FEAR OF BLAME: POST-GOVE CHILD PROTECTION IN B.C.

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FEAR OF BLAME: POST-GOVE REPORT
CHILD PROTECTION IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

ABSTRACT

This study examines how the unprecedented placement of blame on social workers in B.C., following the Report of the Gove Commission into Child Protection in 1995, has affected those workers, by exploring the phenomenon from the point of view of the social workers themselves. By using structural social work theory, with a feminist perspective, the conceptual context is explored in terms of how risk and blame have been constructed and how the relationship between clients and workers, and the treatment of social workers by management have been impacted by that construction.

Purposeful criterion sampling was used, applying a snowball approach of recruitment. Ten social workers participated who are or have been recently employed by the Ministry for Children & Families. Data collection occurred through one focus group session as well as individual interviews. Transcripts of the interviews were made from audiotapes. Categorical and holistic content analysis led to identification of participant themes.

Findings confirmed fear of blame as a significant contributor to high stress levels but, surprisingly, social workers expressed their belief that a similar fear was frequently behind management decisions. This research provides unique insight into the factors which motivate individuals to do the difficult work of child protection. It also offers an explanation for the ongoing difficulty which government experiences in recruiting and retaining skilled, trained staff, which, if unaddressed, is a serious impediment to the effective delivery of child welfare services in B.C.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BETH'S QUOTE</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 General statement of the problem</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 The issue of accountability</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3 The feminist perspective</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER II CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 Evidence of the problem</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 Attempts to resolve the problem through public policy</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 Literature review: the systematic construction of blame</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 Research related to social worker experience in B.C.</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER III PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 Assumptions underlying this study</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 The main research question</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER IV METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Conceptual framework - Goals of this research</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Self-disclosure</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Data collection</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Data analysis</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF TABLES

TABLE 1: Themes derived from coding the transcript .................................................. 78
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I dedicate this project to all the social workers struggling to perform child protection work in B.C. under difficult circumstances. In spite of all the recent publicity in the media, the public still does not have a clear idea of how demanding child protection work is. Hopefully this research will make some contribution to widening the understanding of this challenging and important work.

I would especially like to offer my appreciation to:

• The ten social workers who unhesitatingly agreed to participate in this project. Their courage, humour, and deep commitment to perform the highest quality of social work never ceases to arouse my amazement and admiration.

• My fellow Masters student, Anne-Marie Murphy, for her generous support and assistance with the focus group.

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• My research professor, Deborah O'Connor, who has grasped the essence of how to teach this complex subject and whose enthusiasm for qualitative research is irresistible and infectious.

• My patient, loving family, every one of them, who sustain me and are my centre, and to whom I can always turn to when I need reassurance and energy to keep going.
“... It hits home to you that that’s the ultimate fear. We all know that, you know - a child could die on our caseload. That’s our absolute worst fear. ... And it could happen to anyone.”

Beth
(From interview transcript)
FEAR OF BLAME: POST-GOVE REPORT CHILD PROTECTION IN B.C.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

1.1 General Statement of the Problem

In 1992, the death of five year old Matthew Vaudreuil resulted in a public spotlight illuminating the issue of child death in the province of British Columbia. One significant effect of that death was the judicial inquiry conducted by Justice Thomas Gove, whose findings and recommendations led to a visible and dramatic shift in the focus of child welfare legislation and policy (Gove, 1995).

In the years immediately preceding Matthew's death, the government had stated its intention to enact the Child, Family and Community Services Act (hereafter referred to as CFCSA), which reflected many of the principles contained in Making Changes, (1993) - a report based on a series of province-wide community panels. Considered to be a major break from the previous Family and Child Services Act (1981), the new Act's guiding principles included recognizing the family home as the preferred environment for childrearing, the family's right to support services and a principle of "least intrusion". (Other issues such as culture, kinship, family ties and community involvement were also included, and although of equal importance, are not the focus of discussion in this particular research.)

It can be argued that the retreat from a progressive view of community-based, locally accountable service systems was not a consequence of the Gove inquiry, but was instead a continuation of a steady trend evident in many jurisdictions in Canada. As Sullivan has noted:
...The community panels' vision of a family support system that guard against poverty while it protects children and corrects the historic wrongs of colonialism is laudable, utopian, and sadly out of step with the harsh reality of contemporary Canada. All of us who advocated legislation that would establish “need” as the mandatory threshold for the “right” to preventive service wanted a statutory link between assessed need and service provision. We were swimming against the current in a meaner, leaner Canada, where the link between local need and federal/provincial dollar-matching was severed with the demise of the Canada Assistance Plan; instead, the residualism that is our tradition was reasserted with a vengeance in the 1990's. ... (Sullivan, 1998, p.109).

Granted, there may have been no intent on the part of government to fund the resources which would have been required by the CFCSA, as it was originally structured. However, the fact that the progressive principles, referred to above, were to be enshrined in legislation was felt by some to be a significant event in child welfare in B.C. (Armitage, 1998). Anticipating such a move to a more progressive family support approach, social workers began actively to reverse the trend of taking children into care, with a resulting steady drop in the numbers of children in care, which fell from over 7500 in 1985 to below 6000 in 1993 (MCF - Annual Reports, 1985-1993). These numbers began to rise rapidly again after the release of the Gove Report (MCF, Annual Reports, 1995-1999).

Whether or not the Gove Report caused the change in focus, or was simply another manifestation of the trend towards greater residualism in the social services, there was certainly a noted shift in child welfare legislation and policy, following the release of the Report. Many of the resulting changes were based upon the Report’s recommendations. For example, the inquiry questioned the role of family support and cast doubt on the underlying philosophy of the legislation. Gove recommended that the guiding principle of the new Act should be changed to ensure that the child’s safety and wellbeing be the paramount concern in child protection and the CFCSA was amended accordingly (Armitage, 1998).
Of particular concern for some was that the Gove Report proposed changes to the child welfare system which “succeeded in diverting public attention from structural issues and reasserted the illusion of being able to provide for the protection of children through improved management and professional process” (Armitage, 1998, p.105). Furthermore, the inquiry’s report reflected the view that bad social work practice played a significant part in Matthew Vaudreuil’s death and “clearly established that the poor social work practice evident throughout Matthew’s life was not unique (Gove, 1995, p.30)”. Apparently influenced by Gove’s negative opinion about the competence of social workers, as well as by ongoing attention from the press about the inadequacy of government response to child abuse, policies were quickly put into place which required social workers to conduct child-centred interventions based on rigorous investigative and monitoring procedures.

With these changes came the explicit public acceptance by the provincial government that the responsibility for deaths of children known to the Ministry for Children & Families (hereafter referred to as MCF) was to be placed on that Ministry, and in particular, on the social workers charged with conducting investigations into child abuse and neglect. This thesis will explore through interviews with ten social workers, how the shift in public perception of child deaths, together with significant changes in government policy, has affected the ability of social workers to deliver child protection in British Columbia.

Having been employed by the Ministry for Children & Families continuously since 1982, I have direct experience of the impact of the difficult and challenging work of child protection. Of even greater relevance is the fact that in 1996, a child on my caseload died resulting in a series of internal investigations by MCF management. The outcome of those
inquiries and the impact on myself and my social work team, left me with grave concerns about how the government responds to deaths and critical incidents of children on social worker caseloads. As researcher, my personal experience of this phenomenon has direct relevance in terms of the methodology used in this research study, and will be examined in detail in Chapter IV.

1.2 The Issue of Accountability

For many years social workers had been legally protected by the “good faith” clause contained in the child welfare legislation of the day (Child, Family & Community Services Act, 1996, hereafter referred to as the CFCSA, Family & Child Services Act, 1982) and, until recently, have enjoyed a professional status, ‘underpinned by a belief in elite insights and unassailable judgments, (and) informed by relatively superior social and intellectual status’ (Taylor, 1998, p.49).

With the publication of the Report of the Gove Inquiry, the B.C. government accepted the now widely held belief that MCF had failed to protect children adequately. The question was, who exactly should be targeted and held responsible for this failure. Based on disciplinary actions such as firings, suspensions, retraining and removal from child protection duties, as well as public condemnation (see Appendix 1, newspaper articles, 1995 - 1998), it appears that it has been the child protection workers who, individually and collectively, have been made to assume the greatest share of responsibility.

Professional social workers, as a simple matter of ethics, accept the responsibility of accountability (Practice Standards for Professional Social Workers in B.C., 1992), particularly
One of the valuable qualities which social work has brought to the field of child welfare is the fact that professional education usually involves teaching the kind of critical thinking which encourages one to assess contextually, to consider the big picture, and to connect personal trouble to social issues. As Gambrill notes in a text addressed primarily to social work students, critical thinking is useful:

... in deepening your understanding of issues and selecting well-reasoned beliefs and actions. You will be less likely to offer vague incomplete accounts of problems. Only by considering the interlinked contingencies related to a problem can you and your clients accurately define it and estimate the degree to which it is solvable and if so, how (Gambrill, 1997, p.130).

Social workers trained to think critically, expect to take responsibility for the decisions they make. It is a hallmark of professional and ethical practice. It also provides the freedom to exercise discretion in decision-making which is in the best interest of the client.

It is an assumption of this research study that MCF management, through a number of policy changes, has limited opportunities for critical decision-making by those workers who do have this ability and training. Similarly, by hiring employees who do not have a degree in social work and have not necessarily been trained in the process of critical thinking that is so
important in making quality assessments, management has created a dilemma for child protection workers by making them accountable for situations over which they do not or should not have control.

It is a further contention of this study that child protection workers find that professional accountability has been replaced with blame. Inflexible procedures and demanding work conditions are rife with possibilities for error. If workers believe there is no assurance that there will be a balanced process of case review when critical incidents occur, then it is likely that government will find it increasingly difficult to attract and retain competent professional social workers to do the work.

1.3 The Feminist Perspective

The lens through which this research has been conducted and interpreted is that of radical structural social work theory. As a critical theory, it is “motivated by and interested in the emancipation of those who are oppressed, informed by a critique of domination, and is driven by a goal of liberation” (Kellner, 1989, as cited in Mullaly, 1997, p.108). Child protection workers have increasingly come to be linked with the oppressed client group with whom they work - primarily children and their mothers, who are often single parents, living in poverty with limited access to resources (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, Eds., 1998; Swift, 1991). It is the intention of this paper to explore the possibility that social workers, under current MCF legislation, policies and procedures, perceive themselves as an oppressed group, under the domination of a powerful political/bureaucratic elite who employs them and dictates the conditions of their work.
Social workers have sometimes been described as agents of social control (Carniol, 1995) but, seen through the structural feminist lens, they can also be viewed at the mercy of the elite who manipulate them as agents of the state, and exploit their vulnerability as salaried (labour) service providers, through disempowering acts of intimidation and control. The feminist view rejects placing blame on the individual client or worker, choosing to understand the position of the oppressed in the context of the social and economic structures in which they live (Fook, 1993).

There is admittedly a certain irony in taking an approach often used by social workers in assessing client situations and applying it to the social workers themselves. However, if social workers are an oppressed group, they deserve the same consideration and assistance in becoming conscious of their oppression and participating in their own liberation and empowerment.

A radical feminist perspective recognizes that capitalism is the fundamental form of domination, but it is patriarchy which is the fundamental source of oppression (Mullaly, 1997). Such a view is particularly important in this analysis because it involves the exploration of the concept of power, and challenges the seemingly inherent right of the dominant power group to wield it (Schriver, 1998; Mullaly, 1997).

Although a feminist perspective usually focuses specifically on the oppression of women as part of structured inequality within a class-based social system, I am applying this approach to the examination of the work of child protection based on the following assumptions and beliefs:
Social work is an essentially “female profession”, in terms of role and point of view, (in spite of the presence of males in the ranks of front line workers), and is therefore treated with the same disrespectful and dismissive attitudes by government that other disempowered groups experience (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, eds., 1998, Callahan & Attridge, 1990, Hallett, 1989).

The oppression of women is intertwined with other forms of oppression. Feminist insights on the way patriarchy structures virtually all social institutions such as families, the welfare state, or the marketplace, have been incorporated into structural social work analysis, and in fact, “the feminist perspective is an epistemological imperative for structural social work.” (Mullaly, 1997, p.131).

Transformation of the system is emphasized, which is a desired goal within the analytical process of this paper.

CHAPTER II: CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM

2.1 Evidence of the Problem

The most obvious method of providing evidence that social workers are experiencing dissatisfaction with their work is to look at the employment statistics. Comparing numbers of social workers employed relative to increasing workloads, provides an indication of whether there is a changed relationship between the two, and if this is likely to impact ability to perform. An increase in numbers of resignations and stress leaves for the same time period is significant in indicating a decrease in health and job satisfaction. A decrease in the average length of time an individual spends employed in the field of child protection is also an indicator about whether there is a problem in retaining experienced employees.

The following statistics were gathered from CHIPS (Corporate Human Resource Information Payroll System) and presented at a Recruitment and Retention Workshop.
there were 1182 child protection social workers at that time.

- The turnover rate was measured at 9.4% for child protection workers, as compared to an overall rate of 7.1% for all social workers employed with MCF.

- The average length of service for child protection workers was 7.5 years, as compared to resource workers, for example, at 12.4 years or community living services workers at 11.2 years.

In a similar vein, a study, commissioned by the government, and published in 1996, noted that the government had hired 600 new social workers with a Bachelor of Social Work degree (hereafter referred to as a BSW) since January 1995. The report further noted that in 1995, 14% of MCF’s social workers had left the Ministry (Lannon & Associates, 1996).

In 1997, an employment model was developed for MCF by a private consultant (Children’s Model, 1997). It was anticipated at that time that 220 additional social workers were required to address child protection workload needs. In April 1998, the Minister for Children and Families announced that MCF was launching a nationwide search for 225 more workers (McLintock & Tait, 1998), a number which followed on the heels of the 600 new recruits referred to above. At the same time, the number of children in care was anticipated to be 9,999 for 1998/99, up from 8,250 in 1997/98 and 7,278 in 1995/96 (MCF Annual Reports, 1995-1999).

Although it is difficult to get precise statistics from union or management to corroborate the belief that staff turnover continues to occur in unprecedented numbers, there are some indications that this is indeed the case. For example, in December 1999, MCF
announced that the Justice Institute had been enlisted to conduct independent exit interviews for MCF staff leaving the Ministry. One possible interpretation of such an action is that it is a sensible way to determine the cause of an apparent staff retention problem.

Also appearing in December 1999 was evidence that a staffing shortage continues to plague the Ministry, in the form of an internal memo from a senior management official, appealing for applicants for multiple temporary secondments from the urban MCF workforce to address staffing requirements in certain northern and rural regions, which were acknowledged to be down to 50% or less in some areas. (MCF e-mail, 1999). The reaction to this request did not produce the anticipated results and was followed by an even more urgent memo revealing that the response had been inadequate, noting there had been an insufficient response to what was becoming a critical situation (MCF e-mail, 1999a).

Following such a strongly worded request, yet another communication came out thanking those who had responded, but requesting even more volunteers for secondment, emphasizing that: “Despite all of our efforts to date, the critical shortage remains” (MCF e-mail, 2000). There was no explanation regarding how the depletion of teams who surrendered valuable workers to assist in staffing northern offices, would be addressed.

Further evidence that this staffing issue remains unresolved is found in a recent newspaper article explaining that B.C. is recruiting across Canada to try to ease an unusually acute (my emphasis) shortage of child protection workers that has left 30 per cent of positions unfilled in some regions (Willcocks, Child protection staff crisis, April, 2000). It is also interesting to note that a professor at the University of Northern B.C. was quoted in this same article, stating that some social workers call MCF “the ministry of blame” (Willcocks, 2000).
With regard to confirming the experience of blame and the response of social workers, evidence to date has been provided primarily through the public media from 1994 to the present time, such as the Vancouver Sun, the Vancouver Province, Perspectives (published by the British Columbia Association of Social Workers, hereafter referred to as BCASW), and The Provincial, (published by the BCGEU). Appendix 1 provides a sample list of articles documenting this issue.

2.2 Attempts by Government to Solve the Occurrence of Child Deaths

1. Policy and Legislation

The B.C. government, following the recommendations of the Gove Report, initiated a number of measures to address the public concern for child deaths which occur on social worker caseloads. Such measures included:

- The Child Family & Community Services Act was enacted in 1996. The Act originally had been intended to emphasize support services and family processes. Instead, it was altered to focus primarily on the safety and wellbeing of children as the paramount concern of child welfare procedures (Armitage, 1998).

- The mandate of the Audit and Review Division (MCF Policy, 1996) was changed from one of broad examination of policy and administrative effectiveness to a focus on individual office and worker case practice, featuring intensive review of specific cases, and has become an instrumental tool to examine and evaluate social work practice, particularly where critical incidents have occurred.

- Changes to the Social Worker Act created separation of the Board of Registration for Social Workers from the BCASW (Social Workers’ Act, 1996). The Board continued to regulate and investigate the practice of Registered Social Workers, presumably with greater independence and objectivity.

- The Risk Assessment Tool was introduced in 1996 to provide a reliable way of measuring risk of harm to children under investigation for abuse or neglect.
The Children's Commission Act was passed in 1997, mandating an independent Children’s Commissioner to investigate all deaths and critical injuries to children in B.C, set standards, make reports and provide public education and information. This agency has played a prominent role in investigating incidents involving children known to MCF.

Government initially accepted Justice Gove’s recommendations that child protection workers should have a minimum of a BSW degree, and, as noted above, attempted to recruit the number of workers identified as necessary to meet minimum requirements to address identified caseload needs.

2. Description and Analysis of Current Legislation and Policy

a) Child, Family & Community Service Act

The CFCSA (1996) is the legislation which creates the mandate required to conduct child protection investigations and to provide services to children and families where issues of abuse and neglect are a concern. Social workers are able to wield enormous statutory power and it is their work which comes under intense scrutiny from a number of government bodies and the media when a critical incident occurs on a caseload.

Section 101 of the CFCSA protects social workers from personal liability, provided they act within the mandate of the Act and follow prescribed policies and procedures reflecting intended functions as defined by the Act. In recent memory in B.C., no social worker has incurred any financial loss through court action as a result of a finding of negligence with or without a finding of bad faith (Legal Services Branch Report, Ministry of the Attorney-General, 1996). One may conclude that the legal route of establishing accountability is useful only in extreme situations of criminal negligence and wrongdoing.
As noted in Chapter I, the numbers of children in care rose dramatically in 1994 following the Gove Inquiry, and have continued to rise, increasing social worker caseloads significantly. This was in part due to the “paramountcy” clause in the CFCSA, which implicitly gives social workers greater discretionary powers in removing children. There is little provision in the Act for supportive services and virtually no attention to prevention. The government is therefore not obliged to provide funding for such programs and in this period of prolonged fiscal restraint, has consistently cut back on family support services, choosing to direct increasingly tight funds into the child protection program (Armitage, 1999).

Unless clear risk of harm allows a social worker to bring a child into care, families are left without supports, and cases at the lower end of the risk spectrum, are left unaddressed. However, if such cases happen to escalate into a critical incident, there is no mechanism in place, other than union support, to prevent a social worker from being held responsible for decisions and actions taken, or left undone.

b) Board of Registration for Social Workers

The Board of Registration for Social Workers (hereafter referred to as BRSW) is established under the Social Workers Act, and is a self-governing professional body composed of 10-12 appointed members, two being lay persons, and the rest being registered social workers. The significant tasks of the Board, in the context of this paper, are to establish qualifications required for registration of social workers, and to:

provide for cancellation, suspension or setting of terms and conditions for the continuation of the registration of a social worker who is found by the Board to be guilty of misconduct or of having displayed incompetence that makes it desirable in the
public interest that his or her registration should be cancelled, suspended or limited (BRSW Roster, 1998).

The BRSW is therefore responsible for the protection of the public from preventable harm and represents the public interest with regard to social work practice by Registered Social Workers. It investigates complaints of improper practice involving RSWs, and requires RSWs, whose practice has been found to not meet the standard, to undertake corrective action. Professional discipline can be involved where suitable as well.

Although it can impact a social worker’s ability to practice, this body has not played a large role in MCF-related issues to date, and has little practical relevance to child protection workers and the issue of accountability, primarily because only 1,257 of the province’s 5,800 social workers are registered (BRSW Statistics, 1997). This is due to the fact that registration is voluntary for MCF social workers, who form a significant portion of all social workers in B.C., and most choose not to, for whatever reason. Many MCF employees are ineligible simply due to a lack of a Bachelor of Social Work degree.

Under the Social Workers Act, the Board of Registration only controls title of registered social workers. Therefore anyone, in law, can call themselves a “social worker”, even without any social work training or experience. Similarly, complaints can be accepted and action taken, only against registered social workers.

Thus, child protection workers have no statutory, independent, regulatory body to which they are responsible for their standards of conduct and practice, so that enforcing professional accountability is left primarily to the employer. Having to be accountable to an outside regulatory body does not, in itself, guarantee that no unacceptable practice, misconduct
or abuse by social workers would ever occur again, but it is an essential component in
establishing, developing and enforcing standards, and provides a vital additional route for staff,
service users, and members of the public to use when other systems fail (Hunt, 1998).

c) Re-revision of Audit and Review Policy

Prior to 1991, the Inspection and Standards Unit (ISU) functioned to focus on worker
compliance with detailed policies and procedures. In 1991, a special audit was conducted to
provide an assessment of the Ministry of Social Services’ human resource management
processes for its social workers. One of the findings was that audits of case supervision and
audit processes conducted by the ISU, had not been implemented in a way that allowed the
ministry to monitor social work practice fully. Both look at only part of the work that is
carried out, and do not assess systematically all relevant aspects of social work practice,
particularly the exercise of professional judgment. Because the social worker’s judgment is
critical to the client, and is the basis on which the quality of social work practice can be
appraised, the audit concluded that the exercise of professional judgment should be central to
the supervision and audit processes (Auditor-General Report, 1992).

The ISU was renamed the Audit and Review Division in 1992, and the focus was
revised to review the use of professional judgment by social workers, acknowledging that the
success of professional social service delivery depends on the knowledge, skills, abilities and
attitudes of its social workers. Such an approach provides a much broader base to evaluate
case practice and application of policy, resulting in identification of systems issues rather than
emphasis on individual faults. It was believed that the new policy would:
... foster a climate of fairness and respect in which social workers could examine their case practice, learn from it, and improve their practice. Staff would be encouraged to be accountable for their practice as professional social workers, to be open to acknowledging mistakes in practice or professional judgment, and to continually strive for excellence (Rigaux, 1996, p. 9)

However, following the Gove inquiry recommendations (Gove, 1995), this broader view was abandoned by government and an explicit reversion to the pre-1992 ISU approach was implemented. In its most recent form, the Audit and Review Division once again emphasizes compliance with policy and procedures, and is responsible for internal monitoring and evaluating of social work practice. It is therefore the chief instrument by which the government ensures the accountability of child protection social workers.

The process is intended to provide an objective, impartial and independent review of specific cases of incidents involving families and children, and to assess and evaluate case management against existing legislation policies and standards, as well as in relation to the management of environment and workplace conditions (MCF Case Review Policy, Audit and Review Division, 1996). The procedures are clearly specified and conducted in a supposedly open and inclusive manner, in terms of both process and outcome.

