JUST MANAGING: SYSTEMIC SOURCES OF STRESS AND STRATEGIES FOR WOMEN MANAGERS OF A SOCIAL SERVICE ORGANIZATION

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts
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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of women managers in a unionized social service organization. Specifically examined are the coping strategies utilized to address the stress and demands of the position and the organization’s role in shaping aspects of the women’s experiences. The study has three purposes: 1) to document women managers’ experience of their leadership roles and the stresses induced by the organizational culture and nature of the work that can lead to burnout; 2) discuss possible solutions and coping strategies which could potentially be used by other social service organizations; and 3) contribute to the currently scarce sociological and feminist literature that explores both women leaders in social service organizations and management level burnout. An ethnographic methodology was utilized to depict the subjective views of five women managers via semi-structured interviews and participant observations. The findings illustrate the difficulties inherent in balancing competing roles and the pervasive devaluing of developmental services.

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Dedication

To my parents, for their unconditional love and support.

To a very special person, whose countless hours of support and intellectual guidance will always be remembered and deeply appreciated.
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The study that follows is an investigation of the experiences of women managers in a social service agency. They face many complex and difficult issues in their line of work including role conflict between the needs of staff and consumers. This is complicated by a distrusting culture, the unionization of staff and supervisors in the same local, and the nature of the work that the women do. This study will provide an in-depth look at five women’s experiences of their work, the stresses that they identify and the methods that they use to cope.

My research focuses on an agency in Ontario that serves adults and children with developmental disabilities. The Longview Community Living Association (pseudonym) was formally established in the 1950s by a small group of parents, volunteers and interested individuals who were concerned about the lack of services in their community for children labelled or diagnosed as “mentally retarded.”
DESCRIPTION OF THE ORGANIZATION

The organization has grown from about twenty clients and one room in a rented facility into one of Canada’s largest associations. There are now volunteers, parents, and members, with a full professional staff complement, serving over 350 developmentally handicapped children and adults. The agency offers vocational services in the form of day programs, life skills programs, and a learning centre (focusing on reading, writing, math, and computer literacy). There is a community options program that assists developmentally disabled individuals find work placements in their communities and provides on the job training. Residential services for children and adults are provided in group home settings. The family home program provides support to families with developmentally handicapped family members, as well as matching suitable “associate” (foster) families to those individuals who wish to live in a family setting but have no natural family. The agency also offers a supported independent living program that assists those who wish to locate and reside in their own apartment.

Longview Community Living employs eleven supervisors who are responsible for the programs mentioned above. Seven Residential Supervisors share nineteen
group homes and four satellite programs (individuals living in their own apartments with care provided by residential staff). Two Vocational Supervisors share responsibility for two day programs, a life skills program, and a learning centre. The remaining two supervisors share the family home program, supported independent living, and community options. The supervisors report directly to the Director of Operations who in turn reports to the Executive Director. The Manager of Human Resources, the Director of Finance and Administration, the Director of Operations and the Executive Director make up the Senior Management Team. The Middle Management Team is composed of the eleven supervisors. Women hold all of the above positions with the exception of the Executive Director and two Residential Supervisor positions.

Longview maintains three office buildings which also house day services for the consumers. The management and administrative staff are located in the main office. The buildings are quite old and in need of repair. The interior of the main office is dark, dingy and in dire need of a fresh coat of paint and new carpet. There are quite a few people working in a small office area on the main floor. All of the employees have individual offices, with the exception of the Supervisors, whose
office is fairly large but quite crowded given the number of people sharing it. The Supervisors’ “area,” as it is commonly referred to, is always bustling with activity. It is a place where nine people spend their days talking on the phone, having an informal or formal meeting with a colleague or a support staff, a consumer, an administrative staff, a Director, or whoever else may happen to want a few minutes of that person’s time.

BACKGROUND

The impetus for my research stems directly from my own experience, which makes my own set of assumptions significant throughout this study. I began working with individuals with developmental disabilities as a direct support worker at a large institutional facility in 1987. After working two consecutive summers there, I went to Wilfrid Laurier University where I completed an Honours Degree in Sociology, with a Psychology minor. While there I took several feminist theory courses, piquing my interest in continuing my education with a focus on feminist study. I was accepted into the graduate program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1993, where I enrolled in the Sociology in Education program, focusing on Feminist Studies and Gender Relations in Education. I completed a
“pilot” research project for an ethnography course which focused on the Residential Counsellor’s (direct support worker) experience of the position. What emerged from the study was evidence that the type of work that the Residential Counsellor did was an extension of women’s privatized, unpaid domestic functions that have been transferred into the paid labour market, as women’s work. The position is primarily held by women and can be seen to be part of the segregated women’s work force.

