child welfare. Making the study findings available to participants, and in turn, their social work groups and agencies where they were first recruited, is the first step to sharing this important information. However, there are limitations to the research that could be challenged in future research initiatives.

Specifically with respect to sample size, six people participated in this research. Although the participants varied in age, gender, culture, geographical location, urban and rural centers, and worked between three different child welfare agencies in Ontario, the sample size remains too small to be able to effectively make macro inferences between the data and the provincial mandate of child welfare workers in Ontario. A larger-scale study would be useful in examining factors impacting permanence with workers across the province. A larger-scale study would be better able to more

efficiently and accurately inform policy directives for frontline work with child welfare referred children and families.

Despite what we know to be an alarming proportion of Indigenous children in care, and the exponential rate of Indigenous children apprehended from their families, little is known about Indigenous workers within the system of child welfare. Arguably, Indigenous workers would be best able to understand the cyclic nature of the impacts of the child welfare system upon their communities, and too, better able to understand the dynamic needs of their people. However, understanding this, there is no information available that discusses the number of Indigenous child welfare workers in Ontario. As well, specifically looking at this research study with respect to factors impacting permanence of frontline child welfare workers, research could not be located which specifically discussed long-term Indigenous worker retention in child welfare. Reid (2005) discussed critical incident stressors and related research in her work; however this body of research is arguably very thin. Future research could be done that centers this worker population to better understand their experiences in the field of child welfare and their impacts upon Indigenous children and families.

In Ontario, approximately eight years ago, child welfare reform ushered forward a strength-based practice initiative, replacing the historical deficit-based model of risk assessment and practice with families. Using this same idea of strength-based motivation, future research could look to better understand and evaluate which child welfare agencies (Children's Aid Societies) in Ontario have greater populations of long-term frontline child protection workers. Further, research could be done within these agencies to better understand how this outcome is achieved, and or maintained with

long-term workers on the frontline, knowing that more experienced workers tend to achieve better working relationships with families.

Conclusion

Heckathorn's interpretation of the "hidden population" (2001) as it was applied to this research project, referred to child welfare workers who although viewed as professional social workers, often experience stigma related to their role with children and families. This interpretation of a hidden population helped to pique my interest in completing this research, so that I could understand more about long-term child welfare workers that have learned to overcome this stigmatization, or at the very least have established comfort within their professional role leading to their retention within the field. Strega quotes Heckman when she outlines a major question in anti-oppressive qualitative research practice: "... have we managed to make strange that which appears familiar, and make familiar that which appears strange?" (Hekman, 1999, p. 138, cited in Strega, 2005, p. 231). Is it possible, I wonder, to make familiar the role of the child welfare worker; a role still shrouded in secrecy, formality and authority. In doing so, can we make strange the negative stigma, and critically deconstruct that discourse, while we work to identify strong worker supports within the field, helping to aid in long term worker retention? Achieving better service outcomes for children and families is a priority; one which seems better served by long-term experienced workers, as opposed to a consistently revolving workforce.

As discussed earlier, “The stability of the workforce in any social service agency is important, but perhaps even more so in child welfare and protection agencies, where workforce instability has been linked directly to failures to protect children ...” (Burns & Christie, 2013, p. 340). In its attempts to protect children, the child welfare system in Canada can be linked to the historical genocide of Indigenous people and their children. A stable workforce with the ability to look critically at our history of service is paramount to our ability, as child protection workers, to protect children not only from potential harm or neglect at the hands of caregivers, but also to have the foresight and critical consciousness to protect Indigenous children from the harm inflicted by the system of child welfare.

We must commit ourselves to remain vigilant of these facts: “that a staggering half of all kids in foster care - 14,225 - are Aboriginal,” as well that “One in every 25 Native children is taken from their families” (Ball, 2013, p. 1). Mindful of these facts moving forward, it is critical to remain committed not only to the retention of long-term child welfare workers educated about the history and impact of child welfare policies, but also to the recruitment and retention of Indigenous child welfare workers.

We know that despite matrices of demanding expectations, cultural implications, caseload demands, critical incidents, and what seems to be a consistent critical public view of child welfare, there are frontline workers who have maintained their professional position, day to day, for many years. I have attempted to honour the stories told of participants, outlining their experience of their permanence, and the factors they have come to understand to have impacted their retention. Participants shared that believing there is a light in people and value in their person; finding concrete ways to get through

day by day; surrounding yourself with informal supports within the field; and finding different and expanding ways through education, to do the job; that each had significant impact on their ability to remain working the frontlines.

In looking forward to better outcomes for children and families, understanding the limitations and scope of this study as discussed, it is hoped that further work could continue to introduce a counter discourse to those dominant ones that circulate negative representations of frontline child welfare social workers, while also establishing a better understanding of the impacts and influences on worker permanence. Long-term worker retention is critical to the level and type of services available to children and families, remembering that our child welfare referred families are often some of the most marginalized in society. The ongoing availability of highly skilled service providers found in long-term, experienced workers who are available to assist families, is critical to child and family success.