The employee is able to have union representation and to review the report before it is submitted and have a final copy. The Director of the Audit and Review Division distributes the finalized report, containing recommendations to current perceived problems, to senior management, including to Regional Directors, Area Managers and the Director of Child Protection. It is these reviews which determine whether "non-compliance" with government policy has occurred, and provide a target for blame, leading to disciplinary or remedial action affecting individual social workers. There is virtually no recourse other than arbitration, if one
is a union member, to challenge the findings of a case review.

Ensuring professional accountability is thus left primarily to the employer (government), who is, by definition, often motivated by political and operational factors, which makes the outcome of reviews suspect in terms of impartiality and fairness for social workers. In addition, because risk assessment is central to decision-making in the field of child protection, the audit and case review processes necessarily focus on this aspect of the work and in so doing raise some serious concerns:

The constant demands for audit both gives expression to, and contributes to, the erosion of trust and the expertise and positive knowledge of human conduct on which it was based. As we have seen, such audits and inspections increasingly use notions of risk ... in order to judge the quality of the practices that are being investigated whether this be the individual case or more generally in the organizational processes of welfare agencies themselves. What is particularly worrying is that where concerns about danger, hazards and risks become all-pervasive they can assume a permanent institutional form .... It is as if once concerns about risk become all-pervasive the requirement to develop and follow organizational procedures becomes dominant and the room for professional manoeuvering and creativity is severely limited .... (Parton, 1996, p.112-113).

d) Risk Assessment Model

As is evident from the discussion above, the assessment of risk, and assessment of the assessors is now an important factor in determining accountability. Assessing a child’s immediate safety and estimating the risk of any future harm to a child are two of the most important clinical judgments social workers make. The Risk Assessment Model was designed to help strengthen and support these clinical judgments, but not to replace them.

The Model identifies the nine major risk decisions that are made in child protection and provides guidelines and tools for helping to make those decisions (Risk Assessment Model
for Child Protection in B.C., 1997). It provides a framework for clinical judgment in the social worker’s assessment of the factors which are central to safe outcomes in child welfare and discriminates among prevailing factors in a particular case for the purpose of more accurate service planning (Sullivan, 1998). It remains the main tool for assessing risk of harm to children in B.C.

The Risk Assessment Tool (hereafter referred to as RAT), as intended, has effectively revolutionized the way child protection is carried out in B.C., although, as the research in this study indicates, workers feel they do not have adequate time to complete these detailed assessments according to the specified time frame. Those in authority continue to uphold the belief that the RAT is a primary and indispensable component of a child protection assessment, as a comment, in reference to the RAT, by the Children’s Commissioner indicates:

“The accurate and timely assessment of risk is the beginning of a plan to eliminate serious harm to a child caused by abuse and neglect. Although it is too early to draw a conclusion, problems associated with a failure to report and then investigate a child’s risk are decreasing or absent — We are hopeful that public awareness, risk assessment and more timely interventions are assisting children before crisis and tragedy occurs (Children’s Commission - Annual Report, 1996/97).

However, others caution that over-reliance on an RAT can lull workers into a false sense of security because of the danger of assuming that the RAT generalizations can automatically apply to specific cases and are reliably predictive in every case (Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993). It is not difficult to see how critical thinking may become constrained, and professional discretion eroded, under the impact of mechanically imposed procedure. A further discussion of how the factor of risk has become an ingredient in the social construction of blame follows in Part 2.3 below.
e) Recruitment

In spite of agreeing with the recommendation in the Gove Report that all MCF social workers should have a BSW degree, management determined that it was not feasible to meet hiring needs if a BSW was a requirement, and in 1998 expanded that criterion, with BCGEU agreement, in order to draw recruits from other disciplines, including Child and Youth Care, Counselling Psychology, and Educational Psychology.

As noted above, MCF acquired 225 new child protection workers with BSW degrees in 1998, following a massive hiring of approximately 600 in 1996. An MCF policy analyst, who wishes to remain anonymous, disclosed that the Workload Study referred to in Chapter I, determined that in actual fact, not 225, but between 1000 - 2000 child protection workers were actually found to be required to meet the real need. However, funding was refused and statistics were subsequently manipulated to reflect a need for the much lower number (personal communication - April 1999). The workload issue, in effect, has barely been addressed.

2.3 Literature Review: The Systematic Construction of Blame

1. A recent historical perspective - the role of the public inquiry

The phenomenon of public blaming has appeared in Canada in a number of provinces, notably Ontario, Alberta and B.C., as evidenced by reports in the media. This research will focus on the issue as it has appeared in B.C.

As noted in the introduction, the phenomenon of blame first appeared following Matthew Vaudreuil’s death in 1993. In examining the reaction of the B.C. government to the Gove recommendations, it becomes apparent that there appears to have been no effective
challenge to the taken-for granted assumptions about social worker culpability. Although Joyce Rigaux, the Superintendent of Family & Child Services at the time of the Gove Inquiry, attempted to redirect responsibility from the case social workers to the underlying structural problems in the government (Brook, The second victim, November 1998), she was severely criticized by Judge Gove in his report (Gove, 1996) and was eventually fired by the Minister of Social Services. (Ms. Rigaux subsequently challenged the government for firing her, and Judge Thomas Gove for his criticism of her, both through lengthy court battles - and won).

The government then proceeded to target the Vaudreuil social workers for Matthew's death, removing some from their jobs, sending others for retraining and relocating others to non-protection jobs. The workers were not invited to participate in the interpretation of the gathered information, nor were they asked for recommendations concerning their experience (Griffiths, 1998). This pattern of blaming child protection workers for child deaths on their caseloads has been repeated on a number of occasions since that time, and it will be revealed in the findings of this paper that, for a number of social workers, the expectation of blame has become an unpleasant but understood part of government social work culture.

Nor is the experience of blame and public inquiries unique to Canada. For example, the phenomenon of blaming social workers for child deaths has been well documented in Britain, where social workers, since the mid-eighties, have experienced treatment similar to those in B.C. A number of studies found that inquiry panels, like the Gove Inquiry, were set up primarily to dissipate social anxiety about child deaths and, as a consequence, have reflected the compulsion in society to attribute blame, as a way of disposing of that anxiety (Cooper, Hetherington, Baistow, Pitts & Spriggs, 1995; Dingwall, 1995; Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993).
Hallett (1989), points out that the construction of child abuse as a social problem by the neo-conservative paradigm embraced by bureaucratic organizations, has not been addressed, or even recognized by these inquiries, nor is the issue of inadequate resources emphasized as playing a critical role in the ineffectiveness of the child protection system. Furthermore, one analysis of the relationship between child protection, authority and risk in Britain observed:

The legal or juridical discourse is the lens through which social work is judged and found wanting. Social work in form and effect is stripped from its day-to-day context and ambiguity for the purposes of judging its efficiency in certain cases which have been seen to go dreadfully wrong (Parton, 1991, p. 76).

One study in particular reviewed 35 fatal child abuse inquiry reports which had occurred between 1973 and 1992, summarizing all major inquiries into child deaths during that time period. The deaths were viewed in their social context using a systems analysis. A common feature of the findings of the respective inquiries had been that communication among social service agencies was to blame, and the targeted individuals were the social workers and their supervisors. Although the importance of professional accountability was acknowledged, the most outstanding recommendation of this particular study was to urge inquiry panels to progress beyond apportioning blame, and seek to address the wider systems problems (Reder, Duncan & Gray, 1993).

The above analysis of the role of public inquiries is instructive when reviewing the results of the 1994 Gove Inquiry in B.C. In making a final submission to the Inquiry, the lawyer representing the government and its staff explained what she hoped to accomplish (Morley, Proceedings of the Gove Inquiry, 1994, p. SUB-70-71):

• to persuade the Commission to correct the erroneous impression conveyed in the media
that Matthew, the child whose death was under review, had suffered a lifetime of physical abuse, while social workers negligently took no action, ignoring a multitude of reports from the community of the physical abuse.

- to persuade the Commission that the child's story presented itself to the Ministry as a marginal chronic neglect case, and if it was to be useful as a case study for child protection in B.C., it must be recognized primarily as such.

- To focus the Commission on the assessment of risk and exercise of judgment aspect of the child protection social workers' task of protection children

- to highlight briefly in conclusion the broader societal context of Matthew's case.

The lawyer's final comments ended in the following plea:

The thrust of this submission is that the full truth includes the context in which decisions were made and actions taken by the Ministry in relation to Matthew.

It will not help Matthew if we indulge in the natural human instinct of looking for someone to blame when something goes so dreadfully wrong. Neither self-blame nor finger-pointing will bring Matthew back to life, nor will it lead to the kind of constructive analysis needed to reduce the risks of future tragedies like Matthew's. Let us keep the focus on what will constructively bring about change. We owe it to Matthew (Morley, 1994, p. SUB-196).

The conclusions of the Commission, as noted in the introduction, did not agree with the government's position and, following the pattern of previous inquiries in other jurisdictions, placed blame on the individuals who had case management responsibilities during the child's life, and, as noted above, on the Superintendent of Family & Child Services. One result was the lengthy list of recommendations which were accepted by the government and were to become the basis of the new measures designed to closely prescribe and monitor the actions of child protection workers in B.C.
2. The function of risk in constructing blame

Inquiries, such as that led by Justice Gove, highlight by their very nature omissions, errors of judgment, and the shortcomings of systems and individuals. Macdonald (1990) takes issue with those who assume that the responsibility for bad outcomes in social work is appropriately laid at the feet of individual workers, arguing that a morality of social work must recognize the social and organizational context in which it occurs. On the other hand, structural analyses of the problem often focus on the issue of risk, taking the position that risk has become a way of thinking, rather than a quantifiable entity, and examine how this element came to play such a key role in the contemporary blaming system (Parton, 1996; Rose, 1996; Douglas, 1993).

One writer describes how certain governments in recent years have sought to control the conduct of others through specific knowledge, which is able to lend expertise to a given situation (Rose, 1996). At the same time as government becomes dependent on individuals exercising such expertise, such as the child protection worker, responsibilities are placed upon those experts to collaborate with other professionals in a diversity of practices and apparatuses for the administration of risk in the community. Although Rose’s analysis is made in the context of psychiatry and mental illness, a clear analogy can be drawn to the field of child welfare, by replacing mental health jargon with that of child protection:

.... They [the professional experts] are caught up within a culture of blame, in which almost any unfortunate event becomes a ‘tragedy’ which could have been avoided and for which some authority is to be held culpable. This places new political expectations upon the professionals of [child protection]. It also places new responsibilities upon those who are actual or potential subjects of [child protection investigations] and creates new divisions between good and bad [clients] ... in terms of a calculus of risk. (Rose, 1996).
If risk has indeed become a way of thinking, then it is important to understand how the system has restructured practice to accommodate this fact. Risk is not a new concept and it has long been used as one of several factors in assessing a family for both negative and positive qualities. As risk has become more central to politics and public policy, it has become associated, not with notions of neutral probability, but with negative outcomes, including such concepts as hazard, danger, exposure or harm.

Parton observes that risk assessment suggests precision and quantification, but by its nature it is imperfect, because it is based on causal interpretations, which always remain more or less tentative and uncertain. They can be changed, magnified or minimized within the knowledge of them and to that extent they are particularly open to social definition and social construction. Thus, the RAT becomes a credible way of calculating in a superficially scientific way, a prediction of abuse (Parton, 1996).

Mary Douglas argues that the big difference is not in the predictive uses of risk but in its potential for use in court, as a way of identifying individuals who can be held accountable. Its forensic uses are particularly important in the development of different types of blaming systems and “the one we are in now is almost ready to treat every death as chargeable to someone’s account, every accident caused by someone’s criminal negligence, every sickness a threatened prosecution”, (Douglas, 1993, as cited in Parton, 1996).

This pattern has appeared in British Columbia, where the Ministry for Children & Families adopted its own form of risk assessment, following the “New York Model”, because it best met the selection criteria of being well-researched, credible, valid, and field-usable, (Risk Assessment Model for Child Protection in B.C., 1996). The purpose and objectives are:
..... to promote a structured, thorough and objective assessment of the risk of future harm to a child, then to reduce the likelihood of that harm occurring. By providing a sound framework for decision making, a risk assessment model can improve and support but not replace clinical judgment (Risk Assessment Model, 1996, p.10).

It was intended that the assessment would be a guide and not intended to replace critical judgment. Designed to be incorporated into practice over a period of time, with careful training of and testing out by social workers in its use, it was hastily introduced in 1996 and became the main focus of child protection casework. However, the risk assessment tool took on yet another function, when, as child protection became the main and emphatic function of family service delivery, it became the rationale for providing services to clients, becoming the only justification for accessing the shrinking number of available programs and services:

... the risk assessment model is reduced from its potential as a framework for careful decisions and service planning to an objectified calculation of combinative risk factors. Calculation replaces relationship as the medium through which uncertainty is addressed (Sullivan, 1998a).

The inevitable partner of risk is the government audit, which uses the concept of risk, and the prevailing risk assessment tool, to monitor and judge the quality of social work practice. The constant demands for audit give expression to the erosion of trust, once accorded to social workers both by their clients and the authorities which employ and legitimate them, and the expertise and positive knowledge of human conduct on which it was based, (Parton, ed. 1996). Referred to as “death squads” by one participant in this study, it is the contention of this paper that the use of audits in this manner to verify social worker competence has contributed to the construction of blame. The findings of this research will reveal that it is
through this process that a climate of mistrust and fear has developed and is stifling the professional creativity which is so essential to morale and job satisfaction.

3. Understanding the experience of oppression

This thesis asserts that child protection social workers have reached a state of oppression that should no longer be ignored. The oppression arises in part from the construction of child abuse as a supposedly measurable and preventable phenomenon. It also arises from the association of social workers with the oppressed clientele whom it serves.

A number of feminist writers using the structural social work approaches have made significant contributions to the understanding of the role of women in the welfare system as parents and caregivers, describing the role of the social workers as being inextricably linked with them. Using a constructionist approach, Gelles (1975), applies labeling theory, illustrating that child abuse has been seen as a social deviance, but is actually a product of social labeling. He argues that causes of abuse are products of social definitions, applied by gatekeepers charged with identifying children injured by their caregivers.

It is a well-established belief among socialist feminists that child welfare is a gender issue of inherent attitudes and practices within the system and in part perpetrated by the social workers themselves, which devalue the care of children as women’s work and devalue the work that women do in general, including the separation of women’s work into the private sphere of the family where it is further buried (Baines, Evans & Neysmith, Eds, 1998; Swift, 1991). When management assumes that caring work is an unspoken and, at times, an unnecessary part of child protection work, it is reflecting back the disrespect and contempt that
has always been implicit in the treatment of disempowered women, and the disregard for the economic disadvantage and violent situations with which they must cope.

Swift (1995) articulates the concept that if one accepts that the process of structuring bad mothers is similar to the structuring of bad social workers, it is then possible to understand the common ways in which both groups become vulnerable. For example, there is the underlying devaluation of women, and of professions that are primarily composed of women, or embrace women-focused activities and positive values about caring. There is also the perceived vulnerability of children and the construction of child abuse which quantifies risk and builds in blame and punishment as an efficient way to solve the problem. Swift challenges the accepted view of child neglect and the official response to it. From a critical theoretical perspective, an argument is made that usual perceptions of neglect hide and distort important social realities, such as poverty, marginalization and violence (Swift, 1995).

With reference to audits once again, individuals conducting that process interpret and judge or “mediate” the social worker’s reality. Whether it is for a child abuse investigation or for an audit, facts have been collected, that have been selected according to criteria that have been previously determined and are intended to produce objective, irrefutable results. What is read is interpreted according to a particular context and from a particular ideological framework, often much different from that of the individual who is under scrutiny. As Dorothy Smith notes:

Our knowledge is ideological in the sense that the social organization governing reading and writing practices presumes conceptions and means of description which represent the world as it is for those who rule it, rather than as it is for those who are ruled (Smith, 1973, p.267, as cited in Swift, 1995).
Feminists assert that the structuring of reporting constructs the mother as responsible for the protection of her children, regardless of the circumstances, just as social workers are constructed as being responsible for children dying on their caseloads. The fault is constructed intertextually, that is, in connection with other documents made by other people, whose use of such documents coordinates the course of organizational action (Campbell, 1992).

In the formulation and power of documents it is possible to explain the text-based production of conceptual uniformity about the work, providing the means, not only for its orderly management, but for a ruling perspective to be embedded in it (Campbell, 1992). Clients and workers alike are helpless when systems are developed through which management can more and more directly influence decisions in which they have no input. Social workers are becoming increasingly impotent to help themselves or their clients, as tightly controlled documentary practices become the sole mediators of reality.

Workload too becomes a factor contributing to the construction of blame. One detailed case-weighting study in Ontario determined that management has a very different view from social workers as to what is meant by excessive workload and the stress it may cause. In the process, management misses the workers’ experience completely and reorders it in ideological ways which have consequences for the workers and the work itself (Campbell, 1992).

In order to understand the nature of oppression as experienced by clients and social workers, it is critical to bring people together to share the emotional and conceptual plausibility necessary to change, and focus on the structural analysis of oppressive situations (Rose, 1990). It is also important to explore the construction of the myth about workers’
fundamental inadequacy, which is reinforced in multiple, daily ways, and of how essential it is
that oppression be named (Davis, 1994). This too is a goal of this research.

2.4 Research Related to Social Worker Experience in B.C.

Although there are not many studies focused on isolating the experiences of the child
protection worker in B.C., a number have appeared in the past ten years which are relevant to
this research.

One quantitative study was conducted with regard to workload issues with the purpose
of defining job satisfaction (Gorrie, 1990). Information was obtained primarily through the use
of questionnaires. It was determined at the time that the most significant issues for social
workers were workload, promotional opportunities and professional development. Individual
professional recognition was rated one of the lowest variables, although workers rated the
importance of recognition of the profession in general somewhat higher. It should be noted
that at the time the study was conducted, there was a period of relative employee stability and
satisfaction. The fact that only 55% of social workers had a BSW or MSW may also have been
a factor in the low emphasis on professional recognition (Gorrie, 1990).

At approximately the same time, a qualitative project conducted a research workshop
for child welfare workers, examining critical issues pertaining to difficulties in child welfare
practice and proposed solutions to address concerns from the workers’ point of view. Feelings
of power and powerlessness were explored, as were factors impacting negatively on
relationships with clients and power structures in bureaucracy. The authors noted that a
substantial portion of the literature which they researched dealt with worker burnout and
exhaustion as a feature of the workplace, with suggestions about how workers could better take care of themselves, but generally these studies did not explore in depth the experience of the workers with the workers themselves (Callahan & Attridge, 1990).

More recently, in response to the realization that higher workloads have created a problem of social worker recruitment and retention, a qualitative study was completed by a private consultant for MCF in 1996. The stated purpose of this study was to document what a number of Ministry staff and individuals outside the Ministry had to say about the skills and knowledge required to carry out child protection functions, and what it would take to both recruit and retain individuals with these skills and knowledge. Data collection included individual interviews and a series of focus groups. It did not deal explicitly with worker dissatisfaction, nor did it address how social workers feel about their treatment by management in terms of the new levels of accountability, emphasizing instead the implications of creating higher pay levels and job classifications (Recruitment and Retention of Skilled Workers, 1996).

Of the three studies referred to above, the Callahan/Attridge research has some important similarities with this study. While focusing exclusively on women, it provided important information concerning how female workers experience, power and powerlessness and its impact on them and on their own feelings about the world. The issue of blame for child deaths was not addressed, perhaps because at the time it had not yet become a perceived issue.

Another more recent study featured a two-year research project in a government child welfare agency in B.C., involving child welfare workers and women who are single parents.
(Callahan & Lumb, 1997). The emphasis here was on female clients and front line workers having the power to shape practice according to their joint plans. The underlying concept was the exploration of the collective empowerment of client and workers with the purpose of revealing means of achieving best practice.

This same study noted that although workers and clients may both feel disempowered, their situations are by no means the same, due to the favorable positioning of the social worker as a paid professional who can move to another job if the pace becomes too punishing. Yet it also acknowledged a common burden where social workers, who are often women, accept the responsibility for carrying out the difficult work of child protection. The study does support the view that workers and clients must resist the analysis that they are somehow to blame when they are not able to always successfully protect children (Callahan & Lumb, 1997).

Another project examined what constitutes best practice in child welfare according to clients, social workers, supervisors and staff of community agencies, identifying outcomes of best practice, barriers and supports to it and compared the findings of this study with others in best practice. This study recognized that although the policy and legislative innovations applied since the death of Matthew Vaudreuil were intended to address flaws in the child welfare system, the result has been, in fact, the deployment of many resources to monitor the behavior of clients and workers and, indeed, to track what happens in the system itself. Attention to the actual work of child welfare, that is, what transpires between worker and clients, has been absent in these reforms (Callahan et al, eds. 1998).

In describing the outcomes of the study, the authors observed that the relationship between best practice and positive outcomes for children, parents and workers was clearly
demonstrated, and in so doing, provides some valuable recommendations to effect best practice in the child welfare system. One recommendation actually recognizes and addresses the presence of fear within MCF, identifying the folly of designing a system as if all situations could escalate into violence and potentially death. However, the intent and effect of this study is to underline the importance and methods of strengthening relationships between the workers and the clients, rather than addressing directly or in depth the impact of the current treatment of social workers by management, as experienced by the social workers.

CHAPTER III: PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

3.1 Assumptions Underlying this Study

In the context of understanding the appearance of blame as a socially constructed phenomenon, the following assumptions were formulated, and were imbedded in the study, guiding the planning and research approaches:

- Child protection workers are now aware that there are potentially severe consequences for having a child die on their caseloads, such as intense scrutiny of case practice, relocation to non-protection duties and disciplinary action.

- Expectations for carrying out new time-consuming policies and procedures designed to address perceived public concern about child deaths, have been imposed on child protection social workers, without consultation or consideration for the significantly expanded workload.

- The inability to perform these new duties within the time frames provided has meant that social workers are unable to adequately meet the needs of clients. This has negatively impacted on the public perception of child protection workers and, because of the tendency of the public to see child protection workers as representative of all social workers, undermines the image of the profession of social work in general.
As a relatively large sub-group of social workers in British Columbia, child protection workers have not found a coherent collective voice to articulate their specific case practice issues and the ethical conflicts contained therein, nor to counteract the disrespect of their professional values and prerogatives.

There seems to be no effective forum or means to protect themselves against this unprecedented imposition of an unreasonable responsibility that no other profession bears collectively in this society. They have, in effect, become victims at the mercy of a bureaucratic and political hierarchy, whose intent is to divert an uncomfortable public spotlight away from itself to what is apparently a helpless group of individuals unable to challenge an unacceptable fait accompli.

3.2 The Main Research Question

Although a number of studies have been conducted concerning social worker perceptions of meaning and experience, none, to my knowledge, has been done to date in B.C. with regard to the emphasis on blame, in combination with the rapid introduction of a number of new policies and procedures. My goal in conducting this study is to explore these issues in order to contribute to a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of social worker dissatisfaction and frustration as reflected in unprecedented sick leaves, resignations and recruitment problems, and how this may impact the delivery of child welfare services in B.C.

The main question governing the research thus becomes:

What is the meaning that social workers, who perform child protection duties in B.C., give to their own experiences, both in terms of practice issues and professional identity?
CHAPTER IV: METHODOLOGY

4.1 Conceptual framework: goals of this research

A qualitative study is consistent with the main purpose of this research, in that it is exploratory and descriptive and is intended to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' lived experiences (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). It is also useful for hearing data and understanding meaning in context, while emphasizing the relativism of the culture, the active participation of the interviewer and the importance of giving the interviewee a voice (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Secondly, there is an essential goal of critical social research which also needs to be served here, where the purpose is to discover flaws and faults in society and in so doing promote actions that eliminate problems (Thomas, 1995, as cited in Rubin & Rubin, 1995). In order to test the assumption that a culture of fear of blame is a reality in the B.C. child protection system, it is important to establish what social workers experience directly, thus benefitting from their informed observations when searching for constructive solutions.

