HOW SOCIAL WORKERS LINK THEIR

FAMILY OF ORIGIN EXPERIENCE TO THEIR

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.

by

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ABSTRACT

Over the past decade, previous research has reported that most social workers come from dysfunctional families of origin – and propose that such family of origin experiences may affect the mental health and professional abilities of social workers. This qualitative study was designed to explore how social workers make sense of the link between their family of origin experience and their social work practice. Purposive sampling was used to recruit four social workers that had completed (at least) a BSW degree. Each participated in semi-structured, personal interviews, lasting approximately ninety minutes. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for editing and clarification. Narrative and phenomenological research methods were used to gain a deeper understanding of the contextualised experiences offered by the social work participants. Implications for social work education, social work practice, and professional responsibility are examined.

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PREFACE

As a practicing social worker for the past five years I have discovered a rather negative and stereotypical view that exists about the social work profession. For example, terms such as 'bleeding hearts' and 'wounded healers' are often used to describe the personalities of social workers. Particularly disparaging is the notion that social workers come from dysfunctional families and choose to help others to rectify deficiencies in their own family backgrounds (Ford, 1963).

These views have long been perpetuated by negative media attention. Minty (1995) notes, "no other profession seems to have achieved quite the same reputation for persistent incompetence and lack of common sense as social work" (p.48). In addition to the media, negative views of social work also appear to stem from social work educators and social work literature itself (May, 1994). I wished to know how these pathological perceptions developed and what could be done to change what I believe to be an unfair depiction of social work, social workers, and their origins.

An examination of the literature revealed that research in the area of family-of-origin experiences of social workers, not students, was virtually non-existent as were the voices of the social workers themselves. Literature that did exist on social work students' family backgrounds appears to have taken an overwhelming deficit-oriented position, focussing on the incidence of

psychosocial traumas in the families of social work students as well as determined motivators in career choice. Given the obvious gap in the literature, it seemed appropriate to conduct a qualitative study with the purpose of allowing social workers to express, in their own words, how they make meaning of their family-of-origin experience and how they link these experiences to their practice.

The research question that guided this study was "How do social workers link their family of origin experiences to their social work practice?" Allowing social workers to voice their knowledge about this subject will provide a more holistic understanding of this relationship in the literature. Furthermore, because existing literature is being used to inform social work education and professional development, it is essential that the social workers' knowledge be voiced and represented in the literature.

This thesis contains four major chapters. Chapter One - Setting the Stage, prepares the reader by situating this issue in the literature. This chapter examines what we know about the family of origin experiences of social workers and highlights gaps in our understanding of this issue. It also provides a context for enriching our understanding of the family, and how we might determine the value of family experience as it relates to our future growth and development.

Chapter Two outlines a detailed account of the methodology used in this study by sharing the theoretical and guiding principles of the design. Interview and analytic processes are also described and evaluated.

Chapter Three discusses the findings that emerged from my interviews. It offers four case studies of how participants made sense of their family of origin experiences as well as how they understand these experiences relate to their social work practice.

Chapter Four discusses some of the major themes that emerged in the case studies. The implications that these findings have for social work education and practice are also examined. Limitations of this study and thoughts for future research are also discussed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAPTER ONE   SETTING THE STAGE

My interest in how social workers link their family-of-origin experiences to their practice came about while taking a family therapy course. I became very interested in the notion, voiced by such family therapists as Murray Bowen, David Freeman, and James Framo that the family therapist must seek to understand the interactions and relationships within that therapist's own family before they set out to counsel others.

Bowen (1978) notes that those counsellors who are able to successfully resolve negative family-of-origin experiences are better able to assist their clients, especially those clients with issues similar to the counsellor's own family-of-origin issues. However, if a wounded person goes into therapy consciously or unconsciously as a means of denying or avoiding their painful past experiences, this is potentially disastrous to the therapeutic relationship. Lawson & Gaushelll (1991) concur stating, "a counsellor's ability to effectively address his or her own personal and interpersonal issues is believed to have a significant bearing on the counsellor's effectiveness with clients" (p.309). Buelow, Bass, Ackerman, (1994) explain;

> "A better understanding of this relationship is important, not only for the counsellors' well-being, but also because the claim has been advanced, though not conclusively supported, that clients can progress to no higher level of mental health than that of their counsellor. For example, Wiggins

and Giles (1984) found that student clients who worked with low self-esteem counsellors in training experienced decreases in their levels of self-esteem after counselling" (p.163). Racusin, Abramowitz, and Winter's (1981) claim that family-of-origin dysfunction clearly affects how counsellors view themselves, and thus, their parallel processing of those issues may negatively affect their clients.

In researching the literature on family therapy, I came across an article discussing the families of origin experiences of Master of Social Work (MSW) and other graduate students. This article by Russel, Gill, Coyne, and Woody (1993) titled, "Dysfunction in the family-of-origin of MSW and other graduate students," concluded that MSW students were significantly more likely to come from dysfunctional families when compared with the other graduate students. This finding alone did not trouble me, as I understood that there were a number of reasons for reaching such a conclusion. One such reason may be that MSW students, possibly because of their course work or readings, are simply more able to recognize and disclose dysfunctional behaviour (Rompf & Royse, 1994). What I did take exception to, was the assumption drawn by the authors that past family dysfunction has a negative effect on both the current mental health as well as potential professional abilities of social workers.

In my opinion, this article adds to the unjustifiable pathologising of the social work profession, which I have experienced first hand in my own practice. On occasion I have found myself defending my profession, my family, and my

mental health simply as a result of having chosen to practice social work. In exploring this issue further, I decided to turn to the literature in the hope of challenging Russel et al's (1993) findings. To my dismay, I found none which directly dealt with this issue.

As alluded to earlier, the literature strongly suggests that early-life psychosocial trauma and family dysfunction are associated with the selection of social work as a career. However, there are problems with this research. First, an exhaustive literature search produced not one study that explores the 'functional' backgrounds or familial strengths associated with social workers career choice or competence, as if the literature set out to only find examples of 'dysfunction' and/or trauma.

Second, no empirical evidence supports the claim that social workers who have experienced a dysfunctional family-of-origin are any less competent than those having experienced a functional family background (Rompf & Royse, 1994). There was one study found by Wilcoxon, Walker, and Hovestadt (1989), which investigated counsellor effectiveness and family-of-origin experiences that concluded, "overcoming negative family-of-origin experiences may positively affect facilitation skills of counsellors in training" (p.228). However, the authors admit that findings from this study are limited due to a small sample size.

One would think that with all of the inferences made within the existing literature about social workers and/or counsellors' effectiveness as professionals, that the literature would be replete with studies addressing the relationship

between family-of-origin experience and professional ability. Again, an exhaustive literature search revealed not one study that looked at this relationship. Even though the concerns are not supported empirically in the literature, the belief still remains strong that a dysfunctional family-of-origin compromises one's mental and emotional health both personally and professionally. Hawkins and Hawkins (1996) agree that the "hypothetical link between family-of-origin dysfunction and current personal and professional functioning of MSW students is problematic both scientifically and ethically" (p.133).

Furthermore, the literature does not account for the many capable, effective, and ethical social workers that have experienced what may, in part, be defined as a dysfunctional background. Researchers have not explored how it is that so many social workers triumph both professionally and personally *because* of these experiences, not in spite of them. Also, the fact that so many social workers' families are defined as dysfunctional may point to a problem in the interpretation of family experience, a stereotypical view of family functioning, and an omission of contextualised understandings of these experiences.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to allow social workers to express, in their own words, how they make sense of their family-of-origin experience and how they link this experience to their practice. Allowing social workers to voice their knowledge about this subject will provide a more holistic understanding of this relationship in the literature. Furthermore, because existing literature is

being used to inform social work education and professional development, it is essential that the social workers' knowledge be voiced and represented in the literature. In the discussion that follows, I will critique how the terms family, family of origin, and family dysfunction have been represented in past literature as well as offer an alternative understanding for these concepts.

Defining Family, Family of Origin, and Family Dysfunction

In much of the literature, the terms family and family-of-origin are not defined. Rather, it is assumed that the traditional notion of family is predetermined, expected, and normal; therefore, anything that strays from this understanding is abnormal. Though not reflected in much of the literature, the reality is that the concept of family continues to be transformed and evolve in our ever-changing society. It is now common knowledge that half of all marriages end in divorce. Therefore, single parent families, stepfamilies, foster families, and a myriad of other arrangements offer equivalent representation of what a family looks like. The definition of family is now more subjective than ever, yet there still appears to be negative value attached to any arrangement other than the traditional notion of family.

Feminist theory informs my view of family as a context-bound and an ever-changing concept, which is determined by politics, economics, social needs and individual needs (Goodrich, Rampage, Ellman, Halstead, 1988). "Feminist study instructs us to see families as they are, rather than as icons. For feminists,

the aim is not to save any particular form of family but to ensure that the needs of every individual are well-served" (Goodrich et al, 1988, p.9).

The concept of family of origin appears to be a more generally defined. In a study by Anderson (1996), she defined family of origin in this way,

> The family of origin consisted of biological parents/siblings, stepparents/ siblings, grandparents, adopted families, or foster homes-- the families with which the woman spent significant portions of her childhood and teenage years (p.32).

Hovestadt, Anderson, Piercy, Cochran, and Fine (1985) (as quoted in May, 1994) define family of origin as "the family in which a person has his/her beginnings, physiologically, psychically, and emotionally" (p.131).

Family dysfunction is another term used freely in the literature and often used without clear definition. Those authors who do define family dysfunction do so in such a broad way that it is difficult to imagine any family which does not fit the profile of having a dysfunctional family. For example, Russel et al (1993) explain that for their study,

> Family dysfunction was defined by a member of the family of origin having had one or more of the problems surveyed (drug or alcohol abuse, sexual addiction, bulimia, anorexia nervosa, gambling addiction, schizophrenia, perpetrator of a crime, severe depression, attempted or committed suicide) or by the student's having been severely physically

abused by a family member during childhood or sexually abused before the age of 16 (p.126).

The major flaw in this definition, as I see it, is that it is black and white and does not reflect the fact that correlation does not equal cause. The assumption made in this definition is that individual problems are equated with family dysfunction. It does not allow for a contextualised or evolved understanding of family experiences. For example, it is pathological and inaccurate to label a family permanently dysfunctional because they suffered a tragedy such as a family member committing suicide. Nor does this definition accurately account for the transformation in health when a family member experiences problems with alcohol and then enters into recovery. In this way, it is not the ability to pinpoint an event that defines the function of a family, but rather the dynamic and emergent responses of the family to that event through time, which might yield a more accurate definition of family functioning.

Given the above, I choose to regard family functioning on a continuum rather than to dichotomize experiences into functional/dysfunctional or positive/negative. How one chooses to describe one's family's functioning is subjective and will therefore be defined on an individual basis.

SITUATING THE ISSUE

This next section will examine the Family Systems Perspective, more specifically Bowen's theory, as a clear understanding of this theory creates a

theoretical foundation for why it is even important to study social workers' family of origin experiences. Following this, a number of questions will be asked of past literature in an attempt to provide a clear account of what we know about the family of origin experiences of social workers and highlight the gaps in our understanding. The final section of this chapter will set up how it is that this study will address some of the identified gaps in the literature.

Family Systems Perspective: An Overview

Family systems theory has its origins in the concepts which initially were proposed within systems theory, a biological theory proposing that all organisms are systems composed of subsystems, and are in turn part of super-systems (Payne, 1997, p137). This approach conceives of systems as wholly independent of one another yet interdependent with one another as well, reinforced by the notion of boundaries that serve to distinguish one system from the next. Each subsystem is believed to be "interconnected and influence each other simultaneously" (Freeman, 1981, p.33). The basis of this theory is that a holistic understanding of a person or environment can only be understood in the context of their relationship with one another. Pelech (1994) suggests that "implicit in systems definition is an assumption that interaction between or within systems is patterned, that is that there is some consistent way in which interaction occurs and that they are predictable"(p.8).

Family system theory was first developed, during the 1940s and early 1950s, by Dr. Murray Bowen when he became increasingly dissatisfied with the explanation of psychoanalysis in treating people with schizophrenia. Bowen became intrigued by the family relationships of his patients and, going against the principles of psychoanalytic therapy of that time, began to study them (Kerr and Bowen, 1988). "Bowen proposed that the family operated in ways that were consistent with its being a system and that the system's principles of operation were rooted in nature" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.24).

In the 1950's Bowen conducted a research study in which entire families would live on the ward with their family member who was diagnosed with schizophrenia (Bowen, 1978). It was during this time that he expanded his ideas around family of origins theory and conceptualized the family as an interdependent emotional unit.

However, by 1960 Bowen expressed, "it was clear that all families were pretty much alike. I decided that my own family would provide as much detail as any and would be more accessible. That was the beginning of the multigenerational study of my own family (Bowen, 1978, p.xv)." Over the next five years Bowen would develop the original foundation for family systems theory, including the identification of important concepts like 'differentiation of self', 'triangles', 'nuclear family emotional process', 'family projection process', 'multigenerational transmission process', and 'sibling position'. Two additional

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concepts, 'emotional cutoff' and 'societal emotional process', were added in the 1970's (Bowen, 1978).

A comprehensive review of family systems theory, including a thorough discussion of the major concepts and tenets that underscore this approach to family therapy, is well beyond the scope of this discussion. What does seem important however, is to review those concepts that do have a more immediate bearing on the focus of this research, given the overall goal of understanding the meaning of family of origin experience for future social work practice. A brief discussion of differentiation of self, triangles, and multigenerational transmission process follows.

Differentiation of self

The differentiation of self is considered the goal or the prime importance of therapy. Briefly, this concept involves "the ability to be in emotional contact with others yet still autonomous in one's emotional functioning" (Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p.145). How this relates to social work practice involves how well the social worker has differentiated from their family of origin and therefore how well they are able to remain objective in the counselling relationship and not get triggered by the emotional reactivity often present in a counselling session. A social worker who has a 'solid self' will have more awareness of the influence of anxiety and emotional reactivity on one's actions and inactions. They will also understand that it requires some re-examination of one's basic assumptions

about behaviour and the origin of human problems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.109).

According to Dupuis (1996),

> "family systems therapy promotes self differentiation through the
> resolution of family emotional attachments. The underlying assumption is
> that individual and family functioning is enhanced by a person's efforts to
> be more objective and less reactive in important relationships" (p.15).

Closely related to the concept of differentiation is something David
Freeman refers to as 'unfinished business'. Freeman (1981) explains that
unfinished business refers to emotional dilemmas an individual has not been able
to resolve with significant others. "The greater the unfinished business the more
reactive the relationship will be"(p.78). Freeman (1992) suggests that social
workers' unfinished business can manifest itself in the helping relationship in a
number of ways, for example, joining family reactivity, needing families to
improve to feel competent, or joining a dysfunctional triangle.

Triangles – The concept of emotional triangles involves the reduction of anxiety
between two people by involving a third objective person. "The more
undifferentiated or emotionally fused people are with each other, the more likely
they are to operate in emotional triangles" (Freeman, 1981, p.73). Kerr and
Bowen (1988) explain,

> A basic tenet of systems theory is that the tension in a two-person
> relationship will resolve automatically when contained within a three-

person system, one of whom is emotionally detached. The process of being in contact and emotionally separate is referred to as "detriangling" (p.145).

The goal of therapy then, is to detriangulate the system, in an attempt to have a client attain self-differentiation (Dupuis, 1996). Detriangulation is closely related with the tenet of differentiation in how it relates with a social worker's practice. How well a social worker has differentiated from their family of origin will determine how they are now able to be an emotionally objective third person in the counselling session. Bowen (1978) noted that therapists were more successful at detriangulating clients if they had completed their own family work.

Multigenerational Transmission Process

This concept involves the 'passing down' of undifferentiation from one generation to the next. According to Freeman (1981)

> "nuclear families, both structurally and functionally, reflect many aspects of the adults' own families of origin....by going back at least three generations, the therapist can gain a better sense of why certain problems are emerging in the family of procreation" (p.76).