During the time of this research I was also employed as a Residential Counsellor in the agency that I was studying. I worked there two-and-a-half years before accepting a position as a Residential Supervisor at the agency where I am currently employed, which is also the subject of this research. My experiences as a female supervisor at this agency have encouraged me to take a closer look at the way that the supervisors experience their positions within the agency.

RATIONALE

My first day at Longview Community Living included the presentation of an organizational review conducted in November 1994 by the Ministry of Community
and Social Services. The review was initiated to look into specific issues that had been identified by the Ministry and the agency's Board of Directors. The report identified several areas of concern about the agency: a punitive culture; low staff morale; lack of job security; a lack of commitment to families and their involvement; little commitment to the philosophical values and mandate of the organization; poor training, particularly for supervisory and management employees; and the inappropriate roles Board members were assuming both individually and collectively. Without a doubt, this report was of great significance to the agency and the employees, and it had a dramatic impact on each area of the organization.

The above noted review as well as an Employee Opinion Survey conducted in the fall of 1995 confirmed several of my own experiences as a supervisor within the agency. For example, both the review and survey noted that the supervisors had many issues to deal with outside of the roles and responsibilities listed on their job descriptions. Also noted was the fact that the parents of individuals being supported by the agency seemed to have a strong influence on day-to-day decision making, particularly those parents who made up over two-thirds of the Board of
Directors. Often this resulted in blame-laying, generally falling on the shoulders of the supervisors, whose value and benefit within the agency was publicly questioned on several different occasions.

The agency’s history of managing employees in a hierarchical and punitive manner was deemed to be of great concern, according to the review and survey. Although I had not experienced this element directly, many of the direct support staff and middle management team referred to its existence. Most of the employees at Longview have worked there for years and have experienced inequities first hand or have heard about someone else’s misfortunes through the powerful “grapevine.” My own experience of the staff that I supervised was that they appeared to mistrust my intentions and make conclusions about my management style based on their previous experiences or stories that they had heard about other supervisors. Many of the staff openly resisted making decisions on their own, stating that they were afraid of the consequences of bad judgement. They also relayed specific disciplinary tactics that had been utilized in the past, necessitating their self-protective, mistrustful relationships with all supervisors. This made it very difficult
to establish positive, trusting, respectful relationships with the staff and honest multidirectional communication was often impossible.

Another issue noted in the review and survey stemmed from the unionization of the direct support staff as well as the supervisory team within the same local. The shared membership of these two levels of the organization in the same union local generates unique labour relations issues. The culture of the organization is influenced by the presence of a strong collective agreement that is closely monitored and passionately upheld by the union representatives. In addition, the supervisors and staff are engaged in dichotomous relationships determined by factors such as position, level of authority, roles and responsibilities within each job, their shared union membership, and a care and concern for the service users. The most striking element of this particular unionized environment is the supervisory relationship that necessitates that a unionized supervisor has authority over her union brother or sister. Discipline is handed down from one member to another. Further, support staff have and utilize the right to file grievances on their supervisor when the collective agreement is perceived as having been violated.
Once again, this creates a dichotomy, which affects the way that these labour issues are experienced by the women managers.

This situation has presented many challenges to the operation of the agency. As a supervisor, I have experienced a conflict between operationalizing the mandate of the agency to meet the needs of its consumers and the focus on labour relations issues. At times it was necessary to attempt to balance staff’s needs and concerns and contract rights with the consumers’ needs, as they had the potential to be diametrically opposed. It is my personal experience, having worked in this organization in a leadership role, that quite often the needs of staff are in direct conflict with the needs of consumers. The question arises as to how leaders, and in particular women, experience and resolve this conflict in a management role that clearly outlines as a responsibility addressing the needs of staff as well as working to operationalize the mandate of the organization. It is particularly difficult to supervise unionized staff while being a member of the same local. Both supervisors and the staff that report to them hold union contracts with one union. Although they belong to different units they remain union Brothers and Sisters.
This study focuses on women leaders for two reasons. First, it is my belief that women’s experience as leaders in the caring professions has value and that the information and knowledge that develops from this experience should be shared. Acker (1997: 1) contends that work that women perform in the caring professions necessitates the use of a “caring script” which she defines as “a set of expectations that mimics women’s traditional work in the home.” Although these expectations may be difficult to live up to in the workplace, they nevertheless become part of each person’s construct of what is meaningful. The expression of emotions that are at odds with “inner feelings” (Putnam and Mumby, 1993: 38) is not only expected in the workplace, but “prescribed” in such a way as to convince women that “caring for others is what they desire” (Acker, 1997: 2).