Thirdly, the research in this paper is, in a sense, an ethnography of the profession of child protection social work in B.C., and as such, its goal is to provide a description and an interpretation of this particular social group, where the group's observable and learned patterns of behavior, customs, and way of life are examined, involving participant observation (Cresswell, 1997), which in this study has involved two different kinds of in-depth interview processes.

Both interpretive and critical functions flow out of the feminist perspective (see
Chapter I, p. 4), which informs this research, and has thus been a fundamental determinant, not only of the question for study, but of the research design and the data analysis process. This perspective is also consistent with the examination of context and setting of practice, where social context is defined as a critical determinant of behaviour (Riger, 1992).

4.2 Self-Disclosure

1. Conceptual framework for self-disclosure

It was my experience as a child protection social worker that initially led to the development of a number of theoretical assumptions concerning government attitude and policies. To develop a credible explanation of what I perceived as a widespread phenomenon of social worker dissatisfaction in MCF, I realized it would be valuable to explore and describe experiences of other social workers, from their own perspectives, following an approved research methodology. In researching this subject, I acknowledge that my own experience lends an inevitable bias to the process, and by adopting a feminist viewpoint, I choose to emphasize the importance of explicitly defining the values, beliefs and perspectives that guide my work.

With the above conceptual framework in mind, my goal in providing the following personal narrative is an aspect of the ethnographical approach, and my contribution is therefore autoethnographical in nature, which is described as:

... an autobiographical genre of writing research that displays multiple levels of consciousness connecting the personal to the cultural. Back and forth the autoethnographer gazes, first through an ethnographical wide angle lens, focusing on outward cultural and social aspects of their personal experience. Then, they look inward exposing a vulnerable self, that is moved by and may move through, refract and
resist cultural interpretations ... (Ellis, 1999).

It is meant to be integrated with the remaining stories and experiences that will be presented by the ten participants in this project, further on in the analysis portion of this research.

Reinharz regards self-disclosure as an indispensable aspect of feminist methodology and context, commenting that it is a way of "reformulating the researcher's role in a way that maximizes engagement of the self, but also increases the researcher's vulnerability to criticism, both for what is revealed and for the very act of self-disclosure" (Reinharz, 1992, p.34). In spite of such vulnerability, Reinharz points out that there is an enhanced ability to receive feedback from the participants, enabling the self-disclosing researcher to continuously correct the interview procedure. There is also the benefit of being provided "with an alternative case that prevents (italics are Reinharz's) her from generalizing exclusively from her own experience" (Reinharz, 1992, p.34).

In this spirit, the following is a clarification of how my own experience of the phenomenon of blame, which I encountered as a child protection worker, has contributed to the formulation of this research. This information was provided to each participant prior to their interviews so that they would understand how my experience had shaped the project. It was also my intent to emphasize the similarity between myself and the participants, and thereby gain their trust as one who has familiarity and empathy with their own work experience. I anticipated that the honesty and vulnerability of self-disclosure would help to turn the interviews into meaningful conversations (Arendell, 1992, as cited in Reinharz, 1992), resulting in more relaxed, open revelations of experiences and feelings.
2. My experience as a child protection social worker

I acquired my BSW degree in 1976 and was drawn to child protection early in my career, where I maintained an enduring enthusiasm and pleasure in the work. I have been employed continuously by the Ministry for Children & Families in its various incarnations since 1982, and became a member of a child protection team in a rural community in 1986, remaining in that position for 10 years. I was granted the designation of senior practitioner in 1988. My work experience during that time included front line protection investigations, extensive experience in court work, familiarity with resource and adoption functions, training of new Ministry workers, supervision of BSW practicum students and occasionally assuming the role of acting supervisor of my team. There was relatively low turnover among team members so that the team was strong in its practice and well-grounded in the community.

Following the public inquiry into the death of Matthew Vaudreuil, it became evident to me that the practice of the social workers who had worked on the Vaudreuil case had been targeted by the Gove Report as having contributed to Matthew’s death (Gove, 1995). At the same time, I noted an unexpected silence from upper management with regard to the absence of explanations for the changes which began to proliferate following the publishing of the Gove Report recommendations for changes to the child welfare system. Nor was there a request from management for feedback from social workers, which had become a hallmark of the Ministry’s bureaucratic process during and following the public forums which had preceded the formulation of the new Child, Family & Community Services Act.

Many social workers in our region began to express increased levels of anxiety in terms
of the predicted increase in workload. As a senior worker, confident in my practice and experience, I attempted to reassure my fellow workers by urging them to remember that our good practice would protect us from criticism. I also had always enjoyed a positive relationship with all levels of management and believed that, in spite of the negative publicity of the Vaudreuil case, Ministry workers continued to be valued and supported by senior management.

Nevertheless, in 1996, in the confusion created by the rapid implementation of many changes, my team experienced an unprecedented decline in morale resulting in a number of stress leaves and transfers. Staff replacements were slow in coming, and when they did arrive, required extensive training. The workload was on a steep rise and, as one of the few workers who had a letter of delegation and the ability to provide some training and clinical supervision to new staff, I experienced a profound challenge to my ability to comply with far too many expectations and responsibilities. It was in this context that a child died on my caseload.

For obvious ethical reasons I will not discuss the details of the case to which I refer and will note only that it was an unusually complex family with whom I had been working intensively for three years. This death received much publicity locally and eventually reached the attention of the politicians in Victoria. At no time did I blame myself or any other professional, nor did I blame the parent.

I understood that a child’s death required an internal audit review and I welcomed it as a way to identify the flaws in our system and to determine how everyone involved in the case might collectively have acted more effectively in this complex and tragic situation. Aspects of the audit process caused me concern, particularly where, in my opinion, contextual information
s vital to understanding the dynamics of the family and the services that had been delivered, was ignored or discounted. In addition to the audit review, a Comprehensive Risk Assessment was completed - the first ever in our area - by an individual from outside our community, who did not meet the parent or her children.

This was followed by three senior MCF staff, who were brought to our community and proceeded to do a thorough audit of the entire office, interviewing all staff members. These individuals examined many case files and were critical of practice, regardless of whether the information on the file was current or not. Not surprisingly, due to the state of demoralization and atrophy of staff, the office was uncharacteristically disorganized, resulting in many incomplete file recordings. My caseload in particular came under close scrutiny and, although I made myself available to provide information, no one ever spoke to me about my work.

Following these various reviews, four individuals, including myself, were suspended from our jobs for a number of weeks, which happened to coincide with the highly publicized inquest of the child’s death. During this suspension I was subjected to yet another internal review of my work. Following this last review, although I was ultimately reinstated, I was prohibited from doing child protection work.

Although our team had previously expressed concern about the increased workload and the inability to replace staff, our complaints had not met with an adequate response. Needless to say, following this series of reviews, combined with the unprecedented disciplinary measures against experienced social workers, our team was left exhausted and traumatized.

Of all these events, perhaps the most disappointing result for me personally was to be denied the opportunity to practice child protection, and to have no real recourse available to
reverse that decision, even through union arbitration. I can only say in retrospect that I found the investigative procedures which were followed to be destructive, undemocratic and ultimately wasteful of the skills and abilities of competent and committed social workers.

In the course of this publicized treatment of our office, the entire population of MCF social workers in the province was watching with great anxiety and outrage, as evidenced at the time by demonstrations in Victoria and Vancouver, and by the numerous social workers who contacted me during my suspension. I thus became aware of a belief among many social workers that my experience could easily happen to any one of them should a child die on any of their caseloads. This perception was reinforced by continued communication with social workers in many parts of the province over the next two years.

4.3 DATA COLLECTION

1. The Researcher as an Instrument of Data Collection

In moderating a focus group or conducting individual interviews, the researcher/moderator becomes part of the research instrument, as important as the interview guide and the participants themselves. In fact, in situations where the topic is sensitive, the moderator/researcher should ideally have a background that demonstrates a familiarity with the topic area and characteristics that are similar to those of the participants (Morgan, 1995). My own experience as a child protection worker is therefore consistent with the literature’s contention that the researcher should be well versed in the topic for discussion, as this familiarity permitted me to understand, probe for important details, and to perceive idiosyncratic meanings in participants’ contributions. (Carey, 1994).
2. Sampling Strategy

The group of individuals who participated in this research are, or have recently been, child protection social workers in the province of British Columbia. The study used purposeful sampling, whereby individuals are selected because they have direct and personal knowledge of the research issue and can provide information unobtainable from other sources (Sandelowski, 1993). Purposeful sampling is valuable in a qualitative approach, because it provides a deep understanding which individual, information-rich cases allow. Furthermore, this type of criterion sampling is the most commonly used approach for a phenomenological study, where it is essential that all participants have experience of the phenomenon under study (Cresswell, 1997).

For the purposes of this study then, the beginning criteria for eligibility for social workers to participate were defined as:

1) Each participant had to have a minimum of a Bachelor of Social Work Degree from a recognized university. It has long been the practice of the B.C. government to hire individuals from a number of academic backgrounds to work in the field of child protection. However, for the purposes of this research, it was felt that the point of view provided by a professional social worker, who, by having absorbed and embraced those unique values and ethical standards that a university program instills, is best qualified to provide a valid social worker perception of the child protection experience.

2) Each had to have been recently or currently be employed by the Ministry for Children & Families and have been working in the field of child protection continuously for a
minimum of three years. This length of service was chosen to ensure that an individual has been employed in the field long enough to have become solid in their practice and familiar with the range of complexities of practice situations, as well as government policies and procedures, and would be more likely to have confidence about sharing opinions.

3. Ethical considerations involved in sampling

The sampling design was intended to keep ethical concerns to a minimum. Social workers are not as vulnerable a group when compared with the client populations with whom they work, and are unlikely to be intimidated by the interview process, or by me as the researcher. Individuals were considered to be competent to decide if their participation involved any risk to them personally and no one, to my knowledge, received pressure about whether or not to participate. Consent was informed according to the expectations of the University of British Columbia Ethics Review Committee (See Letter of Explanation, Appendix 3).

Contacts were made as privately and discreetly as possible, in order to maintain a maximum degree of confidentiality. Although I had spoken personally to a considerable number of social workers who had expressed opinions about this research subject, in order to minimize anyone feeling an obligation to participate out of friendship, I chose individuals with whom I was unfamiliar, with the exception of one individual, with whom I had no previous contact for over five years.
4) Recruitment - the snowball method

Individuals were recruited through snowball sampling, a method which identifies potential participants from people who know people who know what cases are information-rich (Cresswell, 1998). I arranged for acquaintances of mine to contact social workers who met the criteria, and to directly invite them to participate in this research project. Potential participants were contacted directly or by phone at home, or in an environment that was not work-related, in order to emphasize that this was a personal and private decision on the participant’s part and not connected to expectations of the job of child protection. This approach gave the participants a choice about whether they wished to inform others about their decision to participate, thus ensuring a measure of confidentiality.

Once social workers expressed an interest in participating in the study, they were asked for their address and a Letter of Initial Contact (See Appendix 2) was mailed to them. The intended size of the focus group was from four to six individuals, as this number is easier to recruit and accommodate and is more comfortable for participants. Limiting the size to a maximum of six has been described as more effective for discussions that involve sensitive topics, and for establishing group cohesion (Morgan, 1995, Carey, 1994, Krueger, 1994). The smaller group size also ensures that each member will have a more adequate opportunity to talk and share unique experiences and perspectives. (Carey, 1994).

Ten prospective participants replied in total. Six were willing to become part of a focus group. The remaining four preferred to participate in individual interviews for this research.
5) Advantages of the snowball method

Snowball sampling was my preferred strategy for a number of reasons. Having been employed with MCF for over 16 years, I knew a number of people, in and out of government, who were willing and able to assist me in contacting possible participants. This strategy provided a more human contact and did not rely on the distancing and time-consuming approach of advertising in professional newspapers or journals.

In choosing experienced social workers, I was relating to my peers, and I believe that my own experience of child protection, plus my personal experience of the “blame” phenomenon created a sense of empathy that few interviewers can easily command at the beginning of a study. In addition, by ensuring that all participants had been grounded in their practice by virtue of having worked in the field for at least three years, I anticipated that the participants would be more comfortable expressing their views. It had already been my experience that many social workers who met the above criteria did hold definite opinions and feelings about the research topic and welcomed a chance to air their thoughts in a safe forum.

6. Rationale for use of a focus group

a) Theoretical justification

In accordance with the conceptual framework of the study, structural social work theory and feminist theory have been used to offer an explanation of the power imbalance between social workers and government. A connection is also drawn between the injustices experienced by the clients (as documented in the literature) and by the social workers who deliver services to them.
Although social workers may experience oppression in an individual way, they also experience themselves collectively and formally as a professional group. It thus made sense to interview participants in a group setting and a focus group was therefore selected as one important method of data collection. In this situation, the focus group experience allowed these participants to articulate how they perceive themselves in relation to the hierarchical structure within which they work, and to identify common themes, recognizing there is a special power in collective sharing of experience. (Wieck, 1994). The participants thus benefit from a potentially empowering experience so that “... research, practice, and socialization are one unified effort” (Swigonski, 1993). As an additional benefit, focus groups often clarify themes which can then be pursued in greater depth through individual interviews.

b) Advantages of using a focus group

- Focus groups are sometimes preferable to individual interviews in that they enable the researcher to capture the dynamic nature of group interactions which can increase the participants’ candor and spontaneity and enhance the quality of the data elicited (Krueger, 1994; Carey & Smith, 1994; Carey, 1994).

- A focus group is considered to be a superior way of providing insight into a range of complex issues presented by a small group of individuals who share a common experience (Carey, 1993).

- Through the interaction and mutual support provided by group process and the skillful facilitation provided by a group leader, rich details of complex experiences and the reasoning behind actions, beliefs, perceptions and attitudes can be revealed (Carey,
• The common experience of child protection social workers provides a high degree of homogeneity, which usually means that participants will be more comfortable sharing information with each other (Krueger, 1994, Carey, 1993).

c) Challenges presented by a focus group

Although the benefits of a focus group are evident, as indicated in the preceding discussion, there were a number of factors to consider when working with this particular group of professionals:

• Confidentiality is always a concern when a number of people are involved in discussing personal thoughts and feelings. Fortunately, respect for confidentiality is intrinsic to social work practice (CASW Code of Ethics, Part 5), and is therefore less likely to be violated by this particular group.

• One of the acknowledged pitfalls of the focus group is the impact of censoring, that is, when a person withholds potential contributions, often due to a lack of trust of the leader by the other members (Carey, 1994). It was my expectation that my similar background indicated a pre-existing empathy with the participants and was likely to increase the trust level. As facilitator I acknowledged my bias, but urged participants to express opposing or contradictory views if that was the truth for them.

• Censoring may also occur if there is a distinct difference in views between participants which may create conflict. As the facilitator I was prepared to be responsible for making the group a safe place for everyone by acknowledging differences which
emerge, while helping participants to express themselves by reframing in ways that others can hear them (Steinberg, 1997).

- Sometimes members of a focus group will conform to the group norm, tailoring their contributions to be in line with perceptions of other group members and/or the leader (Carey, 1993). Follow-up thus became an important part of the focus group process, whereby each person was contacted by phone by the researcher after the discussion, to seek out reactions to the experience and make sure that all participants felt they had a fair chance to express opposing views.

- Data can be more difficult to analyze in a focus group because the group interaction provides a social environment, and comments must be interpreted within that context. Care is needed to avoid lifting comments out of context and out of sequence (Krueger, 1994). This concern is dealt with under data analysis.

7. The focus group interview style and format

To proceed in the spirit of qualitative research I used a semi-structured interview style which allowed participants the freedom to express themselves on their own terms and at their own pace, but provided me with a measure of control and structure, if needed. The interview followed an interview guide, containing a written list of five questions, which were designed to elicit information about the impact of changes since the implementation of the Gove Report and descriptions of personal experience in terms of practice, supervision and monitoring procedures. As a manifestation of the commitment to the qualitative process, which involves participants in the process, as well as the content of the study, the group members were
encouraged to use the questions as a very general guide and were given permission to introduce any issues that had personal meaning and relevance for them. Nevertheless, the appropriateness and effectiveness of the interview guide is a key factor in the success of a focus group (Morgan, 1995). This particular interview guide was intended to help social workers reflect on the impact of their experiences of working in MCF since the implementation of recommendations of the Gove Report.

The questions were structured in an open-ended format as much as possible to avoid yes-no answers and to stimulate the widest possible response. Use of time is more efficient when the interviewer follows an interview guide and decides when and how to focus the discussion and keep group members on topic. This is especially true when a project such as this has specific ideas and issues to explore. There is a danger of being too focused and thereby missing some of the rich detail that freeflowing discussion provides, but an interviewer has the flexibility in a semi-structured interview to pull away structure when the situation warrants (Bernard, 1994).

As facilitator of the group, as noted under Self-Disclosure, I identified my own bias, but urged the participants to use the questions provided as a general guide only, focusing on issues of particular importance to them. The direction of the discussion was accordingly left in the hands of the focus group members, with minimal input from me as facilitator, to permit participants to identify specific topics or themes from their own unique experiences.

8. Rationale for inclusion of individual interviews

In eliciting the meaning of the child protection experience of the focus group
participants and the four individuals, the interviews were expected to take on an evaluative style, in that they involved an attempt to learn whether new programs, projects, or other types of intentional changes within the field of post-Gove child protection were living up to expectations (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). It was anticipated that in benefitting from the initial information provided by the focus group discussion, that the individual interviews would be able to pinpoint more precisely and in greater depth, the issues which had already been revealed. Alternatively, if censoring and conformity were factors in the focus group, the individual participants, who would not be influenced by other speakers, other than the interviewer, might provide a valuable and perhaps even contradictory contrast to the focus group results.

9) Data Management

a) Recording and Storage of Data

- The focus group discussion was recorded on video and audio cassette tapes. Handwritten notes were taken by the facilitator’s assistant and the facilitator. Video and audio cassette tapes provided a complete record of conversations so that all details were captured, while notes helped to accentuate focus points and themes, and were able to fill in unclear places on the tapes.
- Standard procedures were followed for storing data in a safe, locked place and computer files were password protected.
- Actual names of participants were stored separately from the raw data in a secure location.
Paper and computer files were organized for storing the data, derived from the transcribed interviews, once it was separated into component parts. As the researcher, I did the transcribing in order to have the fullest possible appreciation for group process. Nuances of speech were captured as much as possible by careful attention to punctuation, verbal emphasis and non-verbal communication, for example, laughter, smiles and tears (Sandelowski, 1994).

b) Issues of Confidentiality

- Raw data was incorporated into the paper and will not be used again. Data will be destroyed following acceptance of the final written document.
- Video and audio cassette tapes will be destroyed following completion of the project.
- Only the principal investigator, the co-investigator, thesis advisor and participants have access to the raw data.
- No identifying names were used.
- No data which identifies individuals was available to persons or agencies outside the University, with the exception of the participants, who individually have access to their own data.
- Material derived from the research may be submitted to academic or professional papers. No identifying names or descriptions will be used.
10) Preparation of participants

- A Letter of Initial Contact was provided to each prospective participant by his/her recruiter. (See Appendix 2)
- A brief phone call was made by the researcher to confirm participation and to answer any questions about the process.
- A letter was sent expanding on the initial description of the purpose of the research project, including details of procedures to ensure confidentiality and a place to provide written consent to participate. (See Appendix 3)
- A final letter was sent providing details of the focus group or interview, including date, place and time and a detailed map to the interview site, with respect to the focus group. (See Appendix 4)

4.4 DATA ANALYSIS

1. Overview of the analytical approach

Qualitative analysis has been described as an inductive and emergent process involving concrete, routine activities, yet demanding an open-ended approach, resulting in an essentially creative act (Lofland, 1984). However, purely inductive reasoning, which relies on closely inspecting increasing amounts of data to reveal regularities, can be limiting in that straightforward descriptions of social events do not necessarily lead to innovative thinking (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

The analysis in this research has therefore also included what Coffey & Atkinson, (1996) describe as abductive reasoning, where a particular phenomenon is identified and then
is accounted for by relating it to broader concepts through inspecting our own experience and
our stock of knowledge of similar and comparable phenomena: "In other words, abductive
inferences seek to go beyond the data themselves, to locate them in explanatory or interpretive
frameworks" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.156). A certain flexibility is thereby generated
which encourages an open-ended approach where the researcher can move conceptually from a
specific case to a more generic level of analysis.

Using such reasoning, an interpretive approach has been taken, which is interested in
understanding how individuals, such as this group of social workers, understand their world
and how they create and share meanings about their lives, which have been socially
constructed (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). As an interpretive researcher, I am able to take these
meanings and accept that values and views may differ from office to office and worker to
worker. In other words, such an approach recognizes there is more than one reality to be
measured, including, but not exclusively, my own. Ideally, qualitative research should be
performed for the benefit of those being interviewed, to verify their perceptions of the meaning
of their experiences. As Silverman notes, it is important for the researcher to remember that:

Professionals respond to research which seeks to document the fine detail of their
practice, while acknowledging the structural constraints to which they must respond. Put in another way, this means that we should aim to identify the interactional skills of
the participants rather than their failings. Although the researcher cannot tell practitioners how they should behave, understanding the intended and unintended
consequences of actions can provide the basis for a fruitful dialogue (Silverman, 1993,
p. 194).

Some experienced researchers emphasize that, although in theory it is important to
distinguish between form and content, in practice it is worthwhile to consider both (Lieblich et
al, 1998). Rubin & Rubin state explicitly:
Synthesis between form analysis and content analysis can prove very fruitful. Form analysis requires the researcher to engage in definition of criteria, classifications and examinations of the deep structures of a text, while consideration of these categories in terms of content often highlight dimensions and distinctions that would not have arisen from purely structural analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 1995, p.163).

This study therefore integrates categorical-content and contextual analysis to access the broadest possible understanding of the meaning of the experiences of each participant.

a) Categorical-content analysis

The first and predominant method of analysis utilizes a categorical-content approach which is useful when a problem or a phenomenon is shared by a group of people. The original story of each participant is dissected and sections belonging to a defined category are collected and then contrasted and compared (Lieblich et al, 1998, Cresswell, 1997, Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Following a procedure described by Carey and Smith (1994), the data from the six focus group participants was analyzed first at an individual level, with responses and behaviours examined without regard for the group context. Once an initial analysis had been completed of the focus group, the four interviews were conducted and analyzed.

The core activity of the analysis was the coding process which is described as “the word (or short set of words), you apply to the item of data in answering a pre-determined set of questions” (Lofland, 1984, p.186). The goal of coding is to fracture data and rearrange it into categories that facilitate the comparison of data within and between these categories and that aid in the identification of broad themes and issues (Maxwell, 1996).
All significant statements were therefore listed out from the transcripts, with each statement considered to have equal worth. Individual words and statements were colour-coded, physically cut up and then grouped together. Because I felt it was important to maintain an open mind, particularly in the initial analytical process, I minimized my own assumptions as much as possible, so that coding chiefly proceeded from the data itself, where issues were emphasized by participants and/or reappeared frequently throughout the material.