Bowen proposed that the family system is a 'natural system' in view of the fact that human beings are products of evolution and that the same processes that govern other living things govern our behaviour. In this way, anything that affects one member of a family in turn has an effect on the other parts of the

family, and the family as a whole. Similar to other systems, there are counter-balancing tendencies within a family that seek to resist change and maintain 'homeostasis' and 'equilibrium'. This is not to suggest that families do not experience change, more that in striving to maintain the integrity of itself as a system, the family adjusts to changes via the mechanism known as 'morphogenesis' (Nichols & Schwartz, 1991). "Families that are considered to function well are those who are able to strike a balance between opposing forces within itself as a system," (Elliott, 1997, p.17).

During a national family conference in March 1967, Bowen decided to talk about the concept of family systems theory, via an analysis of his own family experience, rather than presenting a formal educational paper. Bowen explains, "this helped focus national attention on the importance of one's own family to therapists (Bowen, 1978, p.xvi)." As a result of his unique insight not only into the family, but as well with respect to the importance of linking family experience of the therapist to family therapy work, Bowen's ideas resonated immediately with others involved in family therapy work. After this conference, Bowen noticed that his family therapy students were voluntarily taking genealogical family voyages to "research their families in the quest for self" (Framo, 1982, p.174). He would later make the claim that the students who did return to their families of origin, to work towards differentiation and become more of an objective observer of self and family, would become the most skilled family therapy students (Bowen, 1978).

Bowen's family systems theory informs the topic of how social workers link their family of origin experiences to their practice in a very important way. The most obvious point is that the experiences social workers have in their families may influence how they respond when working with other families in a counselling role. The suggestion here is that the therapist may inadvertently return to the role they played in their family in order to maintain balance within the family system rather than supporting a healthy change within that family. It is for this reason that Bowen strongly supported family of origin therapy for family therapy students so that they might resolve any unfinished business from their past.

Consistent with the rapidly expanding literature on the family of origin experiences of persons in the helping profession, Lackie's (1983) study found, "there is reason to believe that our caretaking experiences in our families of origin not only shape our career choice, but colour our professional development as well"(p.309).

Why Choose Social Work As A Career?

Over the past few decades social work educators and researchers have focussed their efforts on exploring the motivators behind students choosing social work as a career. Educators became interested in exploring the relationship between family-of-origin experiences of social work students and their career choice after observing backgrounds of psychosocial trauma in

personal statements during the in-class-work or admissions process of students (Black, Jeffreys, & Hartley, 1993). One such study, by Black et al (1993), investigated whether graduate social work students had a higher incidence of psychosocial trauma in their families of origin than graduate business students. Results from this study,

> "Supports the hypothesis that psychosocial traumatic factors in early life history of social work students are associated with the subsequent selection of social work as a career" (Black et al., 1993, p.178).

> Similarly, Rompf & Royse's (1994) survey of four-hundred and fifteen

social work students and a comparison group of two-hundred and three non-social work students concluded that "social work students were more likely to report problems such as alcoholism and emotional illness within their families of origin and to attribute these experiences to their choice of career" (p. 163).

To date, then, social work literature overwhelmingly supports the notion that social workers come from disturbed families. Moreover, this research suggests that their choice in vocation is a result of early psychosocial trauma (Goldklank, 1986; Marsh, 1988; Buelow et al., 1994; Black et al., 1993; Russel et al., 1993). However, Rompf & Royse (1994) caution that,

> Much of the literature indicating that social work students come from less-than-healthy families of origin cannot be considered definitive because of small sample sizes, absence of comparison groups, or reliance upon anecdotal accounts (p.165).

Moreover, the prevailing stereotype of counsellors' family of origin experiences has been virtually unchallenged in the literature (Lawson & Gaushell, 1991). As a result, a number of questions can be raised about the legitimacy of such conclusions.

Some studies concluded that choosing a caring or helping profession is a way of satisfying earlier losses (Black et al., 1993), while others claim that people enter the helping field out of frustration and failure for not being able to save their own families as children (Fausel, 1988). Eipstein & Bower(1997) propose that people enter the mental health field because they have a history of psychological difficulties and are trying to understand or overcome their own problems. Likewise, White & Franzoni (1990) explain, "A prevalent belief is that mental health professionals are emotionally damaged and have chosen their vocation to solve their own problems" (p.258). Previous research has found that approximately half of social work students have at least one alcoholic or drug addicted family member (Marsh, 1988; Black et al, 1993, Russel et al, 1993) and propose that such abuse may affect these students' current mental health and professional performance (Hawkins & Hawkins II, 1996).

First, it is not surprising that pathologies were found given that this was the focus of the research. As discussed earlier, in the definition section of this paper, it is not hard to imagine that the greater population may actually fit the description of having a dysfunctional family as the parameters of the definition are so far reaching. Moreover, the quantitative research methods, which have

been utilized in much of the research to date, elicit only indicators of pathology and dysfunction in the families of participants. At no time were participants asked to reveal positive aspects of their family backgrounds. Additionally, no opportunity was provided for students to put supposed dysfunctional experiences into context by sharing how they made sense of these experiences. Massat & Lundy (1997) express that it is important to "keep in mind that correlation does not equal cause...[and] making causal statements may harm already vulnerable groups" (p.37). Nevertheless, these issues alone do not account for why researchers continue to find that social work students experience more psychosocial trauma in their childhoods than comparison groups.

Why Have Social Workers Self-Identified As Having Dysfunctional Families?

To help explain the prevalence of dysfunction in social workers' families, some maintain that social work students may possibly be better able to recognise psychosocial trauma and family dysfunction and feel less stigmatized and willing to disclose these issues due to course readings, personal growth, or participation in therapy (Rompf & Royse, 1994). Another explanation may be that students tend to describe their families in dysfunctional ways because they want to fit the stereotype of their profession (Goldklank, 1986). Black et al (1993), in their study comparing psychosocial trauma in the early life of social work and business

students, explain their findings may be due to a 'response distortion phenomenon',

> Behaviours perceived by respondents as socially desirable tend to be over-reported, whereas behaviours deemed undesirable are underreported. In the present context, there is the possibility that business students may have been less inclined than social work students to recognise or reveal problematic events in their early lives (p.180).

Family Roles

Literature suggests that most social workers have come to identify themselves with stereotypical and pathologised roles expected of family therapists. Goldklank (1986) refers to the well-entrenched belief among therapists regarding the role they assumed in their dysfunctional families as folklore. She explains,

> Therapists all nod in agreement when they are cited as the over-responsible member of their family. Family therapists see themselves as particularly busy children, vibrating with the moves of each family member, advising, mediating, and fighting for objectivity. Their name for this role is the "parentified child"(p.310).

The role of the parentified child can be described as "a child who inappropriately holds executive functions, thereby implying an impaired hierarchy in the

family...the child takes the place of a parent, or pseudo-spouse to a parent"(Goldklank, p.109).

Similarly, Lackie (1983) studied the backgrounds of 1,577 social workers, not students, and found that more than two-thirds of the participants claimed to have played the role of the parentified child, the overresponsible member, the mediator, the 'good' child, or the burden bearer. Lackie also concluded that the parentified child is more often the firstborn or the firstborn female and assumes a caretaking role initially in the family. However, "this role ultimately spreads beyond to include non-family relationships...and how they express care professionally" (Black et al., 1993).

Social worker researchers have participated in the devaluing of its own profession by continuing to perpetuate the stereotypical role of the social worker as a wounded healer. "Despite the lack of empirical data, we conclude that distressful childhood experiences of some of our colleagues infected them with a chronic disease in which caring too much' is one of the symptoms" (Biering, 1998, p. 334). A closer look at how we play a role in the stereotyping of our own profession follows.

Stereotyping Of Our Own Profession

There is something quite insincere about the fact that so many social work educators claim to come from a strengths perspective, yet are responsible for mounting studies that seek only to look for indicators of dysfunction in the

families of origin of social work students. Russel et al.,(1993) state, "social work educators have expressed concern about the mental health of people entering the helping professions...because of prior traumatic life experiences" (p.121). However, strengths that students of social work may have experienced in their families were unsolicited. If this is representative of how social workers approach their clients, how do they remain hopeful in a session with a client who is working-through painful life experiences?

Social work educators and researchers did not appear to use methods of inquiry that honour a strengths perspective or social work values for that matter. Questionnaires appeared to search explicitly for indicators of pathology and dysfunction. Most importantly, students were not empowered by the research process, they were not regarded as experts of their own experience, and their voices were not valued in the literature.

Strengths Associated With A 'Dysfunctional' Family-of-Origin

While the strengths of functional backgrounds of social workers are largely ignored, a number of authors considered strengths associated with a dysfunctional family of origin. Black et al, (1993) raised the possibility that negative family backgrounds may be useful in that "practitioners who have worked through their personal traumatic experiences may be in a position to more effectively reach out and engage clients"(p.179). Rompf & Royse (1994) concur stating,

...some benefits may come from growing up in a dysfunctional family, among them firsthand familiarity with the social services system and social workers' roles, the ability to relate to clients who feel helpless and overwhelmed, and intimate knowledge of effective coping strategies...additionally, empathy and sensitivity to the feelings of others are likely to be enhanced (p.171).

I would add that a family's ability to cope with certain life traumas or events is dependent upon a number of factors such as family and social supports, socio-economic status, developmental stages of family members, etc (Goodrich et al., 1988). Moreover, a family's coping mechanisms may vary and develop over time. Just because a person may define their family-of-origin experience as dysfunctional, does not determine that they are forever wounded, dysfunctional, or in a state of recovery.

A deeper understanding is lost when conclusions are drawn prematurely regarding the consequences of having experienced a dysfunctional family of origin. Simply stating that social work students have experienced greater psychosocial trauma than comparison groups fosters the construction of deficit oriented views of social work and social workers and unfairly brings into question the professional ability and mental health of this population.

Summary

This literature review illustrates that an essential piece to understanding how social workers link their family of origin experiences to their practice is missing – that is the voices of the social workers themselves. A deficit-oriented view of the family backgrounds of social workers has dominated the literature and therefore, has only offered one view of social worker's family experiences. As discussed previously, existing literature is being used to inform social work education and professional development; therefore, it is essential that the social workers' knowledge be voiced and represented in the literature. This study seeks to enrich our understanding of how social workers link their family of origin experiences to their practice by hearing directly from them, apart from the agenda of others.

CHAPTER TWO METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research design and methodology used for my study in exploring how social workers link their family-of-origin experiences to their social work practice. First, I will explain why qualitative research methods were regarded as the most appropriate in gaining a better understanding of this topic. Next, a review of the theoretical principles that guided the research process will be examined. Finally, a discussion of the analytic process and limitations of this study will be explored.

RATIONALE

Choosing A Qualitative Study

A qualitative research design was considered appropriate for this study as it best responded to the identified purpose, which was to gain a deeper understanding of how social workers link their family-of-origin experiences to their social work practice. A qualitative study seeks to explore the subjective knowledge and experience of the individuals involved and allows for richness and a depth not possible with quantitative research (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). A qualitative research design allowed the participants to discuss their experiences freely and in their own words, thus allowing for a more in-depth exploration of their lived experiences.

Also, the interview design was adaptable and encouraged spontaneous questions to be asked in a natural way, rather than having to adhere to a formal structured format. "Much of the strength and success of qualitative research lies in its emergent nature, its ability to 'go with the flow' rather than control it" (Padgett, 1998, p.20). Therefore, the flexibility of the qualitative design allowed for spontaneity and freedom of open communication to occur during the interviews.

As previously discussed in the literature review, essentially all of the earlier studies in this area of interest utilized quantitative methods of inquiry. Conclusions drawn from these studies were consistently similar to one another and tended to pathologize the families of social workers as well as, in my opinion, unfairly questioned the effectiveness of their professional practice. The lack of qualitative work done in this area of study informed my rationale for a study of this nature. A contextualised understanding of the lived experiences of social workers will provide for a more accurate portrayal of the relationship between family of origin experiences and social work practice. Knowledge generated from this study is intended to better inform social work education and practice for the purpose of empowering social workers and students to reflect and draw on strengths from their family of origin experiences in addition to dealing with any "unfinished business".

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The ideas of hermeneutics and feminist research guided me throughout this study. Each of these research positions will be explained in connection with how they fit the purpose of this research project. This is intended to expose the position and lens I brought to the methodological analytic process.

Hermeneutic Principles

Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of text and is a branch of phenomenology, a tradition of inquiry in qualitative research (Kvale, 1996, p. 46). A hermeneutic approach, "involves the art of reading a text so that the intention and meaning behind appearances are fully understood" (Moustakes, 1994, p.9). "It is grounded in the everyday practices of individuals' lived experiences and seeks to interpret, or make meaning of, something that is not yet understood (O'Connor, 1996, p. 25)."

> Gadamer (1975) adds that,
>
> "in interpreting a text we cannot separate ourselves from the meaning of a text. The reader belongs to the text that he or she is reading. Understanding is always an interpretation, and an interpretation is always specific, an application (as quoted in Van Manen, 1997, p.180)."

In other words, how the participant's transcripts have been interpreted can more accurately be regarded as my understanding of their stories, rather than "(re) presenting the voices of the participants (O'Connor, 1996, p.28)."

Previous studies on social workers' families seldom pushed beyond simple identification of common facts concerning the family experiences of participants. Moreover, the research methods used did not allow these researchers to move beyond this identification to a fuller understanding of the relationship between family experiences and professional practice. Rather, identifying supposed characteristics of family dysfunction and then insinuating this would lead to poor professional practice highlighted a cause and effect relationship. Hermeneutical approach, however, will "uncover hidden meanings as we live them in everyday life" (Van Manen, 1997, p.11) with the goal of "helping human beings to become increasingly thoughtful and better prepared to act tactfully in situations (Van Manen, 1997, p.21).

Hermeneutics guided my interpretation of the interview data in that I was able to move beyond what was being said and look at how I could make sense of the dialogue I had with each participant in relation to the literature I had read and the transcript I had before me. The transcripts were verbatim so that subtle pauses, repetitions, and/or contradictions could add to the deeper meaning of an underlying statement. This was a process of 'teasing out' the subtle nuances of what was going on in each of their unique experiences (O'Connor, 1996).

This iterative process brought the focus beyond descriptions to a deeper interpretation of the interviews. There was a constant back and forth movement between the whole and the pieces of each interview. Each time I posed a new question I returned to the transcript to try and find new meanings in the data, which had been overlooked before. I used my own understanding, prejudices, and assumptions as a

continual checkpoint for my interpretation of the data, including reflexive analysis through the maintenance of a field journal. All interpretations and developing themes were continually shared with participants to check for accuracy and feedback. The feedback from participants was vital to developing themes in that any concepts, which did not fit for participants, were dropped.

In summary, hermeneutics guided my research process and understanding of the phenomena of how social workers link their family of origin experiences to their practice. These guiding principles provided a framework for moving beyond mere descriptions of the participants' experiences and to discover how social workers make sense of these experiences in relation to their practice.

A Feminist Approach

A feminist framework enlightens my appreciation for how the caring profession of social work has been portrayed in the literature as one of the "women-dominated professions [that] have been undervalued and underrewarded" (Baines, 1988, p.23). In an ongoing battle to be regarded as a legitimate profession, some social workers, such as Dr. Helen Reid in 1927, advocated for "identifying with a male scientific model" (Baines, 1988, p.36). The adoption of traditional male scientific models, which take a deficit-oriented position, reflect the disparaging way previous research has been carried out on social workers and their families. Allen and Baber (1992) make the claim,

"Traditional science has been used to exploit women's labour and mystify women's experience, so feminists must seek methods that more accurately and comprehensively reveal women's lives" (p.2).