The second reason stems from the concept of “relational” leadership that is described by Regan and Brooks (1995) as coming “out of women’s experience.” The five attributes of relational leadership, including collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision, are said to evolve out of specific life experiences of women.

Although this study does not examine men’s experiences of their work, it became
clear during the interviews and participant observation that they were not exempt from stress leading to burnout and role conflict.

Tronto (1989) suggests that “men care about, women care for.” This distinction is further encapsulated by Acker (1997: 2) who states that “[m]en may also care for and serve the needs of concrete others, as many women do, but this type of caring is not culturally prescribed for them.” Women are set up to experience mixed feelings about caring for others as prescribed while acknowledging that this is devalued. Acker (1997) contends that when women are “fulfilling the caring script, yet experiencing ‘outlaw emotions’” (Jaggar, 1989) they are “doing good and feeling bad” (Miller, 1976).

Relational leadership theorists contend that attributes of women’s leadership are rooted in their experiences as women. Given this assertion, the conclusion could logically be made that men’s leadership behaviour would evolve out of their experiences. Collectively, women share many experiences that stem from their gender, as do men. However, women do not always operate in the same manner. Failing to recognize differences between women can produce essentialist thought,
which suppresses women’s individual voice and legitimizes our individual and collective tendency to speak for and about women.

As stated above, the women in the organization being studied face a variety of difficult situations that may involve conflicts with colleagues, staff, consumers or the agency and its mission. The issues that I listed at the beginning of my research proved not to be exhaustive, but constituted a starting point from which I developed my interview themes and questions. I expected that the interviews and participant observations would aid in the identification of additional stresses because women do not experience their work in a uniform way.

My intention in completing a study on how women experience managing in a developmental services agency and how they cope with the stresses that result is threefold: 1) to document women managers’ experiences of their leadership roles and the stresses induced by the organizational culture and nature of the work that can lead to burnout; 2) based on this documentation, discuss possible solutions and coping strategies which could potentially be used by Community Living Agencies throughout Ontario to improve the quality of work life of the employees as well as
the quality of support provided to the consumers; and 3) contribute to the limited sociological literature that explores women’s leadership in work that parallels unpaid domestic work.

**PLAN FOR SUBSEQUENT CHAPTERS**

In the remaining chapters of this thesis, the findings of an ethnographic study of women leaders in a developmental service agency are presented. An overview of the literature on burnout, stress, and coping is presented in Chapter Two. This chapter also touches on the feminization of work in the developmental services field and connects this type of work to the caring professions. Chapter Three describes the qualitative research methodology used to collect, analyze and write up the data collected. It details the initial and follow-up interviews of five leaders, notes obtained through participant observation and my journal, and documents collected during the study. The findings from the study, including workplace stresses identified by the participants and coping strategies utilized by the women leaders, are discussed in Chapters Four and Five. Narrative accounts of women leaders’ experiences of the organizational culture, stress and burnout, and current coping strategies provide insight into the women’s understandings of their work.
Using direct quotations ensured that the voices of women remained central throughout these two chapters and the information which they contain come as much as possible from their perspectives and in their own words. The final chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing the major findings of the study and outlining implications and recommendations for further research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

In studies of the field of developmental services, researchers have virtually ignored the experiences of management staff. Their research has primarily focused on quality of life for consumers of service, trends in philosophy or new approaches, deinstitutionalization and more recently, the front-line worker. Research that discusses management personnel has avoided the issue of "burnout" that is generally associated with direct care work. The literature on front-line workers’ susceptibility to burnout has been discussed and described without connecting it to the social and political context in which it occurs. Therefore, burnout continues to be framed as an individual problem with individual solutions which fails to attend to the organizational and social factors that, if understood, might be more powerful levels in ameliorating these problems.