Once the codes were clearly identified, the transcript was put aside and the codes were grouped according to similarities into categories. The interview guide then provided assistance in identifying patterns of issues in these broader categories. Special attention was paid to dramatic and anecdotal statements as possible indicators of themes, recognizing that in qualitative research, categories are usually created based on distinctions in the data where these are recognized or used by the participants themselves (Dey, 1993). Also contributing to the selection of the categories and themes was the consideration of the audience, in this case primarily child protection social workers and those persons involved directly or indirectly in the delivery of child protection services, in terms of what would be stimulating, amusing and challenging (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

The data were then re-examined in the context of the group, where the relationship of the individual to the group was considered. In order to prevent decontextualization of the data that occurs when it is transcripted and fragmented (Carey, 1995, Kreuger, 1994), the transcript was reviewed in conjunction with the videotape to include voice inflection, pauses in discussion, laughter, and audible and non-verbal indications of agreement (Bettcher, 1996).
This initial analysis of the focus group material resulted in the emergence of seventeen sub-themes, with five major themes eventually identified as most accurately representing the "big ideas" (Kreuger, 1994) generated by the discussion. The combined findings from this process verified a definite interest in the issues appearing in the interview guide. Additional important issues which appeared spontaneously during the focus group discussion, or which needed to be better distinguished from the others, led to the formulation of three additional questions in the interview guide, which was used during the individual interviews.

The coding and categorizing process for the focus group and the individual interviews was essentially similar. However, the focus group discussion, which preceded the individual interviews, was analyzed prior to and separately from the latter, with both sets of data eventually integrated together. Surprisingly, initial analysis indicated a similarity of responses and experiences between focus group and individual participants, in spite of the different interview formats. It was therefore possible to easily integrate the two types of interviews and undertake a renewed analysis of the combined data.

From this process, four main themes were refined out from the initial five. The resulting organization of four main themes and sixteen sub-themes is set out in Table 1. The wording of the major themes is derived directly from the statements of the social workers themselves. In cultural studies such as this one, it is important to clearly hear the voices of the participants, so generous use of quotes from the transcripts has accordingly been employed throughout the body of the analysis (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).
b) Holistic-content analysis

The second analytic approach used in this research is the exploration of the holistic content of each participant’s presentation. This is done from a phenomenological stand, that is, the reports of the speakers are taken at face value as a presentation of his/her experience, respecting the explicit narrative as is, yet the story is understood based on some theoretical assumptions and presented through that lens (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). The results of this analysis appear in the participant profiles below, and are intended to provide a broader context of each participant’s unique experience.

Due to space restrictions, the reader cannot benefit fully from the rich description the holistic analysis allowed, but hopefully, what has been provided will ultimately assist in a fuller understanding of the values and beliefs of the participants as they are reflected in the categorical analysis.

The form of analysis also allowed me, as researcher, to communicate my interpretation of each participant’s contribution back to them individually, for examination and comment. Because the holistic analysis inevitably impacted the categorical analysis, I found it extremely valuable to be able to confirm the accuracy of the analysis from the participants’ point of view, which thus contributed to a greater degree of validity to the overall research findings.

2. Confirmability of the data from the focus group

Because this was a one-time-only group of brief duration, I did not expect to have an intense, emotional discussion and was thus pleasantly surprised by the explicit expression of feelings connected with frustration, anger and resentment. Participants spoke in a calm
manner, but managed to express themselves in subtle but definite ways, such as the use of expletives, laughter, and creation of strong metaphorical images. I believe that the sympathy that social workers have for my personal experience also contributed to the willingness to share their own frustrations, and was in part responsible for the frank discussion that took place.

Although there is a danger of conformity in a group setting, I believe this factor was minimized, as evidenced by the frankness of the discussion and the variety of observations. Although there was no serious dissent on any issue, differences in viewpoint were apparent while the intensity of self-expression indicated a comfort with an open and honest sharing of feelings.

In reviewing the individual transcripts it was clear that each participant had a fair share of the allotted time, in spite of differing communication styles. Thus, some preferred to make lengthy comments on a particular subject, and in the process touched on a number of issues simultaneously. Others preferred to interact in a give-and-take discussion, tending to make short, to-the-point statements. There were numerous instances of shared laughter, murmured agreement and other non-verbal expressions of identification.

The videotape also revealed those silent but valuable indicators of shared feelings, such as head nodding and smiling. The group covered a broad array of issues and it is a credit to the cohesiveness created by their shared experience which allowed the conversation to flow as smoothly as it did, which substantiated the claim that familiarity with the topic of discussion is a good predictor of a positive group climate (Morgan, 1988).
3. Confirmability of the data from the individual interviews:

The process of analysis was similar to that of the focus group in most respects. Obviously the content was not impacted by the contributions of other participants and so each interview has its own kind of validity in that the material was spontaneous and inspired almost entirely by the experience of the respective individuals.

As noted above, it is of particular interest that the content of the contributions of the focus group participants and the individuals are remarkably similar. This seems to provide an indication that the data from the focus group has a stronger element of validity than if it had to stand on its own, because the possibility of group conformity becomes less of a factor in the light of consistency with the data provided by the individual interviews.

CHAPTER V: FINDINGS

5.1 The Focus Group Discussion

1. Feedback from the assistant moderator

Following the focus group discussion, I met with the individual who had assisted me in managing the focus group process and had sat through the entire discussion, taking handwritten notes. Her initial and immediate reaction to the group was:

- the subject material during the discussion was well-worn ground in that these were not new ideas or recent revelations, but had been issues for some time.

- the participants were upset with the child protection system. A sense of injustice was expressed, but most were not intending on leaving the work.
there was a sense of underlying anger, rather than a hot, reactive kind of response.

There was also a sense of resignation and an intention to adjust or adapt in some way.

- the nature of the group was neither closed, nor totally open. Most of the participants did not expose a lot of deeply personal issues into the group.

2. Structure of the focus group discussion

Four of the six workers had felt it necessary to take a leave from the work due to health concerns within the past four years. Four indicated they were actively involved in organizing political or social action with regard to work-related issues. Three participants revealed they had experienced child deaths or critical incidents in cases with which they were connected and had also experienced the impact of monitoring processes. None of the preceding experiences were a requirement for being chosen as a participant and as the researcher, I was unaware beforehand of the personal work history of any of the individuals.

The focus group was scheduled for two hours on a Friday afternoon at the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia, which was a neutral site accessible and acceptable to all the participants. Light refreshments were provided prior to the session to encourage individuals to unwind, relax and socialize (Krueger, 1994, Carey, 1994).

The format for the focus group session was based on a pattern recommended by Krueger, 1994. An agenda was provided for each member as well as a sheet of paper containing the main research question, with which participants had already been provided in an introductory letter, and five sub-questions (see Appendix 6) to guide the discussion. The session was half an hour late getting started due to a last minute change of room location (an
unforeseen administrative problem), and the late arrival of two of the participants. The sixth
participant arrived half an hour after the discussion began, but with a brief interruption to
orient her to the process, she was quickly able to integrate herself into the group discussion.
It was agreed that the session would last two hours. Consents were signed prior to beginning
the discussions and parking money was provided.

I was fortunate to have an assistant, who happened to be one of my fellow Masters
students, who had generously offered to sit in on the discussion to help me with the logistics
of the recording equipment, refreshments, late arrivals and to take comprehensive notes of
the discussion as a backup to any equipment failure, providing me with the freedom to direct
the discussion, and keep the conversation flowing, if necessary. It was also helpful, as noted
above, to have her input at a post-discussion analysis of the session (Krueger, 1994). Her
presence was explained to the group members who indicated acceptance of her presence and
function.

3. The Focus Group Process

All participants spoke at length and without apparent hesitation, requiring little effort
on my part to facilitate discussion. Each made strong and valuable contributions and
opinions were readily shared. The conversation flowed smoothly and naturally, with the
only interruptions appearing on the few occasions when I introduced a question to further
capture the essence of the conversation. Without any apparent effort, the conversation
managed to cover the subjects identified in the five questions contained in the guide and in
the sequence provided, although, because of the complexity of the issues there was an
inevitable interconnection and overlap at various times. Questions introduced by me as facilitator were infrequent.

Because the group had started late, we had to go over the time originally designated and two participants had to leave before the discussion had come to a natural end. Nevertheless, each was able to provide a summary of his/her observations before leaving. Within a few days following the discussion, I contacted all of the participants to gather their impressions of the process in retrospect. All indicated it had been a useful and positive experience.

My initial reaction to the group was similar to that of the assistant moderator. However, upon examination and reflection of the videotape and transcript, I found that although the emotional content was well-controlled, there was indeed considerable feeling expressed which was revealed through the language and the content of the stories, and occasionally by strong verbal emphasis, all of which will be discussed in the analysis which follows.

5.2 The Individual Interviews

1. Structure of the individual interviews

The interviews took place in the homes of the participants with the exception of one who came to my home for the interview. There were no other persons present during each interview. Each participant was provided with the interview guide which had been modified from that used in the focus group interview (See Appendix 7)
2. The individual interview process

As the audio tapes revealed, each participant took roughly 45 to 60 minutes to complete her/his presentation and without exception spoke freely, requiring minimal interruption or guidance from me, as interviewer. As in the focus group interview, I refrained from inserting comments about my own experience and only interjected questions when clarification or expansion on a topic seemed to be appropriate.

To a certain extent in the focus group discussion, but even more so in the individual interviews, the presentations, because of the absence of conversation between interviewer and interviewee, took on the form of a narrative, which happened to fit nicely with the feminist approach, which seeks to avoid an asymmetrical power relationship between interviewer and interviewee. Narratives are context-sensitive, and in order to hear participants' stories, "we must invite them into our work as collaborators, sharing control with them, so that together we try to understand what their stories are about (Mishler, 1986, p.249)."

The participants generally followed the order of the questions in the guide, and consciously attempted to cover all of them, although each chose to focus on issues of particular interest to them. Several of the participants became emotional, even to the point of tears, particularly when speaking about the personal impact of the work. This was an indication not only of how deeply the work affected these individuals but also of the level of comfort with the process which allowed for such frank and open expression.

I found each participant eager to speak about his/her experiences as an MCF worker, and after the presentation, each was surprised at how long he or she had been able to hold
forth with very little input from me.

5.3 Description of the Participants

1. Reason for inclusion

The descriptions of the ten participants which follow, as well as my own (presented in Chapter IV, Part 4.2) are inevitably partial and situated. Although it is hoped that the facts presented are as accurate as possible, the goal is to convey the meanings which have been attached to the experiences described. The following brief profiles are intended to summarize and preserve the essence of their unique history and experiences as individuals. At the same time insight is gained into how their individual experiences have determined their contribution to the common issues identified by the coding process which is described under Data Analysis above. These summaries are not verbatim prose, but rather, have been edited and placed in the analytic context of the research. However, participants were provided with the opportunity to read over these summaries and to approve or make changes, in order to ensure the accuracy of the meaning of the text.

In the process of categorization of themes, discussions are by necessity fragmented, with the inevitable sacrifice of personality and context for those participants whose comments are quoted within the body of the analysis. While categorization is central to the overall presentation of the research, it is also important to preserve the individual voices of the participants themselves, revealing them as whole personalities, in the context of the particular environment and forces that shaped their views, because “a primary goal of feminist research is to provide a vehicle for an individual’s experience to be made explicit
and clear” (Bettcher, 1999, p.39).

2. Profiles of the Ten Participants

a) The six focus group participants

The first six profiles are of the focus group participants and include comments about their individual styles and unique contributions to the discussion. The names are pseudonyms chosen by the participants, or chosen by me at their request. The gender of some of the participants has been changed in some instances to further protect worker identities.

THOMAS

Thomas has worked for over 20 years for the Ministry in its various incarnations. He has had a variety of experience doing family support work, generalist child protection work (i.e. investigative, family service, resource and adoption work combined), and most recently has been working with a specialized youth team. Throughout his career he has made a point of being politically active, including participation in union and professional organizations.

In the focus group, Thomas tended to use brief but strongly worded statements about his beliefs and perceptions, rather than lengthy descriptive stories or monologues. Throughout the discussion he interjected humourous comments, liberally spiced with sarcasm, as a way to express his frustration and/or agreement for a particular speaker’s statement. Because of his experience, Thomas seemed to take on an educational role in explaining historical or current policy decisions.
Thomas expressed his disapproval of the current management approach within the Ministry and his expectation that meaningful change is unlikely. He was also willing to comment on the positive aspects of recent policy changes, indicating an ability to provide a balanced analysis. His grounding in political action continues to define the form of his own resistance to perceived inequities in the system, although the pressure of workload has forced him to curtail some of his political and professional involvements.

LACEY

Lacey has 9 years of experience with MCF and is currently a Family Service worker. A recent illness created the need for a sick leave during a period of rapid and dramatic change in MCF, shortly after the recommendations stimulated by the Gove Report appeared. Having been away at the initial implementation of these changes, Lacey expressed her surprise and dismay at the unprecedented prevalence (in her experience) of fear of child deaths and the increased involvement of senior management in social worker decision-making.

Her comments in the focus group featured anecdotal experiences which carried an emphatic and emotional quality that captured interest and support from the others. She made no attempt to hide her deep frustration and often verbally underlined strongly felt emotions. Her impassioned statements stimulated other participants into providing their own experiences in a similar vein.

Lacey described how she is offended by what she perceives both as the demonstrated disrespect by management towards her judgment as a social worker, as well as the frequent
but apparently unsuccessful attempts that have been made to change the child protection system. She described her sense of the daily realization that the high workload could result in disaster for her personally, due to what she believes is the likelihood of retaliation by management.

Her exhaustion from the demands of workload and concern for her health prevent her from entering into a battle, yet she is drawn to the idea of working with other social workers to challenge the government.

ANNE

At the time of the interview, Anne had been employed by MCF for over 20 years. Her experience includes work on child abuse teams, resource work, work with mentally handicapped adults, child protection consultation and After Hours work. Her experience at After Hours has provided her with many opportunities to communicate with workers around B.C., which she believes has given her insight into how social workers generally are feeling about the work at this time.

During the focus group, Anne’s preferred communication style was to make lengthy statements, which she referred to humourously at one point as a rant. Although she appeared to follow the conversation closely, she seemed more comfortable making personal statements that referred back to previous discussions which then stimulated further discussion by the other participants. Anne chose to group her responses in four separate speeches, which were presented in an articulate and passionate style. She frequently made ironic remarks and punctuated her more caustic statements with laughter to soften their sharpness. Her rapidly-
paced speech did not encourage interruption, but her flowing presentation encouraged people to pay attention.

Following her return to MCF after a sick leave, Anne immediately became aware of the impact that the implementation of the Gove Report recommendations had on child protection work. Disagreeing with the thrust of current policies, believing them to be contradictory to her understanding of social work values, Anne stated her intention of redirecting her practice into social action in the community, as the best way to pressure government to make effective changes to the child protection system.

RUTH

Ruth has been with MCF for 12 years. Her experience has been primarily in the area of intake, working on Intake, Family Service and After Hours teams. She also has experience in adoptions and working with the mentally handicapped, has broad experience with investigative work and has assumed supervisory responsibilities under the recently reorganized Ministry. Ruth's perspective towards her child protection work is one of social action, as evidenced by her active participation in union-related activities, including helping to organize significant protest events.

In the focus group, in terms of presentation, Ruth chose to deliver most of her views in a lecture-style format. Ruth was the most overtly political person in the group and many of her statements exhibited an element of analysis that appeared to be based on careful reflection and familiarity with the subject. Even her personal anecdotes and disclosures of strong feelings were provided in the context of the greater political picture. She was less
inclined to become involved in a back-and-forth interchange as the other participants, but her remarks flowed out of the ongoing conversation, providing stimulus for further discussion.

Ruth not only has chosen to exercise her leadership abilities in union-based activities, but has also demonstrated courage in standing up to management as an individual on the job. Ruth's political activism has convinced her there is a lot of public support and sympathy for social workers. She expressed satisfaction in being able to attract the attention of government and media and is gratified when a protest is felt all the way to the halls of power in Victoria.

This defiant attitude is an indication on one hand of Ruth's awareness that there is an element of personal risk in social action, but also reveals confidence in the quality of her own practice, and her ability to survive whatever consequences result from her 'guerrilla warfare'. There is no doubt that Ruth sees that there is a battle to be fought and her ability to survive psychologically is dependent on knowing that she is able to resist and challenge what she sees as unacceptable abuse by government. Not only is this personally invigorating, but for her is an ethical obligation, representing the essence of good social work.

**GRIFFIN**

Griffin has been working for MCF for the past 7 years. She has performed intake and family service duties and currently works in an After Hours setting in the Lower Mainland. She reflected that when she started with MCF she had felt respected by the employer and that her ideas about how to do the work were valued. She, like other focus group members, related her perception of the changes that had occurred in the work environment following
Griffin spoke quietly in the focus group yet exhibited the most emotional style of all the participants. She appeared to sit and absorb conversations and statements and then would quietly explode into speech. Sometimes her statements involved expressions of anger or frustration based on personal experience, while the intensity of her delivery made her contributions powerful and compelling.

Griffin described her personal struggle in debating the advisability of remaining with the Ministry following a child death on her own caseload. She expressed a strong sense of her own competence and professional reliability in spite of a negative experience during an audit review. She noted that it is her inability to trust management because of the apparent need to find blame, which results in emotional damage for workers like herself, who are already so committed to self-scrutiny of practice. This has made her feel defensive, in spite of her knowledge that she did the best job she could have done. It is primarily this negative factor which has profoundly changed the meaning of the work for her.

APRIL

April has worked for MCF for the past three years. She made humourous reference to the fact that she was part of the “shipment (of new social workers) from the east”. She has primarily done intake, although she has performed some Family Service work as well. April noted that she had approached working for MCF with enthusiasm and confidence, having made a deliberate decision to move to B.C. to do child protection, and states that she would
have come, even if the government had not generously provided her with moving and training expenses.

April was the youngest and least experienced of the focus group participants, but she spoke in a strong confident voice about issues that were important to her and was able to break into ongoing discussions to make herself heard. She engaged in a number of interchanges with other participants, helping to generate some interesting and dynamic conversations.

The subject of training was addressed by the whole group, but for April it had a more direct meaning for two reasons: first, she had experienced the core training as a new recruit and had not been impressed; secondly, by working in a training office, she had the opportunity of seeing more new workers like herself become disenchanted with the training and work environment, and then quit.

Although she apparently is still full of strength and energy for her work, by watching how the negative aspects of the Ministry have impacted other colleagues, her sense of commitment to the job has been undermined, and she has begun the process of questioning the wisdom of remaining employed by MCF.
b) The Four Individual Participants

The following four profiles are descriptions of the social workers who participated in the in-depth individual interviews:

LUCY

Lucy obtained her BSW degree in B.C. and has been working for MCF for over seven years. She acknowledges that child protection was not her first interest, but decided to try doing the work anyway. She began as a float and moved around at first, working either in Intake or Family Service offices. She has worked mostly in Family Service and has a strong sense of loyalty and affection for her team members. Over the years she developed a deep respect and appreciation for the work of child protection.

With the advent of issues triggered by increasing workload, the Gove Report, and the Child, Family & Community Services Act, Lucy and her team were moved to articulate their concerns collectively to management about their inability to fulfil service obligations to clients. They felt strongly that it was their obligation to speak out, in an attempt to try to help change the system and make it more workable. Lucy expressed her concern at the unresponsiveness of government ignoring hundreds of Appendix 4 forms (a document whereby government union employees can document concerns about work related issues), which, in her opinion, has resulted in many workers abandoning this time-consuming but valuable type of workload report.

Lucy was perhaps the most positive of the participants, in spite of her detailed descriptions of the difficulties that were encountered in the work. She enjoys doing
beneficial work in an important job and believes that child protection work significantly reduces the suffering of children in B.C. She also expressed sympathy for management and politicians, who have difficult decisions to make and complex issues with which to deal.

JODI

Jodi identified herself as one of the three hundred post-Gove hires, who were brought to B.C. in 1996 to fulfil the quota of social workers deemed necessary to meet the new child protection standards and expectations. She came with a background in crisis counselling in social services and experience in managing high stress situations. When she decided to seek employment with MCF, she checked with acquaintances who were familiar with the B.C. child protection system and discovered there was a prevailing belief that the Ministry was in a state of disorganization and confusion. Nevertheless, Jodi pursued her plan and following a “fast-track”, three week training session, was placed as a float assigned to carry out Family Service duties.

Overall, Jodi feels she was one of the more fortunate of the new recruits because, although she was designated as a permanent float, she was assigned to one Family Service office for a period of two years. She valued the opportunity to work with one team and to be able to establish meaningful relationships with her clients. She found her team to be a supportive, mature group of people and that was an important factor in being able to learn the work quickly and function as effectively as possible, in spite of the chaos that she felt everyone was experiencing.
Jodi explained that she had come to B.C. looking forward to performing child protection duties, but after about a year and a half she found she was no longer able to sustain the enthusiasm she had brought to the work because the systems problems she encountered made it difficult to function effectively. A serious stress-related illness eventually necessitated an extended sick leave, although she is now able to work on a part-time basis.

BARB

Barb was still attending university when the Gove Report was released, which became a matter of discussion in the academic community. She thus became aware of the context and issues raised in the Gove Report and of the potential for impact on child protection workers.

Barb graduated with her BSW in 1996 and deliberately chose child protection as a starting point for her career, believing that she would be able to get a broad range of social work experience. At first she acted as a float, as well as working for brief periods on a Family Service team and a Youth team, but she has primarily worked within one particular Intake team.

Having spent three years working for MCF, she expressed disappointment in not being able to use her social work skills in a way that she had expected during training. She was able however, to identify the positive aspects of doing child protection for MCF, acknowledging that she had learned a lot, in terms of developing her communication skills and expanding her understanding of the social work process in general.
Barb is aware that a large number of people have left the Ministry. She was initially placed in a group of individuals who received the fast-track training but, of the nine individuals with whom she graduated and were subsequently hired together, only she is left.

Barb explained that the stress of trying to maintain the high quality of performance which her sense of professionalism dictates was constantly eroded by the difficulties presented by the job, resulting eventually in the deterioration of her health and a need for a sick leave. Being away from the job provided her with a different perspective and she realized that what she needs in a work environment will not be provided in child protection, until some wider system changes are made. She has therefore made a decision to return to university and does not intend to reenter the field of child protection.

BETH

Beth obtained her BSW in eastern Canada, focusing on community organization, and work with refugees and immigrants. After spending a year working with youth in a drop-in center, she turned her attention to obtaining her Masters of Social Work degree. To fulfil the Masters requirement for a practicum, she made a conscious decision to find a placement in child protection, looking for the challenge she knew that field would offer. She accordingly found work with a front line investigative team, doing protection work.

Beth found her initial three year experience in a child protection system, prior to moving to B.C., to be a positive one, and this formed her conceptual framework for how child protection should be practiced. What was especially noteworthy for her, was that the individual workers usually had a caseload of no more than five to ten families. The low
caseloads, plus a strong team of colleagues and competent, supportive supervisors, provided her with an enriching learning process.

After moving to B.C. during the major hiring of social workers in the aftermath of the implementation of the Gove Report recommendations, Beth was placed on a Resource team doing foster home studies, followed by a move to an Intake office where she worked for one year. She stated that her experience in child protection in B.C. was surprising and disappointing with regard to most aspects of the work, in contrast to her previous experience in another province. After one year of protection work in B.C., Beth realized her health was beginning to suffer from the combined pressure of workload and what she felt to be a negative work environment, resulting in her resignation from MCF, and relocation to a non-governmental setting.