Mason (1997) explains, "with the contemporary women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s came scepticism about traditional research and its treatment of women (p.57)." This movement contributed to the idea of combining feminism with scientific ways of constructing knowledge (Small, 1995). Feminists began to argue that, "social science neglects and distorts the study of women in a systematic bias in favour of men" (Riger, 1992) and therefore, "a new method based on feminist principles is needed" (M.M. Gergen, 1988) (as quoted in Riger, 1992, p.730).

Allen and Baber (1992) express "there are many ways of knowing; likewise there are many feminist epistemologies" (p.3). Hence, "there is a diversity of perspectives about what constitutes feminist methods or feminist research (Small, 1995, p. 952)." Mason (1997) explains,

> "no single method is used in feminist social work research and that feminist principles guide research but do not dictate the use of specific methods. Thus the methods used are as diverse as the researchers and their questions (p.10)."

Feminists are in agreement that the most critical aspect of any research method is "that they be adapted in a manner consistent with the values, ethics, and epistemologies of a feminist approach (Small, 1995, p. 954)."

For the purpose of this study, I do not debate or take one particular feminist position, but rather utilise some common feminist principles to guide the design of the study and analyse the interviews. Feminist principles that were employed in this study will now be outlined.

The first feminist principle guiding my study was recognising the importance of my own subjectivity within the research process (O'Connor, 1996). Mason (1997) explains,

> "In much of feminist social work research, placing the researcher in context involves outlining values and viewpoint in the research report. Thus the researcher appears as a living, breathing human being, rather than an anonymous, "objective" authority figure (p.23)."

The process of explicitly recognizing my subjectivity helped me examine my approach to this topic as my position undoubtedly influenced all aspects of this research. This is a personal subject for myself as I am also a social worker with my own history and intimate knowledge of how I link my family of origin experience to my social work practice. Therefore, part of the research design involved my participating in a personal interview with a colleague and responding to the same interview questions designed for the other participants. This interview was transcribed and made available to participants prior to any of the participant interviews. My intentions for this process are outlined as follows:

- I felt it was important to go through the interview process myself so that I could be made aware of, and sensitive to, what the experience may be like for participants.

- I believe that having my story made available to participants was a way of making this a more egalitarian process.

- In a greater effort to equalize the power between participants and myself, I was open to participants asking questions about my transcript and/or thoughts about this research topic.

- I believe it was important to make my assumptions and biases about this research issue explicit, so that I had a way of recognizing whether or not I was analysing the data to suit these assumptions through my own lens of understanding.

Having a written text and interpretation of my interview allowed me to view and expose my beliefs, values, and assumptions on this topic in a new and enlightened way. This made the process of questioning and owning my response to certain aspects of the literature and/or the interviews to be more authentic. Allen and Baber (1992) explain

Self-disclosure is an important and, in some ways, unique part of feminist research methods....which clearly challenges the objectivist empirical stance and allows a consideration of how the characteristics of the

researcher influence the research process of data collection and analysis (p.10).

The second feminist principle, which guided my research, was to "value participants as collaborators in the research process" (Allen & Baber, 1992, p. 9). "Most feminist researchers believe there is value in establishing an egalitarian relationship between researcher and participants and reducing the distance between the two (Small, 1995, p.952)." The goal of equalizing the power between participants and myself was done in several ways.

- Participants scheduled the location, time, and duration of the interviews.

- Participants were regarded as experts of their own experience. Therefore, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, open format to encourage participants to share the experiences, which they believed were most important in the construction of their family of origin experience as well as their practice. This allowed them the opportunity to voice their knowledge, apart from the agendas of others.

- Participants were given a transcript from their interviews to verify and/or edit any part of the transcript before it was analysed or interpreted. Interpreted versions of the transcripts were also forwarded to participants for their feedback, challenges, and comments. Participants were strongly encouraged to offer their own interpretations of their data. This was done to further acknowledge the expertise each participant demonstrated in

this area. The valuable information received from participants contributed greatly to the constant refining of themes.

Though my intent was to equalize the power relationship between participants and myself throughout the research process, a couple of issues came up that made this difficult in reality. For instance, none of the participants asked to review my transcript before or after their interview, therefore some participants appeared to be uncomfortable at times when offering more information about themselves than they knew about me. Having had previous associations with some participants also made the interview process uncomfortable at times because an imbalance in information between us became evident. However, neither the participants nor myself addressed this issue directly and none of them asked to read my transcript after the interviews.

The third feminist principle valued in this study was that the research must give something back to participants (Small, 1995; Massat & Lundy, 1997, Riger, 1992). Allen & Baber (1992) explain,

> "the feminist goal is to do research that is *for* women rather than *about* women, [they] suggest that priority be given to research that will provide information that women want and need to change the conditions of their lives (p.9)."

They go on to support that feminist research is aimed at challenging and deconstructing existing knowledge and are cautious not to reconstruct oppressive views of reality (Allen and Baber, 1992, p.2). Research *for* women

"tries to take women's needs, interests and experiences into account and aims at being instrumental in improving women's lives in one way or another" (Duelli-Klein, 1983, p. 90) (as quoted in Mason, 1997, p.11).

A feminist approach is consistent with the goal of this research, which is to allow participants to voice their understanding of how they link their family of origin experience to their social work practice. Having this knowledge represented in the literature is the first step towards offering a more holistic understanding of this issue.

Summary

These research positions were chosen over others because they best allow for the exploration of social workers' knowledge and contextualised explanations of their family-of-origin experiences, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of their experiences to the social work literature. Feminist principles used to guide the research process were chosen as the most effective in honouring the voices of social workers, thus offering a more accurate understanding of their lived experiences to the literature.

RESEARCH PROCESS

Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment letters outlining explicit details of this study were sent via e-mail to social work colleagues and MSW students at the University of British Columbia (see Appendix I). A special effort was made to ensure that none of the persons known to myself felt obligated to participate, but they were invited to pass on the recruitment letters to any potential volunteers, thereby encouraging a snowballing technique. Purposive sampling was used to select participants for this study. Criteria for participation included: a minimum of a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree; some work experience as a social worker and participants must be able to communicate in English.

In total, ten participants volunteered to participate in the project. Five of the participants initially expressed interest in the project through emailed contact and the other five approached me personally. Two participants did not meet the criteria of having completed a BSW degree, however, they were both MSW students that had been accepted into the graduate social work program on the condition of supplementing their education with undergraduate social work courses. The main reason for not having them participate in the study was that neither of these volunteers had actually worked as social workers, therefore, it was hypothesized that they would not be able to articulate how it is that they link their family-of-origin experiences to their practice.

Another two participants chose to withdraw their data after the interview due to concerns regarding anonymity. Interestingly, neither of these participants expressed concerns about anonymity prior to the interview. In fact, one of the volunteers first declined to use a pseudonym, preferring to go by their given name. It was not until after the interviews were transcribed and returned to each for clarification that each contacted me to discuss their concerns. Both participants claimed that they had not anticipated the depth of personal information they ended up disclosing during the interview. One participant felt that his/her data was simply too personal to be shared with an audience, "*I would just feel like I've been violated if others were to read it and figure out it was me.*" Respecting this person's decision, I returned the original transcript and audiotape to them and all other identifying information was destroyed.

The second participant's concern centred on anonymity from persons in our shared research class, including the instructor. After discussing a number of options to change identifying information, the participant decided to retract his/her data from the study. All identifying information, including this person's original transcript and audiotape were destroyed upon that person's request.

This experience was a bit discouraging, but I also gained some very valuable lessons. I now have a greater appreciation for how precious the data is that I have collected from other participants. Just the interview process itself taught me how emotional and moving qualitative research can be and how deeply it can also affect the researcher. I understand and respect why the participants chose to withdraw their data, but I am also saddened by the loss of the rich data contained in the stories they shared.

Of the remaining six participants, I knew three of them previous to this study as we all attend the MSW program at the University of British Columbia. Two of the three I did not know well, but the third participant was a very close friend of mine. A fourth participant was a spouse of yet another student in my program. Having participants in this study, who were simultaneously in my research class proved to be much more of a challenge than I ever could have imagined. Throughout the research process, numerous unique challenges and ethical dilemmas presented themselves.

First, I found it impossible to share my experiences or interpretations of the interviews in class for fear that I would either accidentally disclose a participant's identity or cause him/her to feel uncomfortable by discussing his/her stories in front of an audience. Consequently, I missed out on an important learning opportunity by not being able to receive feedback on my interpretation of the data or share my thoughts about the interview process in class. Secondly, I was unable to go to my close friend and learning partner to discuss emerging ideas from the data because this friend was not only a participant in this research project, but a participant in the research course as well. This meant that I could not share any of my interview transcripts for fear of jeopardizing the other participants' anonymity.

At times I felt as if I had unwittingly tied my own hands by recruiting my sample from the research class. The entire research process was very new to me and I really wanted to bounce ideas off someone. This need prompted me to contact a colleague, with whom I could debrief, who did not have any connection to any of the participants in this study. This external contact was able to ask me to clarify and support my

analysis of the data as well as share personal thoughts about meanings and interpretations of the narratives. In addition, my research journal became a valuable tool for expressing my thoughts, fears, and hypotheses.

The final sample resulting from the recruitment process consisted of six participants, one man and five women. All of the participants were aged between thirty and fifty-five years, Caucasian, English speaking, and had completed at least a BSW degree. Work experience amongst the social workers ranged between three and ten years. Two participants have worked with the elderly in a hospital care setting for approximately six years, another participant works in a community based mental health facility offering group therapy for women (years of experience unknown), another participant has worked for the ministry for children and families for three years, another works with employee assistance and has worked as a social worker for approximately seven years, and the final participant has worked in a number of settings, such as disordered eating and addictions, over the past five years.

Interview Process

Participants were given the choice of where they would like the personal interview to take place. Four of the six participants chose to be interviewed in their own home and two preferred to meet in the quiet room in the school of social work building. The quiet room was great for interviewing because it was private and did not have any distraction, however, it did not offer the same comfortable atmosphere as the homes did. In comparison, it felt very sterile and clinical, yet we also did not have to contend

with the distractions experienced in the home interviews. For example, the telephone was an issue in every one of the home interviews. Even if the participants did not answer the ringing phone, the answering machine was still a distraction. Some very important advantages to the home settings, however, were that clients appeared to be more relaxed in their own environments, plus being in the participants homes gave me an opportunity to get to know them better. For example, the depth of one participant's claim to have a strong connection with her family became even more obvious when entering her home, as her entire living room wall was covered with pictures of her family members. Every school photo from grades one through twelve for every child in the family was displayed with pride.

The personal semi-structured interviews lasted approximately ninety minutes each. An informed consent form was signed by each participant prior to the interview (see Appendix II). Three questions were asked to help guide the semi-structured interviews:

1. Can you explain for me the relationship between your family-of-origin experiences and your choice to go into social work?

2. How do you use your family-of-origin experiences as a social worker?

3. Is there anything else that you would like to add that you feel you did not have a chance to talk about during our interview?

Participants were given a respectful forum to express their understanding of family-of-origin experiences in their own words rather than imposing my own understanding of this issue.

Describing Family of Origin Experiences

The term 'family-of-origin' experiences needs to be clarified as it cannot be taken literally in the sense that every family experience has not been revealed or reviewed in the personal interviews. Rather, the participant has chosen to share a select few relevant narratives that, according to Fischer (1992) "represents the biographer's overall construction of his or her past and anticipated life, in which biographically relevant experiences are linked up in a temporally and thematically consistent pattern" (as quoted in Rosenthal, 1993, p.60).

Also influencing the participants' selection of certain family of origin experiences is the interrelationship between the participants and myself. In each of the interviews I began by introducing a topic on a 'single biographical strand' relating their career choice to their family of origin experiences, thereby "providing the biographers with a framework for selecting the stories to be included" (Rosenthal, 1993, p.65).

The first question asked in the semi-structured personal interviews was, "Can you share with me the relationship between your family of origin experiences and why you chose social work as a career?" There were two reasons for making the decision to start the interviews with this question. First, I thought asking this question would be a way of easing into the interview process, as similar questions were likely explored during participants' social work education. The second reason for asking this question was that most of the

existing literature on social workers deals with motivators for career choice; therefore, I was curious to see what could be revealed by asking this open ended question in a qualitative format.

In asking this question I found that at least half of the time spent in the personal interviews were dedicated to participants describing family of origin experiences. Some participants directly related these experiences to their career choice, while others shared family stories that were less explicitly linked to the first interview question. The last half of the interviews were informed by the second interview question, which was "How do you use your family of origin experiences in your practice?"

In retrospect, I question whether or not I should have asked participants to link their family of origin experiences to their choice in social work. Since this question may have influenced participants to share stories which reflect more of what they believe a social worker's background should be, as opposed to how they construct their family of origin experience free from the notion of social work.

Data Management

Each interview was audio taped, transcribed verbatim (including pauses, repetitions, voice intonations, transition statements, etc.), and then given to participants to allow them to make any necessary changes or delete items from their transcript. I transcribed three of the interviews and a professional transcriber did the

final three. The tapes that went to the transcriber were free from any identifying information about the participants. These transcripts were kept on floppy disk and stored in a locked filing cabinet along with all other identifying information about participants. My personal journal recording the research process as well as any emails sent to or received from participants were printed out and also locked up in a filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

The analytic process began by journaling my own experience of the interview process directly after the meetings took place. My own reactions to the narratives and/or thoughts that stood out for me were recorded and later used to assist in contextualising the findings. Notes detailing the physical layout and essence of the room in which the interview took place, were also made.

Next I began reading and rereading each transcript, while listening to the respective audiotapes. This was done in an attempt to grasp the essence or meaning of the narratives as they related to the research question. Short stories (or parts) within the larger narrative where analysed to understand how they contributed to the overall sense of the participant's story (the whole). The structure of the stories, how the stories were told, as well as other unique descriptors of the content were examined to assist in contextualising the narratives. Emerging themes in the narratives were used to systematically organize the writings as they related to the research question.

Self-analysis of the transcripts was also encouraged in an effort to 'co-author' the report. All but one participant preferred an e-mail copy of the transcript to a paper or 'hard' copy. As a means of promoting more credible data through the use of member checking, follow-up communication with participants via e-mail offered a unique forum for clarifying and sharing ideas about the interview process and transcript analysis. It was during this process that I felt I was able to share my analysis and thoughts about the data and the interview process with the participants themselves, thereby adding to the validity of the findings. For example, for the three interviews I transcribed, I formatted the document so that the column on the left side contained the interview data and the column on the right side offered a contextualised account or my interpretation of the interview. These documents were emailed to participants for their feedback. In this right side column I was able to literally highlight themes in different colours to show participants how I followed particular themes throughout the interview.

Having each participant's edited copy of the transcript returned to me via e-mail made for very clear amalgamation of his or her corrections and feedback. Using email was the preferred form of communication expressed by all participants (when a second personal interview was offered as an alternative). I believe this was because participants' time was bound and they appreciated the opportunity to clearly share their ideas in a written format, which they could edit at their convenience.

Analysing the data and writing contextualised findings presented a unique challenge for this 'fledgling' researcher. My goal for the analytic process was to offer more than what Van Manen (1997) describes as "endless reproductions and

fragments of transcripts under the guise that the researcher has decided 'to let the data speak for itself'" (p.167). He goes on to explain that,

> "Sometimes a researcher is unsure what direction to take. And because there is no research design or blueprint to follow, this feeling of frustration can effectively halt the work. This situation is not unlike writer's block that authors sometimes experience" (Van Manen, 1997, p.167).

This quote certainly reflects my struggle at times with how to interpret and convey findings from the transcripts. For example, after having gone through the process of coding the data from the six transcripts and attempting to create categories of the findings, I struggled with 'chopping up' the data. Categorizing techniques simply did not fit what I had intended to get out of this study. My goal was to have the voices of social workers expressed in the literature and for me that meant keeping the stories whole. For this reason, I changed my approach and looked at developing four case studies from the six narratives. The two narratives not developed into case studies were referred to in developing three concluding themes, which will be discussed in chapter four. I chose to develop the narratives of the four participants who expressed the most interest in co-authoring the research. Three of the case studies involved female participants and the fourth case study included a male participant.

