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GENDER AND CHILD PROTECTION WORK: VOICES FROM THE FRONT-LINES

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ABSTRACT

Child protection work largely relies on mothers in fulfilling its aim to protect children and support families. Mothers are expected to shield children from abuse and neglect regardless of circumstance. Fathers evade such expectations, and are rather treated as unimportant or as aggressors. In either case, they are distanced from the child protection process. These divergent expectations of mothers and fathers often go unnoticed in child protection practice, as social workers are consumed with the urgent need of assessing risk to children. Workers' reliance on mothers becomes a habit that is not easily countered because there is neither the time nor the tools to engage in such a battle. The present study seeks to illuminate gender constructions and their reproduction in front-line child protection work through the voices of social workers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight former and current front-line workers for this study.

RESUME

Le travail de protection des enfants compte principalement sur la participation des mères pour réaliser leur objectif de protéger et de soutenir les familles en crise. On s'attend à ce que les mamans protègent leurs enfants malgré toutes circonstances. Les pères qui échappent à de telles attentes, ont peu d'importance dans le déroulement de l'analyse. Ils sont souvent considérés comme des 'agresseurs', ce qui les isolent du procédé d'intervention sociale. Les attentes divergentes des mères et des pères demeurent trop souvent inaperçus par les travailleuses et les travailleurs sociaux qui se préoccupent d'évaluer le risque qu'un enfant soit en danger. La dépendance quasi complète des travailleurs sociales sur les mères est devenue une habitude dangereuse qui entraîne des conséquences inattendues. Cette étude cherche à illuminer les fondements de sexe dans le cadre familiale et le calquage de cette structure dans le milieu de travail l'intervention sociale, comme elle est perçue par les yeux des travailleuses et des travailleurs. Des entrevues semi-structurées ont été entreprises avec huit travailleuses et travailleurs sociaux pour cette étude.

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I would like to thank Linda Davies for her thoughtful insight and guidance. I don't think I would have even contemplated this important subject matter had it not been for her. I would like to thank the social workers who participated in this study and allowed me to listen to their personal thoughts and experiences. I would also like to thank my friends and family for all their support.

INTRODUCTION

Child protection service work is inadvertently oppressive to women in its efforts to protect children and sustain families in need. It is well documented that mothers become pivotal in fulfilling this system's mandate, while fathers are pushed to the sidelines despite being more often responsible for abusing children (Munro, 1998). Mothers become accountable for whatever befalls children. Gendered expectations are virtually unacknowledged by child protection agencies. Clients as characteristically poor and female is all but ignored (Krane, 1997). Discounting the contexts of child protection clients can be attributed to the growing preeminence of risk assessment in this field. Child protection was formerly concerned with "diagnosing, curing and preventing" whatever "'disease" or "syndrome" led to abuse of children while the current focus is on "investigating, assessing and weighing forensic evidence" (Parton, Thorpe & Wattam, 1997, p. 19). Rather than a concern for prevention and treating families, the need to protect children from the individual failures of parents has become seminal (Callahan, 2001).

Front-line child protection social workers are the representatives of this system and all its paradoxes. They embody the conflicting desire to help people and to scrupulously investigate risk to children. They are constantly under a great deal of pressure as their interventions are laden with the threat of personal liability should something go wrong in the lives of children on their caseloads. The nature of this complicated job overwhelms the potential for countering oppressive practices such as the unrelenting focus on women. Social workers have little choice but to reproduce

prevailing institutional norms in the stressful and time-constrained environments of child protection work.

Through the voices of eight child protection workers, I will explore the different ways in which men and women are treated by this system and illuminate how gendered practice is reproduced. I write this thesis from the standpoint of a former foster care worker. While working in this field, I expected more from mothers than from fathers and I often worked exclusively with mothers. I never considered this until a foster mother asked me outright why it is that workers direct their services overwhelmingly at foster mothers. My aim in this study is not only to fill a gap in qualitative research but it is also a personal quest to learn how I became a part of such a practice.

CHAPTER 1 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Mother blame in child protection practice

Traditionally, men have been relegated to the public sphere of paid employment and women to the private realm of home (Miedema, 1999). Influential theorists in the 1950's, such as Parsons postulated that women were uniquely equipped to nurture and care for their children, whereas men were more competitive by nature and belonged in the public sphere of work (Parsons in Miedema, 1999). Bowlby compounded the natural, pre-determined destiny of women by publishing his findings on attachment theory, which held that the presence of a child's mother is fundamental to the healthy development of her child (Birns, 1999).

Women in Western society are expected to be innately and exclusively responsible for everything related to children and should they falter in this role, they are characterized as deficient. This culture of mothering is reproduced through "social structurally induced psychological processes" (Chodorow, 1978, p. 7). The assumption that mothering is natural discounts drastic shifts in motherhood trends through recent history as well as variations in mothering across cultures. Hay's study of 186 different societies around the world contests the Western construct of mothers (1991). She found that in only forty-six percent of communities were mothers primary caregivers. Mothers were primary caregivers of their infants in less than twenty percent of societies and in forty percent siblings were the main caregivers. This implies that Western myths surrounding motherhood find their roots in society, not biology. Forna (1998) poignantly delineates society's lofty and unrealistic expectations of mothers:

> She must be completely devoted not just to her children, but to her role. She must be the mother who understands her children, who is all loving, and even more important all giving. She must be capable of enormous sacrifice. She must be fertile and possess maternal drives...she alone is the best caretaker for her children and they require her continual and exclusive presence. She must embody all the qualities traditionally associated with femininity such as nurturing, intimacy and softness. That's how we want her to be. That's how we intend to make her.

Child protection practice does not exist in isolation in society and therefore it reflects these gendered expectations. Cultural conceptions based in the ideology that women are by nature intended to mother shape our expectations and interventions with mothers. This is evident in the fact that most child protection work is carried out exclusively with mothers, regardless of their hand in abuse to children (O'Donnell, 2001; Milner, 1993).

The reliance on women is partly owed to the preponderance of single mother headed families on child protection caseloads (Maluccio, 1999). However, even when supposedly "single mothers" have men in their lives, or when fathers can be located, mothers are often the primary targets of service interventions (O'Donnell, 2001). Frank (2001) found that birthfathers, if they can be located, are virtually ignored as a resource for children who need to be placed in the foster care system, and that "initial inquiries are almost always confined to mothers" (p. 397). Research by Thorpe (as cited in O'Hagan, 1997) found that among 274 child abuse referrals made to six inner city child protection teams in one year, over seventy-five percent (211) involved single parent mothers. Over sixty percent (128) of these mothers, however, had associations with male partners who had been living with them for varying amounts of time. These findings illustrate that even if men are available and play a part in care giving, they may be virtually ignored.

This reliance on mothers begins at the intake and referral phases of the child protection process. O'Hagan (1997) found that in initial investigations regarding child abuse or neglect, workers direct their attention at mothers. He found that few, if any questions concern men, despite indications that a man is responsible or contributory in abuse. Following initial investigations, men are only marginally included in treatment services. A study of contact with 132 families of children in foster care (O'Donnell, 2001) revealed that over a twelve-month period, most fathers had no contact with caseworkers and had never participated in meetings regarding their children's futures. According to O'Hagan, child protection workers frequently avoid men by making treatment meetings with mothers over the phone with little or no consideration to the availability of men. Important appointments may take place without a father's attendance, whereas the presence of the mother seems compulsory.

A mother's failure to protect

If a mother fails to protect her children in the face of a threat, regardless of whether the mother is at risk herself, research reveals, she is charged as a neglectful parent. Abuse comes to be defined in regards to what a mother "failed to do," rather than in terms of what the "father did" (Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003, p. 397). Scourfield (1997) found in his research that a team of protection workers considered involving an abusive man simply "not an option" (p. 84). Texas legislation stipulates that mothers have a duty to protect their children regardless of any danger to themselves and if they fail to do so, they can be prosecuted (Hosh, Chanez, Bowell & Munoz, 1991 as cited in Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003). This implies that mothers who may be victims of

abuse themselves will be held accountable for what men have done. Magen (1999 as cited in Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003) found that if abusers are not the biological fathers of children, mothers are charged with neglect and failing to protect, while abusers escape responsibility. Milner (1993) found in her ethnographic study as an investigative child protection worker that in allegations of abuse against fathers, in which the fathers admitted to the abuse, the behavior and character of the mother determined whether the case would be further investigated.

Rather than holding men accountable for their actions, child protection relies on mothers to ameliorate their situations; mothers are expected to make the right *choice* and extract an abuser from their lives. In this way, workers rely on women to have the capacity to make decisions that they perceive as rational according to gendered expectations of mothers as committed and selfless, even though this may disregard individual circumstance or cultural background (Scourfield, 1997).

Avoiding fathers in child protection practice

Men as fathers have never been subject to the same scrutiny and idealization as mothers. Although this is slowly changing, Silverstein (1996) notes that mothers still assume the majority of care giving responsibilities and most psychological research concerns the mother-child dyad. This notion is reflected in child protection work. Men are nominally included in services, as they are perceived as less important in the lives of children, or labeled as abusive criminals, and as a result, kept at a distance from interventions.

This lack of interaction stems from social workers' expectations of aggressive or intimidating behavior from men. O'Hagan notes that in actuality male and female workers are more likely to be attacked by women. This is because women are more often the primary caretakers of children and feel more threatened by the presence of child protection workers. Mothers may also be overwhelmed and resentful towards service providers as a result of the exclusive focus on them. Additionally, women are more often the targets of interventions, so there is more opportunity for aggression on their behalf (O'Hagan, 1997).

Child protection workers, who are mostly female, must go to people's homes and investigate cases that may involve an aggressive man. While this is a job that requires skill, little training exists in this area; instead, social workers are expected to be able to deflate violence on their own (Milner, 1993). Rather than confronting this awkward responsibility, workers rely on mothers and avoid any situation with a potentially aggressive male.

Men in relation to this system are demonstrably more abusive to women and children (Milner, 1993; Munro, 1998). However, instead of prompting more services and interventions in order to target this problem, men are marginalized because of this expectation. Pushing men to the sidelines solidifies their evasion of blame and propels the reliance on women. Coohey (2000) suggests that child protection's failure to engage abusers or refer them to legitimate resources denies that men have "emotional needs" (p. 399). Many communities lack any specific resources for fathers that prevent abuse or help men to connect with their children (Coohey, 2000).

It must be added that the child protection world is feminine, practically by definition. Almost all interaction between workers and clients is bound to be female because the overwhelming majority of social workers and of children's primary care-takers are women. The social worker's world is in turn full of the biases that result from being limited to one gender. Few men make an appearance in the world wherein the social workers and clients interact, this leaves things askew and unbalanced. The result is a system that regards men as unimportant and only barely worth talking to.

The child protection culture

The stressful, individualistic and time-constrained child protection environment compels social workers to engage in practices that may be oppressive, without critical thought or reflection. This system is utterly concerned with the need to assess and prevent risk to children, and the tools in place to achieve this greatly isolate parents and social workers. Child protection efforts are not grounded in the desire to help families in need but concerned with the accounting of parental failings to children (Parton, Thorpe & Wattam, 1997). Social workers' mandate to protect children causes them to overlook structural issues such as gender, race or class that may influence the ability to parent (Callahan, 2001).

The ignoring of wider issues facing clients begins in undergraduate social work education, as schools do little to combat prevailing prejudices in terms of gender, race and class (Frank, 2001). Brown charges that "at best the traditional practice of social work functions to manage women's problems; at worst it revictimizes and deepens women's oppression" (1994). Social work as a practice, Comley asserts, has "historically

apprehended social problems as if they somehow existed independently of societal power structures" (1989, p. 49).

In the child protection workplace, practices such as that of documenting "evidence" in files promote the distancing of social workers from the realities of clients. Beginning in training, we are often told to "leave work at the office" and not get too emotionally involved in our jobs (Davies & Collings, 2003). This promotes the emotional withdrawal from one's actions and rather the mechanical fulfillment of responsibilities according to procedure. This distance from emotion is notably embodied in documentation practices. Pare and Szwello (1995) assert that the primary concern for accountability in documents has "far-reaching consequences for individuals, families and even whole communities". Despite their importance, there is virtually no training on how to document but rather social workers learn from reading and modeling after existing documents (Hall, 1997). This in turn is the site at which institutional practices and norms become standardized and reproduced (Pare and Szwello, 1995).

Documents are additionally portrayed as objective accounts. Social workers must disappear in their writing, and awkwardly refer to themselves as "workers", whereas the use of "I" is largely prohibited. This denies the experience and personality of the social worker, implying that documents are based in truth and that any other "worker" would have made the same observations (Hall, 1997, Davies & Collings, 2003). This also denies that child protection work is a very human profession that is subjective and ambiguous (Davies & Collings, 2002). This culture of removing emotion from the important work conducted fosters the distancing of service workers from their clients and their actions.