5.4 Using language to interpret experience

The data revealed that these child protection workers sense they are in a moral and literal battle with their employer which seems to encompass both politicians and senior management. For the purposes of this paper, I will be using the term management to refer to that ambiguous group of people who are seen to have policy-making decision power over the social workers and with whom they feel they are engaged in an ongoing struggle for their own survival. The following words, taken directly from the transcript, appeared in the social workers' descriptions of their experiences, and provide powerful metaphors concerning the vulnerability and anger which all seemed to feel in some respect:
• we’re being whipped into that model
• we’re going to be hung out to dry
• a witch hunt against social workers
• the beast demanding to be fed
• she didn’t have to kick me in the gut
• maybe I’ll get my head chopped off eventually
• we’re like sheep to the slaughter
• the atmosphere is poisoned
• using guerrilla warfare to fight against management
• there’s no individual moving target they can kneecap
• Stalinist demand for accountability
• unacceptable abuse they throw out
• push us until we break
• rubbed into the ground by management
• throw your young ones to the wolves
• the Ministry eats its young
• social workers display as women who have been abused
• the death squad
• people are dying by numbers
• they’re chewing up people and spitting them out
• new workers are fresh meat
• hung out to dry
• our team was crucified
• you’re going to be burned at the stake

5.5 Presentation of quotes

The use of quotes from the participants’ speeches has been presented as closely to the verbatim presentation as possible. They have been edited slightly to eliminate words that do not contribute to the meaning of the statements or that had a bridging function. Some words were eliminated as repetitive or confusing to the overall sense of the statement. Where presentation of an issue was interrupted with a digression that tends to confuse the overall message, this has been deleted, which is signified by using “....”. This symbol has also been used to indicate that a piece of a statement has been taken from a larger portion, where the
remaining sections do not contribute to the issue under discussion. Parentheses appear to indicate a word or phrase that was not provided by the speaker in the text, although the meaning was clear in the body of the speech.

Non-verbal communication is preserved as much as possible in the transcripts. Laughter appeared frequently in the discussion, which I interpreted in two ways. It is my experience that most social workers do try to maintain a positive perspective through the use of humour, in spite of the difficulties expressed. In certain contexts where laughter seems to be inappropriate or jarring, I interpreted it as the way individuals attempt to ease the emotional intensity and painful feelings which discussion of certain situations reveals.

5.6 Themes revealed in the experiences of the child protection workers

Four major themes and 16 sub-themes, as indicated below, emerged from the social workers' account of their experiences of working for the post-Gove Ministry for Children & Families. The first two themes tend to focus more on a description of the context of the work, while the last two address the impact which government policies have on the workers. The titles of the themes are taken from participant quotes, and are deliberately chosen to portray the depth of the disapproval and frustration that were expressed.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 1</th>
<th>THEMES DERIVED FROM CODING THE TRANSCRIPT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. &quot;The atmosphere is poisoned&quot;: How social workers experience changes in the work of child protection following the response of government to the Gove Report.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| a) The sense of betrayal  
b) Detrimental shift in focus from family support to protection  
c) Bureaucratization and increased workload  
d) Training and retention |
| 2. "They're treating us like kindergarten kids": How management reveals disrespect for the profession of social work. |
| a) Refusal to provide resources  
b) Disrespect for professional training and judgment  
c) Social workers are professionals who know how to do the job  
d) Lack of response to expressions of social worker concern |
| 3. "I don’t trust anybody": The impact of fear of blame. |
| a) Expectations of blame  
b) General impact of fear and blame on practice  
c) Personal experience of blame  
d) Who is afraid of blame, really? |
| 4. "The beast demanding to be fed": The consequences of lack of trust in management |
| a) Ways in which management is not listening  
b) What causes workers to resign  
c) Survival strategies  
d) Solutions to the perceived power imbalance |
5.7 ANALYSIS OF THE IDENTIFIED THEMES

1. "THE ATMOSPHERE IS POISONED" HOW SOCIAL WORKERS EXPERIENCE CHANGES IN THE WORK OF CHILD PROTECTION FOLLOWING THE RESPONSE OF GOVERNMENT TO THE GOVE REPORT

This theme identifies the disapproval that these participants have for the government's unilateral decision to adopt many of the recommendations contained in the Gove Report. The way these recommendations were subsequently implemented was found to have a detrimental impact in areas such as practice, workload and staffing.

a) Sense of betrayal

The participants were virtually unanimous in expressing their belief that it was the Gove Report which ultimately determined how the government restructured the child welfare system. Some workers found it offensive that the Gove Commission had been set up to override a community panel report (Making Changes, 1993) which had already made comprehensive recommendations resulting from broadly based public participation, concerning the issues later addressed by Gove:

... the thing that really makes me very angry is this (the Gove Report) was a one man show. They (government) appointed one man, not even a social worker. To me it shows a complete lack of respect for what social workers are doing. Instead of appointing a panel where you have a broad cross-section of the community on the panel, such as maybe a lawyer, a lay person, a social worker, maybe a woman - you know - a balance, a gender balance, and maybe an aboriginal person - they appoint this one person, this very middle class white male to .... make all kinds of recommendations to reshape what social workers do in the province, and I find it quite insulting ... Ruth
Those participants who experienced both pre and post-Gove child protection policies described their sense of surprise and confusion created by the new approach. One worker provided the metaphor of a pendulum to describe the conflicting values of the new Child, Family and Community Services Act and the Gove Report recommendations:

... And at the same time (as Gove was writing his report), they (government) were moving forward with the Act, and the Act was structured under the pendulum ... keep the child in the home because of the great trauma to separate them. There was that type of philosophy - driving the new Act. And it was supposed to be early intervention and prevention --. Don’t just remove them (children) and have a whole billion dollar foster care system - right? And, so then, what happened was Gove was released in November 1995, and the new Act came in January 1996. And so what you had was an Act that was basically one thing and Gove’s report, which said basically the complete opposite, happening at the same time. If you want to talk about a pressure cooker, - it was really, really, really, painful. Lucy

A majority of the participants experienced the resulting administrative changes to have been hastily designed and implemented without social worker input, which disregarded the values and opinions of the child protection workers and left them with a profound sense of betrayal:

I’ve never heard of that done ... with any study, anywhere -They (the) recommendations (didn’t) have to be that very day accepted without any thought, or input, from us, or the community. I mean, that ... was totally irresponsible, as far as I was concerned. It made it seem like everything Gove had to say was completely right. And that everything we had done was lousy social work. It completely disempowered (social workers) - and the morale was just horrible. Lucy
b) Detrimental shift in focus from family support to protection:

For all of the participants it was clear that combining the two functions of investigation and family service is the essence of performing child protection work. Although child protection workers have long struggled with the contradiction of investigation versus helping (Callahan & Attridge, 1990), these social workers stated they are now experiencing a virtual elimination of their ability to provide the supports that make significant change for families possible.

It was felt that a false dichotomy had been constructed by the government between keeping the family together versus protecting the children, and that somehow the two roles had become mutually exclusive. Such a dichotomy ignores the complexities of the work, and prevents social workers from servicing families who fall outside of the strict definition of protection, yet have clear needs that, if left unaddressed, will require critical intervention.

The following statement is representative of the participants' expression of concern about the impact of such a shift in focus:

There's a continuum of family difficulties, where at one end of the continuum, the family needs maybe some simple straightforward intervention and support. As you move along the continuum, you have a more complex family situation, more things can go wrong, you may have more children involved. At the far end of the continuum, you have very complex situations. High risk. Things that will eventually end up in either child protection court, or in criminal court. The problem is that we - our families - cross this line, back and forth between need for support - in fact all families need support - whether they're protection (soft laughter) cases, or whether it's classified family support from the Ministry's perspective. And I think that artificial division is insensitive.  

Anne
What workers have experienced is that the inevitable result of accepting only those cases which fall within the narrow mandate of protection is to have family support services become non-existent:

We just do protection work, basically, because we are waitlisting anything that’s a request for service, and we’re not getting to it. ..... In our region, we have a kind of a dummy caseload (laughs), where we put things that are low priority, and they get assigned when there is somebody able to do it. ..... ’ if you’re just having trouble supporting your kids, and if you’re struggling to get by and everything, and you need some extra help, well its kinda too bad - Give us a call when you’re going to hit your kid, or give us a call when it’s to the point where you can no longer live with your child’. I find that a big source of frustration because there is no such thing as prevention anymore. April

Most of the participants expressed general approval of the measures designed to streamline investigation work. However, there was a general sense of frustration and anguish at the thinking behind policies that place unrealistic expectations on the insistence that all children must be protected all the time:

“... the Ministry is very, very focused on protection only. I can understand that on one level. Because certainly people want to do whatever they can to prevent kids from dying. But I think what’s missed is that we can’t prevent every kid from being hurt. We can’t prevent (all) parents from harming their kids. And the Ministry is not the only solution to the problems that lead to abused kids. The Ministry seems to think all these changes are going to be the answer to everything ----.” Anne

c) Bureaucratization and increased workload

Although the government has recognized the issue of workload by commissioning studies, and has attempted to meet workload requirements periodically by hiring new workers, it was felt that the numbers hired have not kept up with the workload demand. This
issue remains a matter of significance for all the participants and needs to be included here as part of their experience of the work.

The numbers confirm that there is a significantly greater number of children in care since the implementation of the Gove Report recommendations (MCF Annual Reports, 1994 - 1998) which, combined with the new administrative procedures and policies that accompanied the increase, have contributed to consumption of social work time.

An aspect of workload that had special meaning for the workers was the additional expectation in recent years of having to be accountable to a variety of monitoring bodies making many demands on workers, who have very little time to spare for required responses. There were a number of descriptions, of which the following is representative, concerning the emotional impact on workers who have to deal with the time-consuming requirements to document their practice,

So, when you report (a critical incident) and when it goes to Victoria, you create for yourself a nightmare. Not only are you trying to case manage forty-nine families, and worry about this child yourself, and try to, every day, deal with what's going on in her life. Now you have people in Victoria who, who ...., they, they sit around (smiles and laughter from other participants), and think of things for us to do, and they send a list of do this, do this, do this, .... When?! do I do all these things? .... Lacey

All the participants expressed in some way their dissatisfaction with feeling unable to service clients adequately because of workload pressure, and how appalling it is for them to know there are people who need service and are unable to get it. Several described how overwhelming it can be to find the time to become familiar with new files, especially when a majority of the participants stated their explicit understanding that knowledge of case history
is essential to making an accurate assessment of a family's current situation:

I mean, you get some of these honkin' files (of) families that have been .... involved with the Ministry over two, three generations. You don't have time to read the files. And that's pathetic. Because how can I make a comprehensive assessment of where people are now, if I have no sense of where they've been? .... And I would do a hit and miss assessment, based upon the time that I had. And that's not competent work. That's not any kind of quality service to anyone. It's a disservice. Jodi

The impossibility of meeting newly embraced practice standards for case management was equally frustrating, resulting in frequent reference to the preference for capped caseloads. Some of the participants who perform intake described the experience of being unable to cope with the sheer volume of investigations, as evidenced by the following comment:

... I was getting like, three and four investigations plunked on my desk and then three or four (more), two days later. I mean, at a ridiculous rate. A rate that's absolutely impossible to keep up with. And it's absolutely impossible to meet the standards adequately. And .... while I think the (standards) are kind of rigid, I don't think they're necessarily far off from what good child protection is. But it's absolutely impossible to meet those standards, if you're not given a reasonable workload, and enough time to actually do the work. Beth

April and Griffin, during an animated interchange, provided a graphic description of how anxiety and resentment is created as two offices (in this case between an Intake Office and an After Hours office) are compelled to pass cases back and forth to each other as they wrestle with the twin stressors of workload and heightened accountability. (Although April and Griffin do not work together, each immediately recognized the situation as presented by the other):
An After Hours memo was sent to the District Office. They're so busy they can't do it and it comes back here the next night. As a fullblown investigation. It's not because anybody's not doing their job - it's because everybody's so stressed out. It can't go to the dummy file because it's been listed as an investigation .... so someone's got to do something. And it comes back.

Meanwhile there's (only) two people in the district office.

And it creates antagonism between the District and After Hours offices - a potential for a disaster is there, because people, instead of just saying - I mean our supervisor would say: "everybody's stressed out. Just relax. Just do it." But there is sort of resentment. I don't want it. I gave it to you. You should have fixed it and (laughs), why is it back here again? --- So it's very stressful, because now we have it - now it's our responsibility again until 8:30 tomorrow morning, and sometimes it's like that - it's really busy, and you just think - God, I can't wait until 8:30 in the morning until it's your responsibility.

And that's the same level of frustration that we've got at the district offices too - is when you're sending stuff to After Hours and going 'OK, this needs to be done this weekend ...'

- and they say: "What!" .... It is horrible you know, there's nothing - you can't send it back. (General laughter). It's a black hole. It's your responsibility - you have to do something. And nobody's doing it, I don't think, to be mean, or unkind ...

Survival. And it's getting worse for sure.

d) Training and Retention

The overall consensus of the participants is that there is a high turnover of staff and that poor quality of training has been a contributing factor. The training programs provided to new workers since the implementation of the Gove recommendations were generally viewed by the participants as inadequate and simplistic, especially by individuals who
already have experienced intensive training through their BSW and MSW studies. It is this
failure of the Ministry to recognize that child protection attracts a broad range of social work
practitioners with life experience and well-developed skills, which results in dissatisfaction
with the training programs. As one worker noted:

--- Putting people through a cookie cutter training approach is (a) problem. I
think that although the training was well-intended, there had to be some
respect for where people were at --- Anne

Retention of experienced workers is another generally recognized aspect of staffing
that is not being successfully addressed. Some workers feel they are being denied the
opportunity to achieve professional development and that training for anything other than
new workers has virtually disappeared. These participants explained that there are serious
repercussions when too many senior staff leave due to lack of stimulation and recognition.
The fallout caused by the loss of experienced workers is that those who remain have to take
on the burden of clinical training, with no peer support.

Even more troubling is that relatively new workers are left to train even less
experienced workers. Thus, rapid loss of staff can be a result of placing too much
responsibility on relatively inexperienced workers, who are not necessarily comfortable with
the amount of experience they have when asked to make difficult case decisions. As the
following participant honestly recognizes:

Look at the numbers of social workers who have left. New social workers are
the blood that's needed. And you don't want to have a bunch of people who
are gonna be retiring and not have a stable body of staff to move in to senior
level positions. And three years with the Ministry --- although officially I'm a
senior practitioner, I am not a senior practitioner. (Laughs). And I would be
doing a real disservice to myself and the people I work with, and my families, if I walked around thinking: ‘this is it - I know all there is to know about a) the Ministry and b) social work” If you’re constantly only getting people who are staying a year, then the system’s not going to improve, and the (government) needs to look at how to maintain staff - they need to look at how to continue to help staff grow professionally. Barb

The inability to retain both new and experienced workers was also clearly connected back to the issue of workload, which has resulted for some people in experiencing exhaustion soon after they begin to take on a full caseload. Sympathy was expressed by the participants for those new workers who experience burn-out soon after entering the front line:

... People start in Family Service and Intake for a couple of years, to go somewhere else. So the most difficult social work is being done by the beginners who don’t want to stay there. And that’s like in the army, - you know, you throw your young ones to the wolves, in the trenches, and if they survive, they’ll never go back there, but at least they get rotated out after nine months --- because they know about combat fatigue and shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorder. But there’s no such good thinking for child protection workers. --- As they say: ‘the Ministry eats its young’. Lucy

II. “THEY’RE TREATING US LIKE KINDERGARTEN KIDS”: HOW MANAGEMENT REVEALS DISRESPECT FOR THE PROFESSION OF SOCIAL WORK

Underlying the dissatisfaction with the concrete effects of the Gove recommendations and the resulting policy changes, as explained in Part I, above, is perhaps an even more serious problem. There is a feeling by the participants that the profession of social work is neither fully understood, nor respected by senior management and government. This theme surfaced repeatedly as the participants revealed instances of how they perceived management
violated social work principles and demonstrated disregard for the training and experience that social workers bring to the job. In the process of identifying such violations, participants provided their own definition of valid social work and made it abundantly clear that they know how the job should be done.

a) Refusal to provide resources

Social workers have always been in the vanguard of those who advocate for resources for their clients and accept this role as part of working for a government which, in recent years has increasingly yielded to pressure to decrease public expenditures for social service programs. The trend to persistently slash such funding is pervasive in several western countries including Canada and Great Britain (Carniol, 1995, Wharf, 1993, Dingwall 1986).

Nevertheless, social workers in B.C. continue to expect that government should be making a greater effort to provide basic services to families. The frustration for social workers in B.C. has increased since the Gove Report because the increase in administrative tasks together with the numbers of families and children being served has not met a corresponding increase in services. In fact, participants complained that resources continue to decrease as budget cuts prevail.

One participant related a moving story of a small boy with multiple needs, who had come into care under a Continuing Custody Order. When he became critically injured while in foster care, the worker was offended by the response of management to the situation:

... Victoria's only concern was: something had happened to this child, who was a Permanent Ward - was this going to be a significant injury that might impact, not the child, but will this become a media event? (laughs). That was
the feeling that I got, because I had been arguing: 'I need a child care worker attached for more than four hours a week for this child. I am fighting to keep him in school with a special ed assistant. I need more services. .... If we're supposed to be supporting families, these are the things that we need. I need a proper current assessment done on this child.' And those are the things, that if we address, perhaps we don't have critical incidents down the road. And really, if they were concerned for the welfare of the child, I would have got responses that said something other than 'We can't afford this'. Jodi

b) Disrespect for professional training and judgment

All but one of the participants originally entered the field of child protection with a BSW, proud of the professionalism they intended to bring to the work. It has apparently been disappointing and, for the more experienced workers, surprising and insulting, for them to have realized the extent to which the current management has come to disregard their skills and training, as evidenced by the post-Gove policies, which they believe have interfered with their ability to exercise discretionary critical judgment.

Several participants identified that the issue of having a BSW in order to perform child protection work was an important one for them, objecting to the government’s recent reversion to a long-established practice of hiring individuals for child protection work who have not acquired a BSW. The following statement illustrates the general feeling about the lack of recognition by public and government alike for those social workers with formal social work training:

There are ....quite a number of people in our Ministry who are called social workers, who in fact, aren't, professionally. .... Because it takes away from the legitimacy of .... the social work profession - and I can't imagine people like doctors or lawyers, allowing other people doing the same work with them, without the same level of training, and calling themselves lawyers .... Lucy.
Most of the participants expressed their frustration at the confused and negative public perceptions of child protection social workers. They stated their belief that people assume that a person doing child protection social work is somehow less professional and valuable than someone who is in private practice, with one participant commenting that “it’s like being the untouchables of the social work profession”. Anne  This misperception apparently results from a lack of respect and understanding of what doing the work really requires:

There isn’t a respect for the complexity and the difficulty of the kind of work we have. And there’s an assumption by the system and the administration, that anybody can do child protection. If you just run ‘em through these courses and if they can memorize all the work, (they) too can be child protection worker(s). And this is not the case to me. I think there’s a personal - there’s a level of personal suitability that’s necessary to do the work .... Anne

Again, the lack of respect felt was linked back to the attitude reflected by the Gove Report, which most participants believed had resulted in creation of polices which had significantly reduced the social worker’s ability to make skilled independent case management decisions:

And the ironic thing about the Gove Report is he talks a lot, and pays lip service to professionalism and social workers having degrees, and yet they’re treating us like kindergarten kids - like, unless you fill out the right form, you’re not doing your job. Like, it’s on the one hand they’re saying, well we’re making you more professional, and on the other hand we don’t trust you to do anything unless you’re checking something on a box, and you know, there’s no reliance on our skills and professionalism and any training that we might have received. So I found the whole process quite demeaning, and it leaves me very angry. Ruth
Further evidence of disrespect for the values of social work reported by several of the participants is the experience of having to witness, or being forced to participate in, the violation of the rights of clients. Every one of these workers expressed a deep concern with questions of ethical significance. Some expressed resistance to participating in case plans that may conform to policy but ignore the real needs of clients, and particularly do not want to be involved in actions that are useless or damaging to clients. The following statement illustrated how narrow policies may abrogate the human rights of clients, and ultimately serve to perpetuate the risk to a child's safety, by driving clients away:

I took a secondment .... recently and was really struck by the violation of human rights, especially around the issues of drugs and alcohol, where people were being told, either you go and have a urine test, or we'll take your children. There was nothing .... in between. And the numbers of families that went on the lam as a result of being pressured is incredible. Griffin

c) Social workers are professionals who know how to do the job

Throughout the discussion, participants provided examples of situations that demonstrated how they prefer to do social work, which were not dependent on specific policies, but were imbedded in the philosophy and values which they bring to the field. Similar ideas of other B.C. child protection workers have been extensively documented in a recent study concerning best practices in child protection (Callahan et al, 1998).

Participants in this study were able to clearly describe their sense of how the work needs to be done in order for children to be truly protected, which involved relying on their strong ethical values and social work skills and knowledge. As noted above, they feel they have not been consulted in a meaningful way, in the midst of a flurry of changes in the past
four years. This disregard for their input into what is their field of expertise is an irritant that appeared repeatedly throughout the discussion.

For several, an important element in the satisfaction and effectiveness of child protection work is engaging with the family in a counselling role, rather than limiting it to a case management function. Most of the participants spoke to their belief that limiting the social worker role not only takes the pleasure out of the work, but is a waste of valuable resources, as the following comment illustrates:

So, my belief then, is if I'm going to do child protection work, and do it well, I need to join with families. I need to find something that I like about them. At some level. --- From a hopeful (and) supportive perspective, that something can change. And I recognize the authority component too. And I've never made a secret of that with the families that I work with, because (the) bottom line is the safety, and decisions do have to get made, if necessary, to protect the child. But I believe that nine times out of ten, if you take a supportive stance, and you join with the family that you can work well with (them). So, I don't believe in separating out the counselling aspect of it all. .... Because all you're left with is a case management role. .... And you're never the person who gets to really work and have success with the families. Right? You're just plugging all the stuff in .... Beth

d) Lack of response to expressions of social worker concerns

Social workers not only experience disrespect in the way their professional experience and training is minimized or ignored. As their Code of Ethics requires, most trained social workers embrace the value of advocacy (Canadian Association of Social Workers, Code of Ethics, Chapter 10, 1998) which requires them to identify social issues on behalf of their clients and identify where policies are inadequate or non-existent. It also exhorts workers to identify inequity and discrimination in the workplace as it affects their
own ability to perform in a professional and ethical manner. All the participants spoke to the lack of trust they have developed due to management’s demonstrated lack of meaningful response to the expressed needs by social workers on behalf of clients and themselves.

One worker explained how she and her team had identified the issue of escalating workload by filling out a document, referred to as an Appendix 4 (BCGEU Agreement, Appendix 4, page xx), whereby government union employees can document concerns about work related issues.