Narrative Analysis

The narrative approach ensured that a contextualised understanding of participants' stories were honoured and not fragmented. Lieblich et al's, (1998) concept of the holistic-content perspective of narrative inquiry informed my research process. First, I read the transcripts and field notes and listened to the audiotapes several times until I was able to articulate the essence or meaning of each participant's narrative. Next, I would write out my impressions and make notes of missing information or aspects of their stories, which I did not yet understand. As patterns of themes started to emerge they were highlighted in various colours so that the frequency and evolution of each theme could be followed throughout the story. Particular attention was paid to "where a theme appear[ed] for the first and last times, the transitions between themes, the context for each one, and their relative salience in the text" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.63).

I believed that this form of analysis complemented the hermeneutic framework well, as it is similar in its iterative nature of moving in and out of the data or story, though it does not offer as deep an understanding of the phenomena. This approach allowed me to get "a broad perspective of the general theme and emerging foci" (Lieblich et al., 1998, p.87). A Hermeneutic approach offered a format for gaining a deeper understanding of the data.

The analysis of each case study will be presented in two different parts. First a description of the family of origin experiences will be shared and then an

interpretive analysis relating these experiences to social work practice will follow. The purpose behind the description portion of the analysis is to set up or provide a context for the interpretive portion of the study, as well as to capture the rich essence of what these family experiences mean to the participants. The interpretation section of the analysis provides the link for what meaning "family of origin experiences" has to social work practice. The case studies are presented in chapter three followed by a discussion of three overall themes, which emerged from the case studies, in chapter four.

Summary

The methodology I employed for this study provided me with a framework for understanding how social workers link their family of origin experiences to their social work practice. Hermeneutic principles encouraged me to go 'deeper' into the meanings beyond the transcripts. Taking a feminist approach in examining existing knowledge on social work was invaluable as were the feminist research principles that guided every aspect of this research process. Narrative analysis offered a way in which I could analyse and interpret the data and honoured the voices of participants.

CHAPTER THREE FINDINGS

This chapter contains all four of the case studies. As explained in the methodology section, each case study will be presented in two different parts. First a description of the family of origin experiences will be presented and then an interpretive analysis relating these experiences to social work practice will follow.

Recounting Betty's Experience:

As I knocked on the door of Betty's home I realized that not only had I never met Betty before, but also I had never spoken with her. This is because all of our contact had taken place through email. Betty first expressed interest in being apart of this research project after reading a recruitment letter, passed on to her from a mutual friend. After a few emails back and forth, we set up a meeting at her home. I knew very little about Betty prior to our meeting. What I did know was that she was married, had an MSW degree, was a new mother, and was interested in being a part of this research project.

As the door opened, the warmth and colour of Betty's eyes struck me. She was a petite woman with shoulder length chocolate brown hair and big smile. Betty invited me in and explained that she had arranged childcare for her son so that we could have the apartment to ourselves for a couple of hours. I thanked her for going to so much trouble and taking time out of her busy

schedule to be apart of this project. Betty offered me tea, which I accepted, and I began to set up at the dinning room table at her request.

As we made 'small talk' I took a moment to look around the sun filled apartment. I could not help but think that the calmness that was present in this moment was not the usual state of this home. I imagined it was normally filled with the marvellous chaos and laughter that only a child can create. It was a cheerful place with drawings of 'stick people' on the walls, small fuzzy stuffed furniture, and a wooden box overflowing with bright coloured toys.

Betty handed me a cup of herbal tea and began to read over the consent form. We talked about the research and discussed the possibility of a second interview. After Betty signed the consent form, I turned on the tape-recorder and began our conversation by asking her to share her understanding of the relationship between her family-of-origin experiences and her choice to go into social work.

Betty's story begins in Calgary, Alberta where she lived for most of her life. She is a middle child with an older sister and a younger brother, all the children being close in age. Betty's parents stayed married throughout her childhood, but later divorced after twenty-six years of marriage when Betty was twenty-two years old. Betty described a supportive extended family consisting of cousins, aunts, and a paternal grandmother.

Betty portrayed the first ten years of her life as being *"normal"* with a *"pretty stable family"*. *"We did things like baseball and swimming and some*

pretty normal things, even taking regular holidays. [Dad] *was always the coach of our hockey or baseball teams and I liked him being the coach.* " Interestingly, it was not until half way through the interview that Betty provided this brief glimpse into the first ten years of her life. Perhaps this was because these idyllic years did not play a large role in Betty's construction of her family of origin experience. Instead, Betty chose to start with, and largely focused her story on, the *"adolescent years that were out of whack".*

The stories of her adolescent years were dramatically different from the childhood she recalls as having been a period of stability. At the centre of the chaos with which she characterises her adolescence, were stories of her mother's mental health and addiction problems.

> *When I look back on my family-of-origin there were a number of issues that came up, one of them being my mother [was] an alcoholic and made a number of suicide attempts through my ten-year to seventeen-year span.*

In conveying numerous painful stories about what she suggests were her mother's dangerous and "out of control" behaviours Betty explains the impact these events had on her own emotional health as a child.

> *...she would attempt suicide, over-dose on medications and alcohol... I remember going to visit her in the hospital and feeling quite distressed over the fact that she just wasn't getting any better... and that one day she may actually be successful in her attempts.*

Betty describes herself as having been a very independent and responsible teenager, *"in terms of keeping a job and driving and going to school."* While at home, she assumed the role both of *"caretaker"* and *"peacekeeper"* for her parents. Betty never did explain what the conflicts were about between them, only that she ended up getting involved in trying to break up the fights.

> *I did a lot of peacekeeping, trying to keep mom and dad calm. So when they would be fighting, I would be trying to separate them and trying to talk sense into my mom, "calm down"...I took on the role of trying to get help for them, so the caretaker kind of thing.*

Betty suggests that taking care of her parents also taught her to take responsibility for meeting her own emotional needs as well. An essential part of Betty's construction of her family of origin experience involved going to her cousins' ranch some 100 miles north of where she lived, *"they were like my second family actually."* In contrast to family holidays spent together in the early years, Betty indicates that her adolescent years were about spending time *"escaping"* from her immediate family. She notes that not even her siblings joined her at the ranch.

> *I would go away on holidays to my cousin's farm...and ride horses and just have a relaxing holiday away from the family...this was my thing to do for me throughout all of this...*

Stories about her cousin's ranch resurfaced many times during Betty's narrative. Betty described the ranch as the *"holiday from the rest of my life"* where she could not only *"escape"* the pressures of home, but also receive acceptance and comfort from people who would not judge her or her mother.

> *I would often go and see them when things got really tough at home. I would go and tell them what was going on and they would give me encouragement, they were all into AA stuff...I would go back [home] and they would always be available to mom if she needed them.*

Betty explained that going to this refuge always came at an emotional cost for her brother and her. Betty never explained what, if any, responsibility she recognized her father or older sister taking in the care of her mother. Rather, she described herself as the main caretaker with her brother assisting at times when Betty was away.

> *...I just gave myself permission to take the summer off from those kinds of worries and leave them in my brother's lap and I think he was a little resentful that I would take off every summer and he would have to manage mom. So during the year I would manage mom and during the summer he would manage mom, but it was the summer time that 90% of the big disasters would happen and she would attempt suicide.*

Betty explained that, *"Nobody would tell me that she attempted suicide, so I wouldn't come back".* She would not find out until months later that any crisis

had taken place. Betty shared that she had mixed feeling about not being told of the situation immediately.

I am kind-of grateful that they did that in a sense, but in another sense it made me feel a little bit nervous about leaving her alone during the year because I didn't want anything to happen to her.

Betty then shared this story which revealed an incident where her father appeared to have clearly taken Betty and her brother out of the caretaking role, yet, rather than being relieved by this, Betty declared, *"I just couldn't cope not knowing what was happening to mom."* Betty directly linked her anxious response as a consequence of not being told of her mother's previous suicide attempts.

Dad decided that we needed to leave the house for the night because mom had been drinking too much. She was on one of her rants and so he piled [my brother] *and I into his car and we went off to a hotel and I found that I just couldn't cope. So even though it was really chaotic with her being drunk, I had to know that she was safe and I think part of that was the suicide attempts that people kept that from me.*

As a child Betty came to believe that she could trust only herself to keep her mother safe because, as she previously explained, 90% of the suicide attempts would occur while she was away from home. This seems to have made

it very difficult for Betty to set up healthy boundaries for herself and discontinue her caretaking responsibilities. Perhaps this is why the greater portion of Betty's story was constructed around her mother's struggle with addiction and mental health problems and so little of Betty's experiences apart from her family relationships were acknowledged.

Another interesting aspect of Betty's narrative is that she created a very definite container of time within which she constructed her family of origin experience. All of the stories she chose to tell were from ages eleven to twenty-two years. Betty often prefaced stories around her seventeenth year with *"near the end"* or *"towards the end."* 'The end' appears to refer to the time when her mother stopped drinking.

Betty admits that she is still perplexed by the actual event, which prompted her mother to finally get help for her alcohol problems. Betty shared this story of what she thought might have been one of the possible *"turning points"* for her mom.

> *She was drunk and laid down for a nap on the sidewalk, so of course the police came along and took her to the drunk tank...she was thrown in with the prostitutes and they beat her up in jail. She came out black and blue. It was terrible. I thought that would have been a real low point for her, but the anti was being upped all the time. It was getting pretty scary.*

The actual event that Betty identifies as being the *"bottom of the barrel for* [her mom] *was when she realized that her daughter couldn't leave her granddaughter with her."*

> My sister said to my mom that she could never leave her on her own with [my niece]. *Sober or not sober, she just couldn't trust her because she was just so out of control. Mom at that point realized that maybe* [my sister] *had a point and so she quit. She went for alcohol counselling and she joined AA.*

Immediate relief or calm in Betty's family was not brought about by her mother newfound sobriety. Rather, her mother's recovery now shed light on her father's problem with gambling and alcohol.

> [Mom's sobriety] *actually prompted us to look at dad and what was happening with him because he got to hide behind mom's craziness and now his behaviour was starting to come out. I was concerned about his alcohol consumption and it became apparent that he was gambling a lot.*

It appears that her mother's problem with alcohol had a stabilizing effect on the family in the sense that once her mother became stable, her father and sister became unstable. Betty explained that at the same time that she was concerned about her dad, her older sister began drinking and participating in some *"really wild behaviour".* Betty shared how she became involved in having to

"mediate" and confront her sister with an ultimatum, which she believed led her sister to finding help for her alcohol issues.

> *After* [my sister's] *daughter was born and after mom got sober, my sister really went into her scary stuff. At that point, I just wasn't prepared ... and I was doing my mediating stuff again. I went and picked her up at a party and she had been gone for about three days and left her daughter with all of us. We were kind-of sharing* [my niece] *around. I told her I was going to call child welfare and she was furious with me, but I think she kind-of sobered up not too long after that. She only had a short time of it because she was too wild. She wouldn't have survived it.*

While Betty's sister *"sobered up"* her parent's marriage continued to be in crisis until *"they ended up getting a divorce after 26 years of marriage."* It was at this time in the interview that Betty began to cry. She explained, *"even though I was twenty-two when they divorced* [it] *was still a big transition, just to get my head wrapped around it".* Betty then explained how she has come to see that the divorce *"was a good move for mom because she was able to start her own life and dad ended up with a woman who found a way to let him gamble and let him drink, but in a very controlled way."* Betty explained that, through a harm-reduction model, her father was able to control his drinking and gambling in moderation, but this was not until after her parent's marriage ended.

Up until this point in the interview, Betty had focused her narrative on the struggles of others or her relationship with others. Towards the end of the interview, a shift occurred in her story when she began to share her own personal challenges. When Betty began to tell the first story about herself, she actually gasped, as if she were shocked that she had forgotten to tell such an important aspect of her life. Betty then quickly summarized five significantly stressful events, which all occurred at the same time.

> *The other interesting thing that I completely forgot which* (gasps), *it's ridiculous* [that I forgot] *but when I was about 22, I was in the midst of my social work diploma program and I was working with battered women and I was also going through a significant relationship break-up. My parent's got divorced and my best girlfriend was moving from Calgary to Victoria. And at that time, I started getting all these sore bones and stuff and I ended up with arthritis. So, I think that was significant.*

After this statement, Betty had such a profound emotional response that the tape recorder was turned off for a time until she was ready to continue. When Betty had collected her thoughts, the tape recorder was turned on again and she shared how she links her family of origin experience to her developing arthritis. Betty conveys her belief that her arthritis was a manifestation of silencing her emotional pain.

I think [getting arthritis] *was a result of holding everything in. I'm sure it*

was a combination of having to be strong. I felt that I was pivotal. I felt

that I had to keep together for mom and dad to be okay. There was also

sadness for what everybody had to go through in order to get to where

we were at that point. So I think that had a lot to do with getting arthritis.

Betty believes that she contained her pain to protect herself and others,

and this coping mechanism resulted in the physical destruction of her body.

Betty communicates that she also denied her pain during this particular period of

crisis because she was in the School of Social Work, *"During that time, I know I*

went through a really bad depression and I had to keep denying it because I was

in social work". Betty made this statement, then immediately went into another

story, thus not clarifying her comment. Later, I ask her about her denying her

pain because she was a social work student, but unfortunately I posed the

question in a way, which prompted Betty to relate her comment to social workers

in general.

> *The good ones I don't think do. But there are some that when I look at*
>
> *their lives, and it's just clear to me that there are unresolved stuff and it*
>
> *gets in the way of the work that they do with people. So, I think from that*
>
> *I take that it is really critical to get support.*

From here, Betty naturally began to initiate thoughts about the connection

between her family of origin experience and her social work practice. Though

this portion of the interview was considerably shorter, Betty was able to clearly show how she has made meaning out of the challenging experiences from her past. She articulates how she attempts to use this knowledge to help guide her practice with others, a practice that is constructed from an evolved ability to harness the mobilizing energy of resilience when others are ready to seek change in their lives.

Links to Social Work: Resiliency

A central theme in Betty's narrative was that of resiliency. Betty's family demonstrated the capacity to change, adapt, and grow *"in the midst of the many years of dysfunction"* as well as *"manage to maintain a relationship with each other".* Betty explained that her family of origin experience has allowed her to bring to her practice,

> *The belief that people had inner resources, which would guide them toward healthy choices and they would also discover they had the courage and strength to come through very difficult experiences...even in the most chaotic families there is a genuine base of love and caring which connects the family members in spite of their behaviours. It is helpful to assist clients in identifying this base and the strengths the family has in the midst of their "dysfunction".*

Though Betty does not describe it as such, she appears to approach her practice from a strengths perspective in that she appreciates that "people have resources, knowledge, skills, and competence to call on in times of distress" (Early & Glen-Maye, 2000, p.118). One of the most powerful experiences for Betty was watching her mother improve her own life by building and relying on her own strengths to become healthy again. She appears to base her theory for practice largely on this event.

> *I discovered that when situations seemed the bleakest the person, namely my mother would find her way and the healing process was underway. My mother ... inspired me to become a facilitator of change, to believe that each person is ultimately responsible for their own growth and process...*

Betty explains that she transformed her family role as the caretaker to a facilitator of change. Betty does not expand on what she means by *"facilitator of change".* However, my interpretation of this statement, in the context that it was presented is that, for Betty the facilitative role would present itself once a client has already made the decision to make a change in their lives. Betty would be a guide, supporter and/or witness to someone's willingness to change or grow, but she would also respect that each individual has the strength and ability to change their own lives. As a child Betty came to understand that because as much as she tried, she could not change her mother's behaviour.

When Betty's mother was prepared to address her problems with alcohol she revealed inner strength and courage, which Betty had not anticipated. Social work education and life experience has guided Betty to understand and respect that people possess inner resources and the ability to change their lives and will only do so when and if they are ready. Each person is entitled to determine their own journey, even if that means not taking any action at all to make changes in their lives. In essence Betty has learned to *"respect the journey of others"*.