Management personnel in developmental service agencies experience stresses due to the nature of their work, but these stresses have never been investigated. Researchers have focused on management skills, leadership styles, organizational
change in the face of financial difficulties and utilizing human resources. Supervisors in developmental service agencies are responsible for administrative and management duties as well as the care and support of the individuals supported by the organization. The position requires supervisors to spend a minimum of fifteen hours per week in their locations with the consumers and staff. For this reason, these supervisors appear to be very different from those managers who have little direct contact with the consumer of service, as they continue to work closely with people, as part of their daily job routine.

Workshops and seminars intended to teach workplace wellness are readily available through professional training firms in the areas of communication, time management, leadership, organizational development, and many others. Although these activities are a practical way of learning new skills and dealing with the stresses of managing in a public forum, they reach only a small percentage of the workforce and fail to deal specifically with the job stress women encounter as managers in a non-profit organization.
A growing body of literature on women leaders has begun to surface in the midst of a growing consciousness that links empowering management techniques with leader success. Women managers have demonstrated that using the “command-and-control” (Rosener, 1990) style of managing others, a style generally associated with men in large, traditional organizations, is not the only way to succeed. Studies of women leaders offer diverse theories of the causes and effects of varying leadership styles and tend to focus on the similarities and differences between men’s and women’s management techniques. For this reason, only a very small portion of the leadership literature was incorporated into this study. In particular, I drew upon the new, yet poignant exploration of “relational” leadership introduced by Regan and Brooks (1995). Relational leadership is defined by its creators as a “synthesis of the feminist and masculinist intellectual traditions” of leadership (Regan and Brooks, 1995: 3). Leaders who use this relational style are motivated by a moral code of conduct. They empower others to achieve mutually agreed upon goals and encourage and guide others to behave in morally responsible ways. Relational leaders also possess a vision of the organization’s, their own, and others’ goals and assume responsibility for the group process and outcome involved
in reaching these goals. A critical element of relational leadership stressed by Regan and Brooks (1995: 42) focuses on leaders’ desires to make choices that are aligned with their “firmly held beliefs about the dignity and worth of each individual, retain agency through which we make many small, but significant impacts” on the organizations in which they work. By doing this, the leader facilitates her own and others’ involvement in the organization rather than giving up her voice and her power to define the organization.

Regan and Brooks (1995) outline five attributes of relational leadership that are developed from women’s specific experiences as women; collaboration, caring, courage, intuition, and vision. The attributes of collaboration and caring will be defined in this chapter as they were most frequently identified by the respondents. I will link the issues identified by the participants with these two concepts in Chapters Four through Six.

Collaboration and caring are attributes of leadership that have generally been associated with women. Helgesen (1990) found that female heads of organizations were concerned about relationships. They viewed unscheduled tasks and meetings
as opportunities to increase their accessibility, rather than considering them disruptive. Difficult decisions did not eliminate a fundamental focus on caring, being involved, listening and building relationships. According to Rosener (1990), women actively work to make their interactions with subordinates positive for everyone involved. They encourage participation, share power and information, enhance other people’s self-worth, and believe that encouraging employee contribution benefits everyone.

Collaboration with peers and subordinates and care and concern for others becomes an integral element of many women’s leadership styles. Collaboration is defined by Regan and Brooks (1995: 26) as having the “ability to work in a group, eliciting and offering support to each other member, creating a synergistic environment for everyone.” Cooperation and connectedness is encouraged, promoted, and applied on a daily basis by many women leaders. Caring, another attribute of feminist leadership, is defined as “the development of an affinity for the world and the people in it, translating moral commitment to action on behalf of others” (Regan and Brooks, 1995: 27). Noddings (1984: 24) contends that “caring involves stepping out of one’s personal frame of reference into the other’s.” Relational
leadership reflects women's care and concern for colleagues, staff, and the recipients of the service provided.

In their interviews with women school teachers, Regan and Brooks (1995) found that the teachers’ care for children underpins almost all of their actions as leaders. One woman in their study described a difficult situation that she was faced with at her school. The union was insisting on a weighting system that would “count” some children more or less than others. The teacher facilitated a process that would encourage a collaborative decision but that would not violate her own value system. Categorizing children was unacceptable to this teacher and inconsistent with her commitment to act in a morally responsible way. Unfortunately, women leaders are not always able to succeed in amalgamating others’ goals and decisions with their own belief system. Situations that are out of one’s control, have ambiguous results or repercussions, or are reaped in tradition can produce barriers to the alignment of actions with one’s intrinsic values or beliefs. This thesis will examine women leaders’ experiences of stress and burnout that are often the result of difficulties inherent in an attempt to balance two opposing forces.
The lack of literature on women’s experiences of stresses as managers in the developmental service field indicates the need to document the effects of this type of work and provide effective and accessible strategies for coping.