Our region .... sent, I think, 25 detailed Appendix 4 letters to the then Deputy Minister .... It went to the Area Manager - the Network Manager. At the time she said: 'I can't do anything about it.' Then it goes to the Deputy Minister's desk. We were never responded to .... Nothing was changed. .... Those of us who had been together for five years and felt that we had strength in numbers, that for the sake of children and the clients, and workers, (we) would not leave the Ministry - that we could, would speak out. That it was our obligation to speak out, to try to help change the system - to make it more workable. And our goal was always to say, either reduce the expectations, and the level of responsibility, or increase the resources. .... It was so clear - you know? ... Lucy

For some workers, the sense of the vast gap between management and line workers and the apparent lack of political will to respond to worker concerns was so strongly felt, that to speak out seemed like an act of futility. Still, several had attempted, like Lucy and her team, to directly communicate concerns to management through such avenues as the union, public demonstrations and e-mail, and most had met with unsatisfactory results. Overall, most of the workers communicated a sense of oppression and impotence in the face of being so blatantly ignored and disregarded:
... And it's very, very sad to see people who I think are competent and strong workers, and I include myself in that, - feel that they just can't do what they should be doing. And then knowing, although we give that message over and over and over again to our supervisors, to union, to management, - it's not heard. And even though we've said we're not doing what we should be doing - if something happens, we know that management will plead ignorance ...

Barb

3. "I DON'T TRUST ANYBODY": THE IMPACT OF FEAR OF BLAME

As the title of this research project indicates, fear of blame was intended to be a subject of discussion. Although, the questions in the interview guide were stated in such a way as to give the participants an opportunity to emphasize what they found significant in their own experience of the work, the participants confirmed the assumption that this is indeed a major issue underlying the meaning of the work. However, some refreshing insights were provided about the strength and courage of individuals who have lived with the phenomenon of blame on a daily basis in recent years.

The issues raised in the focus group and the individual interviews provided evidence that social workers expect to be blamed, and that the experience of blame, when it happens, is unpleasant and even traumatic. What was most significant however, and not entirely expected, was the collective expression of the participants' irritation and frustration at having to accommodate what they have come to understand is a profound fear of blame on the part of management.
a) Expectations of blame

There was a unanimous belief among the participants that the possibility of blame for critical incidents on their caseloads is a constant threat which all workers must now face. Whether or not a participant had experienced blame personally, all had been made keenly aware of the experiences of others, either through newspaper reports, through the Ministry grapevine, or having been on teams which had been audited.

All acknowledged that when a critical incident occurs they are prepared to be accountable for their actions, and expect to debrief with peers to review what happened. However, because of the pervasive expectation of blame by management, there is resentment that self-evaluation of one’s role and practice is neither a safe nor objective process.

Participants who had actually experienced some form of review, expressed strong disagreement with the approach that a number of monitoring agencies take, both within and outside of MCF. These social workers’ sense of justice has been offended by the fact that the investigators don’t necessarily make valid conclusions, yet, at the same time, do not appear to be equally accountable for the work they do. Most identified a serious need for social workers to have legal protection from the potentially slanderous and damaging impact of these investigations, such as a participant who was critical of investigations conducted by the Children’s Commissioner (an agency external to MCF responsible for monitoring child deaths in B.C.):

... We need a lawyer, when we’re called before the Children’s Commissioner, .... because right now we’re going there with a shop steward, and our union contract doesn’t apply to the Children’s Commissioner. It offers no protection. We need a lawyer, because the CC is serious business ... and they’re saying all kinds of slanderous things about us, or potentially slanderous things, that
are making it to the media, and I think we're - like sheep to the slaughter, when we go before them without having proper representation. Ruth

Throughout all the interviews, it was apparent that a majority of the participants, in spite of admirable personal courage, are affected adversely by the fear of being left to hang alone if a critical incident occurs on their caseload. In an attempt to adjust to a stressful situation, several revealed a common contradiction in their self-perception which involved struggling to maintain a sense of confidence in the quality of their work while having to acknowledge an overwhelming sense of vulnerability to criticism. For example, one new worker insisted that she did not spend too much time worrying about making a mistake. Nevertheless, she noted that, in spite of how confident she felt about her work, she believed that if something went wrong with a case, she would not have been safe from blame:

We have no idea what's going to happen. And we make decisions based on what people tell us. And if they're lying to us, and we don't have "proof" ....people (clients) can do whatever they want. I know that. My supervisor knows that. And I think the people I work with know that. I don't think management can allow themselves to know that. And central office certainly, in the cases that have gone wrong, have gone after social workers. It's wrong, and I think any social worker that they've done that to deserves our support. So, I think I would stand my ground, in terms of decisions that I've made. But I know that the Ministry wouldn't support me. Barb

b) Impact of fear of blame on practice

The participants expressed their collective concern at how they saw the health and good practice of child protection workers deteriorating because of the stress which the possibility of blame had contributed to an already difficult and demanding job. Referring to
her experience on a Family Service team, one worker described the pressure that leads to feeling burned-out and the anxiety that builds when expectations by management cannot be met:

... If you get a multi-problem family .... how are you going to be able to manage that with the hours? Because no one's getting approval for overtime. So, you're damned if you do and you're damned if you don't. If you do the work that's needed to be done, you either burn out, trying to do it all, trying to juggle it all, or you start working a lot of extra hours. .... And that takes its toll .... so, you may go out in the field, work with the family, do whatever liaison work you have to do, and you may not have everything written down to substantiate that, because you don't have the time. So what ends up happening when what I like to call the death squad (referring to the MCF Audit & Review team) comes to the office to do their audits is, you get confronted and challenged. Jodi

One participant firmly declared her ability to practice in a manner which does not force her to make decisions based on 'covering her ass', or erring on the side of caution.

However, her positive manner faltered as she described the consequences of maintaining her ethical stance of putting the time into a case that it deserves in order to make a thorough and accurate assessment:

And so, indirectly I worry about getting 'in trouble', and I think that makes me do very thorough assessments, which then gives me a caseload (that is) completely unreal. So I can't do the kind of work that I would like to be doing. To feel that I could stand under scrutiny if something went wrong in a case. Because I'm not given time to do that kind of work. And I make that time. And so I work too much. And I carry my cases home with me. And it affects me more personally than it does professionally. .... It's had a huge impact on my life. Barb

More than half of the participants had taken recent medical leaves due to stress-related illnesses, and all, without exception, were able to describe numbers of co-workers who had also succumbed to the pressure of the current work environment. One worker who
had not been targeted individually by a monitoring body, but was affected by the experience of her colleagues, explained her own reaction to the prevailing stress:

I mean, I started developing physical symptoms. My back went into spasm. And I had .... really anxious moments. Not because I ever doubted my own skills or ability. Or not because I never enjoyed the work or didn't like working with the families. But because of the absolute unsupportive environment, and the completely crazy-making, unreal workload. I think that's what the body does when faced with a traumatizing (laughs) environment.” Jodi

c) Personal experience of blame

Several of the participants had actually been subjected to investigative procedures, which had been conducted by a variety of monitoring agencies. The following descriptions speak for themselves in terms of the impact such investigations can have on the social workers involved.

Griffin described how she had gone into an internal audit without a union representative, because she trusted the process and believed she had done her job well. She was prepared to be accountable for her practice and felt no need to be defensive. Instead she felt attacked, judged and betrayed when the auditor seemed to turn Griffin’s honesty against her and tried to make her feel responsible for the death of a child on her caseload:

... It comes and goes - my anger. But I went through a review and after she (the auditor) asked all her little ... questions - at the very end - it was almost like she had some insight into me - that it was important to be open and honest and it was so important to be forthcoming with all the information, and her last question was (sighs): ‘well, Griffin, did you have any gut feelings about this?’ So I thought: ‘hmmm, now I know what I should say, (laughs) - I should redirect her question somehow so I don’t really have to tell the truth, but what’s the point of that?’ And in fact, I had some sort of gut feeling because there was an unresolved issue the first time we received a report. And we hadn’t been able to establish how an injury occurred. And, so I said: ‘well yes,
I did.' And her response was: ‘well, Griffin, sometimes you just have to trust your gut.’ And I felt so blamed, and so upset, that I might as well have disemboweled the child myself. (Griffin is expressing strong emotion here and appeared to be on the edge of tears.) And that will always stick with me and that has affected practice and will affect my practice for as long as I do it --- underneath a bureaucracy. And I didn’t kill the kid, and all I was doing was responding to her (the auditor’s) questions politely and respectfully, and that’s the way that she treated me. - and in fact, she, at that time, was one of us. You know, it’s not outside. She had been a social worker before. So there was no empathy. Now, she didn’t have to take care of me, but she didn’t have to kick me in the gut. ‘Griffin

Griffin described how her self-confidence as a professional has been shaken by the audit process. It is obvious that having a child on her caseload die created a need for Griffin to reflect repeatedly on the situation in order to understand her role and what she might have done differently to achieve a more positive outcome. She states this is a process that she would have engaged in, regardless of outside scrutiny, and knows that the child’s death will always be with her, in all her practice decisions. Yet she needs to know that senior staff support her and respect her basic decision-making ability. To have been denied that, and to have been judged, was a devastating experience which continues to affect her deeply:

.... but within our own house, we (should be) looking after each other .... I think that sometimes that can make a huge difference, both in your morale and the way that you do the work, and I don’t feel like I have that safe place to just be myself as a professional, practicing social worker. Griffin

Ruth described a conversation with an auditor, who was gathering information about a sibling of a dead child, wanting to know about Ruth’s historical involvement with the family, which took place even before the child under review had been born. When Ruth explained her rationale for determining that no risk had existed at the time, the auditor
criticized Ruth for what Ruth felt was an irrelevant error:

When I was interviewed by the ... practice analyst, there was a discussion around resistant clients, because I had at one point - and if you can believe this, this was before the (child) that died was even born ... When I was the social worker briefly, it was the first child that was on the scene that was still alive, and doing well. I said that I didn't go in and deal with that child because (an adult relative)was in charge and the child didn't seem to be at risk. So what the practice analyst said was that I was lacking in skills in dealing with aggressive clients. And I said to her, I disagree with that, you know. If you want to hang me, hang me for the reason I give you, (which) is that I assessed that there was no need to intervene, because there was no concern directly about the child. But she put this in the report and the recommendation was that all social workers in my region receive training in this particular skill which she felt I was lacking. Ruth

Several participants objected to the current audit process in general, believing that even though sharing information and feelings is a basic social work principle, in the current environment of blame, a social worker’s honest effort to be self-critical can be used to establish guilt. Ruth offered the example that in her experience, during a review of case practice, “any alternative that I suggested came back (and) was used against me.” Not only did she feel blamed, but felt she had no ability to defend herself against the resulting criticisms of her practice:

... " we really lack the opportunity to correct anything that's said about us ...of correcting things, or at least registering a dissenting opinion about what is said about us. ..... we have no opportunity to really challenge those decisions. ..... we're only shown the narrow part, in the sense of a factual verification they call it .... but what we miss is the overall context in which they put that in. And the recommendations and the interpretations they put on that - that's where the process is really unfair. Ruth
d) Who is afraid of blame, really?

What was perhaps the most unexpected reaction by all of the participants was the expression of anger, contempt, and even amusement, in the face of what they saw as the fear of blame which management itself often communicates to the line staff. These social workers found it difficult to tolerate the impact that such fear had on the creation of what they believe are irrational, ineffective policies and the resulting administrative demands that create additional workload or impact social worker ability to make critical judgments.

Most of the participants agreed that management, in constructing a fear-based child protection system, has made it impossible for anyone, at any level in the bureaucratic/political system to be comfortable to openly admit that errors will inevitably be made during such complex, unpredictable work. One worker acknowledged this reality by expressing her regret that honesty about the work is in effect discouraged by unrealistic performance standards:

Well, I mean, I think that people need to have their work reviewed from time to time. And I'm very sad that we can no longer admit that we make mistakes, - that we all have to be perfect. Because by not acknowledging there are things that need to be learned, or there are mistakes that have been made, you know - I try to do that in my practice, and when I go to court and somebody says, you know, why didn't you do this? I sometimes have to say, yeah, I made a mistake. Anne

In a similar vein, a participant complained at one point that she had felt forced by management to become defensive during her negative audit experience, in spite of the fact that she believed she had done competent work, and received the following expression of sympathy from Thomas:
Perhaps in a supportive environment, you know, where there wasn't this malaise of blaming that permeates the Ministry, and government looking for ways to get out of the trouble that they're in when children die, .... in a supportive environment that's respectful of the profession - you wouldn't need necessarily need to take along an army of representatives to protect your interests. Thomas

In spite of the expectation that blame is a factor in how management responds to critical incidents, these social workers expressed a solid belief in the importance of being held accountable for their professional practice. Furthermore, while most expressed resentment and anxiety concerning what they perceived as the heavy-handed actions of management, there were, at the same time, expressions of confidence in taking the risk of challenging management directly.

Thomas' manner of speaking featured the use of dramatic and powerful metaphors to express his disapproval of various decisions and programs that have been introduced in recent years. Nevertheless he was prepared to use his real name (the name by which he is commonly known does not appear in this research), which was a clear indication that he personally did not have any fear of speaking out against the employer. Most of the participants agreed with Thomas, who felt there is less risk in challenging authority if it is done through some form of collective action:

You see, ....the risk is reduced by participation and .... I don't think there's a huge risk there. I mean, the system will always be nervous and shaking and finding ways to kinda cut people's heads off. I mean, that's what they do - you know, but they become less effective the stronger you are. Thomas

Several of the participants described the various ways they had openly confronted senior management about their concerns. For example Lacey spoke defiantly about a
challenge she had made directly to the Deputy Minister concerning a policy with which she disagreed:

I wrote a letter to (the Deputy Minister), right after this last piece of (nonsense) that came .... So I just wrote him a letter and said how I felt about it. Like, I asked him on what basis was he making these decisions, and why did it feel like somebody out there was trying to destroy this job that we do?. Lacey

In noting her frustration with management however, Lacey admits that she still feels constrained in the type of responses she is able to make. Significantly, it is not fear for herself, but the complexity of the loyalty bind that is revealed as she expresses her concern for a supervisor whom she respects:

--- I would personally say, screw you, I'm doing my job, but my supervisor, who is a very good supervisor - people get down on him, and so then you think, oh, OK, so I'll do their little list of whatever, you know? Lacey

4. "THE BEAST DEMANDING TO BE FED": THE CONSEQUENCES OF LACK OF TRUST IN MANAGEMENT.

This last theme is identified by the strong metaphor above, which characterizes senior management as an entity, at once aggressive and powerful, yet seemingly mindless, as evidenced by decisions that do not seem to be based on logic or common sense. What crystallizes here is the individual expressions by participants of their strong dissatisfaction with management and their belief that this is a general phenomenon among the majority of MCF social workers.
In fact, the themes of feeling attacked at both professional and personal levels are not discreet, and frequently overlap. However, it is important to isolate the feelings that the negative work situation has generated and to understand how the participants have managed to survive what they view as a hostile environment. These social workers not only have explanations for how they survive on a personal basis, but have also given thought to how they can best address the power imbalance they experience between themselves and management.

a) Ways in which management is not listening

Many aspects of child protection work will always be difficult and frustrating (Callahan & Attridge, 1990), which these social workers understand and accept is part of the work. What these participants found to be unacceptable is the way in which management, in their opinion, has introduced policies which have increased workload and contradicted social work values. Even more reprehensibly, management has not seemed to have heard or responded in any meaningful way to the level of concern that these workers insist has been so frequently articulated by themselves and other social workers throughout the province.

Supervision was a subject that came up in a number of different contexts, indicating a keen awareness of the significance of the role that supervision plays in their work. Those who had a supervisor whom they could trust and respect reported having a more manageable work experience than those who did not, and attributed this as a factor in their survival in the field. On the other hand, new workers in particular, felt the absence of competent supervision, and described the distress they felt when encountering supervision from
someone who had no training or background in social work.

Just as the government has not required that line workers have a BSW (except for the brief period between the release of the Gove Report in 1996 and 1999), in the experience of these social workers, there is still no requirement that district supervisors have social work training either. Some participants, who had worked in a number of different work environments within the Ministry, were incredulous that there was apparently no common practice wisdom prevalent throughout the Ministry, with a sense of a common goal, a consistent rationale, and a process that made sense, case to case. This lack of a coherent conceptual framework, apparently throughout all levels of the Ministry, was believed to be a significant factor in what all participants found to be inconsistent supervision and management.

The following statement speaks to the disappointment of a new social worker who was so eager to practice and improve her newly acquired skills:

... He (her supervisor) had no idea what our Act (CFCSA) was all about. He had no idea what social workers did on a daily basis. And he couldn't consult on cases. He's not delegated. He doesn't have a social work background .... So they create a level beneath him, and call her a clinical supervisor and she's to be the person who consults on the cases. But when you hear 'clinical supervisor', you expect then, naively so, to get actual clinical supervision. And you don't .... Barb

There are times when it is just sheer exhaustion that takes its toll, and is exacerbated by a sense that nobody in management is listening or really cares. This is reinforced when workers are aware in the course of their daily work contacts, that many co-workers around
the province are worn out because of lack of coverage, yet the expectations of the job continue and the level of accountability remains the same. The result of being disregarded saps the energy of even the most determined survivor. One new worker described her own sense of how abusive the situation has become, as she watched the deterioration of morale of the senior workers to whom she turned for leadership:

I hear over and over and over again that this is the worst they've (senior workers) ever seen it. And these are people who are rocks in my opinion. People who could do this job, no problem, and had a real sense of .... how to manage their work. And they are going on leave. They're despondent. You know, people get depressed. Again, we social workers classically display like women who have been abused. I mean, we're treated with a lack of respect. And that affects everybody. ... Barb

Universal consternation was expressed at the combination of loss of resources at the same time that workload and expectations had been significantly increased, while no one in authority seems to be aware of the lack of logic which such a construction involves. One worker captured the collective sense of frustration as she described her own realization a few years ago that the nature of the work had been “revved up” and attempted, along with her co-workers, to communicate to management the necessity for making funds available for resources:

" and despite the fact that we went on in detail about highlighting the issues in the Gove Inquiry, about training, about support for our staff, about supportive supervision, about having adequate resources, in terms of preventive services and also placement resources - it was impenetrable to these people. Anne
But finally, the clearest expression of the resentment and frustration felt by all the participants was the following simple but heartfelt lament:

I mean that is just ridiculous. ---- who else, what other profession - what other profession - is held responsible for other people’s actions? Lacey

b) What causes workers to resign

Several of the participants were able to identify the specific breaking point for themselves which has resulted or may soon result in their withdrawal from child protection work.

Most of the participants find the heavy emphasis on the investigative role to be offensive to their values, attributing this trend directly to the *Gove Report* which suggested that social workers get special training to become better investigators (Gove, 1995). For some the sense of having moved too far into a policing role, at the expense of providing meaningful support and change, has made the work an unsavory experience:

“So I resent (laughs) being an investigator. I didn’t want to be a cop. I don’t want to be a private investigator. I don’t want to do anything like that. .... I accept that we have a legal authority, but I think there’s a way that you can perform the legal function, and be a support to families. And I don’t think the Ministry gives us the time or the support to do that. And I think if you move into only doing investigations, and dumping the support (role) on the community, you’re going to see social workers leaving the (Ministry). Barb

Workers who have joined the Ministry since the implementation of the Gove Report described how their initial enthusiasm and interest have been eroded by the negative working environment. One worker graphically described how the constant work pressure finally
created not only an awareness of her own suffering, but of that of her colleagues as well:

You just develop these physical symptoms, and then you'd have people dropping like flies. Getting sick leave here - stress leave there. And so the team would constantly dwindle. There was no consistency in staffing. Almost every person that I knew there had a plan about how they were going to get out. I mean, we're talking about an organization in crisis. And really, how can you expect workers to make sound decisions if they're walking around traumatized (laughs). That's how I felt - I should be in my best frame of mind if I'm going to be doing this really challenging, demanding work. And here I am walking around with back spasms. I could barely drive, you know. With this (laughs) - the weight of the world on my shoulders. .... and I made a conscious decision that I did not feel safe with the practice that I could do. I did not feel that I could do adequate work .... Beth

Many of the participants stated in various ways that they had come to the Ministry expecting more from their employer in terms of sensitivity and responsiveness to the difficulties of the work. Several mourned the loss of the joy and enthusiasm they had brought to the work but which had gradually been eroded by the negative work situation.

I think for myself I find it .... quite sad. .... I'm somebody who came to this job wanting to do child protection and I see a lot of value in that job. And I feel good for doing this, when I can do it. And the sad part is that now I'm kind of at the point, along with other people I know, who joined at the same time, and have the same attitude towards the job - that we're looking at other avenues now, because we're not feeling appreciated. We're not feeling like we can do our job. It's almost like there's this little game of the people in Victoria that are going: 'let's see how far we can push them until they break. (Laughs) -If I feel like I can have a voice, and if I can just, in my own little way, effect some change, then that's great, and .... I will always consider staying in this job. .... it comes down to the fact too that, yes, we have a certain amount of responsibility for our own wellness, but when all of the responsibility is placed on us to look after our own wellness, and our own stress level .... that becomes a great source of frustration and it's more like just kind of throwing your hands up and saying: "well, forget it, I'm outta here."  April
c) Survival strategies.

In spite of the number of stressors that were identified and the range of negative feelings expressed, the participants of this focus group displayed humour and a strong will to survive. Each provided examples unique to their own needs and personality of how they resist and combat the forces they experience arrayed against them.

Some strategies have already been referred to in previous sections above, such as turning to union related documentation and activities. Certainly, for those who had survived for a relatively long period of time, and were determined to continue to do so, taking some kind of social action on their own behalf was essential to maintaining a healthy level of morale. For example, some of the more experienced workers declared their confidence in standing up to management and refusing to participate in procedures they feel are harmful to social workers or clients. Some advocated just saying no as individuals to whatever impossible bureaucratic demands are made, (none advocated refusing to do a direct action that would negatively impact a child or a family), such as refusing to cooperate with an audit or doing paperwork that is felt to be redundant or unnecessary. Several workers indicated there is a certain freedom and satisfaction in resistance, as the following statement asserts:

And you still feel a hell of a lot better if you can make them (management) uncomfortable and get them to back off. I feel more demoralized if I just sit there and take some of the garbage (other participants murmur agreement) and some of the unacceptable abuse that they throw out, without challenging it. So, it's much more invigorating to actually do something. And that's what social workers should be doing, if we're living up to our Code of Ethics. Ruth

Most of the participants described how sustaining the relationships are which they have with fellow social workers and clients. Similarly, several commented that just the
simple act of meeting together and sharing experiences is a valuable activity for shoring up
morale, especially when the daily grind causes people to question their work and perceptions

It's really important to have time just to sort of commiserate with people. .... and it's good to .... know I'm not by myself. But it's always good to hear succinctly put, other people's experiences, and to know that sometimes it's a bit crazy-making. You know, you think: 'am I the only one that feels there's something, some deficit in me, as a professional?' Griffin

Some participants however, admitted that nothing has been able to compensate for or alleviate the stress that has accumulated in the current work environment. Knowing they cannot possibly meet the demand of the workload, there is a tendency to withdraw into a kind of professional isolation. Such isolation is a kind of strategy to deal with the desperation created by the struggle with the dual issues of workload pressure and the fear of blame:

After awhile you get discouraged and disillusioned and people leave. ..... then you start feeling like you're the only one left standing, and eventually you withdraw into your own cubicle .... and just try to survive. You get in survival mode. So, what's happened in actuality is people are praying - you know - that the next disaster that happens, won't happen to them. That's what it's come down to. Lucy

d) Solutions to the perceived power imbalance

In the course of the various discussions when so many concerns were being revealed, it seemed important to also touch on what workers felt were possible solutions. For three participants, the ultimate answer lay in resignation and working outside the government system. Two have recently found work elsewhere in MCF. For the others, some form of collective action provided the most appealing alternative. Yet all had given some thought
about where the system could be improved and the profession strengthened, although only one expressed confidence that collective action within MCF will ultimately be effective. This subject will again be addressed in the discussion of the findings, which follows this section.