Though a great deal of healing has taken place in Betty's family, the pain and distress which Betty suffered during her family of origin experience, has not been disregarded. In the contrary, Betty expressed how she now uses this understanding to strengthen her relationships with clients.

> *How I use my family- of-origin experiences in my practice is that it helps me to generate empathy with clients in that I know what it is like to be hurting, be frightened, and to feel hopeless. I also know how I have been able to process the pain and fear in order to be ok again.*

When asked if there were any triggers Betty had in her practice because of her family experience she discussed her relationship with people who have addiction problems as being an area of struggle for her.

When I went into Social Work, I thought I wanted to deal with addicts.

Then I got into it and I thought, No, I don't really want to deal with them.

I was kind-of fed-up with them.

The way in which Betty chooses to address people that have issues with addictions as *"them"* may indicate that she still has some unresolved issues from her family of origin experience around addictions that challenge her professional practice. When asked if she has to support people with addictions in her daily work she responded,

Oh, I deal with them a lot more in my work now and I know how to deal

with them but they still frustrate me. They have to be on a pretty good

roll with me to roll with them.

Betty's honest recognition of her challenge with this population encouraged me to ask the question, "So do you choose not to work with this population or are you just very conscious of your boundaries?"

I'm conscious, yeah. No, I actually deal quite a bit with them. The job

prior to this one I was working in a domestic violence and an alcohol and

drug program. I was doing both of those programs and that was good

because it gave me a framework to view the addicts through.

Betty's perseverance in dealing with her family of origin issues helps us to understand that social work practice is not about being flawless; rather it is about acknowledging that personal and professional growth is an ongoing process.

Of course my family-of-origin continues to present me with challenges as once I reach a level of functioning and understanding I am in for another lesson, which helps me to understand the process clients enter into in their journey.

Recounting May's Experience:

May and I first met while taking a course together at university. However, we did not know each other very well when she first contacted me, through email, to ask about participating in this study. May explained that she had heard me discuss this project in class and decided that she would like to be involved. We spoke briefly on the phone about the project, then set up a time and place for the meeting.

May suggested that we meet at the school of social work in the quiet room. I booked the room for two hours and arrived early to set up because I had never seen this room before and did not know what to expect. I found a small room without pictures on the walls and not much for furniture, but it was quiet and private and served our purpose.

I was sitting on a short futon bench when May walked in. We exchanged greetings as May took a seat on an identical bench directly across from myself. May appeared very relaxed and immediately picked up the consent form and read it over. We then spent some time discussing confidentiality and the possibility for a second interview. May then signed the consent form as she crossed her legs up under her, smiled, and shrugged her shoulders, cuing that she was ready to begin.

May began her story with her parents immigrating to Canada from Britain because her father *"was very affected by the oppression of the class system that he grew up in Britain. He couldn't stand the class hierarchy...and the injustice of*

people [being] judged as less". May explained that because her parents were both part of the oppressed British working class and they became *"real believers in social justice."* May indicated that it was her parents, *"believing in trying to help out the community and giving to those who have less"* that influenced how she has come to understand her responsibility to others.

May expressed that, while her parents were content to come to Canada to start their own family, May's mother found it difficult not having any extended family available to assist her, *"I think it made it more intense and difficult for mom because she didn't have any support when she raised us kids."* May clarified that her father worked full time, thus leaving most of the childcare to her mother. The lack of external support for May's family created a situation where from a very early age May was *"asked to act beyond* [her] *years"* and be a support to her mother.

> *As I got older my mom relied on me and would even confide in me about things that were probably not very age appropriate in terms of my development or needs. My mom couldn't confide in or rely on my dad. So, I learned how to listen and how to give support and I became very tuned into that. I was encouraged to develop the skill of asking how my mom wanted me to help her out.*

May was the middle child with one brother who is two years older and a sister who is six years younger than her. May and her older brother were born

and raised in Canada until their father's job gave them the opportunity to move to New Zealand when May was five and her brother was seven years old. May's mother was six months pregnant with May's sister at the time of their move. May's family only lived in New Zealand for approximately two years before deciding to return to Canada. Interestingly, May dedicated a significant portion of her narrative to this relatively short period of time, thus indicating that the events, which took place in New Zealand, were significant in May's construction of her family of origin experience. May explained, *"I think it was the combination of my temperament...my sensitive nature... and my birth order, which encouraged me to become a real helper in my family".*

> *I think because my mother was unsupported in raising the kids and she was about six months pregnant on the trip over [to New Zealand] it just all threw her into overwhelm. But I think even before that, because my nature was to be an independent and willful child, I was seen as having strength and so seen as someone who could look after herself...and when my sister came along I was seen as being able to help out my sister because I was six years older.*

May clarified that her ability to support others and not need much herself was a way she felt valued and special in her family of origin.

> *It was just the way that I was being good or being a valued person in my family. It was by filling that role, looking after others and being*

independent, not needing much myself, and just being able to support my

mom.

May believed that the role of looking after others was not unique to her. She referred to this role as a *"disease",* which had been passed down for generations amongst the daughters in her family.

> *There is one theme from my grandmother, which my mom definitely has.*
>
> *It's a disease.* [They] *passed down this thing about thinking of others*
>
> *more than yourself. My mom used to be really bad about this.* [For
>
> example], *whenever I told her something was wrong with me...she would*
>
> *come up with some terrible story that was far worse than anything I was*
>
> *going through...so no, you couldn't get any support.*

May does not include much about her siblings in her narrative. The greater portion of her story appeared to be dedicated to her relationship with her parents. In fact, approximately one quarter of the text of her narrative involved her relationship with her mother. May often described feeling unsupported by her mother and portrayed herself as a *"helpful, independent, and good child"* that naturally *"looked after herself"* and others. She repeated this description numerous times, but not to reaffirm that this was an accurate depiction. Rather, she appeared to bring this image to light to share that, in fact, she was not all of those things. Referring to her mother, she provided this example, *"Oh, here's*

someone who can look after themselves. Great! Maybe they can look after me

too?" It seemed that the image of a wilful child that she portrayed and the skills

she developed through her independent nature actually masked what she really

wanted or needed as a child, which was to have parental support. May offered

this story as an example of one of her earliest memories,

> *I went to school by myself when I first went to New Zealand, I said, "Well,*
>
> *I'll go by myself." New school, this new country, and I'm six. And I think*
>
> *my mom agreed to it just because I had said, "I was okay". If she hadn't*
>
> *been so stressed out herself, I'm sure she would have been able to say,*
>
> *"Well wait a minute, though you are six, I am supposed to come with you,*
>
> *even though you said you're okay." But she was too overwhelmed*
>
> *herself.*

May shared a story, which she referred to as *"a bad parenting moment"*

on her mother's part. An interesting aspect of this story was that May only

shared this *"pivotal moment in* [her] *childhood"* at the end of the interview when

I asked her if there was anything else she would like to add about her family of

origin experience in relation to social work practice. She explained,

> *I was thinking about this one story. Now I don't know if its going to be*
>
> *relevant or not. So maybe I will just tell it and* [you can decide] *whether*
>
> *you find something interesting in it or not...It just popped into my mind.*

This incident was a defining moment in May's childhood because "*it solidified something in* [her]. *It was like* [she] *understood something about life now.*" This story involved an incident in her grade one class when she lived in New Zealand. May's teacher scolded her for doing something wrong in the classroom. May was so upset by the incident that she left school at recess and went home to her mother.

> *I remember* [my mom] *was quite distant with me. I was helping her make the bed ... she was like, "So, what are you doing here?" I said, "Well I was in school..." and I think I told her about what happened. And she said, "Well you're going to have to talk to the teacher and tell her why you left."* [The teacher] *lived up the street so* [my mom] *sent me up there alone, I was six years old.*

> *I got there and* [my teacher] *sat me on her knee, and asked me why I left school and I couldn't tell her that it was because she yelled at me. I told her that I had been teased by these boys at recess and was afraid to go back out at lunchtime. And so she goes, "Oh! You just keep your chin up!" I felt so bad* [for] *lying to my teacher... I think I couldn't tell her the truth because I had already learned, that young, to protect parents from what they do.*

May explained that by age six she had come to believe that she could not trust her parents or other adults to be there for her. She learned not to share her true feelings with anyone because it was not safe.

I remember this whole experience so vividly. I was walking home and it was like a real coin dropped in me. It was like I understood something about life now... you just have to look after yourself and not tell adults what's really happening for you because that's not safe and you protect them from their behaviour. When they yell at you, you don't tell them [how you feel] because you don't want them to get upset. Anyway, I just remember that. It was really a pivotal childhood experience.

At this point May became tearful and appeared to take a few minutes to reflect on things. She did not seem at ease with her tears as she apologized for crying more than once. When she spoke again she discussed how, in retrospect, she has come to make sense of her parent's lack of support because they themselves were unsupported. She discussed the impact of not having any extended family around when she grew up.

The struggle that resulted in all of this was my parents not having support. If they had had support, I would have had more support. If they had had their more immediate family around, then ....I would have had interaction with them too and maybe I'm sure one of them would have

shown me the adult care that I was missing. It could have been a lot

more enjoyable experience for my parents as well as for us kids.

May describes her father's relationship with the family as traditional in that *"he worked, would come home, read the paper and have dinner, and you don't bug dad about stuff as soon as he comes in the door."* Today, May is able to apply some of her feminist understandings in the construction of her family experience.

There was a big turning point for me when I did my first degree

[because] I took some feminism classes and it really helped me to see the

ways that systemic oppression works as opposed to just individual stuff.

It helped me to understand myself too and the way I was. "Why am I

such a wimp?" and "Why do I find it so hard to stand up to men? It

helped me to understand, "Oh, okay its not just because I am innately

weak, it is because I'm socialized to defer to men." So it also really helped

me to understand myself without blaming myself.

I think more than anything, just the socialization of society as well as

within my family around looking after my dad. You know, he's the man,

that he is working hard and that we need to always be supportive of him.

There [it is] again, the focus on other, especially caretaking a man. [Men

are] *little boys inside* [and] *we need to be gentle with them, even though they're being jerks.*

Supporting her father appears to mean that the rest of the family made a considerable effort not to upset him in any way. That included not going to him for support. May did share some memories of her father playing with her siblings and herself, but these were not purely pleasant recollections.

I remember him playing with us for sure, but my dad drank as well and still does and so his presence was somewhat unstable ...he would be a little bit unpredictable...he would either be exuberantly happy and playful, which wasn't a super common thing in my family so it would be like, "oh my God, this is scary." Or, he would fly into a rage.

May did not expand on what his rage would look like. Even today May struggles with needing to protect other's feelings. She admits that she cannot talk to her father candidly about her feelings around his drinking, *"I'm protecting him again from his behaviour by being afraid to tell him how I feel about his drinking because I don't want him to feel bad."*

When I asked if May found that she continues to caretake her partner in her relationship today as she learned to caretake her father in her family of origin, she responded,

In my relationship? No, because I am a lesbian... I seemed to have

partnered up with a really strong woman who is kind-of a caretaker

herself, so it is almost like... I'm on the other end of that and she is

learning to stop trying to caretake me.

Interestingly, May does not include what it was like for her to tell her

parents that she is a lesbian in the construction of her family of origin

experience. I purposely did not ask her about this occurrence, as I wanted May

to include only those events, which she naturally incorporated into the construct

of her family experience. The fact that this aspect of her narrative is absent is

intriguing because many developmental models regard the process of coming out

as a pivotal event in the lives of gays and lesbians. May either chose not to share

this experience for personal reasons or she may have felt that this event was not

crucial in the construct of her family of origin experience. However, it is curious

that May does not relate this experience to her practice even though she does

"provide counselling to transgender individuals, lesbian women and gay men."

An additional interview may have allowed us to explore this aspect further.

Linking To Practice: Self-Awareness

The central theme to May's narrative suggests a journey of self-awareness. She attributes much of this internal connection with going for therapy herself to deal with issues from her family of origin experience. May does not disclose what originally inspired her to go into therapy, but she does offer this powerful experience of validation, which moved her to share her feelings with someone else for the first time.

> *A really dear friend of mine started crisis line training for the sexual assault centre and. ...*[she taught] *me about active listening. I* [thought], *"This is great! This person is listening to me and they're not interrupting me or telling me what they think or talking about their story, they're just listening to me." I would start crying and that inspired me and I took the training after her.*

While taking this training course May was introduced to the woman who ran the training program. May fondly regards this woman as *"my first mentor in this work".* May closely associates her relationship with this woman with the decision to practice social work, *"I really felt like she believed in me. It was very powerful and someone believing in me...made me think, "Oh, this is the work for me."* As the belief in herself started to emerge so too did her desire to find an occupation, which would allow her to inspire others.

May now practices social work and describes the relationship between her self-awareness and her professional practice as a reciprocal process.

Doing this work helps me to work through my family stuff. It's like it works hand in hand. The more I am able to do that in my own personal life, the more I am able to do that with clients...the clients keep me honest to myself...doing the work with them.

As May becomes increasingly self-aware she is able to bring this knowledge to her practice and the knowledge she gains in her practice may shed light on emotional triggers, which she may need to work on in her own therapy.

A recognised strength in May's social work practice is her ability to genuinely relate with her clients' difficult situations.

...Because I was emotionally neglected as a child, and explored this experience deeply in my own therapy as an adult, I am keenly aware of how neglect can impact on a person's development and what the repercussions might be as they try to negotiate intimate relationships as adults. I believe I can better understand how and when a childhood experience can leave a client feeling unloved and unworthy in some way, and perhaps the things they might need to do in order to heal from that.

May is able to intimately understand the emotional aspects as well as articulate the developmental implications, which neglect can have on a child.

Having a multi-dimensional understanding of this issue reinforces a holistic approach in practice. While May highlights the positive aspect of knowing what it was like to experience neglect as a child, she also draws healthy boundaries between her experiences and those of the people she supports.

> *Going for my own therapy around my childhood issues has been critical, as without the self awareness I have gained through that process, I believe I would be at risk of trying to heal myself through doing work with clients. I would probably identify too strongly with their issues of childhood neglect and get entangled in their process, rather than being a guide and companion to their own process.*

May reframes what some may regard as a potential for pathology as a asset in that she believes her experience of having survived a neglectful childhood has strengthened her professional practice. May makes a link between her family of origin experience, the label of a 'wounded healer', and her role as a social worker.

> *I think you have to do some kind of healing. I don't think you have to have the same wounds as someone else but I think you have to have that experience of knowing what it is like to have felt wounded and have known what it is like to start to heal. Not even to heal completely but have just started at least.*

May continues to recognize ways that unresolved issues her family of origin experience influence her practice. She deals with each of these concerns as they arise. A recent example of this influence on her practice is expressed in how she learned to support others by acting subservient.

> There is this "safe to be the underdog" kind-of theme in my family. One of the ways that my family always supports other people or the safest way to get by is just agreeing with people and not being intimidating and not knowing more than other people.

May observed that this "underdog" theme was compromising her professional practice.

> In therapy when I am with a client and they present as if one of the ways they feel safe and in control is by feeling that they know what they're doing and that they need me just to keep supporting that they are okay. I can sometimes get hooked into that and not challenge them.

May's awareness of her getting hooked into not challenging clients has helped her come to understand the long-term benefit of moving beyond what's safe.

> I realize that it is not about just immediate gratification or feeling better in the moment. It is about the long run, sometimes when you do things for the clients.

May also ties the supportive role she learned in her family to her social work practice. She explained how she felt validated and rewarded for using these same skills in a conscious way in practice as opposed to feeling obligated to use them in her family of origin experience. Her role as the *"helper"* in her family of origin has now evolved from something being expected of her to a role she chooses to engage in as a helping professional. In other words, through self-reflection and education May has discovered a positive way to use or reframe a coping mechanism learned from her childhood.