The introduction of risk assessment tools embraces the culture of managing risk and stifling subjectivity. Risk assessment tools are questionnaires consisting of research-based criterion that workers must use in completing investigations of child abuse and in determining whether children can return to their families once in foster care. There however does not exist any research-based evidence that these tools actually predict risk to children, although children are removed from homes on their basis (Callahan, 2001). Callahan (2001) asserts that risk assessment tools are largely individualistic, discounting fundamental influences in child maltreatment and placing parents at odds with social workers. The tools cause families to be fearful of child protection services because of its concern with risk management and investigations rather than attention to helping people in need.

In conjunction with this risk management culture, social workers have little time to analyze or counter harmful practices such as gendered interventions. Davies and Collings (2003) note, "It has become a practice of standardizing, documenting, adopting seemingly objective, scientific frameworks that aim to guide workers in the detection and management of risk" (p. 1). If social workers fail in this mandate, they may be virtually crucified for their negligence. The finger is often pointed exclusively at social workers when something goes wrong with children on their caseloads. The inadequate government programs, structural barriers to successful family life and assessment tools escape scrutiny (Callahan, 2003). Social workers must be decisive, effective and unwavering in their detection of risk in order to forestall harm to children and personal liability for wrongdoing. This hurried, crisis-filled atmosphere sustains certain ways of

thinking about people, as injustices go unchanged and unchallenged amidst the more pressing responsibility to assess risk to children.

Objective of this study: a personal account

The aim of this study is to explore the construction and reproduction of gender through interviews with eight front-line workers. This is also an attempt to fill a gap in research, as Scourfield (2001) asserts that there is limited qualitative study on gender biases in child protection. I became interested in this topic after reflecting on my experience as a foster family care worker throughout my Master's studies.

This thesis does not specifically address foster family care but it encompasses the gender biases that permeate this system. Foster family care relies on the unpaid, unrecognized work of women to care for children who have been removed from their families by child protective services (Smith, 1988). It is a "state provided opportunity to fulfill an innate aspect of womanhood" (Wozniak, 1997, p. 364) and payment for fulfilling this role is thoroughly taboo. In the agency in which I worked, it was prohibited to describe the compensation for taking in children as "payment". It seemed that any semblance of fiscal reward for foster mothers' care giving was unacceptable. Smith (1988) asserts, "The belief exists that foster mothers, like all mothers, should work for love, not money; care of children in the home is not counted as labor requiring skill or expertise" (p. 35). Wozniack (1997) poignantly summarizes the paradox of foster mothering,

> Women who live with, feed, clothe, love and educate numerous children for little or no financial assistance are exalted as 'Supermoms,' while they are simultaneously debased as whores whose services are bought and whose labor is exploited and

> exploitable. Like other economically marginalized and exploited women, foster mothers are raped by the state (p. 363).

Seldom does a man foster solely and if a foster father is involved, his role is marginal (Inch, 1999). The expectation is that women selflessly and contentedly care for children because it is their calling to do so.

It was only after I left work and began my Master's that I could fully consider this imbalance. While in the field, such reflection was virtually impossible. The work was stressful, time constrained and laden with the threat of personal liability should something go wrong on my caseload. I think this environment separated me from the realities of my clients and the larger injustices in this system. Researching this subject and conducting interviews was a great learning process. I had no clear understanding of my topic or the depths of this issue until drafting my analysis. Initially, I had difficulty defining my topic and thinking critically about this subject. This is partly because I restricted my voice and experience in my writing according to rigid expectations of what I thought research papers should resemble. This practice is emblematic of the way I wrote reports as a foster care worker: I had to remove any trace of myself and constrain my writing about diverse people within fixed categories. Researching and writing this thesis has helped me to think more critically and to question common practices and ways of thinking in social work. I hope it will provoke thought and reflection for others.

CHAPTER 2 – METHODOLOGY FOR INTERVIEWING FRONTLINE CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS

This qualitative study aims to provide some insight into the ways in which gender is constructed and reproduced in child protection practice. I chose a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews because this enables individuals to speak about their perceptions and experiences without the imposition of fixed categorizations that may potentially limit the field of inquiry (Weber, 1986). I conducted eight semi-structured interviews with individuals either previously or currently employed in child protection services. The interviews were conducted between March 2004 and May 2004. They lasted from fifty minutes to two hours and provided rich access to the experience of front-line workers.

Rationale for qualitative approach

Qualitative research seeks to generate understanding and knowledge of social phenomenon through oral accounts of individual's subjective experience (Berg, 1995). Qualitative research is concerned with how individuals define and evaluate their experiences in their own terms (Anderson and Jack, 1993). I chose to conduct semi-structured interviews in order to allow the participants' perspectives to surface in their own words, while simultaneously enabling me to investigate my topic of interest (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

Qualitative research and social work practice are intrinsically linked, as they are both generally concerned with human rights and social justice. Qualitative research "(selects) a topic for study that has the potential to improve people's lives ... by writing

up and disseminating the findings to a larger audience we are fulfilling our ethical obligations as researchers who care about human concerns" (Padgett, 1998, p. 62). Qualitative approaches inherently illuminate the plight of disadvantaged groups, enhancing the ability for social work practice to better tackle their problems. The qualitative approach was most fitting for this study because it enabled me to explore the complex and varied individual experiences of front-line workers.

Design of Study

I interviewed eight individuals previously or currently employed as front-line child protection workers between the ages of twenty-three and fifty-five. In order to be eligible for the study, the interviewees had to be working in child protection or to have had recent employment in this field. Two interviews were conducted over the telephone, while I transcribed certain comments and took notes, and the remaining six took place at my home or at the residence of the interviewee. The interviews were recorded using a small tape recorder. Following the interviews, I transcribed the words of the participants verbatim. I collected roughly eighty pages of single-spaced raw data in which I altered the participants' names.

Engaging participants

In recruiting participants, I approached individuals in person or through email, provided them with a copy of my consent form (see Appendix I), and briefly addressed my subject of interest and genuine yearning to explore this matter further. Expressing a

sincere desire to learn about the valuable experiences of potential participants purportedly leads interviewees to partake in the study (Weber, 1986).

Collecting and analyzing findings

I reviewed debates from existing related scholarship on my subject matter, in order to devise the semi-structure questions for my interview guide (see Appendix II). The initial questions are straight forward, with the intention of gaining some level of comfort with the interviewees. I divided the interview guide into personal demographics (work history, educational background etc.), demographics of clients, job description, parental involvement during investigations, treatment, and placement, experiences with mothers and fathers, documentation practices, and experiences in education and training. There was frequent deviation from my interview guide throughout the interviews. I supported and embraced this, as the most interesting and significant insight resulted from such digressions.

I firstly conducted a two-hour pilot interview with a former child welfare worker in order to discover the kinds of responses my interview questions would elicit. Prior to conducting the pilot interview, I intended to explore the general presence of mother blame in foster family care. Following the pilot interview, I became more interested in the differing constructions of men and women in child protection generally, but I still did not have a clearly defined topic or hypothesis until drafting my analysis. This was initially problematic, as during some interviews, I was mistakenly searching for information regarding my topic, about which I was uncertain. I additionally had never conducted a qualitative research project before and was studying and learning as I went

along. After the first few interviews, I felt more at ease with the process and as Aderson and Jack (1993) advise, I started to listen and really hear the words of the interviewees instead of my own presumptions.

The interviews were open and conversational, allowing the interviewees to tell their stories, which shaped my analysis. I employed open-ended, semi-structured questions throughout, presenting the interview as a discussion to which I contributed (Weber, 1986). I had to be particularly careful not to "interview down," which is how Kirby and McKenna (1989) classify interviews in which the researchers present themselves as being an authority on the subject matter. This was important, as I was taking a critical look at the practice in which the participants are or were employed. I tried to avoid conveying my opinions or being critical, but the nature of my questions and subject matter made this difficult at times. Regrettably, I think that I made some interviewees feel as though they were being judged.

After assembling my findings, I read over them numerous times and began a "research diary" (Silverman, 2000). Because I was unsure about what I really wanted to say in my thesis, I began this process of reading the data repeatedly and writing down my reflections. I would write whatever came to mind, even if it had no relevance to my thesis. This diary was a most valuable tool. It allowed my ideas to freely surface and provided an outlet to express my feelings about the research and writing process. After becoming more comfortable with my subject, I extracted roughly twenty themes from the data and formed them into representative headings. I then placed fitting interviewee quotations and my analyses of them beneath these titles. Ultimately, I collapsed some of the headings into concise categories and began drafting my analysis.

Description of the Interviewees

I interviewed seven females and one male for this study. It must be noted that all of the interviewees were Caucasian and had an average of one and a half years of child protection practice experience. Had I elicited a more culturally, racially diverse and experienced group, my analysis may have varied significantly. A brief description of the interviewees, using their pseudonyms, follows.

Jane

Jane is Caucasian, in her early twenties, with a Bachelor's in social work. She worked in a "treatment" capacity throughout her undergraduate field placement and employment in child protection for a total period of one year. She has since pursued a career in public relations and vows never to return to child protection work, citing differences with her supervisors and an aversion to the stressful nature of the job.

Susan

Susan is Caucasian in her early twenties with a Bachelor's in women's studies, as well as a Bachelor's in social work. She has worked in child protection practice in an "investigative" capacity for over a year. She intends to quit and pursue a career elsewhere because of the intense and frustrating nature of the work. She does not like the fact that the system seems motivated by the need to "cover" oneself and the agency rather than a desire or ability to help people.

Anne

Anne is Caucasian, in her early twenties with a Bachelor's in psychology and social work and is near the completion of her Master's in social work. She worked in child protection practice in an "investigative" role for roughly one year and will soon

begin work again in the same capacity. She took a critical course on child protection practice and expressed that this has helped her to approach her work with a renewed sense of empathy and understanding about the situations of clients.

Karen

Karen is Caucasian, in her early twenties with a Bachelor's in social work and is near the completion of her Master's in social work. She has worked in child protection services for roughly a year in an "investigative" and an "intake and referral" role, and continues to work in the field. She tries to leave her work at the office in order to avoid feeling too stressed. Sometimes she wants to discuss issues related to her job that really affect her, but does not have an outlet to do so.

Jackie

Jackie is Caucasian, in her early twenties with a Bachelor's in social work and is near the completion of her Master's in social work. She has worked in child protection for a little over a year in a "treatment" capacity and continues to work in the field. Jackie is critical of the tendency in child protection practice to label clients quickly, with little thought or reflection.

John

John is Caucasian, thirty-three and near the completion of his Master's degree in social work. He completed a Bachelor's in social work with an emphasis on child protection services. He was formerly employed in a child protection agency in an "investigative and treatment" role, servicing aboriginal peoples, for one and a half years. He does not intend to work in child protection again, citing its stressful and oppressive nature.

Carmela

Carmela is Caucasian, in her late twenties, has a Bachelor's and is near the completion of a Master's in social work. She has worked in child protection in an "assessment" role for three and a half years and continues to work in the field. She expressed frustration at the new legislation in her area that demands police to involve child protection services in every case of domestic abuse in which there are children living in the home. She says this greatly increases her caseload, causing her to often intervene unnecessarily in the quarrels of couples.

Shelly

Shelly is Caucasian, in her early fifties with a Bachelor's in social work and is near the completion of a Master's in social work. She has worked in the field for two years in a treatment capacity and continues to work in the area. She expressed feeling disheartened by the overwhelming numbers of very young, poor parents on child protection caseloads in her region. She asserted that the real problem these families face is poverty and a lack of community services and support systems.

CHAPTER 3 - CONSTRUCTING MOTHERS IN FRONT-LINE PRACTICE

Maternal responsibility

Many expectations of mothers surfaced throughout the course of the interviews. The agency practices that the interviewees described expected mothers to be committed to their children regardless of individual circumstance. They had to protect children in the face of a violent man or from the ills of poverty, even if they were victims themselves. Women were expected to willingly comply with the every demand of the child protection system, despite their hand in abuse to children; if they did not comply, they risked having their family disenfranchised. Women, unlike men, were also more often caregivers, and therefore, available to assume the expectations that child protection services have of them. John acknowledged that there is little way of avoiding this:

> ...ultimately, the primary care taker is usually the woman, so it's her responsibility to keep the kids safe and whether (the father) did or did not follow on whatever it is we were trying to do, it was kind of a non issue for us because we're looking at the kids and the primary caretaker who is almost always a woman.

Karen emphasized the preponderance of mothers on her caseload as primary caregivers:

> Most of the time we end up speaking to mothers, especially in divorced families ....The person who has custody is usually the mother...for whatever reason, you're mostly speaking to the mothers.

The assumption that mothers would be able to fulfill their expected selfless commitment to children was present even if mothers were victims of abuse. This was exemplified in Carmela's description of her agency's demands of women in cases of domestic violence:

> A majority (of cases involve) domestic violence and most often (the couple) got in a fight, dad assaulted mom and we go out and interview both partners. The other day I visited a home and they only had a verbal argument...dad threw a vase across the room and the police called us. It was just a fight and they were willing to get counseling. We closed the file. When kids are smaller, it's rated higher, it depends.
>
> But cases where it's excessive...like the woman was beaten pretty badly, our expectations are different. We will put restrictions. You know, 'if you allow him back in the home we're going to take the kids,' he is not as much involved in this process.