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Appendix 1

Email Script (Accompaniment to Participant Recruitment Flyer)**Maintaining Workers Reserve: Examining Influential Factors and Supports
Leading to Long-Term Worker Permanence in Child Welfare**

Student Researcher: Suzanne Howard-Peacock
Graduate Student: Masters of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Susan Strega (PhD)
Human & Social Development: School of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

“Hello,

My name is Suzanne Howard-Peacock and I am a Master of Social Student at the University of Victoria. In an effort to complete the requirements of the Master of Social Work degree, I am working toward the completion of original participant research in the field of child welfare practice. It is my goal to recruit five to eight senior frontline child protection workers who have at least ten years of child welfare practice experience and who remain practicing frontline in the field, to participate in my research study.

The purpose of my research study is to understand more about the factors or supports that have influenced the permanence of frontline child protection workers. As well, I am interested in worker narratives hearing about how workers are talking of their experience in working on the front lines of child welfare practice. The main objectives of my research are to promote a voice of frontline worker experience within the field of child welfare and to facilitate the translation of learning from senior frontline child protection workers to those beginning to practice within the field.

Participants will be invited to participate in one in-depth interview with me and can expect to commit to approximately 1.5 to 2 hours of their time; while the location, date and time of the interview will be held where the participant identifies they are comfortable to participate.

Please see the attached Participant Recruitment Flyer for additional details and information about my research study, as well as my contact information should you, or anyone you know be interested in participating in the research, or have questions about participation.

With Thanks,

Suzanne Howard-Peacock”



Appendix 2

Participant Recruitment Flyer**Maintaining Workers Reserve: Examining Influential Factors and Supports
Leading to Long-Term Worker Permanence in Child Welfare**

Student Researcher: Suzanne Howard-Peacock
Graduate Student: Masters of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Susan Strega (PhD)
Human & Social Development: School of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

The purpose of this study is to understand more about the factors or supports that have influenced the permanence of frontline child protection workers. As well, I am interested in narratives about how workers are talking about their experience. Using a qualitative narrative methodology, supported by anti-oppressive theory, semi-structured interviews will be used to engage workers in producing conversational narratives. Worker narratives will then be subjected to narrative analysis, hoping to uncover impacts and influences on permanence of front line child protection workers.

The main objectives of the research are to promote a voice of front line worker experience within the field of child welfare and to facilitate the translation of learning from senior front line child protection workers to those beginning to practice within the field.

The main research questions are as follows:

- What do you understand to be “long-term” worker permanence in child welfare?
- Tell me the story about how you’ve remained practicing in child welfare so long?
- What do you think has supported your permanence in child welfare?

I hope to interview four to six participants as part of this research project. Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may decline to participate in this research, or later withdraw their commitment without any repercussion whatsoever. Should potential participants have any prior professional relationship with me, they should not feel obliged to participate in the study. If you do agree to participate, you will still be able to withdraw at any time without having to provide any explanation. Following participation in the interview process, a final summary of the research findings will be available to participants if requested from the researcher.

As part of this research project, participants will be invited to participate in one in-depth interview with the researcher. Participants can expect to commit to approximately 1.5 to 2 hours of time with the researcher. The location, date and time of the interview will be determined in consultation with the researcher and occur at a mutually agreed upon location where the participant would feel comfortable during the interview process.

Participants may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns they might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca). The Ethical Protocol Number, assigned by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board is 13-251, and remains valid until August 5, 2014.

If you are a frontline child protection worker, with at least ten years experience, and are interested in participating in this research study, please contact me by email at peacocks@uvic.ca.



Appendix 3

Letter of Information / Informed Consent**Maintaining Workers Reserve: Examining Influential Factors and Supports
Leading to Long-Term Worker Permanence in Child Welfare**

Student Researcher: **Suzanne Howard-Peacock**
 Graduate Student: Masters of Social Work
 University of Victoria
 Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Faculty Advisor: **Dr. Susan Strega (PhD)**
 Human & Social Development: School of Social Work
 University of Victoria
 Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

The purpose of this study is to understand more about the factors or supports that have influenced the permanence of frontline child protection workers. As well, I am interested in narratives about how workers are talking about their experience. Using a qualitative narrative methodology, supported by anti-oppressive theory, semi-structured interviews will be conducted to engage workers in producing conversational narratives. Through narrative analysis I hope to uncover impacts and influences on permanence.

The main objectives of the research are to promote a voice of front line worker experience within the field of child welfare and to facilitate the translation of learning from senior front line child protection workers to those beginning to practice within the field. As such, apart from the final thesis document, wider publication of the final thesis, or presentation and discussion of findings within scholarly meetings is possible.

Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may decline to participate in this research, or later withdraw their commitment without any repercussion whatsoever. If you do agree to participate, you will still be able to withdraw at any time without having to provide any explanation.