> *It felt meaningful for me to try to help people out when I was working on a crisis line. I felt like I was important. It just seemed like, "I know how to do this." It came easily...and other people appreciated it. I think that was kind of neat because I was doing it more consciously. Consciously choosing to help someone and sometimes they would thank me and that was really different than just a pattern of helping people because I felt I had to, like in my family. This sort of, 'I had to or I'll pay,' kind of thing.* [Now] *it was, 'I want to do this because I feel good when I do it'.*

Humour is another example of a positive coping mechanism May developed in her family of origin experience,

I think the use of humour in my practice is quite linked to my family of origin experiences. Humour has always been used as a way to cope in my family, often through laughing at ourselves.

She now uses humour in her practice to build a relationship of trust with her clients.

I believe it is useful to help clients to tap into their own ability to laugh at the many things we don't control in our lives but think we do." This has been useful in my practice, as I find clients often get bogged down in taking themselves and particularly their mistakes very seriously, making it difficult to find compassion for themselves.

May explained how developing the ability to laugh at herself was encouraged by her parents as a way of not getting down on herself for making mistakes. This was a lesson for her to pass on to others and her way of dealing with not having to be perfect.

I think it also helps when I demonstrate that I can laugh at myself by making it a joke when I say something that is really rather unskilful during a session. I think it helps to show that I can make mistakes and not take them too seriously, but instead laugh at the obvious silliness of my question or remark.

Recounting Alice's Experience:

Alice and I met as MSW students, but aside from participating together in in-group activities, we had never spent time together. Alice e-mailed me at home to volunteer for this study after reading a recruitment letter passed on to her from a friend.

Alice was unique from the other participants in that social work was not her first career. She did not enter into social work until her mid-thirties after she and her husband decided to get out of the agriculture business. I was curious to see if the fact that Alice had not always intended to go into social work would have her stand out from the other participants in any way.

We set up our meeting, via e-mail, to take place in the quiet room at the school of social work. I felt more prepared and excited about this interview and I arrived early to set up the room for Alice's arrival. This was the second interview I had done in this room so I knew what to expect.

Hurriedly, Alice walked in, dropped her bags, and stated how nervous she was. When I asked her why she explained that she really never thought that there was a relationship between her family-of-origin experiences and her practice before. Nevertheless, she was very enthusiastic to find out how they might be related. I explained to Alice that I really was not worried about the fact that there may not be a relationship between the two for her as this information would be equally valid and valuable to the study.

With that Alice picked up the consent form from the coffee table and began to read it over and signed it. I leaned over and turned on the tape recorder between us and described the format of the interview. I also reminded her that she was not obligated to answer anything she did not feel comfortable answering. Alice nodded to acknowledge that she understood and the interview began.

Alice shared that she grew up in a small farming community on the Canadian prairies. She was the youngest of three daughters, *"in a very tight grouping, we were just a year apart so we were more like triplets."* Alice explained how she came to find her unique role amongst her siblings, *"My eldest sister is the nice one, my middle sister is the reserved thinking one, and so what would I do? I had to be crazy and funny."* During Alice's childhood she would describe her father as abusive and authoritative, but as she matured her father's behaviour changed, as did her opinion of him. She now regards him as being, *"much like* [herself] *in that he's emotional and has...this little kind of spongy heart".* Alice portrays her mother as an intelligent, musical, artistic, teacher, and dreamer who *"can talk about emotions, but she doesn't actually do emotions."* Alice conveys many stories about the *"oppressive and pretty abusive"* childhood she experienced.

> *Oppression does fit for my experience as a child in that the container was quite small. You had to be very good and quiet. I had the capacity for*

neither of those things really. [I] *was basically a good person but I could be naughty too and noisy like kids can be...growing up in that environment was not easy for me, not easy at all.*

Alice portrays herself as having an innate sense of fairness as a child, which enabled her to trust her instincts regarding right and wrong behaviour long before anyone was able to validate her feelings. She also developed a strong conviction not to harm others as she was harmed and believed that she had the strength to make a difference.

[As a child] *it jelled for me that it is not okay to be hierarchical and tough and I am not going to be like that. I had always been quite fascinated by something that has been part of me for a very long time that is the sense that if you didn't like it, then don't do it to someone else. Nobody told me that... my parents [were] very much into, "you discipline the children and you keep them in line", but my decision in that was "I am not going to do it"...I always wanted to make it different, believing somehow, somewhere I developed the strength to believe it could be different.*

Alice reflects on how her *"innate warmth"* and ability to help others were valued and used by her friends and family, thus providing her with a training ground for her future role as a counsellor.

My experiences with friends and neighbours always was around the kitchen table talking about how things are going and... half of the family would come to me, I was very much the helper, and the frustrated helper, because I didn't have the skills. I had an innate kind of warmth and openness that people would come to me with issues and concerns and ideas and problems and we would talk. At that point in my life I was probably looking way more for solutions for them than just, being an ear for them, but people were drawn somehow to me to use me and I guess I wasn't so bad that they didn't come back because it went on and on....

Intertwined with the stories of oppression were many strong maternal influences in Alice's young life. She spoke most often of her Amma (Icelandic grandmother) and the strength she received from her presence.

I think my Amma was a huge piece of this for me, she wasn't extremely verbal but... I remember standing beside her wonderful rocking chair, and she would just pat my hand and I think I got some like energy from her, some strength...it was amazing... My sense is that she was a radical, as radical as you can get, and yet somehow I caught that and I think my sisters did as well. I just have this intuitive sense that this woman had an amazing strength....

Alice describes a special bond between the women in her family, a bond through music. Singing appeared to be a safe way for Alice and her sisters to express themselves and stretch, what Alice refers to as, *"the container."* Alice giddily explains how it was a safe way to be naughty, "we went to church to sing in the choir, which is kind of an interesting way to come at religion...[after all] I am an atheist."

> *My Mom came from quite a musical family and we sang together, my sisters and I, and my mom always played the piano. We sang at wedding showers. There was a time we used to joke that you weren't actually legally married unless the* [Smith] *girls, sang at your wedding shower. Actually a huge part of my life was music and my sisters.*

Alice's maternal extended family played a large role in the construction of her family experience, *"when I think about the larger context of my life I think of growing up in my extended family* [which was] *very politically aware."* Numerous times throughout Alice's story she spoke about the important role that politics held for her. Alice explains that her family strongly encouraged her and her sisters to become politically aware, to be conscious of others, to use their voices, and to get involved in the community. The idea that there is strength in a united group empowered Alice as a child and continues to influence Alice's personal and professional relationships today.

There was a political awareness in my family about the need to be aware

of other people and ... particularly my mother's family was very vocal

about it, ... I always was pretty clear about their views on things and ... I

remember being so young as to not really understand ... what that was

about, but just that there was something going on in the larger world,

that it was okay, and good to be involved in it.

When I asked Alice if she was encouraged by her extended family to challenge and question things in her childhood she responded, *"Yes, exactly. Now, in my family of origin I would not say that it was, for me it was the oppression of my family of origin, so I think I quietly survived that experience."* Alice spoke quietly and became tearful at the end of this sentence. Interestingly, she made a distinction between her extended family and her family of origin as being separate. Alice only includes her immediate family in the construction of her family of origin experience. (how does relate to the multigenerational literature?)

She then made an effort to provide some context to the surroundings she was raised in by explaining the community and the traditions, which governed it and ultimately contributed to the oppression she experienced as a child.

It was not easy growing up female in an agricultural family. My father

was a farmer and had a very traditional home for the first twelve years of

my life. Dad made the decisions [he was an] authoritarian father. He

strapped us, which now I just say absolutely not, it's not all right, but it was certainly the norm in the area where I grew up. It was pretty typical then, but destructive nonetheless. I think now we would say, all that stuff is pretty abusive.

Alice made a point of stating that it was only up until her twelve year that her father *"made the decisions."* Later in the interview she explains that when she and her siblings entered their teen years they began to challenge the status quo and took action against their authoritarian father. The sisters found the strength they needed to challenge their father's physical abuse by *"band [ing] together in [their] adolescent years."*

> *We began to really use each other for support and so we would say to Dad, "No you are not going to strap one of us, you are going to strap all of us if you are going to strap one of us"...I think how outrageous that was, to think of actually strapping someone who is 12 years old, I mean it's not nice to strap anybody, but just the idea that that's how you are going to make someone conform.*

This political awareness from their extended family seemed to empower the girls to use their intellect to achieve positive change by challenging the abuse, rather than rebelling in self-destructive ways. In a later interview, Alice

revealed that she recognizes a link between the ways she and her sisters coped with their family of origin experience and their relationship with food.

I think too I used a heavy dose of denial to keep myself going - I normalized my experiences and minimized them so I could cope. One of my sisters has suffered from depression since she was a child. All of us have a complicated relationship with food - all of us are female!

Alice acknowledges that her parents were also living in an oppressive and fearful environment and the impact this had on the way they parented, *"We were just amazingly good kids, but that sort of fear that my parents lived with, that we would not be good or what good was it makes me very sad to think what that would have been like."* Alice explains that,

These were the values of that day and age that perhaps their children's behaviour would reflect badly on them and they were sort of judgemental about kids who were behaving badly...you didn't have to do much to be badly behaved.

When asked, "How is it that you were able to triumph over the oppression you experienced in your family?" She explained:

There wasn't one person who took a particular interest in me - there were lots of understanding people along the way that showed me kindness. At a deep level I sensed from various people, [that] our family had contact

with, a certain understanding of the oppression that I lived with. I

remember nothing being said directly, but people would silently pat me on

the arm and I somehow I knew that they knew that Dad was hard on my

sisters and me and that seemed to encourage me. I think I took comfort

in those messages. I knew that open rebellion would not be helpful - I

also figured out that no one was going to stand up to my dad so it just

became this little knowing look of pity on people's faces when dad would

start in on one of us.

When I asked Alice to describe her dad she shared a story about a time when he *"turned into a sweetie."* Alice started to cry as she told this story. Alice's view of her father appears to have evolved over the years as she claims his behaviour towards her has changed.

I was about 18 and I was living away from home and he had known I had

always been a sewer. I was helping him pick potatoes at the farm and he

said to me, "I was thinking that you will be missing having a sewing

machine, I was thinking I could get you one." I was like (gasp) *that was a*

really... wonderful gift, it was $79.That was a turning point I think, in my

relationship with him, on one level. I realized that he cared and could be

kind of a gentle caring guy, because he had been pretty mean. My sense is

he thought he needed to be like that in order to make us into decent human

beings.

As our interview came to an end, Alice conveys a sense of understanding and acceptance of her relationship with her parents. Her closing words were almost whispered and she became tearful as she spoke of her resiliency.

It [is] *nice, at this point, to feel a bit more at peace with that relationship and just feel that they provided me with the very best they could, you know functioning out of whatever had been their experience. I feel fortunate in many ways to have at least had the spirit to survive.*

Links to Practice: Being aware of the hooks.

While analysing Alice's transcript I noticed that, for the most part, Alice chose to construct her family of origin experience from negative or oppressive narratives. I was curious as to how this might link to her social work practice and decided to explore this further by sending her this question via email, "Will you please share with me some of the 'positive' family of origin experiences that you've had and link them to your social work practice, if you can?" She responded;

I really am struggling with this question. I have trouble thinking of positive experiences, which makes me realize that I have really focused on the negative ones for a lot of years now. It seems to me that the positive things are hard to see because we just go with them and build; the

negative things are tough because we have to struggle against them and

they take more effort and attention to change.

Alice admittedly focuses on the negative stories, yet she also reflects on and reframes these experiences through a feminist lens. She has come to understand why she and her family experienced an oppressive environment and is now able to bring this knowledge into her practice.

The oppression that I could see as a child and experienced as a child, I think

it made me want to fight so social work being concerned with advocacy and

all that, I think it seems to be a logical [career] *choice.*

Alice also makes the connection between her early understanding of oppression and her natural attraction to feminism. Her *"spirit to survive"* oppression as a child now translates into hopefulness and sensitivity in her practice with women who have also experienced oppression.

I think the oppression that I experienced, really informed my feminism. I

was really able to, from my own experience, move into an analysis of the

world that would be feminist. So I think I can understand a woman's

experience in having not been in a physically or emotionally abusive

situation as an adult but having experienced that as a child...I don't say to

women, *"I know what you are going through"*, but it does make me

sensitive.

The interview process took on a unique feel from the others in that, while Alice chose to start off sharing negative stories the outcome of the interview was very hopeful and positive. She also took every opportunity to bring laughter into the interview, yet did not hesitate to cry when she was moved to do so. In the interview Alice described a process of moving in and out of tense moments through the use of humour in her work with groups. This process seemed to capture the essence of our interview together.

> *I really do use my humour. I am careful [and] I am always aware of when I use it ...I use it a lot in group and individual work as well. [For example] things will be getting very heavy and I can sense that women are starting to get uncomfortable so I will say something wild and zany that is related to this and we will have a little laugh and then I will take it back there and just reflect. We do a little release through laughter and then we can go back at it and be brave again for a little while. So that's one way that I use it and I use it just as a way of developing comfort too, it can be in stages...*

For Alice, the use of humour, developed in her childhood, has now evolved into a valuable tool for her practice. Alice is careful not to use humour as

a distraction to avoid difficult situations for herself or the client. On the contrary, Alice highlighted that she uses humour in a very conscious way to develop a sense of safety and relief for clients, but then she brings them back to that painful place to do more work.

Alice conveys, *"I do associate my interest in working in groups & group work to my roots in the family and the cooperative thinking that was a part of my extended families outlook."* She shares how she continues to *"believe in the larger system and looking at the power that coming together in unions and being part of that kind of environment was supportive."* In her social work practice she chooses to facilitate therapeutic group work. She proclaims, *"I love what happens in group...you might be a fabulous therapist but in group it just happens when you bring people together, it is an amazing thing that happens - it's magic!"*

Alice articulates how she believes it is important to do her own work before and while she practices social work. She is careful to point out that she continues to learn from her past by recognizing when 'hooks' from her past become exposed. As the interview came to an end I asked her, "Do you find that certain things trigger you when you are working with clients?" Alice articulates the benefit of supervision in maintaining a healthy social work practice.

I would say it does, and that is one of the hugely valuable things about

supervision. Being able to work with a supervisor [that can] help me figure

out what I'm hooked on, and that I don't end up feeling like I am a bad

social worker because I have hooks, but that you simply have the

awareness and willingness to get unhooked. I certainly am aware that there

is stuff [and] *I think it is so important to be able to have that awareness... I*

worked very hard to do my work...and I don't believe in perfection so it is

ongoing.

At the end of a previous interview, a different participant had walked me out

to my car and just as I was about to pull away she flagged me down. I rolled down

my window and she said, *"Oh yes, another thing I think you should know about me*

is that I'm a damn good social worker." With that she waved and walked away. I

was left thinking, what a great question. I decided to write Alice and simply as her,

"Do you think you are a good social worker?" She replied:

I know I am a good social worker - for lots of reasons: I do a whole lot of

self-reflection in my practice. Ask myself - what is going on for me- In the

myriad of client situations that come up I want to make sure that my

interventions are clean - that I'm not reacting out of my own stuff and if I

am - I try to be honest about it and get help from a colleague or

supervisor. I am genuine - this is who I am - I don't try to be anything I

am not. I've done lots of personal work and continue to do so when stuff

comes up for me. I am dedicated to learning - to acquiring training in

different techniques for work with clients. I have a warm and caring

approach to clients, which I value. But most important to me is that I

understand oppression because I have lived with it and so when clients

come to me they don't have to prove that to me, I simply believe them.

By sharing her family and personal experiences Alice was able to clearly connect how her family of origin experience impacts her personal and professional life. Alice's strength and hope for the future have developed not despite of but because of her past experience. Alice clearly articulates that continuing to analyse her family of origin experience has brought her closer to self-knowledge and self-acceptance, which has only strengthened her professional practice.

Recounting Andrew's Story:

Andrew and I know each other socially as we have been acquaintances for approximately seven years. He found out about my research project through a recruitment letter, which I emailed out to everyone that I knew in the field of social work. Andrew phoned me shortly after the mail out and conveyed his interest in participating. We decided to meet at my home for the interview at a mutually convenient time.