In this example, the mother becomes responsible for protecting herself and her children from her abuser. As Carmela notes, if she does 'allow him back in the home,' her children will be taken. It seems the woman is further victimized by child protection involvement, in that she is threatened with the removal of her children while in a vulnerable position herself. She has to comply with certain demands while her aggressor disappears from this equation. In my interview with John, he identified a similar practice of relying on women to make important decisions, regardless of a man's role in inflicting abuse:

> She was the primary caretaker and she would be the one that would have to make the decision to move out or to do whatever she had to do to make sure the kids didn't witness the violence...which meant she had to take a stand and say, 'Hey look get out of my house,' which is not easy for women to do especially in violent situations. She basically had to be able to convince us that he wouldn't be allowed back in the home or if he was, then somebody else would be there.
>
> If that didn't happen, certainly (we) would be heading in the direction of removing kids...our team was pretty slow to remove kids but if it was discovered that he was over a few times and even if he was violent, yeah we would be looking at moving the kids...She is totally relied upon to make that choice.

Child protection practice relies on mothers, because of their expected innate and selfless commitment to her children, to make the "choice" of her children's welfare over her own needs, the needs of her partner and of her family as a whole. It becomes the individual decision of the mother regardless of her particular circumstance. The father's responsibility in this case is not apparent. As noted in my discussion with Susan, this expectation that the mother "decide" between her children and her partner is evident regardless of cultural determinants:

> What do you do in the instance where dad may be the aggressor but maybe mom believes she wants her family to stay together and the family comes from a culture where leaving one's husband is strictly prohibited?
>
> I think in that instance it would be certainly something to keep in mind and that may be a point where your clinical work could start but I wouldn't keep a child there because of a cultural (matter)...it would be something that I could work with mom and dad on and maybe we could find a way to have him stay...I understand why mom would stay. I get it. But at the same time, I'm not going to compromise the safety and security of the kids.

The child protection worker depends on the mother to separate from her husband and to protect her children. This system does not expect men to demonstrate the same divine responsibility to children. Ultimately, women come to own the violent actions of men as they are the ones held accountable. Shelly explicitly asserts that if mothers do not recognize the abuse or protect children, their ability to parent is called into question:

> Children are brought into care if mom doesn't acknowledge abuse, if children were abused we have an issue with mom, because mom wasn't protecting the children.

The construction of mothers as primary clients

The interviewees expressed that mothers were not only more often primary caregivers but they were considered less threatening to work with than men. Social work is

a female dominated profession; Carmela and John noted this may contribute to the reliance on mothers. Carmela acknowledges that she feels more comfortable working with women because, as a woman, she relates to them:

> More contact is usually made with mothers. I think that relates to most often the (fathers) would rather the moms deal with it and I approach the mother more because I can relate more with the female I always ask for the mother and speak. All files are under moms' names.

John also expressed the following:

> I think it's easier to work with women. And I think that probably women find it easier to work with women, especially in situations of conflict.

The ease in working with women seemed to influence interventions, as even if fathers were available and responsible for abusing children, interviewees noted that mothers were the targets of interventions. John noticed this tendency:

> The most common referrals came from schools...regarding children having bruises or acting strangely. The client population was primarily all women but the perpetrators of the abuse, a few more men...but the system seemed to always work with the women.

Karen revealed in response to a question regarding foster parents that women become the focus and men just seem to disappear:

> You know all we have is the foster mother's name on the list. It's very interesting, isn't it? In fact, two days ago, I had a father call me asking for the foster mothers name and phone...because he wanted to call his son. When I called the foster mother I said, 'Can I give the father the number?' and she said, 'I didn't even know there was a father involved,' and I said, 'Well, yes, the parents are living together,' and on the form it was only the mothers name on the form. I don't know if that means something but I think that's pretty significant that it says here in the computer the parents are living together...so I was kind of shocked that the foster mother didn't know that there was a father.

Women aren't violent

Interviewees reflected practices that did not anticipate violence or aggression from women. They outlined agency practices that worked primarily with mothers, while keeping men (particularly abusers) at a distance. Karen identified the different constructions of mothers and fathers outright:

> I would say men are put in these categories that they are abusers by nature and women are not by nature.

Men are demonstrably responsible for more violence, but this fixed perception of men and women as a certain way has uncertain implications for practice (Milner, 1993). Individuals do not fit into concrete stereotypes according to gender, race or culture; practices that assume as much deny individuality of clients and could result in misdirected interventions. In this example, Carmela's expectation that men are usually abusers shaped her intervention. This assumption proved erroneous:

> Men are always seen as the dominant person who tends to abuse, its almost expected of men.
>
> The other day I interviewed this child about bruises and it was all about the dad and I interviewed the mom...it turns out she was the one perpetrating the abuse. We were going to say 'dad has to leave the home' but (then) we found that mom was inflicting abuse...dad was penalized but mom was also abusing...no consideration was given to her.

Carmela was convinced that the father was the abuser but in actuality, the mother was responsible for the abuse. It is interesting to note that although she thought the father was the abuser, his participation in the investigation is not evident. Carmela stated that her agency was prepared to demand that the father leave the home, without having confronted

him about his hypothetical actions. Carmela also explicitly acknowledged that she is more intimidated by men. This is despite having twice been attacked by women clients:

> I feel more intimidated by men than woman...I have been attacked twice, by females. The first time I just talked her down, she was destroying furniture, and the other one was because I was apprehending her children and she grabbed me...and the police were there so they withheld her.

Expecting that a client will fit a certain mold such as violent or non-violent according to gender can shape practice interventions that reproduce these often misrepresentative constructions. By limiting contact with men on the basis that they are more violent, Carmela reifies this perception of men as intimidating because this fear is not countered in practice. The expectation that women be responsible and protect children, regardless of the situation, compels women to assume this demand in order to keep their families together, which in turn reproduces their expectation as committed to children.

Single mothers

The interviewees excessive work with women was partly due to the preponderance of single mother headed families on their caseloads. Interviewees unilaterally noticed the disproportional number of single mothers involved with this system. As the social workers put it:

> All of them were female, all my cases, all mothers, single mothers, all single mothers, one of them had four kids she was a black women, two of them were Caucasian and all low income and all on welfare. (Jane said of her three clients as a student with a field position in child welfare)

> About 70% are single mothers on my caseload. (Carmela)

> It's mostly single mothers, fifteen out of 32 are single, the others had men but most contact is with mom. (Shelly)

> I'd say about 80% are single mother headed. (John)

John observed that this disparity is owed to the vulnerable societal position of this family type:

> I think there are more single mother headed families because more families that are struggling are headed by single mothers. It's not because they're headed by single mothers but because they're aboriginal, they're women, they're uneducated, most of them are on income assistance, they had a whole slew of things working against them in the world that we live in today.

Susan identified the abundance of single mothers as related to their being impoverished:

> I have found that...if it's neglect and a mother is single...it really could be financial, because a lot of the cases I've found where there are single moms, either she's working and she can't get to things in a timely fashion, as is expected or whatever, usually I find it's financial.

The interviewees identified that they did not commonly elicit the involvement of other individuals involved in the lives of single mothers such as boyfriends or other family members. This excludes other individuals, although they may be significant in the lives of children because they are not biological parents. Jackie describes the focus on biological parents and the marginal role of stepfathers:

> There is a real focus on the parents, on the biological parents, and really if there is a stepfather, he just goes in the "collaterals" (section of the assessment) but it doesn't go in a significant (area). He's not even a part of the court proceedings.

Mothers under scrutiny

The interviewees identified exorbitant expectations of mothers. When mothers deviated from expectations, they were denigrated in some interviews. A mother's lifestyle, behavior, appearance and domestic capability all came into question as these perceivably reflect her ability to protect children. In my interviews with Anne, Jane and

Karen, mothers' life choices, attitudes and personality traits became the focus of conversation with little prompting.

The same characterizations of fathers did not appear in any discussion. Anne recounted a case of serious neglect in which her description shifted from initially discussing both parents' participation in the neglect to solely focusing on the mother's behavior:

> I had a six year old, it was a medical neglect case. Mom and dad completely neglected her. She had three other boys all healthy except for a little girl with definite mental deficiency, her face was telling of something, she had cavities in eight of her teeth, her vision was neglected...she was almost blind. The school was calling everyday, her eyes were oozing puss and blood. She was very trusting and would go with any stranger, she was not a typical six year old.
>
> Mom refused to see any of it. 'No, there's nothing wrong mentally and physically,' mother was in complete denial, she lied left right center about the medical part of it, she said that she had taken them to see doctor but she had not, she gave me names of doctors and they would say no. She was pathological almost. I took her to court to get the child the medical help she needed. Even in court, she denied everything. She said I lied. This child was in serious risk because mom was in denial.

In my interview with Jane, when discussing the relationships with foster families and biological families, we quickly diverged into an assessment of a mother's behavior and personal history:

> What was the relationship like with foster parents and biological parents? (interviewer)
>
> It's a weird dynamic and for the little amount that I worked there, it was really present, that there is a problem. One mother, Caucasian, single mother, this mother had six kids with five different fathers, she had a borderline personality disorder. (Jane)
>
> How did you come to know she had that disorder? (interviewer)

> I think my bosses told me...she is a borderline...this was a case that was being passed to different workers not only a lot of kids by different fathers but the mother had so many problems...all the kids were placed in different foster homes and there was a huge conflict and loyalty issue.
>
> The mom would have total control over those kids even though they were all placed. She would not let them invest themselves elsewhere...she would talk shit about the foster family to the child and say, 'How were you raised, what is this?' and put the child against the foster family and against us as workers. Why? Because she felt threatened, she just didn't want to lose that loyalty or that bond. (Jane)
>
> How did you deal with that? (interviewer)
>
> Well, it was really hard and each case was hard. This type of mother you couldn't confront, she would explode, with the past that she's had: abuse, prostitution, you name it, she's done it. It was horrendous; this woman could not be put back into question. So what do you do, there's not much to do, just keep it stable, but everything was such touch and go. The kids were messed up, it's their future you're talking about and you're supposed to be there to protect them and I was always questioning why aren't the visits supervised with this mother, because she transmits things that are going against the well-being and good development of her children in care. (Jane)

Jane depicted this mother as controlling and promiscuous because she perceivably failed in her expected maternal role. Later in our interview, Jane described the same mother as being stable both financially and in her relationship with her partner. When I asked Jane why this woman could not have her children returned to her custody, she rationalized this by disparaging the woman's character:

> Funny thing, when I was working, we actually sent two of her children back with her. A mother that is a borderline, a mother that...is not letting you get in there, a mother who talks shit, a mother who really wants to personify you as the bad person when you really are trying to help, a mother who tries to pollute her children's minds, you know you figure for the children they sent two kids back to her and I think they forget why we took them in the first place. (Jane)
>
> She wasn't still involved in prostitution...what was her current dilemma? (Interviewer)

> Good question...she had stable housing, she had a boyfriend, she had money...she had a steady check, she had a newborn and we let her have that and keep him, we didn't place him, and she had another one of her sons come back to her. She had two out of six living with her and I feel that it's just (her) personality...I mean she was just unstable...her lifestyle was just...she has lived a lot of instability in her life...like we don't ask for perfection but just you know, I don't think she even placed her children's welfare before her own...her bitterness, her vocabulary, it was a combination (of things)...She's unstable, and very vile and her lifestyle is drugs, prostitution...that in itself doesn't mean she's unfit (to mother) it's just that she's unstable.
>
> Sometimes I question (the issue of why she didn't have her children) because she did have housing, she did provide for them in the sense that the two kids had clothing. But then again one of her kids was doing terrible in school in pretty much every department. I just felt she was totally, personally inadequate. (Jane)

Jane's intervention became a moral assessment of this woman's character and parenting abilities. The mother did not seem to place her children's 'safety and security' at risk but she was deemed inadequate because she deviates from the expectations of a good mother. As Jane said, "I don't think she even placed her children's welfare before her own," meaning that "adequate" mothers have to be entirely selfless.

The job of the child protection worker becomes that of making moral assessments regarding the behavior, character and life choices of mothers. Women are expected to be all-important in the development of children and therefore everything they do becomes the concern of child protection, as this is purportedly indicative of their maternal capacity (Risley-Curtis & Heffernan, 2003). This disregards the often hugely conflicting life experiences and social contexts of clients and social workers. Social workers are frequently Caucasian and middle-class whereas clients are largely impoverished and minority. These expectations of mothers have their roots in Western ideology. It may be inappropriate for social workers to apply such standards to different cultures in which

spanking children is not seen as a criminal offence and child care is not exclusive to mothers but is often assumed by siblings and extended family (Gould, 1985).