BURNOUT

A Definition

As a manager in a developmental service agency I attempt to put words to the feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion that I was experiencing in my job. Burnout seemed a possible label, so I took a closer look at the literature describing burnout.

There are many definitions of burnout in the health professions but there is no clear operational definition or description of the burnout process (Beemsterboer and Baum, 1984). In addition, the term “burnout” is used by many people who define it according to their own situations. Considering this, I decided to use the term burnout only as a means to make use of the literature which sheds light on the experiences of managers.
I chose two definitions of burnout that seemed to best represent my own experiences of managing as well as those of the women that I interviewed. Maslach (1982) describes it as emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people. She suggests that burnout is a response to the chronic emotional strain of dealing extensively with other human beings, particularly when they are troubled or having problems. Beemsterboer and Baum (1984) define burnout as a progressive loss of idealism, energy and purpose experienced by people in the helping professions as a result of their work conditions. Many of the other existing definitions of burnout, when described loosely, connote a failed responsibility on behalf of the individual to safeguard their health. Maslach and Beemsterboer and Baum depart from this conception of burnout by asserting that it is best understood as a response to situational sources of stress rather than the result of individual personality factors. Although these definitions help to establish what constitutes burnout, they fail to capture the uniqueness of the experiences of managers in a developmental service agency or its political context.
Indicators of Burnout

Research describing the indicators of burnout is plentiful. The types and intensity of stress can contribute to a feeling of being “burned out.” During the interviews the women explained their experiences of feeling overwhelmed or “stressed out” by their work. Indicators of burnout found in the literature also emerged throughout my study. They included feelings of isolation, lack of support, anger, over-investment of energy in work, feelings of hopelessness. The literature also suggests that one of the main indicators of burnout is the switch from a caring attitude towards one’s clients to a callous, uncaring attitude (Brown, 1984; Greenstone and Leviton, 1993; Welch, Medeiros and Tate, 1982). This uncaring attitude is also described as the most visible impact of burnout. “Motivation decreases, frustration increases, and an unsympathetic, ‘don’t-give-a-damn’ attitude predominates” (Maslach, 1982: 77). Other signs and symptoms of burnout include:

1) a pervasive sense of failure, as indicated by such expressions as “I can’t do enough”; 2) anger and resentment; 3) guilt and blame; 4) discouragement and indifference; 5) negativism; 6) isolation and withdrawal; 7) feelings of immobilization; 8) cynicism toward clients, coworkers, or the world in general;
9) rigidity in thinking and resistance to change; and 10) a sense of increasing helplessness (Greenstone and Leviton, 1993).

Causes

After reviewing the literature, I selected the stresses most commonly identified by the participants. These stresses include expectations and goals not being met, continually giving without getting anything back (ie. inadequate pay, lack of support), overwork, inability to set limits and interpersonal conflicts on the job. Literature relating to the social work profession reveals that social workers are subject to some stresses similar to those that I felt as a manager (Eason, 1988; Watson, 1979). One example is the stress of mediating between the client and the social structure that is not meeting the client’s needs.

The suggestion that Watson makes, that social workers may experience a clash between the values of humanism and those of the scientific method, is similar to the experiences of managers of developmental service agencies who see a disparity between their views and those of the social systems within which they work. The work that managers do may, at times, make them experience dilemmas. Political
factors such as scarce resources and financial cutbacks may also impact on the manager.

COPING

A Definition

Coping is defined as a behaviour that protects people from being psychologically harmed by problematic social experiences (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978). It is a reaction to particular stresses as well as influencing the stress experience. The amount of stress that an individual experiences is dependent upon the availability of coping mechanisms according to Roskies and Lazurus (1980). However, when defining the ways in which women attempt to change the environment in which they work, the term coping is not always used. For this reason, Pearlin and Schooler’s definition of coping is useful as they allow for a broader definition of coping by using the word “problematic” rather than “stress”. When coping is seen as purely a reaction to stress, it implies that we know what is stressful for each individual, due to our preconceived notions attached to the word stress. By allowing each individual to determine which of their experiences were
“problematic,” I was able to include in this study instances in which the women did not define their reactions to problematic situations as coping.