For me, this interview felt more relaxed than the others. I am not certain if this was because it took place in my home or that I was familiar with Andrew or both. Andrew arrived on time and we immediately got comfortable in the living room. Andrew read over the consent form, signed it, and agreed to a second interview in the future. I turned on the tape recorder and our conversation began.

Andrew is a middle child with an older brother and a younger sister. His family lived in Jamaica until Andrew was twelve years old at which time they immigrated to Canada. Andrew begins his narrative by sharing the significant role his parents have had in giving him a sense of other and an appreciation for difference. Andrew describes his mother and father's style of parenting much like he structures his narrative - well thought out and determined.

What is really clear is that both of my parents had very concrete and

specific ideas about how they wanted to raise us as children. My father

was adamant that we look at the world as not a place that has fixed

ideas, but rather that we look at the world as a place that had many

different ideas about the same thing...learn to question what was around

us, not take for granted the things that we had and not have contempt

for the things that needed to happen to promote a change in some way.

My mother wanted her children to be raised with a sense of the other

person.

As his narrative continues I notice that his responses were strikingly purposive. Almost every experience Andrew shares about his family-of-origin relates directly to his social work practice. This made Andrew's interview unique from the others in that, prior to this interview, Andrew had already analysed and could now offer a clear interpretation of how his family of origin experience directly relates to his practice. This was not by chance. Andrew has shared with me on several occasions how his father *"took* [him] *to task"* throughout his life to be precise and articulate in expressing what he had to say. Andrew explains, "It is not what you have to say that is important to my father, but how you say it that matters". Because Andrew is very clear about the purpose of this research, he makes certain that his responses are suitable. It became clear that how Andrew shares his story is as important and telling of him as any content he offers.

Andrew appears to oscillate between discussing the broader philosophical ideals behind his mother and father's parenting style to then sharing detailed narratives of how these ideals directly impacted his life. For example, Andrew shares this story, which illustrates how his father encouraged his children to understand the impact that oppression has on others in the world.

> One story that I remember is that my Dad had a best friend named Christof and Christof was from Jamaica. I remember Dad asking my brother and myself to go over to Christof's house and he was going to tell us who Chez Guevara was ... my Dad thought it was necessary for us to know who Chez Guevara was and to know that there ... were people in a different part of the world who were being oppressed in some way and to know that it was important that something be done about it.

This is a telling story as it brought up two important, but conflicting issues in Andrew's childhood. On the one hand his father would include Andrew and his brother as equals in adult conversation, which Andrew appears to enjoy. For example:

> Dad would always encourage us to be a part of conversations, even as young children who didn't know anything about the world. We were always as much a part of a gathering as the adults were and always privy to whatever it was that they were talking about.

However, Andrew explains, *"I know that my brother and I never felt like we had a childhood...I can't look back to a time when I can say that I felt like a child."* Andrew regards this as a consequence of them having to *"stretch"* themselves beyond their years.

> *We had to stretch ourselves and we were stretched emotionally I suppose and maybe it is too much to say, but perhaps even intellectually we were stretched from a very early age [and also] stretched in terms of needing to adapt to a different situation.*

Andrew describes being very *"stretched"* and *"challenged"* by his father. In contrast, he portrays his mother's as *"always the fun of the parenting and kind of the heart, the sensitivity behind the parenting role."* Andrew's deep affection for his mother is evident in the strong presence she has in his narrative.

> *Mom had this very intuitive sense about each of her children and maybe, I think my Dad did too in his own way, but she would hold me in her lap when I was a little boy* [and] *she would constantly move the hair on my head behind my ear, and I used to love that feeling... my great grandmother would say, when I was playing in the yard, "That is a really soft child, Beverley, you have to be really soft with that child." My Father never listened to that, but my Mother did.*

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Andrew appears to display a great admiration for his mother's strength in being able to adapt to difficult situations as well as place her children ahead of political beliefs. Andrew shares this story of what prompted his family to move from Jamaica to Canada.

> ...She was a white woman [and] her husband demanded that we not live in the city, that instead we live in a remote village in the middle of the Jamaica at the top of this hill, no running water and with these three young children – one of which was a newborn. The maids would come up and say, "There are bad drugs coming into the country Miss Bev, you need to take your children and go." She had basically given my father an ultimatum. She said, "It is your political beliefs or it is the health of your family – I'm taking them back."

A theme of validation emerges repeatedly in Andrew's narrative. He described many experiences with his mother that explains how affirmation from one's family-of-origin can translate into effective practice. Andrew conveys that his Mother gave him the experience of unconditional love, acceptance of self and other, and the power of validation in her declaration, "you have a right to be here." Andrew explains how he is able to honour people he supports by validating them and their experiences.

> I remember the adjustment to Canada...was really difficult for me because for whatever reason...I was afraid to go to school, she got the Desiderata, [they are] words of inspiration... I remember that she sat me down on my

bed and she made me repeat over and over again this one line, "You are no less than the trees and the stars in the universe, you have a right to be here." It is this part of the Desiderata that I have never forgotten. I can remember this because she made it absolutely clear that it was important that I was here ...that is what she gave me, she gave me the right to be here, and I think that is my responsibility as a social worker to give that to a client, that they have a right to be here.

Andrew then explains how he believes his family never fit in with society. For Andrew, having experienced marginalization as a child allows him to empathise with the people he now supports in practice.

We were always outsiders. Our family. We were always on the margin of something...my father was also a rebel with his family because he just couldn't stand the colonial mind set that operated in Jamaica among whites and so, as a white person himself, he just deliberately set himself apart. The irony is, of course, whom he went to were the Afro-Jamaica people, black Jamaicans. He was an outsider with them because he was white...Then, we come to Canada...we are on the outside because we have no participation in its history and we speak with funny little accents... So I grew up in my family of origin with a feeling of being on the margin, being on the outside of what is considered normal.

Andrew further illustrates this feeling of *"being on the margin"* in revealing that, *"because I am gay... the children I went to school with, also had an intuitive sense of that, I became really experienced at being on the outside, being teased and the rest of it."* As opposed to May's experience, Andrew does include his sexual orientation in the construction of his family of origin experience. He expands on how being gay influenced his experience of his *"social circle"* as well as his family of origin experience. Andrew conveys that, *"I was so empowered by exposing my sexuality to my family that when I was in university I used the idea of homosexuality for the subject of all my papers."* As empowering as his experience of exposing his sexuality was with his family, he still did not feel that his peers could validate who he was.

> As a gay person I had a qualitatively different experience of growing up then I think other people did... in the sense that...most other people didn't have to go through a process of hiding [or] not give expression to a really significant component of themselves that is often celebrated through rituals of just growing up and growing older. Things like, high school proms and dances and all that kind of stuff. So I grew up with a sense that, at least in my social circles, that there was a part of me that could not be validated, that couldn't give an expression to even attempt to have it validated.

Andrew addresses the disparaging way others have interpreted social workers' family-of-origin experience.

> *I think that I am moved by some of the things that I thought of, that I actually haven't ever thought of, and seeing some tangible connections...I am thinking that we are often blamed for, or really thought less of, because we go into social work and somebody finds out that, like many others, we had our own family problems and I guess for me what I am moved by is the fact that I am not seeing the connection to problems in my choice to pursue social work, I am seeing the natural bridge that just my simple experiences with my family allowed me to cross over into my choice to pursue social work and that bridge is made up of pretty powerful and important experiences born out of both positive and negative times and challenges...*

Linking to Social Work Practice: Validation

What is most evident throughout Andrew's narrative is the strong presence his parents' teachings had in guiding his practice. In fact, aside from a few stories about his siblings, he largely centres his focus on his parents. Andrew describes this presence as their "voices" coming out in his practice.

For example, Andrew describes a woman who came to realize and accept responsibility for her anger and was able to acknowledge that she was really

angry about having diabetes, but took these feelings out on her daughter by yelling at her. This was Andrew's response to her.

This is an example of my Mom's voice coming out of me in my practice, I said, "You know what, I think you have just defined bravery for me because I don't think bravery means you have to jump in an ocean when someone has fallen out of a boat, I think bravery is when you have a moment in your life that you realize that something you were doing wasn't right and had more to do with your own stuff than somebody else's and that you actually say it, so I think you are a very brave person." And the expression on her face was amazing because you could tell that smile that says thanks or that I feel like I am an important person now.

[My mother taught me to] *always make somebody know how important they are regardless of how they are behaving... Anybody who feels anything remotely negative in their life, all they need to know is that they are still important anyway."*

Andrew described his mother as "the heart of the family" whereas his father's presence involved intellectual challenge, reasoning, and logic. Upon asking Andrew how and/or if he heard his father's voice in his practice he shared the following;

My Father's voice is expressed in my not taking the system for granted, not having contempt for it, we have to live within some kind of system,

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but at the same time learning how to question things ... when somebody

has an idea for a new program my Father's voice is expressed when I find

myself questioning that program, or not questioning it for the act of

questioning, but because there can be something different that might be

more meaningful, get to a deeper level, there is something that is more

easily missed. That is my Father's voice in my practice.

Andrew conveys how needing validation is as important to him now as it was for him as a child. For Andrew, affirmation is now present in his life through his ability to help others in practice.

I don't know who I am and I don't know why but it is almost like I have to

do the work that I do in order to be reminded about the fact that I have a

right to be here, that there is a reason for me to be here. If I didn't have

those moments like that woman [I helped that had diabetes]*... I think I*

would be without my lifeline to tell me it is important that I am here.

Andrew's self-esteem and believed purpose for existing appears to be based in large part on his ability to help others. Traditionally, this has been regarded as a weakness or flaw in the counselling relationship, but Andrew helps us to understand that it may be seen as an essential aspect of a successful

helping professional's personality. Andrew is able to eloquently articulate the

benefit of reflecting on he uses his family-of-origin experience in practice.

> [My family] *has inadvertently been a training ground for how it is that I*
>
> *actually end up approaching my work. I bring the past with my family, into*
>
> *almost every moment of my work as a social worker. That is not a bad*
>
> *thing, it is something to celebrate and embrace I think, because knowing*
>
> *that it is important that we are here, knowing it is important that somebody*
>
> *has the right to be here, all those things translate into when I make contact*
>
> *with somebody as a client and as a worker.*

> *It is not that we have negative experiences in our life that should preclude*
>
> *us from doing social work, it is the power that comes from our ability to*
>
> *respond and adapt to those experiences that are the reasons why we*
>
> *should be social workers, it is almost like we should feel obligated to*
>
> *pursue social work because of the experiences we have come through*
>
> *with our families and we should be obliged to perform the service.*

One aspect of Andrew's story appears to come as a revelation to him

when he makes a connection between his relationship and role with his siblings

and his development of assessment skills for social work practice.

I was always the person who actually expressed what it was that I

observed...being caught in the middle of [my brother and sister]... *they*

forced me to be specific about what it is that I had observed. Their role

with me was to force me to be sure and to clarify what it was that I was

seeing, and if social work is about assessing things and in the most

accurate way possible, of what is going on in a situation [then], *I think I*

had unwittingly trained with them my assessment skills.

Andrew's personal interview stood out from the others is that he revealed very few negative stories. I decided to ask him why this was. He made sense of the purposive selection of his positive stories in this way:

Since going into social work, I've been exposed to the idea of the

'narrative' as a force that both represents and affects how we experience

and make meaning of the lives we live. My 'narrative', or 'story' seems for

the last 10 - 15 years to have been focused on the negative, to the point

that I really don't think that I was able to identify and embrace what was

positive as well. To that end, I am trying to find ways to, not ignore what

may have been or exist now as a challenge, but to also make sure that

the positive within is also focused on. I want to change my 'story' not so

that it is inaccurate, but instead so that it is more rounded and not

focused on one extreme over the other.

With respect to what I shared about my family, I think that I shared what I did because I have done a lot of work in dealing with my family, my past, and the things that I experienced, to the extent that I have moved beyond the need to just be a negative by-product of my family, and instead appreciate how it is that I have been able to grow and develop BECAUSE of what I once defined as negative. I have moved beyond the idea that to be from a good family means that you had no 'negative' experiences. So I am at a place where good or bad, I can reflect on my family for what it actually was, instead of what I feel it should have been.

As the interview came to an end, I asked Andrew it there was anything else he would like to add. He ends our time together with these words.

When I think about social work and what ... my family gave me for social work, it was the idea that it was important to have heart and to be sensitive to other people, to understand that there are other perspectives that other people have that are valid and important, that you don't have to agree with them for those things to be valid, but to accept and embrace them because maybe there is something about the way that they experienced the world that would enhance the way that I would or that we would as children. So I think ... both of them together gave us

the sense of the other and the need to sort of care about the experiences

of the other as well.

CHAPTER FOUR DISCUSSION

In keeping with feminist goals for research, the participants' voices and knowledge were used to advance our understanding of the complex relationships between social workers' family of origin experiences and their professional practices. Participants were also involved in coauthoring the findings for this study by providing clarification and editing for each theme. As mentioned in the methodology section, the additional stories and feedback from Petunia and Renee were involved in the construction of the three themes that follow.

Upon analysis and interpretation of the narratives it became apparent that as the participants reflected back on their family of origin experiences, three themes emerged, which help to demonstrate how these experiences find translation within each of their practices. The first theme that emerged was participants identifying their families of origin as a training ground for their future social work practice. This training was expressed by the taking on of certain roles in their families. The second theme is represented by each participant actively engaging in a 'restorying' of their family of origin experiences away from the label of dysfunction in order to reconceptualize or reconstruct them into meaningful knowledge. Finally, participants described a natural bridge between earlier family experiences and their present-day social work practice. This was expressed by an awareness of an iterative relationship between past and present events.

How each of these themes emerged will be demonstrated and relevant

literature will be brought in to compare these findings with previous

studies. Implications for social work education and practice will also be discussed

in a separate section to follow along with a discussion of the limitations of this

study and the need for further research.

Family of origin as a training ground

The theme of the family of origin as a training ground for social work

practice emerged early-on in all of the interviews. Two of the participants

actually used the concept of *"training ground"* to describe how they made sense

of the relationship between their role(s) in their family of origin and acquired

practice skills for social work. Other participants also described this training

ground by identifying specific roles they took on in their families of origin, such

as, *"good listener"*, *"caregiver"*, *"mediator,"* *"helper,"* *"observer,"* *"caretaker"*,

and the *"good child"*. Moreover, most participants conveyed that they took on a

number of these roles at the same time. For example, one participant described

herself as being the *"mediator,"* *"caregiver,"* and *"peace keeper"*, yet another

described herself as the *"good child"* and *"frustrated helper"*.

Participants understood that the purpose of these familial roles were to

maintain or preserve a balance in their families, and from these roles, skills for

practice were born. One participant described her mediating role as *"pivotal"* in

keeping her family together. She later linked this skill to her practice in being

able *"to remain composed in times of crisis"*. Two participants discussed taking on *"caregiving"* roles, for their parents and siblings, when one or both of their parents became ill or incapacitated after using drugs and/or alcohol. One of these participants saw this role as a *"natural entry"* into the *"caregiving role of nursing,"* prior to her career in the social work profession. The second participant articulated that this caregiving role helped her develop the skill of being *"sensitive to the unspoken"*. She now regards this as *"a great advantage"* for her social work practice, "*I frequently observe elderly patients who cannot articulate what is going on for them and if I can verbalize what I see – they often agree."* This finding may support Lackie's (1983) claim that,

> "those who become social workers appears to have been assigned and to have played roles that promoted seeming self-sufficiency: the parentified child, the overresponsible member, the mediator or go-between, the "good" child, the burden bearer " (p. 309).

Other researchers have found family helpers to be disproportionately represented among counsellors (Racusin et al., 1981; Buelow & Bass, 1994).