The child protection worker coming from a completely different reality is assigned the task of intervening and assessing clients that they likely do not understand. Karen embodies this in her appraisals of mothers on her caseload. She was candid about her inability to understand them:

> Most of the time when we're dealing with these families, even when the mother's not the alleged abuser, the mother's not doing anything to prevent it...uh whether they can't or won't...we don't really know, it's often, you know whether a mother feels too weak or feels powerless to her husband because of abuse, domestic violence, whatever the issue may be I still sometimes have a hard time identifying with why it is that they can't intervene or why it is that they don't leave you know that's still a difficult thing for people who are in the workforce and you know hopefully are in more healthy relationships and raising their kids well...but it could happen to all of us, so I think we have to keep it in the back of our minds and I think you know there's a part of me that tries to empathize and tries to identify with these women who are struggling You have to, otherwise, I'm judging them.
>
> Especially with poverty stricken, because we're workers, we don't get paid very well but we're still working with an income and sometimes working with mothers who don't have an income and who don't care to have an income and it's affecting their kids and impacting on the welfare of their kids. I don't know if everyone has as hard a time as I do identifying...

Karen's interpretation of the victimized mother who doesn't do anything to deflect her violent husband and protect her children, and doesn't "care to have an income," represents huge assumptions regarding the realities of mothers with whom she does not relate and cannot understand. The type of mother she described is not complicit in any abuse, but she is ridiculed for not preventing abuse. The aggressive man is free of any moral assessment and personal disparagement; any shortcoming is a mother's responsibility. Mothers garner such scrutiny because of deeply entrenched societal

expectations of how they should behave. Fathers are not granted the same attention or scrutiny. Mothers are rather of utmost importance and their every affliction is the concern of child protection services, because it is perceivably vital in determining the well being of children.

CHAPTER 4 – CONSTRUCTING FATHERS IN FRONT-LINE PRACTICE

Unlike mothers, fathers are not primary clients in child protection practice. As a foster care worker, I seldom directly elicited the participation of fathers and admittedly felt more intimidated in a father's presence. I expected biological or foster fathers, if they were there, which seemed an anomaly, to be more hostile and I did not feel confident in my ability to deflate hostility or violence. It became comfortable for me to perceive men in a certain light and therefore work principally with women in order to avoid confronting the challenges I anticipated from men.

While exploring this subject with the interviewees, similar experiences and insights came to the surface. Men were typically portrayed using words and phrases such as, "He runs away," "He's usually hiding," "He doesn't want to be involved," "His whereabouts are unknown," "He's the perpetrator," "He's aggressive." These descriptions construct and reproduce expected behaviors on behalf of men. Because fathers are so often aggressors or absent, certain behaviors come to be expected and this shapes practice interventions (or the lack of intervention) with fathers. Child protection workers invoking fathers' involvement becomes simply a legal formality done in order to adhere to agency procedure. A father's participation is seen as voluntary, and should he exhibit any positive effort, this is highly commended because of its rarity.

"Fathers aren't there"

The interviewees expressed the difficulty of often having to locate and involve a father whose whereabouts are unknown or who has not seen his children for many years.

This is evidenced in the overwhelming number of single mother headed households on child protection caseloads. Karen notes:

> 90% of the times it's the moms we're involved with...mothers are mostly the primary caretakers especially in broken homes and I would say there is a large percentage of mother headed families so you're relying mostly on the mother's testimony of her experience and her previous history, but again if the worker is doing her job properly they have explored the father, if there is one.

Workers described their often futile efforts to seek out fathers who had not been involved with their families for years. This process further complicates a worker's already demanding responsibilities. John described the process of locating an estranged father:

> Well, whenever we needed to something like go to court, we had to do something or at least attempt to contact both parents. Asking one of the spouses if they knew how to contact the other and that kind of thing and if we couldn't get anywhere that way then we would hire somebody to...run an ad in the paper which I guess ...says to the state that we did everything we could to contact the parents. It's tough because I'm not sure that we could do a lot more, I mean we could just spend a lot more time investigating or trying to find out where the person is. Social workers probably make one or two phone calls on behalf of that.

Susan described a more thorough process:

> If there's a parent on the birth certificate, we have to call them, the only time I haven't been able to find a dad, I did a 411 search in Canada and then I went through the Bangladeshi embassy, we're expected to try that hard. I have to speak to each father and I can't talk to them about a child that's not theirs.

There was the additional question of how much workers involve an individual who has not been a part of a child's life for several years. Jackie asserted that it is not the role of the social worker to rearrange a family's structure if a father just has not been involved:

> In so many cases, their whereabouts are unknown. It's an issue in the sense that the mom's the one's who has been raising the kids, what is my role? Not to bring in a dad that's never been involved...

Karen also noted that it is impractical to bring in a stranger because of his biological connection with a child:

> If he's not involved with the care of the children or if he's not involved with the children anymore and there's a consensus among all parties saying, fathers not involved, father won't be involved in youth protection either, then that's the way it is, unless we need him to start assuming a parental role, and he's willing In a situation where he hasn't been involved in because he has no knowledge of what's been going on for the last ten years all we can do is call and say do you have any concerns and what are they and how do you justify them if you haven't been involved for ten years...

Jackie asserted that when fathers are not around, they escape blame and responsibility:

> Fathers experience blame but if their whereabouts are unknown, it's all focused on the mother.

Men as perpetrators

The interviewees mostly portrayed men as aggressors. They asserted that fathers with whom they came into contact were usually abusive to their children or their partners. John recounted his experience with a violent father:

> There was one man who threatened to kill me and another social worker. He didn't say this to me directly but he said it to my partner. He threatened to kill us if we removed his kid...there were a lot of men who were physically violent with children or their spouses or partners.

Jane commented:

> With fathers, I find them very aggressive, very violent...very volatile, and I noticed especially with the borderline people, (questioning them) generates an explosion.

This perception led workers to limit contact with men. This taken for granted conception of the violent father was validated in training as Carmela noted:

> ... most often you do training and the perpetrator is always male. I took training with police officers...it's always a male...it's easier to believe that the male would do it.

Workers limited skills on how to deflate hostility

Child protection workers are constantly in situations in which, as Jane put it, "people don't freaking want you there". Yet, there is limited training or discussion regarding how to deflect violence or protect oneself in hostile situations. Karen addressed this in our interview:

> Did your training give you any practical skills in terms of deflating violence or hostility? (interviewer)
>
> No, and interestingly enough, we have to use (these skills) because, especially in youth protection you're being intrusive whether you try to be or not. Sometimes the aggression is so internal that you can feel it sitting across from them, you could feel their rage...it's more of (how to) protect yourself, like we have cell phones, we're taught about staying close to the door...actually...I think I learned that in my paramedic training...but I think we're also taught to watch our entries and exits and make sure you're not cornered in a small house...(Karen)

As John stated, when it is alleged that a man has committed abuse, "Police are always called". Instead of eliciting the father's involvement in some capacity, the interviewees and the agency practices they described seemed to maintain a careful distance from fathers because of their expected potential for violence. Fathers are then placed in a category resulting in less involvement, less services, and their evasion of any responsibility.

Susan illustrates how managers are likely to discourage workers from meeting with violent men, but do not follow the same procedure in regard to allegedly violent women:

> ...it's easier for (managers) to say the allegation is that dad's violent, don't go to the home, stay here at work, you don't know what's going to happen, you don't want to get yourself involved...(however) it might say in the allegation that mom's been investigated by the police and you're still kind of expected to go to the home, it's kind of bizarre. I think that definitely happens we identify automatically there's the possibility regardless of what the allegation is, but especially if it's physical abuse or domestic violence...automatically there's this thing like 'Dad could hit you' but never once have I had that same suspicion from moms.

Gendered assumptions prevent Susan from going to homes in which there exists the potential that a male will abuse. However, the same standard does not apply for women. Allowing assumptions according to gender to shape agency practice is misguided. By avoiding the home, men are granted certain immunity because of their potential for violence. Child protection services must be sensitive to the safety of employees, but avoiding men on the basis of gender rather than confronting this issue exempts them from the same procedures to which women are subject.

Anger management?

The interviewees noted that there are few resources available explicitly for men and characterized those that do exist as inadequate. Anne addressed this:

> Our services are not preventative...there are domestic abuse clinics for men but very few resources for men and even the ones that do exist aren't targeting the issue, when men abuse their partners it's not an anger management issue it's an impulse, judges always say go to anger management without consideration to the problem.

Following the substantiation of an abuse allegation, this system frequently mandates men to attend anger management. The interviewees described this generally as an ineffective, impractical service. Carmela said that the court often directs men to anger management, but does not connect them with an actual service:

> When it's excessive and the woman was beaten pretty badly, we will put restrictions, 'You know, if you let him back in the home we're going to take the kids,' he's not as much involved in the process. We never connect him with a service, we say dad needs to do this and that but they don't and we don't even know if these resources exist. We make recommendations but we don't know of any anger management services.

Shelly noted that the services provided to men are voluntary and that most often they do not attend:

> ...(dads are offered) group treatment for sexual abuse, anger management, counseling. It's voluntary, they have to want to go. They're court ordered but a lot of them don't go...we rarely interact with them because of the criminal piece, we say dad can't have any contact, we recommend treatment...most often dad has to leave or the kids are gone.

She confirmed that programs to which clients are mandated are not beneficial or realistic:

> When we have consultation, it's what the parents have to do to have their kids back. If dad's in the home he has to take anger management or go to AA or certain things, both, whoever is in the home they both have to do certain things... rarely does this really happen. I've only had one infant that returned home because it was determined that (the parents) did everything. (Shelly)

Shelly must adhere to agency policy and direct clients to services despite her knowledge that they seldom attend services and that this may actually work against her clients.

John additionally discussed the practice of recommending anger management in his work within an aboriginal community:

> What kind of treatment do they get or services? (Interviewer)
>
> There were non-violent healing circles that men would go to, we would give a phone call to sort of check up and see how it's going, it was more like checking in. (John)
>
> Would any actually go to treatment? (Interviewer)
>
> A large portion of them wouldn't go. The ones that went I can honestly say a lot of the time it didn't really do anything, it was really all about I think how much you are willing to put into the group and how seriously you took it. I actually to

> be honest I don't really believe in anger management I think they are a bit of bullshit.
>
> (In) some therapeutic services we had some agencies that would provide an elder for an aboriginal family and they would act as sort of a counselor that kind of thing I think it was hard to get a lot of time with the elders because they were so busy. (John)

Directing men to a disparate service, unconnected to the child protection process diminishes their responsibility to families and rather relies on women to assume all responsibility. This additionally denies men effective services, leaving open the possibility that abuse will reoccur as it is not adequately treated or confronted.

Involving fathers as a legal obligation

Interviewees mostly anticipated fathers' commitment to their families to be nominal at best. As a result, obtaining fathers' signatures or involving them in assessments seemed a matter of fulfilling a legal mandate to avoid liability for not having done so. Jackie described the inclusion of a father solely as perfunctory:

> Most services are directed at mothers regardless of the family dynamic. In one case, dad was in jail and the only time I visited him was to have him see forms and sign papers so that the children could be placed. It was only for signature purposes, so he could read the measures and so the children could be placed with their maternal grandmother.

Carmela also explicitly described the inclusion of men as little more than a formality:

> I think the only time we include men is we attach them to our risk assessment modules. Safety and risk assessment paperwork all information is plugged into a form and coded so you know which areas to work on. If (a father is) in the home, he'll be included and asked to participate in terms of the paperwork, we have it there in case...In terms of physical abuse, it's a criminal joint interview with the child and detective. The police will arrest the father and interview him and we observe the interview. The only contact we ever have is when we are deciding to put him on the child abuse register, we say 'would you like to meet with us,' but

> that never happens, which is kind of hard because usually it takes a year to two years for it to go to trial.

Fathers' inclusion as a legal formality derives from the expectation that fathers are not important in the lives of children, are perpetrators, estranged from their families or do not *want* to be involved in the child protection process.

Fathering as voluntary

Child protection workers see any effort on a father's behalf as an aberration. From the interviews it seems men have to demonstrate their commitment and dedication to their children so that the system will actively include them in the process. Importantly, it is a father's *choice* to express his commitment and to involve himself. Interviewees' accounts portrayed fathers as unwilling or not wanting to be involved with workers for a variety of reasons. Fathers did not see the process as their obligation and they would rather, as Carmela expressed, let the "moms deal with it." They were unapproachable, hiding or they ran away as soon as the social worker showed up. Whatever the reason, fathers, if they were there, had the option to be involved.

In the following quote, Carmela addresses her preference for working with women, acknowledging that the father's involvement is discretionary:

> More contact is usually made with mothers. I think that relates to most often the (fathers) would rather the moms deal with it...I approach the mother more because I can relate more with the female I always ask for the mother and speak to her.