Any information that participants provide as part of the interview process will be kept confidential. Given the qualitative nature of the study and the use of transcripts, I will ensure protection of the participant's confidentiality by changing and omitting information that could identify the participant. The anonymity of participants will be ensured to the limits of legally required disclosure. In the event that I receive any information about the abuse or neglect of a child I am legally obligated to report the information to the local Children's Aid Society. As well, if any information shared indicated a plan to harm oneself or others, I similarly have a duty to report such plans to the local authorities. Outside of these exceptions, any information given in interviews will be locked in a password protected word processing program on a laptop which is also password protected by the researcher.

As practicing social workers, research participants should refrain from mentioning clients or situations that could identify a client.

All information collected via interview notes, audio records of interviews, or transcribed audio recordings will be destroyed five years after the completion of the research study.

Following participation in the interview process, a final summary of the research findings will be available to participants if requested. Upon completion of participant interviews, and the subsequent data analysis, I will write my findings as part of my thesis in the Master of Social Work Program at the University of Victoria. I will provide a link to an electronic copy of the final thesis to all research participants, when oral defence has been completed and accepted by the University of Victoria.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have had an opportunity to review the information regarding participation in this research study, and have understood the information to your satisfaction; further that you agree to participate in the research study.

Again, participation in this study is voluntary and you may decline to participate in this research, or later withdraw your commitment without any repercussion whatsoever. If you do agree to participate, you will still be able to withdraw at any time prior to the writing of the final thesis, without having to provide any explanation.

If at any point prior to your scheduled interview, or time following your interview, you have any questions about your interview or the research project, please contact me at peacocks@uvic.ca.

A copy of this Letter of Information / Informed Consent has been given to you, to keep for your personal records.

You may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Signature

Date



Appendix 4

Tentative Interview Guide**Maintaining Workers Reserve: Examining Influential Factors and Supports
Leading to Long-Term Worker Permanence in Child Welfare**

Student Researcher: Suzanne Howard-Peacock
Graduate Student: Masters of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Susan Strega (PhD)
Human & Social Development: School of Social Work
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

Identification of Supports:

It is possible that during your participation in the interview process that you begin to feel fatigued or stressed. If this occurs, you can ask to break at any time, for any period of time. As well, if you request, the interview can stop for the day and resume on another scheduled date.

As a consequence of participation in the interview process, it is possible that you may have feelings of emotional or psychological discomfort triggered by discussions of your past experiences or opinions. Prior to beginning the interview, I would like for you to identify a support person immediately available to you, with whom you are comfortable, who will be able to debrief with you either during, or following the interview, as you may need.

Demographics:

(1) Age:

(2) Gender Identification:

(3) Cultural Identification:

- (4) Current Frontline Child Welfare Position:
- (5) Years of Experience in this Role:
- (6) Previous Frontline Child Welfare Positions Held:
- (7) Total Years of Child Welfare Experience:
- (8) Previous Professional Social Work Roles & Years of Experience:
- (9) Current University Degree of Study Held:

Semi-Structured / Open-Ended Questions

- (10) What do you understand to be “long-term” worker permanence in child welfare?
- (11) Tell me the story about how you’ve remained practicing in child welfare so long?
- (12) What do you think has supported your permanence in child welfare?



Appendix 5

Narrative Analysis – Stories Across Stories – Initial Findings

**Maintaining Workers Reserve: Examining Influential Factors and Supports
Leading to Long-Term Worker Permanence in Child Welfare**

Demographic Data Analysis

	ANNE	BEAN	GREG	MADDIE	ROCHELLE	ZAZA	AVG-N/A
Age of Participants	45	33	59	35	44	46	43.6
Gender Identification	F	F	M	F	F	F	5 F 1 M
Cultural Identification	C/PORTUGUESE	C	MOHAWK	C	C	BRAZILIAN	3 C 1 MOHAWK 1 BRAZIL
Current Frontline CW Position	FSW	FSW	FSW	FSW/INT	FSW	FSW/INT	4 FSW 2 FSW/INT
Years of Experience in Role	10	10	21	11	13	12	12.83
Previous Frontline CW Position & Years in Role	FSW-7						
Total Years of CW Experience	17	10	21	11	13	12	14
Previous Professional Social Work Roles & Years of Experience		F Parent 2	Add/MH 9	MH 1			
Current University Degree Held	BA PSYCHOLOGY	BA CRIMINOLOGY	BSW FGDM	BSW	BA SOCIOLOGY	BSW	3 BSW 1 SOC 1 CRIM

Narrative Data Analysis

	ANNE	BEAN	GREG	MADDIE	ROCHELLE	ZAZA	AVG-N/A
Believing there is a light (Exploration & Intrigue of Human Spirit)	+	+	+	+	+	+	6
Getting through day-by-day (Survival)	+	+		+	+	+	5
You can't do this job by yourself (Working your way out of isolation)	+	+		+	+	+	5
Finding different ways to do your job and do your job better (Training & Education)	+	+	+				3
Supervisor Impact		+		+			2
Compensation & Benefits		+			+		2
External Support System				+			1