The following is a partial list of some solutions which were put forward by the participants:

- seeking protection through legislation:
  
  You almost need to have a social workers' Bill of Rights .... you need to narrow it down to the number of processes that are there to review the work. But you also need to have some kind of document, and practice, that speaks to respecting people while they're going through that (investigative process). Thomas

- obtaining right to the title of social worker which would address the apparent confusion that the public and media have about who exactly is doing the job of child protection social work:

- increased participation of social workers in union-related activities.

- development of the recently formed professional association, whose membership consists solely of child protection workers, which is intended to operate separately from the BCGEU and the BCASW.

- creation of a Ministry spokesperson, similar in function to the spokesperson employed by the Vancouver City Police, who can respond within limits of confidentiality to the specifics of any case, so that social workers can have confidence that a balanced assessment of a particular situation is given to the public and the media.

- provide a sufficient number of competent clinical supervisors so that each line social
worker is able to access intensive and timely supervision for case consultations.

- perhaps the most frequently mentioned issue was that of the capped caseload as recommended by the Child Welfare League of America (1989). In a similar vein, it was suggested that the B.C. government examine a number of jurisdictions, for example, other provinces, such as Quebec, the Scandinavian countries and Australia, to compare and contrast with alternative models of child protection

- connect the issue of workload with resources, in terms of workers and funded services:

  ... And our goal (Lucy and her social work team) was always to say: ... There’s only two solutions to this problem: narrow the mandate, or increase the resources. You can’t have it both ways, or you’re going to have a staff recruitment and retention problem, and a service quality problem'. Lucy
CHAPTER VI: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

6.1 Validity of the Findings

This study is intended to reflect the generally accepted wisdom that validity, as the "correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (Maxwell, 1996, p. 87), is a key issue in research design. Reference has already been made throughout the Methodology Section to ways in which the gathering and interpreting of data has been structured to ensure that the results are clearly representative of the views of the participants.

Although this study reveals important information concerning the experience of performing child protection work in B.C. at the present time, certain limitations are inherent in such a project. The following is a presentation of possible limitations, and responses to address the validity concerns which they raise:

1. The qualitative nature of the design of the study and the small sample size may limit the generalizability of the data to a wider population.

It is widely recognized that a qualitative study such as this, which relies on the detailed narrative descriptions provided by its participants, need not rely on replicability of results as a criterion for its evaluation (Lieblich, 1998, Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, Silverman, 1993). Likewise, the local context and the human story are the primary goals of qualitative research, not generalizability (Miller and Crabtree, 1994 as cited in Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Exploring the meaning of the child protection experience with a relatively small number of social workers is the explicit goal of this research. By making what Coffey and Atkinson refer to as abductive inferences, that is, "going from specific cases or findings
toward generic levels that allow us to move conceptually across a wide range of social
contexts” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p.162), these findings have attempted to reflect the
generalizability of these cases to theoretical propositions rather than to a specific population

All of the above not withstanding, it is still important to bear in mind that there was a
clear consistency of experience and opinion among all ten participants in spite of differences
in age, length of employment with MCF, gender, and type of work performed (e.g. 'Intake,
Family Service, After Hours, Youth Worker, Supervisor etc.).

2. There is a possibility that the title of the research (Fear of Blame) inevitably
attracted social workers who had a negative view of MCF, for whatever reason, and
the participants may not necessarily reflect the majority of MCF workers.

This is a legitimate concern and the reader must ultimately decide if these particular
participants, in light of other studies, media reports and MCF statistics (all of which have
been quoted in the body of this study), accurately reflect views prevalent in the general MCF
culture. It is the contention of this study that corroboration of the findings is indeed provided
through these external sources and, although generalizability is not an explicit goal, it is
nevertheless possible to interpret the views of the participants to be a reflection of a general
phenomenon among the MCF social worker population.

Using similar logic, one may argue that if these social workers do have a negative
view of the MCF management policies, then it is possible that a majority of the MCF social
workers share this point of view.
3. Only one focus group was conducted and the experiences reported may be confined to the perceptions of those individuals.

As noted in the Focus Group Discussion in Chapter IV, there was a surprisingly high rate of consistency of data produced by the focus group and individual participants, in spite of the marked difference in setting. This has been interpreted to mean that the perceptions of the focus group members, although relatively uniform, was not necessarily limited to that group of individuals. Furthermore, additional focus groups may provide more distinct data and balance the idiosyncrasies of the individual session (Kreuger, 1994).

4. Perhaps the most potentially serious limitations are the acknowledged researcher bias and the influence of the researcher on the participants during the interview process.

Transparency has been described as a means whereby the reader of a qualitative research report is able to see the basic processes of data collection (Rubin & Rubin, 1995). Therefore, in order to ensure that researcher bias was minimized in this study, it was essential that the data collection and interpretation processes be as transparent as possible. For example, all of the interviews were recorded and transcribed, which allowed an accurate presentation of participant discussion and evidence of how the researcher interacted with participants.

Member checks, which is the systematic soliciting of feedback about the data and the researcher’s conclusions, from the participants themselves (Maxwell, 1996, Guba and Lincoln, 1989, Miles and Huberman, 1984), are a particularly important device to guard against researcher bias in interpretation of data. Instances of how this was accomplished appear in the Methodology Section, Part IV.
5. There were a number of instances in the data which seemed to provide contradictory pictures of a situation, sometimes among different individuals, and in some cases, within the narrative of one individual. This could indicate that the original assumptions upon which the study is based are incorrect and thus invalidate the findings (Maxwell, 1996).

“In qualitative research, the goal is not to eliminate inconsistencies, but to make sure you understand why they occur” (Rubin and Rubin, 1995, p. 87). With one exception, there were only minor inconsistencies between participants, and these did not impact the ultimate identification of themes. However, the one area where notable contradictory statements occurred was when workers insisted they personally experienced no fear, yet made other statements revealing a high degree of anxiety concerning management response to critical incidents. This apparent contradiction has been interpreted in the findings and is considered to be an important aspect of the discussion in that it not only underlined the complexity of the situation, but revealed an additional aspect that had not been originally considered.

6.2 Relationship of the Findings to the Literature

This study has provided insight into the lives of ten individuals with a wide range of experience in the field of child protection. It is pertinent to underline once again that this research has been concerned primarily with understanding the issues which social workers are facing, as they themselves see those issues. In a sense, the findings stand on their own, because the participants defined their own issues. They also articulated their own analysis and critique of the current system of child protection in the Province of British Columbia. Many of the observations and opinions of the participants in this study support the findings
of a number of other studies concerning child welfare issues, yet also reveal unique insights into the source of what was revealed as widely-spread social worker dissatisfaction.

Fundamental to the findings of this study is the belief of social workers that the child protection system has changed dramatically for the worse, and that this change is connected with the government’s acceptance and implementation of the Gove Report recommendations. Those individuals who worked for MCF prior to the Gove Inquiry have the benefit of an historical perspective which informs their strong sense of the experienced difference in the new approach. For workers without that historical reference, there is the sense of disappointment at the discrepancy between newly embraced social work values and the reality of having to work within a system which does not allow those values to be meaningfully applied. Nevertheless, for both kinds of workers, there is the certain sense of a ‘poisoned atmosphere’, and a profound disagreement with the focus of the work and the disrespectful attitude which management displays, consciously or unconsciously, towards the social workers.

1. Workload is a severe symptom, but not the real problem

The impact of the new approach to child protection in B.C. on workload is indisputable and the findings from this study confirm that the participants consider this to be a major issue. Worker burnout from sheer exhaustion, resulting in stress leaves and resignations, is perceived as an inevitable and frequent reality within MCF culture. Social workers legitimately want to reduce workload to relieve the inevitable exhaustion created by increased administrative expectations. Hiring more staff is certainly one solution. However,
workers are not so naive as to believe this is the only solution to the workload problem.

MCF has made repeated attempts to recruit large numbers of social workers, including advertising in jurisdictions outside B.C., and dropping the requirement for new workers to have a BSW. However, there is some cynicism and resentment felt by social workers that the government is not really interested in relieving their stress and is actually reacting to persistent negative publicity in the media. There is a recognition that negative press may indeed result in the creation of more child protection positions. There is also an understanding, as a recent analysis of the role of the press in policy making in child welfare has noted, that negative press can and does lead to more stringent policies and procedures, making child welfare work even more difficult (Callahan and Callahan, 1995).

As a further irony, because child welfare services are focused on the parent’s failure to care, rather than the provision of services which enhance the capacity of families to provide care, the message conveyed to the public when management hires more workers is that more and better trained social workers can expose the child abuser. Once again, the concept of blame is reinforced.

Whatever the interpretation of the need for more workers happens to be, workload indisputably remains an ongoing issue. Sadly, attempts being made by management to address what appears to have become an ongoing staffing crisis in MCF fall short on two counts. First, management has simply not been able to attract and keep the number of workers required. Secondly, such hiring attempts are only stopgap measures which do not address the more serious problems identified by the workers, which are the drift away from family support and the loss of services for the wide range of situations where abuse and
neglect exist.

In other words, while hiring more staff is essential in the short term, what the government may be missing is that filling in the spaces with more bodies is not the real solution to the problem. Instead, attention needs to be paid to the complex philosophical and ethical issues that have been identified by these participants. If MCF is to provide effective child protection services, it is these issues which need to be addressed.

2. What is obvious continues to be ignored

The pronounced emphasis on protection rather than family support and prevention is a subject that surfaced repeatedly throughout the research process. Most of the participants were more inclined to embrace the philosophy which had been put forward clearly by the Berger Commission as long ago as 1985, and more recently by the Making Changes Report in 1993. Both emphasized the importance of family support as the major tool of state intervention, believing that compulsory intervention by the courts should not be encouraged, except in the most extreme circumstances, unless the family has first been offered supportive services in the home.

It is difficult for social workers to perform in a system that has created what they feel is a badly skewed intervention procedure. While agreeing that child protection must absolutely remain an item of the highest priority, this research indicated that social workers have strong feelings about the shift in emphasis from prevention to investigation and agreed with Kendrick’s observation that:
we must be on guard against a government that, under the banner of benevolence, sanctions wholesale interventionary tactics, undermines civil liberties, and potentially harms both the children and the adults it intends to help (Kendrick, 1990).

Social workers find themselves struggling with the construction of a system characterized by a preoccupation with documenting and reducing risk factors of abuse and neglect - a preoccupation which has overtaken the equally important principles of support and prevention. Social workers thus find that their inability to offer families the supports that are so clearly indicated by the assessment process is a clear violation of social work principles. Furthermore, another result of this apparent disregard by management for their professional opinion and training is that social workers feel disenfranchised in their own area of expertise (Callahan et al, 1998, Callahan & Lumb, 1995).

In describing what feels unethical and ineffective, the question is then begged, what does feel right? What does work? In examining these questions, this research has reinforced some of the findings of a recent University of Victoria study into best practice in child welfare, which raised a number of issues concerning the impact of best practice on children, parents and workers. In exploring other studies concerning best practice, the University of Victoria study found that the importance of the relationship between parent and worker was emphasized, and in particular, how vital the quality of this relationship is to the actual outcome for the child (Callahan et al). For social workers to be denied the ability to exercise best practice not only offends their sense of ethics, but in the process, as this research reveals, appears to contribute significantly to worker demoralization and burnout.
3. The sense of disempowerment

The questions posed above begin to uncover the more serious problems which are contributing to the high levels of stress and dissatisfaction among child protection workers in B.C. The clearly identified issues of workload and inability to exercise ‘best practice’ are familiar to social workers and have been recognized in the literature.

The findings in this study are consistent with those which have focused on the fact that organizational requirements and policies in many bureaucracies in recent years have led to the erosion of professional autonomy and decision-making and contributed to the familiar phenomenon of burnout for human services workers (Arches, 1985, Gambrill, 1983).

Also confirmed is the deeply felt sense of disempowerment and disrespect that the participants experience in their relationship with management. This is further intensified by the ethical abhorrence these workers have for the manner in which policies and programs have been implemented or eliminated, with apparently no consideration for the negative impact on clients and staff.

In identifying that social workers are well aware of how child protection should be practiced, this study revealed the frustration inherent in expressing opinions based on knowledge and experience, which are repeatedly disregarded by management. In a similar vein, another recent research project, in the process of asking workers and clients how they would design child welfare services if left to their own devices, discovered that one of the clearest findings from workers interviewed was their sense of isolation and lack of power. The authors found that: “Just as clients feel marginalized and stigmatized by child welfare, so do workers” (Callahan and Lumb, 1995). Workers felt they were able to please no one,
sustaining criticism from children, managers, other professionals, the press and the public. Callahan and Lumb also note that workers, like their clients, internalize the blame.

4. Fear of Blame

All of the issues identified above certainly contribute to social worker dissatisfaction, yet these alone still do not adequately account for the high levels of turnover and frustration that were reported by the participants in this study. Analysis of the data in this research reveals that it is the combination of the sense of disempowerment felt by workers and the expectation of blame, that has been the final straw for most of the participants with regard to their ability to either commit to or take pleasure in the work of child protection.

The critical ingredient that has apparently exhausted the social workers’ tolerance of injustice appears to be the unprecedented imposition of blame. This has not only contributed to worker anxiety, but has created a deep sense of anger and frustration. This study confirmed that fear of blame is an important element in the complexity of issues contributing to worker stress and there was general agreement among the participants that this fear has become a constant consideration while performing the work.

What was unexpected in the findings however, was that it was not necessarily their own fear that the social workers found most difficult to endure. Although workers have been disturbed by the possibility of personal blame if something goes wrong on their caseloads, this group revealed that they are even more angered by, and even contemptuous of, the fear of blame which they sense in senior management. It is this fear which they see as the underlying motivation for many government decisions. Ironically, social workers stand
confidently behind their practice, when allowed to operate as their ethics and values dictate. They understand that it is management who is afraid of public condemnation when a child dies and it is that fear which is passed down to the social workers in the form of what they feel are irrational policies and unreasonable disciplinary actions.

5. Distortion of accountability

One of the explicit sources of worker frustration is management's preoccupation with preventing child deaths. Most offensive is the assumption that it is possible to accomplish such a task, and worse, to place the responsibility for that task on one group of people, namely the child protection workers. This stance by management has resulted in a proliferation of mechanisms to monitor social work practice. Social workers expressed an absence of confidence in the resulting accountability procedures which have been set up, supposedly to protect the public from social worker incompetence. These procedures are perceived to be administered unfairly, tending to suppress rather than encourage best practice. In the process, social workers understand that the whole concept of blame is a constructed reality by management. This perception coincides with that of Dingwall (1986), who has found that blame is applied by governments without a coherent or sympathetic framework to facilitate the understanding of the many inter-personal factors contributing to a child's death.

Social workers also resent that the audit process has been generated by a public perception of a problem which, as Parton (1991) has stated, has become focused on a phenomenon when there has been no marked increase in its incidence, only a surge in our
awareness of it. This perception of ineffective utilization of practice review also concurs with Hill's view of such inquiries. He explains that their prime function is to exercise a social control function response to child deaths with respect to public employees, and has resulted in actual and threatened use of sanctions such as disciplinary action, redeployment or firing (Hill, 1990).

Although social workers may not feel oppressed to the degree that many other disadvantaged social groups do, they still must live with the realization that they are vulnerable and stigmatized. They experience a sense of victimization by a management which has changed the rules for how accountability for their practice is carried out. That is not to say that social workers don't expect to be held accountable for their practice. What they do feel is a strong sense of injustice and helplessness when they believe, and in some cases have actually experienced, that they can be held responsible for situations over which they have no control, such as lack of time, resources or adequate supervision.

In emphasizing the element of fear, this study does not intend to portray social workers as quivering in a constant state of terror. In reality, social workers seem to be able to separate their private anxieties from their practice, and admirably, for most of the participants, personal vulnerability appears to be endured with varying degrees of courage, defiance and determination to survive, in spite of the obvious stress that the culture of blame has created. Yet the reality of blame remains and the tension it creates undermines mental and physical health. The study Best Practice in Child Welfare (Callahan et al, 1998), in one of its major recommendations, also acknowledged the reality that social workers must "navigate through fear", and observed:
... as long as government ministries charged with responsibility for child welfare convey the message that they can protect all children, then they set themselves up for failure, public scandal, pressure to tighten up procedures and monitor more closely workers and parents to prevent 'mistakes'. Workers must demonstrate that they have done everything possible (within policy guidelines) to prevent child tragedies, even if they know what they are doing makes no sense. Parents avoid the Ministry and community partners criticize its efforts (Callahan et al, 1998, p.64).

Examples of criticism which are well-intentioned but perceived as destructive by social workers are those made by agencies set up to monitor social worker practice. In a recent annual report, the Children's Commissioner observed that:

Based upon our review of the 130 current plans of care, we concluded that care planning for children in continuing custody at the present time is inadequate and requires a major overhaul. Only 8% of care plans were in compliance with MCF standards (Children's Commissioner, Annual Review, 1998, p. 22)

While such observations may be correct, workers feel the implication is that it is social worker planning which is somehow inadequate, while insufficient attention is given in the report to the cause for those inadequate plans, including the issues of workload and the absence of resources. Workers are aware of many situations such as that quoted above, where such criticism is believed to have been used by management to target the case worker rather than the bureaucratic organization which has created unrealizable standards and expectations.

The experience of what is felt to be negative, undemocratic monitoring procedures has therefore shaken the loyalty of workers to the employer and has damaged the trust and sense of safety that is an integral part of a confident, creative practice. It is this inability to trust management, because of the apparent tendency to divert blame for system inadequacies to the worker, which has undermined the commitment of many child protection workers in
6.3 Implications for social work

Based on the findings in this study, the implications for social work can be expressed, as follows:

- Expectations for carrying out time-consuming policies and procedures designed to address perceived public concern about child deaths have been imposed on MCF social workers. This has been done without consultation or consideration for the significant increase in workload or personal responsibility for the workers, nor with attention to best practice. Resulting exhaustion and low morale have serious negative consequences for recruitment and retention of trained, competent, child protection staff.

- Social workers feel limited in their ability to exercise the kind of critical professional judgment that is required to ensure ethical, effective social work practice. The inability to perform their new duties effectively has meant that social workers feel they are unable to adequately meet the needs of clients. This has inevitably had a negative impact on public perception of the profession of social work, as represented by the child protection workers.

- In attempting to prevent child deaths, government and media have distorted the concept of accountability, and enhanced the focus on blame, which has had a negative impact on the social work practice of child protection workers. There seems to be no effective forum or means to protect themselves against this unprecedented...
imposition of responsibility that no other profession does or should have to bear collectively in this society. As a relatively large sub-group of social workers in British Columbia, child protection workers have not found a coherent collective voice to articulate their specific case practice issues and the ethical conflicts contained therein, nor to counteract the disrespect of their professional values and prerogatives. (The BCASW has attempted to fill this role, but, as outlined in Chapter II, Part 2.2, it does not have the support of the majority of child protection workers and is thus hampered in effectively representing their interests to government.)

- Social workers have an ethical responsibility to reveal the flaws in the system within which they work. There is thus a need for social workers to participate in reconstructing the definition of child welfare in B.C., not only to improve their own sense of professional identity and practice, but to challenge and change the way these concepts are defined by government and the community. This study has indicated that, unfortunately, social workers do not believe that management has any real interest in accommodating their views for structural change of the child welfare system.

6.4 Recommendations

The possible solutions to the problems revealed in this study are too numerous to detail here. Involved is a complex mix of interrelated issues concerning professionalism, education, public relations, workload, hiring practices, review mechanisms and the underlying theme of a residual approach by government to child welfare which affects
funding, and the role of the social worker in providing services. Clearly, social workers need to have a role in reworking the child protection system and in redefining their own professional status as employees of the B.C. government, in spite of the context of fear which inevitably inhibits the possibilities for structural change from the bottom up.

Important issues such as workload and best practice have been dealt with extensively in other research and are mentioned only briefly below. Therefore, the recommendations in this study will focus primarily on the issues of accountability vs. blame, and professional recognition. It is these issues which are critical to addressing the anxiety and lack of professional respect which the findings revealed were significant factors in how social workers view their working relationship with management.

1. Previous studies of workload should be reexamined, and the cost of the real numbers needed to supply the workforce necessary to meet the current policy requirements should be discussed in a public forum.

It is essential that the public understands what is required to provide the level of service of child protection that has been demanded in the media and the Gove Report. A decision then needs to be made about whether the millions of dollars required should be spent. If the answer is no, then the government should be prepared to take a stand that the structure of the child protection system, as demanded in the Gove Report recommendations, should be modified, and a more reasonable approach taken, given the resources that are available.

A relaxation of the fixation on preventing child deaths above all other social work functions, yet keeping the safety and wellbeing of children as a paramount consideration, in
accordance with the CFCSA, would not only make the job more attractive to the workers, but would remove the need to assign blame at every crisis. This would require a government committed to taking a strong stand in defence of what is reasonable, and accepting that there is an inherent element of risk in child protection that will always be part of the work.

2. The Social Workers' Act should be amended to create a College of Social Workers and a Board of Registration, which is responsible to its membership, through annual elections and reporting procedures. Implicit in the creation of a College and a Board would be the control of title, as would the mandatory registration of all those deemed to be social workers. Possession of a social work degree from an accredited institution would be a requirement for title.

One way that social workers can become better respected as professionals is by working pro-actively to improve their identity and image in the community by strengthening those professional bodies which are designed to represent them. Obtaining right to title is one solution that is long overdue and would achieve the raising of the standards of qualification and practice for all those undertaking to call themselves social workers (Alcock, 1998). This is not a new concept, but the necessity for its actualization is becoming increasingly urgent as social workers struggle with the knowledge that their ability to assert their professional perspective continues to be undermined.

It is important that social workers become united in their commitment to accountability, and further, that they have confidence that accountability procedures under the Social Workers' Act not only provide protection to clients, but are also administered fairly and with the goal of improving practice. To remove the capricious nature of blame, which is inherent when an employer is driven by political and fiscal imperative, an
alternative and credible process must be in place that demonstrably protects the public interest.

Standards of conduct and practice would have to be defined, including those affecting social workers in the field of child welfare. To this end, the College should become involved in the setting of the training curriculum of Ministry employees, in collaboration with the professional association, the academic institutions, and the employer.

It is not reasonable to set high standards of accountability when individuals have not been required to have the tools to meet them. Grandfathering employees who could demonstrate required levels of skills, competencies and critical decision making could be considered, at least in the short term. Training to bring employees up to the required standards could be provided by the employer.

It is likely that the public would favour a strengthening of social work professionalism. Most resistance would come from management due to the cost of retraining and perhaps the cost of registration for employees.

There is also the unavoidable fact that there are simply not enough trained social workers at the present time to do child protection as it is presently defined. Thus, the goal of all child protection workers possessing a degree will need to be achieved in an incremental way.