Jackie described a perfunctory check on fathers:

> The father is always explored because again, legally, you have to. In most cases they aren't involved and haven't been for a while. There's not much effort from fathers, they expect this has nothing to do with them.

The idea that men would "rather" mothers assume the professional relationship with social workers or that men "don't expect" that they have to be involved, exonerates men. This is present despite men being more often responsible for invoking the need for child protection intervention in the first part. My discussion with Shelly revealed the image of the resistant, unwilling dad:

> More time is spent with parents than with children. We work with parents to make sure they understand. Dads rarely showed up, (mom is usually) with the child.
>
> Men don't play a parenting role, the biological dad didn't play a role. Biological dads don't want to get involved. If there are several different dads, it becomes difficult, moms going through partners and when (child protection) appears they run, they don't take any responsibility at all...

The descriptions of men as not "wanting to show up" or as "not taking responsibility" are markedly different from the characterizations of mothers. Mothers' behaviors and life choices are heavily scrutinized, and any hint of wavering commitment to children calls for urgent intervention. In this excerpt, John describes his experiences with aboriginal fathers:

> I found that if there was a dad around that quite often, and I don't know if this is an aboriginal thing or not, but dad would be hiding like in a room with the doors closed.
>
> With the dads that happened quite a bit, with the dads that I had, often I wouldn't even know who they were, you know, until a few days later after talking to the kid or the mother again. (John)
>
> Did you go and approach dad? (Interviewer)
>
> You know what not usually...that's a good question, I wonder if I did it because I was afraid of confrontation or because I was being respectful.
>
> I guess I always looked at it like, you know, this white social worker invading an aboriginal home and dad doesn't have the tools to engage in that battle. A huge percentage of the parents we work with have been in foster care or residential schools and so they're fearful or resentful of us. (John)

John describes fathers as not wanting anything to do with child protection. At the time, he did not directly approach fathers or include them in his efforts; evidently, he is still uncertain about the underlying reason for this. Although John now recognizes the pattern of the "hiding father," he cannot identify himself as having had a role in insisting that the father participate. He was rather fearful of overtly including the father because of his "white social worker" identity, seemingly reproducing the oppression that the aboriginal man experienced. John was uncomfortable about this interaction and instead of confronting his feelings he turned to the mother.

The myth of the overachieving father

When fathers participated, some interviewees characterized them as involved fathers. Susan discussed that all the fathers on her caseloads are willing and involved but went on to say they are in the 'background'; while the professional relationship is mostly held with women. This implies that a willing and involved father is one who is simply around. Wanting and willing to be involved connotes being there, in whatever capacity. As Susan said:

> I've had cases where it's the mom who talks throughout the whole meeting and the dad will sit there, that happens a lot but the dads usually want to be there and answer questions. But usually it's the mom that will kind of hold the meeting with me in a way, then the dad will just watch and ask questions. During home visits sometimes it's difficult because I have found that the dads, it's more difficult to meet with them. I'll try if the dad is working to meet with them after work but I've had a couple of cases that during the visits the dads will just go off and do something else and come and sit in on the meeting later. Moms tend to have the professional relationship and dads are sort of in the background.

Susan's description also exemplifies the discretionary role of fathers, able to come and go at will during meetings. Anne describes a father who was very involved in the child

protection process. It was "all the dad" as she says, and the mother only held one meeting without his presence:

> The case with the bipolar kid, it was all the dad. The mother was active when I requested her presence but there was only one meeting she was there without the dad. The dad was the one who was absolutely involved, he had money and was willing to use it but she just couldn't deal with it any more.

It seems fathers are subject to different standards. If they demonstrate any sense of commitment or involvement, they are commended, while mother's commitment is expected. A father having meetings on many occasions along with the mother translates to a father who is seriously involved in the process, whereas this involvement from mothers is taken for granted.

Concluding remarks

The interviewees constructed men as unwilling, estranged or abusive in child protection practice, while mothers were expected to be responsible for their children, the actions of men, and the professional relationship with social workers. If mothers diverged from their expected roles, they were ridiculed. John identified some implications of this practice, saying:

> To be honest with you, I think that...social workers could do a better job of attempting to locate the other parent, and in a lot of cases we're talking women are the primary caretakers, so in a lot of cases it's men...some of that might have been due to (social workers) being too busy, some of that might also have been due to possibly men being seen as a little bit evil and granted a lot of them were not very supportive with the women we were working with, that had something to do with it too, but there were a few occasions where men would go up to the office and say 'Why didn't anyone call me, what's going on here, you know these are my kids, I care about them.'

> That practice works against the men that really want to be involved. Dad has a right to know if his kids are being removed, there have been occasions where men would go up to the office and say, 'Why didn't anyone call me.'

Through his comments, John shows how gendered expectations of men may cause interventions to disregard their inclusion. He reflects how this adversely affects men who deviate from negative expectations and truly want to be involved.

In the next chapter, I will explore how gendered expectations are reproduced in practice. The interviewees identified a number of paradoxes relating to gender and class with which they must grapple. These are such as the overrepresentation of poor and single mother headed families, or the mandate to recommend certain treatment services, such as anger management, that may not meet the needs of clients. Susan identifies the disconcerting contradiction that wealthy families are frequently exempt from child protection interventions:

> ...very few times do we get upper class individuals and I think there are some obvious reasons for this, one being that schools, especially private schools never (call child protection services)...unless the problem is dramatic but we never get (calls) from a private school and in fact it's really difficult to go see a child at a private school, there's a lot of tension because, well, the parents are paying, it's a private institution and for some reason they don't want to call. But it seems if you're poor, your issue becomes public...

How do social workers function within an environment that they identify as greatly flawed and hypocritical? How does the evident reliance on women who are largely impoverished, go unchallenged? What are the organizational processes in place that stunt the kind of critical thought and reflection needed to combat such imbalance?

CHAPTER 5 – THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER CONSTRUCTIONS IN PRACTICE

The interviews shed light on a number of complex features of child protection work that contribute to the reproduction of gendered practice. These are for example, the supposed "objective" nature of the job, the exorbitant amount of clients and the lack of time in combination with the strict mandate to document everything and to be individually accountable. The fear of being at fault if a child is harmed permeates this practice; therefore, it becomes a job of policing families in order to forestall such an occurrence (Davies & Krane, 2000). Ultimately, the reliance on mothers becomes a habit that goes unquestioned in a job that is demanding and time-constrained.

'Supporting' and investigating: negotiating the contradiction

The interviewees expounded the conflicting child protection mandate of having to scrupulously investigate families while concurrently providing "help" and "support". Terms such as "surveillance," "collaterals," "perpetrator," and "investigation" were very much a part of their vocabulary throughout, symbolic of the investigatory nature of their role. As Anne put it:

> My role was entirely investigative, I did court work and petitioned for clients, placed kids, made recommendations, formulated plans and passed it along.

Jackie described her role as both supportive and investigative:

> I was applying measures recommended, helping families to follow through with measures, doing long-term follow-up, supportive...It's definitely supportive, but also a bit of surveillance in terms of making sure there is no risk to the child, you're always assessing, assessing risk while being supportive.

Several of the social workers described the need to assess risk with a sense of tension and frustration at being unable to build relationships with clients, or feeling insincere in trying to do so. The interviewees expressed the difficulty of their mandate as supposedly "helping" while having to constantly assess risk or potential risk to children. Jane explained this contradiction, saying:

> It's a pull and shove trying to get into their lives. They don't want you there and you're trying to put it nicely. One of the biggest problems was in doing what youth protection wanted, establishing a supportive relationship but then again that's so contradictory when they don't want you there and more or less you're hypocritically trying to find out information from them...yeah, I mean we want to improve well-being and all that but at the same time we're trying to gain information to get these kids in a safe place, but they don't want to give you the information. It's so hypocritical.

Jane describes the blatant hypocrisy in her detective role and the need to collect evidence alongside the agency declaration to improve the well being of families. Interviewees explicitly asserted the implausibility of helping. The conflict Jane identified results in workers having to suppress their yearning to help in order to carry out the more pressing stipulation to assess risk. The obligation to investigate, coupled with heavy caseloads and strict documentation guidelines, hinders the provision of support and practical assistance. Jane explains this point:

> ...every case to go from one point which is the point of why we got involved in the first (place) to actually helping them...you can't really delve into because we don't assure constant support. There's so much to do, and sometimes our demands are too much to ask. It's...support with a catch. We have to validate everything they say. It's almost impossible to do a quality intervention, trying to juggle support and investigate...you're there to assess risk...to really try to work with these people, you don't get a chance.

Anne illustrated that providing "support" is difficult when during some investigations of abuse, she must be accompanied by police:

> ...in terms of abuse, the first thing we do is notify the police, that already places you at odds with the client...'Hey, I'm the social worker, don't mind the cops here just in case you beat me', the cops are notified immediately if there is any (or the suspicion of any) physical or sexual abuse.
>
> Our role is really to find out if the child is in danger, so we're interviewing the abuser and collaterals to find out if it's going on. There's very little relationship building, we're instructed to build relationships, but the relationship wasn't secondary or tertiary or below. I'm not saying I didn't have relationships but few and the only way I could do that is acknowledging their frustration and say, 'I'm not here to penalize, I just want to hear your side'...they feel very attacked, it's not my intention.

Carmela identifies a way of negotiating the contradiction through maintaining a detachment from her clients:

> It's more investigative. It's hard because family service workers do try to be more supportive but when it comes right down to it they are always really investigative. I have some families that will try to be friends with me and I try to distance myself and I say I'll try to be supportive but I tell them that that's not my role at that point, it's very hard to understand, they (want) see me as helpful in (my) role.

Carmela has to consciously place an artificial disconnection between herself and her clients, undermining any potential for a supportive, trusting relationship. She is always investigating and therefore cannot breach the point of befriending or helping as there is the very real possibility that she may have to "apprehend" children. Implementing a forced distance from clients as a means for managing her stressful and contradictory roles, restrains her very real and natural emotions.

The need to constantly assess risk prompts workers to search for individual deficiencies isolated from culture and context, and classified according to predetermined criterion. The investigatory nature of this work makes seeing people in context difficult; likewise it makes seeing oneself as a social worker with a pivotal role in this context also challenging. While negotiating the paradox of assisting families and simultaneously investigating them, workers must stifle their desire to help in basic ways, which some

interviewees said, was their inclination. Adhering to agency policy overshadows such urges.

The obligation to be 'certain'

Interviewees identified the requirement to be certain about their cases and to plan interventions according to "facts." Yet contrary to expectation, the social workers demonstrated that interventions hinge largely on the experience, personality and emotions of the worker. For instance, Carmela expressed that depending on the social worker, a file may stay open for different periods of time:

> Depends on the worker, some (clients) are pretty messy but the only time I push a little more is if it's to the extreme, if dishes are piled up, floors unkempt. Some workers will find that terrible and keep the file open for that reason...everything depends on personal biases.

In this example, the determination of files remaining open depends on a worker's tolerance for messiness.

The process of assessing risk and documenting "facts" attempts to assert clarity in unclear work. Social workers must profess to know facts about a client and must document and declare these facts in court. As Jackie puts it, '...there's no room for I don't know":

> There's definitely a lot of black and white...'Mom's very immature, she didn't do this, this, this,' then she is neglectful. It's very cut and dry, it's easy to label quickly...in my opinion I think in a lot of cases its flawed, the legality of it all, because your going to court...you have to just fight for your case and justify and defend. That leaves no room. You can't go to court and say 'I'm not sure,' you can't be wishy-washy, I find there's no room for I don't know because that doesn't look good in court...

According to Jackie, the mandate to categorize people stems from the court system. Workers are asked to make subjective moral characterizations of a client, framing their

assertions under the guise of objectivity. They then must defend their characterizations with evidence assembled in visits with clients. Ambivalence is unacceptable. Assigning clients to static characterizations such as "mother is immature" or "neglectful" and presenting them as factual evidence in court, reproduces set conceptions of diverse individuals. These characterizations are often misrepresentative and depend on the perception of the social worker.

Jackie additionally reflected the court as discounting variables beyond the individual, such as poverty, race or gender that may play a role in abuse and neglect. Neglect, as mentioned, is often the charge against single mother headed families in child protection and is related to the vulnerable financial state of this family type (Toth, 1998). Discussing neglect, removed from the context of a poor, single mother headed family entirely undermines fundamental issues of gender and class. This presumes that we live in a utopian society in which every individual is granted the same opportunities regardless of circumstance.

Documenting client lives

The interviewees described documents as hugely important in the child protection process. As Karen explained, she uses them to help her understand her cases without influencing her judgment:

> Managers ask us about what's in those files to help understand what's going on because I don't think we can make good decisions or devise plans without reading those files so it's not really like we read files and then we're starting off on the wrong foot but rather I think we need to in youth protection...

Karen identifies the need to read files as lives may be at stake if something is overlooked.