On the other hand, this finding may also support Goldklank's (1986) view that social workers may come to identify themselves with stereotypical roles expected of family therapists. Buelow & Bass (1994) offer,

> "Although family facilitation roles seem to be transformed into counsellor helping roles, how that transformation takes place, and whether the

transformation is a healthy one for the children in the family system, is not clear", p. 166).

If we are to accept the definition of dysfunction as it has been defined by previous studies, then without exception, every one of the participants in this study described their family of origin experience as dysfunctional. For example, five of the six participants disclosed that at least one of their parents had issues with alcohol and/or drugs. While the sixth participant did not experience issues with addictions, she described growing up in an extremely rigid, oppressive, and physically abusive environment. Three of the six participants also conveyed that they experienced domestic violence while growing up. Severe mental health problems were also experienced in the families of two of the participants.

Concern is expressed in the literature that social workers who are adult children of alcoholics (ACA), may have chosen social work as a career so that they can meet their co-dependent needs in their counselling relationships (Fausel, 1988). Some of these needs are thought to be expressed in "symptoms of boundary issues, low self-esteem, and a need for approval" (Hinkin & Kahn, 1995; O'Gorman, 1993; Sherman et al., 1989) (as quoted in Biering, 1998, p. 322).

Five of the six participants in this study are female; therefore, it is important to look at the concepts of co-dependence and caring from a feminist perspective. Feminist literature strongly opposes the concept of co-dependence because the patterns of behaviour and family roles that are labelled as co-

dependent are strikingly similar to roles and behaviour traditionally associated with a feminine gender role (Collins, 1993). Many identified roles or behaviours of co-dependency and feminine gender roles are also common to the social work profession. This is observed in the literature in that,

> "several researchers also have found that adult children of alcoholics are over represented in nursing and other helping professions, such as social work and psychotherapy (Dean & Edwards, 1989; Holder, Farnsworth, & Wells, 1994; Pilat & Jones, 1984; Wittman, 1990)" (as quoted in Biering, 1998, p.320).

My findings concur with previous studies in the identification of certain family of origin experiences, such as issues with alcohol, drugs, mental health, and domestic violence as well as the recognition of particular roles such as mediator, helper, and caregiver. However, the findings from previous studies did not go beyond identifying a cause and effect relationship. They failed to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning behind these identified commonalities amongst social workers' family of origin experiences in their linear, objective methodologies. Had the analysis and interpretation of the personal interviews ended here, this study would not have contributed much in the way of expanding our knowledge of the meaning, which social workers attach to their family of origin experiences.

(Re)storying our family of origin experiences

The value of this study is best demonstrated in the second theme, which emerged as the participants articulated the multidimensional aspect of their family relationships and exposed the diversity in outcomes that resulted from these experiences. It was during the discovery of this second theme that the power of qualitative methodology guided by feminist principles came to light. The open dialogue and free flowing conversation, which represented the personal interviews, allowed the participants to move beyond just relaying the information about the roles they may have played in their families, and instead shifted to an explicit reconstruction of these experiences into meaningful knowledge. Participants were able to voice that their family of origin experiences are not fixed in time, but rather evolve with every new experience they encounter, hence the theme of (re)storying our family of origin experiences emerged.

The main premise behind this theme is that each of our family of origin stories are incomplete because every time we tell our story to someone new, we are in a different context and therefore, we (re)story our experience in a different way. This is a natural process whereby our experience is re-evaluated over time, thus the stories I am portraying are only temporal representations of one particular version of that story, from a specific period of time, and in one particular context.

Throughout the course of this study it became apparent that participants, as well as myself, had to work past using the same deficit-oriented language, which is used in traditional science, in explaining our family of origin experiences. We came to recognize that the use of these pathologizing terms have become so natural to us, in describing our families, that we do not even stop to question the oppressive nature of them. Through the process of sharing some of the feminist and empowerment ideas with the participants, along with my interpretations of their transcripts, we were able to reframe and move past describing relationships, to understanding the meaning attached to these relationships.

One of the ideas we explored was how the literature regards certain identified facts about family experiences as dysfunctional rather than seeing families as responding to the socially constructed image of the perfect or functional family. Moreover, "feminist thinkers have demonstrated that family forms are socially and historically constructed" (Zinn, 2000, p. 42b).

One participant made the connection between her father's authoritarian and oppressive style of parenting and the oppression he was responding to as a result of living in a small, extremely judgemental community. She reframed her father's use of extremely rigid rules for his children as a way that he responded to the community's expectations of a good father and/or family. It should be made clear that this participant was quick to explain that she in no way condones his abusive actions. She is, however, able to restory this experience in a way that allows her to move past only feeling wounded by this experience.

Through the process of reconstructing her past experiences, she is able to bring this knowledge to her practice in her understanding of what it was like to have felt oppressed as well as have an appreciation for how the socially constructed image of the perfect family contributes to the subjugation of families.

Another participant experienced an important revelation during the interview process, while reflecting on her family of origin experience. After discussing how her father's alcohol problems encouraged her to take on a caregiving role, she suddenly realized that, in fact, it was her mother's modeling of compassion and non-judgement for others which had the most influence over her career choice and the way she approaches her practice. Moreover, she acknowledged that all four of her siblings were also inspired to go into helping professions because of their experience of having a father with addiction problems as well as having a mother who modeled compassion for others. This is just one example of how participants were able to challenge the notion that negative or dysfunctional experiences have the strongest influence in one's personal and professional development.

All of the participants made the point of explaining that it is not their family of origin experiences alone, which they bring to their practice. Rather, it is the knowledge gained through reconstructing these experiences, which they are now able to offer to their practice. Participants often described this process as "*doing their own work*" and regarded this process as essential to effective practice. Many of the participants shared that they had been for counselling to

help *"deal with"* issues from their family of origin. This finding may suggest that the participants agree with Bowen's (1978) assumption that those counsellors who are able to effectively address personal and interpersonal issues are better able to assist clients. However, participants openly challenged the idea that personal issues are ever completely dealt with. Moreover, they regarded this process of revisiting past experiences as a healthy practice that encourages self-awareness and enhances professional skills.

Natural Bridge

Each participant described an iterative relationship that exists between past family of origin experiences and present social work practice. Moreover, they regarded this iterative process as essential in maintaining healthy personal and professional lives. Participants gave expression to this relationship through the use of metaphors, such as, a *"natural bridge"*, *"pathway"* or *"ongoing journey"*.

This theme emerged as each participant accounted for how they dealt with having emotional responses to certain situations that emerged during practice. Participants openly discussed how these responses were a natural and common feature in their social work practices. These responses were not limited to negative emotional issues or what Freeman (1992) may refer to, as "unfinished business."

One manner in which participants referred to these emotional responses were as their *"issues"* or *"stuff"* being *"triggered"*, while counselling others. In this sense, the trigger involves emotionally revisiting past family of origin experiences that have not yet been resolved, recontextualized, or (re)storied to a point where they no longer hold an emotional impact. One participant described the triggering process in this way,

> *There's a pathway there for [me to] take it all on, 'someone's in trouble and I have to do everything to make it better'...I really have to work at [not] getting pulled-in and feeling responsible for the person who's in the room*

However, the trigger or journey back to revisit negative experiences is just one dimension of this process. One participant offered this explanation of the multi-dimensional construction of this concept, "*we bring our past with us into the present, but we also bring our present experiences back to our pasts to help make sense of these experiences in a new way*". The new meanings found in this 'journey back' are then brought back to this participant's practice in the way of practice skills. Another participant explained, "*I bring the past and my family into almost every moment of my work as a social worker. That is not a bad thing, it is something to celebrate and embrace.*"

This finding is similar to what Buelow & Bass (1994) regards as parallel processes of novice counsellors. Their explanation follows,

"often the parallel psychological processes they experience deepen understanding and provide new meaning to their counselling: sometimes counsellors' dysfunctional family backgrounds lead to the parallel processes that interfere with their progress as clinicians" (Buelow & Bass, 1994, p. 162).

Many participants offered stories of inspiration from their families of origin, which may also be triggered at times while counselling others. In this way the iterative process helps us in terms of personal growth as it informs the moment of practice. Emotional triggers may present themselves during practice in that we may recognize a need in a client, which we have experienced in our past. This trigger can bring us back to a past need, for example the need to be validated. We recall what it felt like to want and receive validation and understand what we needed to heal from that experience. We may then bring this knowledge back into the counselling relationship by offering the client that piece of validation to assist them with healing. This offering of validation would then be 'checked-out' with the client, to see if this response fit for them. In this circumstance, the skills that already existed from past experiences were bridged with the future to inform practice in the present. This is multi-dimensional issue, which is more like a circle or spiral in its process and anything but linear. For this reason, qualitative methodologies were most effective in exploring this theme and would have been lost by traditional research methods.

Implications for social work education and practice

These findings suggest several implications for social work education and practice. It is incumbent upon the social work education programs to take an empowerment-approach in their curriculum and course work material so that the following points may be addressed;

- Students would be encouraged to draw out and build on strengths from their families of origin so that this positive exploration of their family experiences might translate into practice by way of them becoming equally curious about exploring the strengths in clients' families of origin.

- Deconstruct the myth of the perfect family and perfect social worker. Social workers need to know that they do not have to be the experts and doubt their professional abilities if they are 'triggered' by another family's experience. In this way students would be encouraged to become clearer about how they construct their own family of origin experiences as defined in their own words and without the agendas of others. This will encourage practitioners to respect the subjective and personal nature that the terms family and family functioning hold for their clients.

- Social work education can assist students with exploring the personal strengths and skills they already posses. This may contribute to the validity of them entering the social work profession. These strengths might initially be expressed in the form of 'stereotypical roles' they played in their families. However, it is important that students get to move beyond describing these

roles to a reconstructing of what the experience of acting out those roles meant to the student. It is through this process that students are able to access their family as a training ground for social work rather than it being seen as something to overcome.

- Professors need to normalize the idea of dealing with family issues on an ongoing basis and reinforce this as a healthy process that does not need to be hidden. This will encourage social workers to ask for assistance, if they need it, and not feel stigmatized for seeking counselling.

- Social workers need to acknowledge their own ability to change or evolve because of family experiences rather than in spite of them. This will allow them to assist clients with recognizing the interdependent nature of family grown in relation to their family members rather than separating as a sign of health.

Need for further research

It is imperative to social work practice and social work education that additional studies offering contextualised accounts of social workers' family of origin experiences, as they relate to social work practice, be represented in the literature. This research is at the heart of social work because the data is provided directly from the people that do social work.

Lindsey (1997) suggests, "many feminists have adopted the postmodernist assertion that there is no absolute truth or reality that researchers

can pin down" (p.76). This perspective would indicate that others, besides social workers, may have important knowledge for how social workers relate their family of origin experiences to their social work practice. For example, social workers that do not relate their family of origin experiences to their practice. Another example would be to have social work educators examine their own relationships with their family experiences as they relate to practice as they are much of the source behind the studies that have been done on students' families in the past.

Another gap in the literature that could benefit from an in-depth qualitative study is looking at people who regard their family as functional versus people who regard their family of origin as dysfunctional to look at the differing perceptions with regard to practice issues.

Research that values the voices of social workers in needed to gain a deeper understanding of this issue. While this study opens the door to exploring these issues further, it by no means offered a total picture of this complex issue. For many participants this was the first time they had ever looked at this relationship and they no doubt have developed these ideas further since our discussion – though feminist critics may express concerns regarding the ethics of such influences on participants reality.

Limitations of this study

One limitation to this study was my lack of experience in conducting research. This was my first research project and as such may be a more accurate representation of my learning process than a solid piece of research. Nevertheless, I am proud of the fact that this project, no matter how limited in sophistication, in some way honoured the voices of social workers.

Another limitation to this study is represented in lack of diversity in my sample. It must be acknowledged that the participants that were drawn to this study were similar to me in their age, social status, and cultural background. It would be important for future research to look at how I chose to recruit my sample, to try and determine why my recruitment methods did not attract people from other cultures.

As described at length in my methodology section, recruiting from my peer group proved to be challenging in a number of ways, however, most of these limitations were around my learning process. The benefits from working with my peers came during the formulation of the themes. I simply could not have developed the depth of understanding, on my own, that I experienced having coauthors that were dedicated to this project.

Another limitation to this study was in understanding that to capture the entire family experience in a few interviews is impossible. The issue is too complex and no one's story is ever finished.

Conclusion

The information and knowledge shared by the participants in this study

provided great insight into the complex nature of the relationship between their

family of origin experiences and their social work practice. The stories revealed

that these relationships are complex and unique from one another and therefore

need to be honoured as such and not simply quantified into causal relationships.

The ongoing and positive experience of dealing with issues and discovering

strengths in one's family of origin is not explored in the existing literature, yet

this came up as a continuous theme during the research.

In addition, the family functioning of social workers and how this relates

to their practice is a social work issue, yet there are essentially no other

qualitative studies that reflect the voices of social workers. Quantitative methods

have focused on certain factors in social workers' family of origin experiences to

identify cause and affect relationships whereas qualitative methods reflect the

multifaceted nature of these relationships. The nature of quantitative measures

is to seek out one truth or reality of what a dysfunctional family involves and

then assign or predict one true outcome of what this family experience will

dictate for future practice. None of the quantitative studies have actually proven

that what they consider to be a dysfunction family experience does in fact

determine dysfunctional professional practice. In fact, no studies could be found,

which actually looked at this relationship. Nor have studies looked at or proven

that coming from a functional family will produce a higher functioning social

worker. Yet the majority of the literature makes the assumption that a dysfunctional family background is cause for alarm regarding future professional and personal mental health of social workers still exists.

Feminist principles negate the idea of one truth; rather they accept that there can be many truths or realities to any given situation. Because previous literature does not regard these experiences as potential for growth would suggest that social work education, which does exist on exploring one's family of origin experiences, may be based upon these pathologised assumptions of what a dysfunctional family is and programs or curriculum would be based on the assumption of what having a dysfunctional family would mean for their professional practice. This would foster an environment where social workers would need to hide rather than be supported in working through difficult family issues.

My study was not designed to disprove previous literature but went as far as consistently demonstrating that existing literature is not sufficient in explaining the complex issue of social workers family experiences and their professional abilities. I am not negating that some social worker do come from difficult family experiences, but the literature does not reflect that many diverse outcomes may result from these experiences. Social workers need to contest contradictory messages that on the one hand they are seen as not being able to be authentic to their clients if they have never experienced a difficult or similar

experience and yet their professional abilities are questioned if they reveal dysfunction in their family history.

Participants make it clear in this study that they have ideas about how they used their family experiences in positive ways in their practice. This knowledge is valuable for social work education in that it may speak to the need for developing projects for social work students, which reflect on the positive or strengths they take from their families and bring to their professional practice. This in turn will encourage social work practitioners to look for existing strengths in the families that come to them for support.

The goal of this study was to help fill the gap in our understanding of how social workers link their family of origin experiences to the social work practice. Clearly additional feminist research through qualitative methodology will allow the knowledge of social workers to be voiced and validated in the creation a more respectful literature.

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APPENDIX I: SAMPLE RECRUITMENT LETTER

EXPLORING THE FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORKERS AND HOW THEY RELATE TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding of how social workers use their family-of-origin experiences in their social work practice. To date, the research and related literature on this topic is limited in that it has not allowed social workers the chance to define their experiences in their own words apart from the agendas and demands of others. It is the intent of this study to provide a forum for social workers' voices to be heard. This will be done to offer a more holistic understanding of social workers' family-of-origin experiences to the existing body of literature. This research maybe used to assist social work educators as well as social workers in understanding their own practice framework.

How will the study be conducted?

- A two hour, personal interview at the time and place of your choice.
- The interview will be audio &/or video tape recorded and transcribed (your choice of recording method)
- Participants will be provided with an interpreted version of their interview, and asked to verify and clarify the data.
- A summary of findings will be provided to each participant, upon request.

Who's invited to participate?
- Any social worker that has completed a bachelor's of social work degree program.
- People of various sexual orientations, ethnic backgrounds, ages, abilities, and religions are encouraged to participate.