Hopefully, by taking responsibility for monitoring the professional behaviour of child protection workers, a College of Social Workers and Board of Registration would reduce the need and the ability of government to apply the kind of controls over professional decision-making that currently exists.
Coincidentally with the writing of this paper, MCF struck a Working Group to develop a framework for regulation in the social service sector, with its composition reflecting participation from a number of constituencies including Social Work, but also featuring representatives from other disciplines such as Child and Youth Care, Early Childhood Education and Community Living. One of the stated tasks of the Working Group is to focus on issues such as reviewing a variety of regulatory models and legislation from B.C. and other jurisdictions with the intention of developing a regulatory framework for each of the human and social service professions involved. Each profession would have its own Professional Board, but a Council of Human and Social Service Professions would have superceding jurisdiction over the individual Boards (Robinson, 2000).

Although this Working Group is sponsored by the government and has an unprecedented opportunity to finally develop some kind of professional regulatory mechanism which would impact the profession of social work, there is a need to proceed cautiously. In the rush to deliver better protection of the public and clearer requirements for registration, including such important matters as right to title, it is important to consider the flaws in such a group regulatory mechanism. One critic of the plan expressed his concern that:

To advance their profession through self-regulations, Professional Boards must be able to intervene and resolve issues pertaining to their profession. While these professional issues can often overlap with issues pertaining to employee-employer relations, the proposed Act must offer the necessary authority for intervenor status of a Professional Board, should the need arise. Should this role and authority not be granted, one can predict there will be little change from the present outdated Social Workers Act, which is hampered by its inability to promote professional social work and regulate practice of its members (Sasaki, 2000).
Social workers should be careful that, in the relief at finally having the opportunity to enhance professional status through self-regulation, compromises made with the other groups involved on such a Council will not undermine or dilute the values and goals of the social work profession.

In conjunction with achieving recognized professional status, it is imperative that child protection social workers work together collectively, under one strong, united professional body. Whether this is the BCASW, or another organization of their choice, the key is to speak with one coherent voice.

3. Social workers need to be involved in discussions which redefine the case review process, as conducted by the Audit and Review Division.

The impact of the audit and review process on social workers lives and reputations is so profound that it is imperative for that process to become more equitable and balanced. Issues such as excessive caseloads, inadequate supervision and high levels of agency change and reorganization are indicators of risk to good case work and to the personal wellbeing of the workers themselves. In times of crisis, these factors are not always taken into consideration and the narrow facts are interpreted to the disadvantage of the worker. The employer of course has a right to conduct its own internal reviews of employee performance. However, there should be room for improvement in the process as it currently stands.

For example, analysis of the psychological components of the case is important, as well as the facts. There is value in not only asking ‘What happened?’, but also, ‘How can those events be understood?’ An appreciation of relationship influences on families and
professional workers utilizing concepts such as systems and social construction theories, are helpful when reviewing professional actions, and acknowledges the importance of professional accountability (Reder, Duncan, & Gray, 1993).

Social workers should be able to respond to case review reports in a way that they feel heard, and their views about the case review process itself should be included in the report, whether or not they are contradictory to the perceptions of the practice analyst. Ideally, case reviews should involve discussions with all persons involved in the case under investigation, individually and in a group, so that there is less likelihood that one person becomes targeted with responsibility for an unfortunate circumstance. Such a multidisciplinary discussion would help to provide a common understanding of the ‘facts’.

4. **Social workers should insist on reinstatement of a government e-mail system which allows them to communicate as individuals to the entire group at one time.**

Accountability requires information and exchange of ideas. An available and effective communication tool which links social workers is an indispensable component of organizing change. Without the cooperation and support of management, it is difficult for such a large workforce to effect this level of group interaction.

5. **All child protection workers should be provided with effective clinical supervision by individuals who are also trained social workers.**

Accountability requires consultation with an effective, knowledgeable supervisor. A survey of professional social workers in Britain in 1996 revealed that an overwhelming
majority of social workers believe that all social work managers should be experienced in social work practice (Hunt, 1998). Closer to home, the Recruitment and Retention Study (1996), determined that social workers felt MCF should pay special attention to the training and other support needs of District Supervisors so that they can properly perform their clinical supervision role.

6. Child protection workers should demand, through effective advocacy groups, to collectively have meaningful discussions about practice and policy issues, and to be able to provide feedback to management concerning major policy decisions.

This recommendation speaks in part to the necessity of defining and implementing ‘best practice’. This is an issue that has been explored extensively in a number of studies, notably in the Best Practice in Child Welfare study (Callahan et al, 1998) cited previously. My study endorses the findings of that research and urges that careful consideration be given by government to implementation of its recommendations.

Inherent in this particular recommendation is the advisability of social workers and government together examining alternative approaches to the delivery of child welfare. There are a number of jurisdictions in the western world, for example, France (Cooper et al, 1995), Sweden (Hudson and Galaway, Eds, 1995), and Australia (Fook, 1993), with systems which do not feature a preoccupation with worker accountability and blame. It is not heretical for social workers to insist collectively that there are other ways of providing child protection that are more respectful of clients and workers alike, and yet are able to ensure reasonable levels of safety for children in the community.

Acquiring the ability to take on such a role goes hand-in-hand with strengthening
professional status, as noted above. It also requires the strengthening of whatever agencies or associations that social workers want to use to represent them as advocates, whether it is a union or a professional association, or both. Whatever alternatives are chosen, social workers must be prepared to participate actively and collectively for such bodies to be effective.

7. Caseloads of child protection workers should be capped according to standards set by the Child Welfare League of America.

This recommendation is included because it was so overwhelmingly endorsed by the participants in this study. While recognizing that every agency should conduct its own work analysis in order to determine its appropriate workload standards for child protection services, the CWLA has stipulated recommended caseload sizes:

- **Investigation or intake**: no more than 12 active cases per month.
- **Ongoing cases**: no more than 17 active cases (families), assuming the rate of new cases assigned is no more than one for every six open cases.
- **Combined investigations and ongoing cases**: no more than ten active ongoing cases and no more than four active investigations per month.

The CWLA further states that caseloads should be maintained at reasonable levels and notes: “Any significant increase in caseload size raises the risks to children, may result in poor social work, and can lead to social worker burnout” (CWLA, 1989, p.52).

Admittedly, workload relative to available staff do not make this an immediately
realizable goal. Nevertheless it is a goal that should be targeted as one which would enable the effective delivery of services to families who have such complex and diverse needs, and who deserve the time and skills that a well-trained social worker can provide.

8. MCF should consider carrying out a province-wide research project which would gather child protection workers into focus groups, and utilizing a format similar to this project, determine the issues that are contributing to the high turnover and inability to attract new workers to the field of child protection.

An excerpt from the CWLA Standards of Excellence, with regard to the basic premises of staff recruitment strategy, outlines the elements that are necessary to attract social workers to the field of child welfare, and which were identified as missing by the social workers who participated in this research project:

   Effective staff retention/recruitment is founded on the assignment of appropriate workloads and the provision of quality training, preparation, and supervision; adequate financial compensation; access to resources for clients; liability protection; clear performance expectations; recognition for providing quality service; positive images of the role of practitioners; file clarity; opportunities for career advancement; and participation in the decisions that affect one’s work (CWLA, 1996, p.62).

   If these elements are revealed to be missing in the opinion of the majority of child protection workers in B.C., as this thesis contends, then the government would be wise to review the measures that need to be taken to ensure these same elements are evident in the workplace. Only then will it be possible to attract the numbers of trained individuals required to provide the effective delivery of child protection services.
CHAPTER VII: SUMMARY

This study has attempted to reveal how the implementation by the provincial government of the recommendations contained in the Gove Report has had an adverse impact on child protection workers. The most visible result has been a huge increase in workload. In addition, lack of effective supervision of new staff, and the sheer difficulty of the work itself, has intimidated and discouraged new workers, resulting in staff retention problems. Experienced workers are not supported to have positive training opportunities and are expected to shoulder the ever-increasing weight of workload without recognition of the time and pressures involved, causing unprecedented numbers of sick leaves and resignations.

The social workers themselves believe that all of the above have contributed to their inability to perform the work in the manner they were trained to do. At the same time, the government has created measures which effectively result in denying social workers the ability to use their professional judgment. Removal of resource funding prevents effective change for families and places social workers exclusively in the role of social police.

Issues of workload, disregard for professional prerogatives and inability to perform effective, ethical social work have always been present to some degree in the field of child protection. What is novel to the current situation, and has tipped the balance in terms of the social worker's ability to cope, is the now pervasive sense of vulnerability and danger at a personal level. It is the contention of this study that it is this factor which has contributed in a subtle but powerful way to what appears to be a crisis of child protection in B.C.

The fear of blame has been created, not only from the public criticism by government of social workers in high profile cases, but also by the ongoing scrutiny of practice as
conducted by audit and review teams, whose procedures are perceived by the social worker to be judgmental and destructive. The fear of blame thus creates pressure on workers to spend inordinate amounts of time documenting practice while trying to manage high numbers of serious risk situations. The result is an unprecedented occurrence of worker exhaustion and burn-out.

It is not that social workers are afraid of having their practice scrutinized, because they know they can justify what they do verbally and contextually, and are prepared to stand by their work. It is the expectation that the review process is not fair and condemnation is inevitable once the process is begun. Fortunately, their commitment to the work allows social workers to courageously carry on in spite of such an omnipresent threat, yet the anticipation of that possibility take its toll.

At the same time, social workers are disgusted and contemptuous of the fear that is manifested by senior management, as evidenced by policies that are interpreted as elaborate 'cover-your-ass' attempts of those in power. The social workers perceive it is actually the fear of blame by senior bureaucrats and politicians, which provides a significant impetus to what is interpreted as the current ineffective and unsatisfactory approach to child protection in B.C.

This study provides a description of experiences which may assist other social workers in identifying their own dissatisfactions, as a vital preliminary step in challenging the constructed system of blame and financial restraint, which penalizes workers and clients alike. There is more than one way to approach child protection and this research confirms that social workers have a good sense of positive alternatives to performing their tasks.
Furthermore, with their unique training and values, social workers have a vital role to play in advocating for the children and families who benefit from child welfare services. What makes this process so challenging for social workers is that, as individuals and professionals, their interests should be very much aligned with those of their clients. Social worker empowerment needs to become an issue that extends beyond personal security in the workplace. They must provide leadership in defining the fundamental shifts which need to occur in terms of how society perceives control and distribution of resources, poverty, gender discrimination and the construction of child abuse itself.

Social workers have the choice of taking control of their professional life by embracing the concept that “radical activity is one positive response to workplace oppression” (Arches, 1985). By becoming empowered as professionals, social workers can participate on a more equal footing with government in reconstructing a child protection system which takes into account the needs of clients and the ethical imperatives of the profession. As a previous Superintendent of Child Welfare has commented:

The Ministry for Children & Families needs to be modest in its objectives and humble in its achievements. It needs to shift its focus away from administrative and organizational change and to be realistic about what can be achieved with the theories and practices available to its social workers. It needs to listen to staff and support them in the difficult environment in which they work (Armitage, 1998, p. 106).

This research offers a unique opportunity for MCF management to gain insight into ways of restoring the damaged relationship with employees that has become a serious impediment to accomplishing the goal of delivering effective child welfare services in B.C.
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APPENDIX 1

SAMPLES OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES FROM 1995 THROUGH 2000
CONFIRMING THE NEGATIVE SITUATIONS CHILD PROTECTION WORKERS
ARE FACING, IN B.C., AND OTHER JURISDICTIONS.

- Alarming child abuse allegations are going unheeded (Vancouver Sun, April 22, 1995)
- Teacher frustrated by social services’ inaction on abuse case (Vancouver Sun, April 24, 1995)
- Tot died after four reports of abuse not followed up, report says. (Vancouver Sun, October 19, 1995)
- Calgary social worker fired after tot’s death in house fire (Calgary Herald, December 21, 1995). Social Services minister blamed poor judgment and a miscalculation by staff. This was the first time in 14 years that a social worker had been fired for incompetence.
- Premier Glen Clark: there’ll be disciplinary action if there are problems (Vancouver Sun, April 22, 1995).
- Suspension of four social workers politically motivated, union says, (Vancouver Sun, November 14, 1996). Suspension of social workers without pay, reassignment to positions of lesser responsibility and retraining, no child protection duties. The union reported that social workers across the province were afraid they were next on the government hit list.
- Nelson children taken into care for political reasons (Vancouver Sun, November 25, 1996). President of BCGEU, John Shields says “when you see the level of involvement going all the way up to the Director of Child Protection to decide whether something is grounds for apprehension, and it’s made at a very serious level, you almost get the impression that they’re deciding to do it to cover their backsides.
- Stress forces social workers to quit (Vancouver Sun, February 15, 1997). Social workers stressed out by workload and public criticism.
• Don't join wildcat walkout, union tells social workers (Vancouver Sun, March 4, 1997). Although the government recently hired 300 additional social workers, workloads remain high and many social workers are said to be demoralized by scrutiny of the ministry’s actions in several high profile cases involving the death of children.”

• Abbotsford social workers stay home to protest crisis (Vancouver Sun, March 6, 1997)

• Social workers struggle under caseloads, criticism (Vancouver Sun, April 24, 1997)

• NDP spurns Campbell’s offer to help children by spending more, (Vancouver Sun, May 14, 1997). Premier Clark recruited “tough-as-nails” Plecas (Deputy Minister) because as Clark put it: “you can’t have a bunch of social workers running the Ministry”.

• B.C. Family Services draw new fire (B.C. Bureau, June 28, 1997). Investigation showed that there was a serious misjudgment on the part of the Ministry.

• B.C. children remain at risk, union claims (Vancouver Sun, November 26, 1997). BCGEU President, John Shields says that child protection workers are away on sick leave at twice the average of other government employees. Most of the 300 social workers hired since the Gove Report have quit.

• Abused children put on waitlist (The Globe & Mail, October 17, 1997)

• Stressed workers, new obstacles (The Province, May 25, 1998)

• Threats, fear, come with the territory (The Province, May 25, 1998)

• More grief for B.C. children of tragedy (The Province, August 2, 1999)

• B.C, scrambling to deal with child-protection staff crisis (Vancouver Sun, April 1, 2000). Child-protection staff demoralized, overworked.
January 28, 1999

Project Title: Fear of Blame: Post-Gove Report Child Protection in B.C.

Co-Investigator: Marsha Early - MSW Student
Principal Investigator: Dr. Deborah O’Connor
   Assistant Professor
   School of Social Work, UBC
   Phone: 822-5299

Dear Prospective Participant:

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project that I am conducting as a student in the Masters Program at the School of Social Work at the University of British Columbia.

The purpose of this research is to understand how the fear of being blamed for child deaths on their caseloads impacts child protection social workers in B.C. I am interested in talking with a number of social workers in some depth to get an understanding of what this responsibility means to you, in terms of how you manage personally and professionally while carrying out the difficult job of child protection work.

It is my belief, as a former child protection worker myself, that involvement in this project will provide social workers with a way to focus on their experiences, individually and collectively, in a supportive, confidential environment. The objective is to develop insights into how to relieve the imposition of a stressful and unreasonable responsibility, and at the same time become more empowered about the professional aspects of the work, in order to provide the kind of service that is not only protective of children but also satisfying for social workers. It is my hope that this project will make a contribution to expanding public awareness of the deeply felt
APPENDIX 3

LETTER OF EXPLANATION TO RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS, INCLUDING CONSENT FORM

Date: March 15, 1999

Project Title: Fear of Blame: Post-Gove Report Child Protection in B.C.

Co-Investigator: Marsha Early - MSW Student
Principal Investigator: Dr. Deborah O'Connor
Assistant Professor
School of Social Work, UBC
Phone: 822-5299

Participant:

PURPOSE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

Thank you for your expression of interest in participating in this research project.
As outlined in the first letter you received (or notice to which you responded), the purpose of this research is to understand how the fear of being blamed for child deaths on their caseloads impacts child protection social workers in B.C. I am interested in talking with a number of social workers in some depth to get an understanding of what this responsibility means to you, in terms of how you manage personally and professionally while carrying out the difficult job of child protection work.

It is my belief, as a former child protection worker myself, that involvement in this project will provide social workers with a way to focus on their experiences, individually and collectively, in a supportive, confidential environment. The objective is to develop insights into how to relieve the imposition of a stressful and unreasonable responsibility, and at the same time become more empowered about the professional aspects of the work, in order to provide the kind of service that is not only protective of children but satisfying for social workers. This project will form part of the graduate level research course requirement towards my Masters of Social Work degree.

It is expected that your participation will involve two separate sessions: The first will consist of an individual interview session with me.* The other will be as part of a 6 member focus group discussion, which I will facilitate, to expand on and share
the variety of information that came up in the interview discussions.

The anticipated time commitment required from you will be approximately 4 ½ hours. The interviews and discussion group will take place at a mutually acceptable location. The School of Social Work at UBC is one option. I have attached a copy of the interview questions which will serve to focus and direct discussion, although there will be opportunity to address other relevant issues of interest to yourself and other participants.

The interviews will be semi-structured and questions will usually be open-ended allowing for a wide range of response. The group discussion will follow the same format. The interviews and focus group will be recorded on audiotape, and transcribed by me. You will receive a copy of the transcripts from your personal interview and invited to provide corrections and feedback.

Because of the sensitive subject matter under discussion, there will be an opportunity at the end of the group for debriefing. I will also make follow-up phone calls to all participants to provide another opportunity to express any outstanding concerns.

Confidentiality

To protect your right to confidentiality, you may expect the following procedures as part of the research process:

- No identifying names or descriptions will be used and pseudonyms will be provided when referring to individual social workers.

- Standard procedures will be followed for storing data in a safe, locked place and computer files will be password protected.

- Actual names of participants will be stored separately from the raw data.

- Any raw data or quotes that are incorporated into the final research report, or any academic or professional publication, will have all identifying information removed.

- Selected parts of the research may be presented to class for discussion and analysis, but will have all identifying information deleted.

* When it became clear that some participants would be more comfortable with individual interviews, a decision was made to have one focus group of six people, and four individual interviews. Each person was required to participate in only one group or individual session, lasting approximately two hours.
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time.

I agree that any discussions or interviews in which I participate in connection with this study may be audiotaped and that tapes and other identifying data will be disposed of as outlined in the body of the above letter.

I will be provided with a copy of this consent form for my own records.

I consent to participate in this study.

Participant Signature          Date

Signature of Witness           Date

Yours truly,

Marsha Early,
Graduate Student,
School of Social Work,
University of British Columbia
APPENDIX 4

LETTER PROVIDING DETAILS OF THE FOCUS GROUP

Dear

This is to confirm that the focus group, in which you have agreed to participate, will be held as follows:

DATE: Friday, March 19, 1999

PLACE: University of British Columbia,
School of Social Work,
Room 124

TIME: 1:00 - 3:00 p.m.

Attached please find a rough sketch of how to find your way if you are not familiar with the University campus. As noted, I am suggesting that you park in the parking structure just slightly south and west of the School of Social Work. Parking is relatively expensive there, but I will be reimbursing you for the cost of parking (or bus fare) for all participants.

I would like to take the opportunity here to provide some further clarification of the topic under discussion. As noted in the original letters of introduction, I have made an assumption, based on my own experience, plus discussions with many other social workers, that child protection work today is carried out under a number of demanding expectations concerning job performance and practice issues. It is my intention to gather information directly from front line workers, and hear in their own words how they understand the meaning of their work. I am looking forward to hearing all points of view, which will be integrated into an analysis of all the information gathered.

In terms of the kind of information that will be produced, I anticipate that social workers will not only provide an explanation of how the work they do impacts them personally and professionally, but will also help me to identify more clearly the specific
personally and professionally, but will also help me to identify more clearly the specific issues on which my research should focus. It is my hope that the process will also generate some innovative ideas for constructive empowerment for the profession.

In addition, I hope to identify recent changes or shifts in government policies and performance expectations and how practice has been impacted by the current government approach to child protection, in terms of providing effective service to clients. A view of stressors as well as positive changes within the system will all provide valuable insights into the meaning of the work.

The intended audience for this research is, most importantly, social workers in the field, who can benefit from having a clear and detailed articulation of how a number of their fellow employees view the work as professionals and how this compares to their own experiences. The information will hopefully prove useful for groups which normally provide support to social workers, such as the union and the professional association, and the Board of Registration for social workers, as well as government itself and post-secondary educational institutions. Finally, I hope that this work may in some way provide the public at large with a better understanding of what it is like to do the work of child protection under the present system, and the significance this has for planning effective services.

As facilitator I will be moderating the discussion and providing you with a general guideline using a brief number of open-ended questions. We will be discussing the important issue of confidentiality prior to the beginning of the discussion and will be signing the Consents to Participate together. I look forward to seeing you on March 19th!

Yours truly,

Marsha Early,  
Graduate Student,  
School of Social Work,  
University of British Columbia
FINAL LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS REQUESTING FEEDBACK ON DATA ANALYSIS

March 20, 2000

Dear

I have finally completed the analysis of all the data I collected through interviewing you and nine other social workers. I am now asking you to help me with a final task as a participant in my research.

I am providing you with a portion of my thesis pertinent to the analysis and the findings. I have not provided the Introduction, Literature Review (which includes the conceptual and theoretical description of the problem), Explanation of the Purpose of the Research or the Methodology Sections. I apologize for their absence, but I didn't want to burden you with reading the full thesis at this point. I believe that the analysis, discussion of the findings, and recommendations are the most essential part of the research in terms of your contribution. If you would like to read those sections referred to above, I will be glad to provide you with them at a later date.

In the meantime, please find enclosed:

- a summary I made of your contribution, including an interpretation of the meaning of your experience as you communicated it to me. This will not appear verbatim in the thesis, but will inevitably be reflected in the analysis and findings.

- a brief description of you as an individual which will be included in the body of the thesis.

- the analysis as it will appear in its final form in the thesis, complete with quotes by the participants.

- a table identifying the themes which arose from the data analysis.

- the discussion of the findings and recommendations.

- note that all references to you will be under the pseudonym you chose.
INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION: What is the meaning that social workers, who perform child protection duties in B.C. give to their own experiences, both in terms of practice issues and professional identity?

Sub-questions:

1. How do you perceive changes in government policies and procedures since the release of the Gove Report in 1995, in terms of affecting quality of service to clients?

2. How do you see your ability to apply your social work skills, values and knowledge to your practice? What factors inhibit or encourage your professional creativity?

3. How do you experience supervision and monitoring of case practice?

4. What does the concept of accountability mean to you in terms of your practice and case decisions?

5. What are the most significant aspects of the work to you personally and professionally?
APPENDIX 7

EXPANDED INTERVIEW GUIDE PRESENTED TO INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION: What is the meaning that social workers, who perform child protection duties in B.C., give to their own experiences, both in terms of practice issues and professional identity?

Sub-questions:

1. How do you perceive changes in government policies and procedures since the release of the Gove Report in 1995, in terms of affecting quality of service to clients?

2. How do you see your ability to apply your social work skills, values and knowledge to your practice? What factors inhibit or encourage your professional creativity?

3. How do you experience supervision and monitoring of case practice?
   - how are your opinions and observations concerning assessment and case management received by your supervisor? By senior management? Can you give examples?

4. What does the concept of accountability mean to you in terms of your practice and case decisions?
   - what is your understanding of the process by which the government currently monitors social work practice at this time?
   - what meaning does the monitoring process have for you?
   - what does the possibility of being held responsible for child deaths mean to you personally?

5. What are the most significant aspects of the work to you personally and professionally?

6. How do you experience support?
   - are there any other kinds of supports or actions that would contribute to a more positive work experience for social workers?

8. How do you evaluate your ability to do the job?

9. What role does fear play in your work:
   - at what level of confidence do you function in your job?
   - what inhibits or enhances your self-confidence to perform well?