The social workers also identified documentation in files as a primary learning tool:

> A practicum in child protection, I learned there. I read a few and I had a couple of clients and did them myself and went over them with my supervisor. (John)
>
> I learned to write them, they're very easy to do, I would refer to other workers files and just did them. (Carmela)
>
> I did my field placement (in child protection)...I was given old files and an outline to tell me what goes in what section. (Jackie)
>
> I learned to write assessments through reading like tons of other's reports and pick and choose what works for you and then your supervisor checks them. (Susan)

Learning to write in child protection by using examples of existing documents means looking to the past for guidance regarding the present. By employing old assessments, new and impressionable workers do not look for new approaches to assessment writing and intervention (Hall, 1999). Existing documents are not truths; rather, they are representations of the social workers that wrote them and their perceptions at that particular time. As the interviewees explained, women are more often the focus of service interventions, a practice that documents exemplify. Therefore, old files expose new workers to the standard reliance on mothers, legitimizing the practice. As a result, new workers, who presumably seek to model their practice interventions after more experienced workers, reproduce the status quo biases.

Anne described the importance of documentation and learning to document the "right way" underneath fixed headings:

> ...as soon as you got the case, you check to see if they have a file, you have to read it in-depth, which is very influential, it shows patterns and cycles, things had happened before...(it makes you) more quick to judge...(it's) quite a staple.

> I learned to do files by reading others. We would write a report and a supervisor would rewrite...I came to realize the standard was to stay within headings. I didn't like the language they expected us to use ... (such as) 'lacks insight' that was a funny way to put it, (or) 'unmotivated' because (clients are) resistant.

The described need to document according to predetermined confines leads to characterizing individuals as one way or the other with little room for aberration or ambiguity. Anne described the search for one version of truth with substantiating "facts" that warrant intervention:

> ...we were looking for negatives and we were so excited when we found them. (The secretary) got so excited every time I brought evidence, it was like 'Oh, this is juicy, we're going to crucify the mom'...it was something about finding concrete evidence about how to protect the child but I hate the way it's discussed, the way it's dialogued in conversation, it's like 'Oh, good, we nailed them'.

Some interviewees described their use of documents in files as references in order to confirm that their clients were being truthful. Jane explicitly described the perception of others' writings as factually based:

> ...a file is basically what we have, why it was (that child protection was called) what's happened in the past, honestly I didn't have time to question it. I was already overwhelmed in trying to get the work done, so when I read a file, I took it for gospel...but no opinions are there, it's all facts, you know 'I called this person and she said this.' You're not supposed to put in your opinion, but it's all facts I have to say I would really take it for you know that's it, 'This is this, and this happened,' you have to keep objective.

Karen and Jane both identified using files as a means of ensuring that clients are not lying or being deceitful. Karen matched the purportedly untruthful accounts from clients with the supposedly factual accounts of other social workers. This supposes that social work writing is based in truth, while client's stories are innately suspect. Karen expressed this, commenting:

> I would say if someone isn't reading the files at some point early in the intervention, that's not to say that a worker who goes into a client's home has to read the file before they go in, because maybe they'll have a very blank slate to

> start questioning with and they'll just go with what the parents give them, but then when they get back to the office they need to be able to cross-reference, you know 'is my client telling the truth about what happened three years ago?' And we have to read reports because we go in asking specific questions about the reports. So we have to rely on client files.

Karen's comments demonstrate that files are an extension of the investigation and allow the detection of inconsistencies. Jane also described having to seek out the "truth" in files:

> ...a client tells you, 'Yeah, yeah, sure I believe you,' but you always sniff under and try to find a hidden bone, you kind of feel it, you have to read the history ... you have to read the file, by reading you have to say 'What do you think about this person when you read the file? What were the reasons why they got involved with us?' Because a person won't tell you and especially if you're (a new worker) they might take advantage of you...test you out, you can't take everything they say because they'll give you, 'Yeah, sure, fine,' but you know we're here for a reason so you've gotta get the real issue...

Whose version of the truth is accurate? The interviews reflect a culture in which clients are devious and scheming and, therefore, social workers have to meticulously search for deception. If the worker does not get to the "truth," there is this intense fear of liability as a result of negligence. Because of this, social workers are compelled to submit to this culture of searching for inconsistencies.

Silencing yourself

In learning how to write assessments, I went through the unnatural and awkward process of referring to myself as "the worker" and eliminating any trace of me in my assessments. This was a difficult process, and I constantly had to correct myself. I now realize that I was going through a method of becoming mechanical; I was silencing my own voice under the falsity of producing real and 'objective' accounts of people. Clients

are also notably absent in documentation regarding their personal lives. Ultimately, the social worker, as a representative of the agency, with no apparent individual identity, makes suppositions regarding their client.

The process of documentation is the pivotal site of the construction and reproduction of gender difference because it produces characterizations of people that are read by social workers and taken as objective truth. The practice of erasing our identity from assessments prompts us to remove ourselves from our actions. This not only falsely portrays subjective work as objective, but it attempts to exempt us of any feeling or responsibility for the intensely important work that we carry out.

Incompatibility of documentation demands and client needs

Social workers must account for every stipulated assessment category when a lot of "social work" does not fit into these set classifications. John's extra efforts with clients, that are probably the most meaningful for all involved, do not fit in his risk assessment module:

> I helped a lot of clients move. We had a van to help them. I remember taking them shopping, you know, whatever you need to do to sort of help them out. That was the best thing about the job, we had a lot of resources, we could easily provide cab fare and stuff like that, we had four cars and a van for eight people... you could just easily grab a car and help out a client, people need help once in a while.

John expressed how risk assessments do not always fit client situations:

> Risk assessments are standard and all based on research like twenty-nine questions you know the social worker rates the client on a scale of one to four regarding abuse, it was these twenty-nine factors that indicate the detriment of a child. It relies on research, which obviously speaks towards the past and research changes. If you did the same research ten years from now, you might come up with something different.

John was critical of applying a set of assessment guidelines based in scientific research to unique situations. He implied that research may be determined by knowledge at a certain time, which may not be important or relevant if applied in a different context or at a different time. He described falsifying risk assessments in order to support clients by providing day care services, which is what he believed would be best for them, especially for single mother headed families:

> ...one of the powers we had is if someone phoned and said they needed some daycare, the law said we could provide day care as long as it ensured the child's safety...that was the law, but the neat thing with us is that essentially we would provide day care for everyone that phoned...we would fill out a risk assessment and we would make up something, to be honest...we would make up something that would not sound too serious, but if it was looked at you know it would justify day care. To be honest, I would provide day care and not even do the risk assessments.

John felt that providing an overwhelmed family with a break was most constructive for the family, but he had to manipulate the system and the assessment in order to actually help the client in a way that he deemed effective.

Time, pressure, and too many cases

All of the interviewees addressed the lack of time in child protection in conjunction with too many cases and the intense pressure to do work decisively and effectively for fear of being individually penalized and responsible for abuse to children. The chaotic culture emitted made it impossible to truly develop relationships or provide helpful and supportive services. Jane described the bombardment a social worker feels, saying:

> It's very individualistic...The metaphor that I used both when I worked and in my (field placement) was the way I felt was if they push you into the sea, can you swim or will you sink to the bottom? There was a lot coming at you and people are so overwhelmed with what they have to face...

> It's chaotic, there's a lot coming at you. I guess maybe the organizational structure makes it so that it's stressful. There's so much pressure to do so much all the time.

She portrayed a sense of unease, as too much is demanded of her:

> We find that there are so many different things that can happen. For example in one case, I helped a client find housing, you deal with so many different things that you're not necessarily equipped to deal with but that you need to answer...I find it leaves you very vulnerable, sometimes disarmed and it's so unstable like something can become an emergency like housing or anything that you thought was stable can be unstable.

She described feeling overwhelmed due to her exorbitant caseload:

> I guess that I'm trying to say it's volatile. Again, an example is we have caseloads and youth protection says...that ideally we're only supposed to have sixteen cases and people would love to have twenty at a maximum but the reality from what I saw when I was working there...is that it's about twenty-seven.

Jane, like the other workers, is responsible for many tasks at once: to support families, protect children, assist with housing and manage crises. The reliance on mothers to assume the task of protecting children seems plausible as this ameliorates some stress for Jane. Monitoring a mother's capacity to assume one of her many roles, that of child protector, is more manageable than assuming this task entirely herself.

Jane describes how her job of assessing and managing risk to children gains primacy over the provision of meaningful and supportive services to clients:

> I think that one of my biggest (problems with the system is) they put so much pressure (on workers)...(I like) to be able to establish a certain relationship but usually you have to pack so much into a meeting that there's no time. There's so much paperwork and so much writing of reports but really (being with) people you don't get to do that often and therefore the quality that's brought to these people is (poor). You've got so much to do you have to do more with less...

Susan described how the demand to assess risk effectively and decisively overpowers critical thought and discussion among her team members:

> One of the main tensions for us with the place where we work is that the focus is on productivity and so we tend to not discuss clinical issues because we try to see what we do as very crisis oriented and not that much therapy. We don't discuss these things because the workers and managers tend to view our role as very short term...I guess because it is so fast paced, we get caught up in how can we be effective in our crisis role and so we tend to not discuss those issues.

Susan has so much to do and little time to reflect or question when faced with a crisis. The process of managing crises defeats the possibility of fighting larger injustices. Team meetings and meetings with supervisors are a matter of accounting for one's actions and gaining practical guidance. The elements of pressure and time lead to the focus on "what" rather that "why."

Feeling conflicted in the child protection role

The nature of the social worker's positions as "child protectors" inevitably places them at odds with clients. Jane asserts, "I have to say that our job was so hard...people don't freaking want us there, they hate us from the get-go, we're already seen as bad." Interviewees expressed feeling badly because of their inability to provide resources or their mandate to "apprehend" children, or having to court order families to fulfill measures that at times they did not think beneficial. They expressed trying to do their best in this role, or trying not to think about their job and the implications of their actions.

For example, Susan details the case of a single mother, who in between her full-time job and caring for her children, did not have the time during the week to accompany her son to a the psychiatric assessment mandated by child protection. Susan, with the guidance of her manager was forced to invoke court measures as a threat to the mother, despite feeling frustrated and uncomfortable in doing so:

> I have one single mom and she's working insane hours and there's nothing for her and there are certain things she has to do for her son to get better but she just doesn't have enough time or money so in that it becomes really frustrating... you feel like a jerk because, and this is when you become child focused and my manager told me I have to separate the child from the family and by doing that you focus on this child who needs a psychiatric assessment and mom's got to be there so you identify the risk and you say we'll get a court order and you use it as a threat. It becomes a threat and maybe people don't want to identify it as a threat, but it is. You're threatening a parent and you're saying 'Okay if you can't do this by tomorrow, we're going to court' and then mom did it, and so I think I'm not giving her a break at all. I think that's what needs to be done, finding a way to support single moms and single dads because it is really tough.
>
> I think workers see this pattern and it's frustrating because you can't give money, we don't have the resources (or mandate) to give people money. There's not enough resources to support single parent families, there's just not enough. It's like you *want* to fix this, but you just don't see a way of going about it.

Susan expressed frustration at negotiating contradictions in practice such as the need to adhere to agency policy regardless of whether it fit the reality of her client or if it runs counter to her intuition. It is virtually impossible to develop meaningful and supportive relationships when you are constantly assessing risk, and at any point may have to invoke your authority by threatening vulnerable clients. Susan expressed her frustration over the way in which the system prohibits workers from helping clients in basic ways for fear of fostering dependency or setting a dangerous precedent:

> ...There aren't enough resources but I think we can find ways...like in this instance it could just be the worker that brings mom and kid to the appointment and that's looked down upon. They feel like, 'well we can't hold their hand the whole time, this is creating a dependency' but I think for the first couple of assessments you can help.

The implication is that driving a mom and her child to a psychiatric assessment, which may save them hours on public transportation, so that the mother could manage this within her workday, will create dependency. This suggests that clients are somehow deficient or incompetent; workers cannot give too much or they'll just want more and the

agency will become overwhelmed. This is consistent with the need to constantly second guess clients because you are always looking for evidence of deviance. Susan must suppress her impulse to help and tailor her work with clients according to agency policy despite her personal inclinations.

Feelings of futility

The interviewees expressed a sense of futility in relation to imbalances they identified in practice. Some interviewees avoided dealing with the injustices of this system because it would only compound the already hugely difficult demands of their everyday work. John recognized this tendency among workers:

> ...to be honest I think that child protection workers...need to reflect more on themselves and their own practice and I think a lot of workers really shy away from that...they don't talk about it. (the difference in expectations of women and men) is kind of a non-issue.

Karen described the conscious process of shirking critical reflection:

> ...I don't want to. I try to forget the cases as quickly as I write them up. You know sometimes it's interesting for me to know what happened to that family the reality is that you know in the last six months I wrote up a hundred and something (potential investigations) and I couldn't possibly follow all the ones that I retained.

Karen leaves her work at the office and separates herself from her work. This may hinder any serious reflective thinking about her position. Critically analyzing imbalances and injustices in this practice may be too difficult to grapple with while trying to function in this environment. Karen accepts the gender imbalances apparent in her work as the nature of the environment in which she has to function:

> I still think there are gender roles and gender type jobs. Social work is highly dominated by women, mothers are the dominant parental figure, especially in split

families and in dual income families as well, that's just what we've accepted. I think, that's what I've accepted.

Not wanting to become a part of the problem

A few interviewees identified their older co-workers as burnt-out, embittered and disgruntled because of the difficult nature of this work. Susan described this culture:

> There seems to be this culture...older workers hate their lives...there's no growth ... I feel like they get very cynical and jaded, they're like 'Whatever, it's all the same old thing, oh you have a singe parent household, oh and mom's doing this than this is the answer...(there's) totally a need to classify, stereotypes are a lazy way of thinking, it's easier to group things in a way that doesn't challenge us, to put things in a category and go on to the next case, they really get caught up in that. It makes my job really easy if I can say people are this way or that or people from this country are like this, it's very bizarre and I don't think (workers) even know they're doing it.

Jane's supervisor treated her as foolishly naïve in her attempts to challenge practices. Jane also doubted herself because her tendency to question is met with resistance:

> ...(my supervisor would) suspect because, let's say on paper it says when you see these signs it means this...With kids that I'd see, she'd categorize and I find that maybe it's because I'm naïve or I don't have enough experience, but that every case is special and different and even though you think something in the back of your head...it's like a hypothesis, but you can't factually think, 'that's it,' and categorize and leave it at that...

Jane's comments illustrate older workers as thinking they've seen it all and as having lost interest in what they are doing. The outcome is burnout or becoming jaded. She further asserted:

> We're intrusive, we go into people's homes and lives and from what I've seen the way we even treat each other, the way that I've had problems with the system itself. I don't think it's sensitive enough because I think that workers, we are human, you know, we have a life and I think that this kind of a job is not a job. It's a nine to five, it takes up a lot of your time and people get jaded. I think a lot of workers from what I encountered with my supervisor at stage was like as if she had seen and done it all and I find that people lose that and you can't have people that lose the love for it.

Jane identified the faulty process of thinking of people in fixed categories and the idea of not being able to "know" one way or another about clients. However, at various points of our interview she also engaged in the practice that she criticized. For example, she asserted that documents in files are objective facts, contradicting her statement that you can't presume to know anything, "(There are) no opinions (in files), it's all facts...I would really take it for you know, 'that's it, this, this and this happened' you have to keep objective." She also characterized a mother on her caseload as "totally personally inadequate and unstable". Jane was not alone in identifying negative practices, but still engaging in those practices herself. This seems emblematic of the complex nature of child protection work, so fast-paced and stressful that if there is no discussion surrounding such critical issues and the frustrating emotions connected to them, workers cannot help but become subject to the same processes they purportedly detest.

"We never really talk about it."

The probability of the interviewees falling prey to practices that they intellectually oppose is compounded by the fact that there are no open discussions of injustices in this system. Each interviewee asserted that critical issues around gender, such as the fact that mothers are primary clients, are all but ignored in social work education, and training and team meetings in child protection work. For example, Susan asserted;

> The thing is we don't really talk about it...to be honest, there is no real clinical discussion, which is scary...I just feel the things we discuss is more like how to we get this case to move on there's no real talk about this mom as a single mother or what kind of things can we do for her and I think in that way we forget to be family focused.

> And we look only at it like, 'Well mom's not doing what she needs to do and like too bad if she's a single mom and working sixty hours a week and can't get her son to a psychiatric assessment, too bad, she has to do it,' you know I think that's where we slip up a little bit, I don't think we give single parents enough credit for what they're dealing with and I don't think we understand that there are no resources for them...

Karen noted the lack of discussion regarding gender, beginning within the walls of the child protection office in which most social workers are women. Her team addresses this issue through making light of it:

> I think nobody really addresses it, I mean people crack jokes all the time about the amount of male workers on staff...you know people will crack jokes about my manager being surrounded by women, but that's about the extent of the gender issue, I don't think we discuss it.

Susan commented that the overwhelming presence of female social workers is ignored. The agency seems to pretend that it is not an issue and that there is no difference between a male social worker and female social worker:

> I think it makes a difference if you have a female worker versus a male worker... sometimes it works for the family to have a female worker and sometimes it works for the family to have a male worker. It varies from family to family and I think at (the agency name) we tend to kind of put that to the side because there's no way to really deal with it, so instead of worrying about it, people pretend that it's not an issue, like saying 'oh, women can do the same thing' and 'it's the exact same thing if it's a woman or a man'. The issue goes to the margins it's not addressed...

Susan highlighted the importance of gender when working within various cultural contexts:

> ...we had this Muslim fair and they were presenting issues for basic understanding...there was one leader saying that when a female worker calls the home...the man should always be called first in a Muslim family and that it should be a man that calls the father because different sexes shouldn't really be speaking...so in a sense we need to really be cautious of who we assign to cases and I do think it impacts, for sure, having a female or male worker.

In some cases, it may be more fitting to assign social workers with the appropriate gender, race or religion in order to better meet client needs. Gender is also important regarding cases in which there is the presence of a violent or sex offending male. In such instances, the gender of the social worker must be discussed outright and perhaps a male worker, who feels he will not be as vulnerable physically to a client, should be assigned. Agencies must adapt to the various needs of clients rather than accommodating themselves through avoiding such issues. Pretending that the gender of social workers does not matter may foster women focusing more on mothers, for fear of aggressive males, and in turn mothers and clients of different cultures feeling resentful towards agency officials.

Education

The interviewees identified the beginning of the lack of discussion surrounding gender at the undergraduate educational level. Susan stated:

> ...in social work, absolutely not, gender is discussed but we discuss it in terms of women, we don't talk about men or when we talk about men it's very stereotypical, it's like we have an idea about men and we talk about how diverse women are. We didn't talk about it in (a course on) child welfare. The only time they ever discussed gender in terms of child welfare was women and children and actually...that was a women's studies class. No gender, I find that when we talk about child welfare it's about resistance and involuntary clients...

Despite his having completed a specialization in child welfare, John noted that gender was entirely absent from the discourse:

> (There was) no class that related gender to child welfare or no lecture on that issue, not that I can remember.

Anne also said:

> We never discussed gender, class, poverty...It's cultural, mothers do all the work so we just accept it and everything is the mother's fault, which is interesting because in most of the cases dads were the problem, they were the issue.

The lack of critical discussion related to gender oppression, or class and race, fosters the thinking of clients in isolation from their social context. The comfortable position of focusing on the individual inadequacies of clients and categorizing their faults without reference to external variables makes the arduous role of a child protection worker easier. Ignoring gender issues in education relating to child protection work is the site of its construction as a non-issue. It is taken for granted, something commonplace and acceptable.

Training and Supervision

Interviewees identified the absence of discussion regarding gender in training and supervision. Karen described her work training in which gender was not discussed as an issue, but rather this was glossed over as a fixed standard:

> No, (we didn't discuss gender in training)...the facts were laid (out). Most workers are women, most parents you work with are women. Those were sort-of laid out. On the training team when we would have clinical discussions, we were all girls on the training team, so when I was (an evaluation worker) I was surrounded by female workers and it was sort of said, 'look we all work with women', or 'we all work with moms' or 'this mom this and that mom that' and you hardly spoke about the dads.
>
> ...(it's) because of the fact that most often we were working with mothers who were out of control, mothers who were single, or mothers and their boyfriends. Boyfriends who were very unstable, people coming in and out...

This absence of discussion ignores the realities of clients. As Susan put it, training only addresses topics that are popular in the news:

> ...we talk about culture and I think that's because it's kind of an issue politically, like in the papers and stuff I find that (the agency) tries to focus on the things that the public would want them to focus on and I feel that there's a very strong emphasis on culture but gender not so much.

Team meetings and supervision were portrayed as outlets for managing crises, as there is little time for anything else. Susan discussed this:

> I'm quite independent. I do meet with her once every two weeks and then I can go to her office if something ever comes up but it's very, it's not very critical, it's more of a discussion, it's more like what's the next step.
>
> I think that in terms of the team meetings where we can talk about our cases I think it's so the kind of thing that you have to do yourself. You have to consciously say you know Friday mornings I'm not going to have meetings or write reports.

Karen also identifies the bureaucratic and administrative nature of team meetings:

> ...sometimes I come home and tell (my partner) this was sick, this really affected me but I try to get it out so that I can move on from it...in our (team) meetings we don't often talk about (the difficulties of our job) it's mostly what's on the agenda...what affects workers or you know administrative stuff or we need to correct something that's not being done right.

Jane did not have any specific training in her job in youth protection, although she formerly had a practicum in the area, in a different sector. She describes the absence of training alongside the difficult nature of her job position:

> I didn't have any (training). I was just put...they need people so badly and it was just horrendous. You really had to learn on the go a lot of the nights I would go to like weeks of court appearances. You had to do so much work I really had no life when I was working there because they really pack you with stuff and like I said it's sink or swim and I tried to keep afloat but it's so much information...

Wanting to make change

Jane asserted that she lost her job because of her tendency to challenge common practices and ask too many questions:

> ...you have no room to question...and people that do sometimes question (get into trouble). I would really not get along with my boss if I questioned things. That was actually one of the reasons I was fired they said I didn't deal well with authority...I found that some points should be taken more seriously and I was told that I have a problem with authority and my boss would say I know better and if you try this you're just going to hit a wall and that was one of the reasons I got fired.

From Jane's example, it seems that discussions surrounding critical issues are discouraged in practice. Jane demonstrated a desire to critically analyze her role but was unable to do so in this environment.

Susan described making a conscious effort to take time out and think about her cases, sometimes writing about them. She described her team as beginning to think critically at team meetings:

> It's frustrating because you want to talk about these things, you really have to take the time and we're starting to do this on our team. We meet every two weeks where we take two cases from the team and we discuss them clinically, which is very good because we don't get that with our supervision with managers because usually that's discussing what to do next but we don't discuss the family as a whole like the different issues going on...it's terrible, but at least as a team we're starting to do this, we're trying, but certainly a lot more needs to be done.

After completing a Master's course that critically examined child welfare work, Anne and Jackie portrayed an awareness of wider issues that affect clients and a new sense of empathy and understanding in their work. Jackie stated:

> I look at things in a more critical way...it gives me more confidence...I learned about (issues like gender) and this definitely changed a lot of things for me, on a more personal level I look at more societal issues.

Anne described how this course influenced her way of thinking:

> (I am) a lot more client and human oriented after taking (a critical course on child welfare in relation to gender and poverty). I felt so mechanical before and I didn't even see it as that at the time. I just did my job and moved on and didn't think about wider issues, it gave a sense of empathy to the work...I learned the most from this class, every time I think back now I kick myself...but that's what school is for, I think it should've been at the bachelor's level.

Anne identified a new way of approaching work with understanding and consideration to "wider issues." However, she questioned the utility of these thinking tools. She described her new sense of understanding as a potential source of frustration due to an inability to change the status quo:

> At the same time, it's hard to employ a lot of those theories, you have to consider the client but you also have to protect the child...(in the case of the six year old boy) I would not have been able to get the woman to see anything ... she was going to hate me even if I did act in a more empathetic way. I don't think it would have changed things.

CHAPTER 6 – IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The practice of focusing investigations and subsequent treatment services on the capabilities of women may avoid the fundamental issues leading up to the need for services. This unduly punishes mothers for neglect or abuse to children, regardless of whether such happenings were within their control. The expectation that mothers be selfishly committed to children and the shaping of interventions on that premise compels women to fit this mold for fear of having their children removed. Anticipating that men are unimportant or aggressive and therefore limiting contact with them, validates this expectation of men that is maintained because of the nominal contact with them.

The accounts of these eight social workers highlight the overwhelming expectations that the system has for mothers and the few, if any, for fathers. Their words reflect the often confusing, chaotic and contradictory roles they must negotiate. The reproduction of gendered expectations takes place because workers are busy and they lack the time and skills to confront men. Fathers are often not there while mothers are readily available, and this pattern becomes an expectation because, as an issue, gender is virtually ignored in education and training.

Implications for clients

Gendered practice in child protection has implications for women, men and children. Expecting that mothers adhere to rigid ideals reinforces women's subordinate status as responsible for the home and children (Finn, 1994). As Meyer (1985) noted, ideals surrounding mothering that relegate them to the private sphere of home and family, have "important personal, social, economic and political consequences for women" (p.

250). The perpetuation of expectations of women as primarily nurturing enables institutions such as child protection to continue targeting their interventions at them.

Child protection workers' half-hearted inclusion of men who have abused ignores the relationship mothers and children have with them regardless of their offence. Failing to confront abuse with men and directing them to questionable anger management services denies them real and effective treatment. The expectation that fathers will be absent, unwilling or aggressive and allowing this to influence interventions has adverse implications for fathers who are involved or whose involvement only needs to be facilitated by the agency. The negation of fathers in regards to family undermines and illegitimates their caring capacities. It must be considered that in various cases the involvement of an abusive father is not appropriate. However, the practice of ignoring the strengths of men as participants in treatment plans denies their potential as fathers and as fundamental parts of a child's life. Ignoring fathers, like focusing too much on mothers, reproduces their relegation to the public sphere and their disconnection from the private sphere of home (Silverstein, 1996).

The avoidance of men may also impede social work treatment plans in terms of collaboration with families. Because this tendency may overwhelm and offend both mothers and fathers, an increasing distrust of child protection workers may result and inhibit any positive working relationship.

Children

Children are greatly victimized by the practice of targeting services primarily at mothers. When mothers cannot stand up to an aggressive partner or in between mothering

single handedly and working, cannot fulfill the mandates of child protection, their children may be apprehended and placed in foster care, an "overburdened and underfunded helping system" (Finn, 1994, p. 382). Some suggest living in foster care may be equally or more harmful than children remaining in abusive homes (Steinhauer, 1998). The average child in foster care endures three to four different foster family care and institutional placements, and most child protection agencies do not monitor what effects their efforts have in the lives of children (Toth, 1998).

When abusive men are not included in service treatment, their potential for violence may be overlooked. Children and women bear the burden of this oversight. This is evidenced in cases where men's violent abuse of children and women that may result in death is inadvertently disregarded by protection agencies (O'Hagan, 1997). Unfortunately, in such instances blame is often assigned to individual child protection workers, rather than viewing the flaws of the system as a whole. Blame cannot be placed solely at the individual level. In the same way that clients cannot be treated as somehow isolated from their social and cultural contexts, child protection workers' actions cannot be seen in isolation from the nature of the child protection system in which they function.

Social Workers

Child protection workers will continue to "burn-out," and quit as several of the interviewees have done or intend to do, if changes are not made in this system. The high turnover rate among child protection workers is widely known and this problem persists with little attention granted to effective ways of countering it. It seems that talking about

difficulties in practice is discouraged and the focus is rather on doing something to make stress go away. "Take a bath, exercise, and get your mind off it," we're often told.

Perhaps social workers do not need to get their minds off their work but on the contrary, they need to think critically about what they do. Advising workers not to become emotionally involved in their work implies that they should mindlessly follow procedure or example, rather than promoting new and innovative ways of thinking and interacting with clients. Child protection agencies need to recognize and discuss the emotionally taxing, difficult and contradictory roles that social workers assume on a daily basis, or this system will continue to oppress clients and lose social workers.

Recommendations

Education & Training

Brown (1994) asserts that traditional social work does not explicitly acknowledge or address social oppressions and the need for social change. The reliance on mothers and avoidance of fathers in child protection practice must be explicitly addressed beginning in undergraduate social work, as Jackie suggested in our interview. Social work must acknowledge that class, race and gender influence the lives of clients and affect their ability to parent successfully. If social work education does not discuss such critical social problems, it cannot help but inadvertently reproduce them in work with clients (Comley, 1989).

The absence of meaningful training at the university level and in work experience may inhibit workers from engaging men. The fear of confrontations with men may stem from workers lack of skills in dealing with aggressive or violent behavior. Practical ways

of managing hostile behavior is not emphasized in course work or in training, as the interviewees expressed, despite the reality that child protection work is extremely sensitive. Workers should feel equipped to deal with the very natural sentiment of anger that this work likely invokes. Ways in which to deflect anger in a manner that does not provoke individuals but acknowledges their feelings are fundamental. Individual workers should also explore their personal biases in terms of gender in order to confront and challenge them.

Policy

The law and policy that dictates child protection practice must maintain egalitarian demands of mothers and fathers. Parental responsibility must be demanded from unwed fathers (Risley & Hefernan, 2003). The law that shapes this practice must begin to meet the needs of increasingly vulnerable single mother headed families. Perhaps offering concrete resources and support services in neglect cases, rather than making impractical treatment demands on this family type would better meet their needs. There must be a shift in focus from risk management and investigation to treatment and support. Shelly explains this:

> Younger parents don't have...basic services...they become pregnant, drop out of school to raise children...there is a lack of education, a lack of employment...most of them are on social assistance and it's difficult to get off. These are people in poverty, in financial difficulties; they need more money and more community services and good support.

Practice Development

Change will not take place until the gendered nature of child protection interventions is recognized as problematic within this institution. Nothing will be

ameliorated in this regard if the problem continues to go unnoticed. Child protection services need to account for who are the primary targets of their interventions and why this is. Agencies cannot continue hiding under the supposed objective interventions with "parents," when it is widely evidenced that poor mothers are the targets of services. The differences in working with women and men, and with single parent families and two parent families, must be explicitly enumerated.

Specific interventions and services should be provided in the case of single mother headed families, particularly concerning neglect. As the interviewees noted, most of their clients are single mothers and most of them are poor. We cannot pretend that this is an anomaly and that somehow these families are devious and deficient, otherwise this family type will continue to consume caseloads as a result of their vulnerable position in society. Single mothers must to be given the added assistance that they need.

This system should develop programs specifically for men in order to promote the importance of father-child relationships and help to forestall the occurrence of abuse rather than intervene after the fact. As Cooley (2003) and the interviewees assert, current treatment for men is virtually non-existent, particularly for men who have abused. This frees men of responsibility for their actions and ignores any discussion or treatment of abuse, leaving open the potential for it to happen again. Regardless of who men are, or what they've done, they must be appreciated and included.

Looking beyond parents

Many women labeled as single by agencies do in fact have boyfriends or significant men or women in their lives, but they are not involved because they are not

biologically or legally bound to children (O'Hagan, 1997). Margolin (1992) in her study regarding the abundance of child abuse perpetrated by mothers' boyfriends asserted that this is partly owed to the fact that their positioning as boyfriends is not perceived as valid and there exists little social acknowledgement or support of their role. "Where no adequate term exists for an important social role, the institutional support for this role is deficient and general acceptance of this role as a legitimate pattern of activity is questionable" (Cherline, 1978, p. 643 as cited in Margolin, 1992, p. 542). Not only must we begin to acknowledge fathers but also the presence of boyfriends and significant others in women's lives such as extended family members that play a role in parenting. Gould (1985) noted that "the failure to understand and reinforce the benefits of extended family ties" among certain single mother headed minority families, "has resulted in lost opportunities to integrate the minority mother into an existent support system" (p. 296). People other than biological relations who are important to children should be included in this process in order to lessen the overburdening and isolation of mothers.

Narratives

The voices of clients should be included in practice interventions and shared (Davies & Krane, 2000, Brown, 1994). This work should embrace the exposure of the experiences and insights of all those involved, particularly the clients, as interventions critically influence their lives. Social workers should engage in this narrative practice, providing an outlet for their frustrations and experiences. Clients and social workers should share their narratives as this may diminish the resentment often felt on both their behalves.

Documentation

In terms of documentation, perhaps locating ourselves in written assessments would make the experience and the emotions involved in child protection practice come to life. Additionally, variables beyond the individual such as poverty and gender that may inhibit successful parenting should have a place in assessments. The nature of the documentation process in which workers remove themselves coupled with too many clients and too little time compels us to reproduce injustices without thought and consideration.

Investigation and support

The need to support and investigate was a difficult position for interviewees to maintain. Perhaps it would be beneficial if a separate agency assumed the investigatory and policing role, so that social workers could focus on providing supportive services. Combining these two functions causes the risk assessment task to overpower the provision of support. This juxtaposition leaves social workers conflicted and clients feeling defensive.

Research

Increased qualitative research regarding gendered child protection practice that includes the voices of social workers, men, women and children should be conducted. Research should particularly involve fathers and their experiences and perceptions of child protection practices.

Conclusion

This thesis has been a meaningful experience. Had I thought about this subject a year ago I would have had no concept of gender difference in child protection. Like some interviewees, I had neither the time nor the critical tools to intellectually challenge the practices of my agency. As I near the completion of my Master's, I'm strongly considering returning to child protection work and the mere thought of working in this field evokes the same anxiety I felt while employed.

It is a comfortable position to pontificate about the pitfalls of this system while I sit at such a distance. I do not know if I will have the time and capability to engage in the same thinking while employed in this system, as it may be lost in the flurry of report writing and investigating. I wonder if the mandate to protect children at all costs will undermine my conflicts with certain practices of this system. Will I be able to identify imbalances, but have no other choice than to reproduce them in order to maintain my job and my sanity? Will I shortly "burn-out" like so many child protection employees? As Anne said, I am unsure of to whether thinking critically will help me, hurt me or do nothing. I think the solutions to the many problems addressed in this thesis lie in the re-shifting of this system's values. The injustices outlined lie at the very heart of this institution that in practice penalizes largely disadvantaged people while exempting others.

APPENDIX I – CONSENT FORM

RESEARCHER: Katherine Morgan
SUPERVISOR: Linda Davies

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH STUDY EXPLORING WORKING EXPERIENCES WITH MOTHERS AND FATHERS IN CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

I am a master's student of Social Work at McGill University conducting research for my thesis. I am doing interviews with individuals who have formerly worked and currently work in child welfare services. My intention is to explore the extent to which men are included in service delivery versus women. I will be asking participants about their own experiences as social workers.

If you are interested in talking to me about your experiences, we can arrange an interview that will take about one hour to an hour and a half. I promise to protect your privacy. The contents of the interview will be kept confidential. Your real name will never be used, and every effort will be made to ensure that no identifying details are made available to anyone inside or outside the agency.

In order to ensure accuracy, I will be taping your interview. When the research is complete, the tape will be erased. I will be the only one with access to the tapes and their content.

While we are talking, if you do not want to answer any particular question, you may refuse. You have the right to stop the interview at any point, if you wish, without any penalty.

Do you agree to be audiotaped?

Yes ____ No ____

Participant's name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____

Date: _____

APPENDIX II – INTERVIEW GUIDE

Demographic questions:

How old are you? What is your educational background?

Experiences in Child Protection:

Can you describe your job and your mandate?

What was the general demographic of your team in terms of gender?

What kind of services did you mostly provide?

How often do you think it was supportive and treatment oriented?

What were most often the circumstances under which most families came to the attention of child welfare? What were common types of allegations?

Were men or women most often perpetrators of abuse?

What was your client population generally in terms of (gender, socio-economic class, family type)

How many single parent families did you have on your caseload or on the caseloads of your agency more generally? How many were female headed versus male headed?

With whom do you and your team most interact mothers, fathers, children?

What was the extent to which your services and the services of your agency more generally involved mothers versus fathers?

How often would you say generally were men were involved in services?

When fathers were around, how did you attempt to engage them?

If men were not involved was this discussed amongst your team and were concerted efforts made to involve men?

If not, can you point to any reason for this?

Parental Involvement During allegations

What happens during allegations of abuse?

Describe the sequence of events and what leads to decisions being made?

During investigations, treatment meetings, home visits, court appearances, permanency meetings, are both mothers and fathers present?

If one more than the other, is there a reason for this?

What treatment services are offered to abusers (men/women)?

If the man is an abuser, what happens?

Is the abusing male engaged at all? How do you feel about engaging male abusers?

Were male abusers in your experience assigned to any resources such as anger management? If so how many followed through with the treatment and was it at all effective as far as you know?

What is asked of the mother in situations in which her partner is inflicting abuse?

What happens if mom doesn't acknowledge the abuse? How are moms dealt with when their partners have been abusive towards their children?

Are any exceptions made for cultural variations?

What happens in cases of neglect? Is neglect more common in single mother headed families?

Placement

If children need to be placed, are biological fathers sought out? Are boyfriends/commonlaw involved in the decisions?

When are children placed with dads? When are dads used as a resource?

How are placements with dads? Do they breakdown or sustain?

With whom are children on your caseload most frequently placed? Is it most often a male/female relative?

What are foster families like? Are they mostly single parent or nuclear families?

Experiences with Mothers and Fathers

What are some of the dads you've been involved with like? What are their relationships with their families?

What are moms like? What are their relationships with their families like?

Have you or your colleagues ever experienced any violence or hostility from men?

Have you or your colleagues ever experienced any violence from women clients?

Documentation

To what degree did the agency rely on files or treat them as factual accounts?

In reading of others files and writing your own was there an extensive focus on either parent?

Were files under the name of both parents?

Education and Training

What was your training and social work education like?

How did you learn to write your assessments?

Does your agency at all discuss the differences or challenges of working with women versus men?

Is the fact that women are more often clients (if the participant identifies that they are) discussed?

What efforts are made by the agency in general to involve birth fathers or foster fathers?

Are gender issues ever discussed in your agency?

Were gender issues discussed throughout your education or training?

What is supervision/team meetings like at your agency?

Do you feel you have time to reflect on your cases?

General Comments

Are there any other general comments related to gender issues and the disparity of services focused on women versus men in your experience?

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