Strategies

There is an abundance of literature that describes different methods to alleviate and/or avoid burnout both on a personal and organizational level (Corey and Callanan, 1993; Eason, 1988; Greenstone and Leviton, 1993; Roskies and Lazarus, 1979; Welch, Medeiros and Tate, 1982). The strategies that I believed might be relevant to managers were getting support from colleagues and bosses, focusing on the positive, setting realistic goals and limits, divesting energy and concern, separating home from work, and obtaining training.

Several of the available strategies provide a protective function for women. Pearlin and Schooler (1978) describe this as eliminating or modifying conditions that give rise to problems, perceptually controlling how the experience is defined in a way that neutralizes the problematic element, and keeping the emotional consequences of problems within manageable bounds.
THE FEMINIZATION OF WORK IN DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES

The unique type of work stress and burnout that is experienced by the women managers in a developmental service agency should not be taken out of its political and social context. The work performed by direct support staff as well as by management staff working in developmental services is part of the segregated women’s work force. It is a fairly low-paid, service-oriented type of work and is overwhelmingly performed by women. The work that women perform in this field can be paralleled to the tasks associated with “mothering”; they are caring for the physical, emotional, social and developmental needs of the individuals they serve. It is seen as a natural extension of women’s biological reproductive role.

Substantial work has been done by feminist scholars on pertinent issues pertaining to the feminization of social work. Recurrent themes echo throughout the literature. Hartmann (1986) examines “sex-based occupational segregation” and notes that, historically, men have controlled women’s labour power in both the “private” and the “public” spheres.
Historically, “the organizers of welfare work viewed it as an extension of nurturing skills and domestic expertise into extra-familial arenas” (Dressel, 1987: 56). There are striking similarities between the perception of mothering and the work done by direct support workers. Many of the duties and responsibilities are also similar, including meal preparation, household cleaning, purchasing groceries, administering medications, and completing personal hygiene routines for the individuals they support. An initial examination of the nature of work supporting developmentally disabled individuals reveals a striking similarity to women’s work in the private sphere.

Women hold eighty-five percent of the direct support positions within the agency under study. Similarly, the middle management team consists of nine women and two men. The low wages they receive, in conjunction with the domestic nature of the job, reinforces and perpetuates this type of work as “women’s work,” reproducing the sexual division of labour in the public sphere. What makes this type of “women’s work” different from the work that women do as professional social workers is the way that both the public and professionals view the mental health sector versus the developmental service sector.
CARE AND MAINTENANCE – THE DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES

For persons with mental illness, rehabilitation and cure are the focus (Nugent, 1994). There is the prevailing belief that many persons with mental illness can, with the assistance of medication and therapy, be helped to live fairly "normal" lives. Therefore, the goal is a return to as near to normal as is possible. In fact, this is what does happen for many people with mental illnesses. However, for persons with developmental disabilities, the emphasis is on training and support. Education and adaptive skill training are the focus, rather than "cure" and restoring previous functioning levels. The goal is to lessen the deficit.

Services for people with developmental disabilities are just one part of the Ministry of Community and Social Services which is also responsible for, among other things, social assistance, child care, child welfare, and probation. There is a separate unit for developmental services which has a distinct system. The Ministry is divided into thirteen geographical areas, each having an Area Office. Services are planned, funded and monitored at this local level.
Mental health services are just one part of the Ministry of Health which is responsible for, among other things, hospitals, health insurance, long term care, and community health. There is a separate branch for mental health services. This Ministry has divided the province into five geographic districts. These districts are combined differently for various types of services.

Both Ministries are now struggling with the implications of escalating costs, restricted funding, and increasing needs. Reform is under way at both Ministries in an attempt to use existing funding more effectively. However, the funding for mental health is more abundant than it is for developmental services. The question of whether or not this may be due to the values that our society places on caring versus cure has not yet been taken into consideration.

Social work is also included in the “caring professions” in which the work force is largely female (Oakley, 1981), and the labour is often invisible, devalued and privatized. However, social workers are professionalized. The educational requirements include a Bachelor’s Degree and quite often, a Master of Social Work Degree, in order to practice in the field. The people that social workers support are
viewed as having the potential to be “cured” and able to live “normal” lives in the community. Women working in the developmental service sector do not have a professional body that upholds standards that its licensed or certified members would have to adhere to. In addition, they support people who will never be “cured” of their disability. They are “glorified babysitters” in the hearts and minds of the communities in which they work. Neither the causes nor the symptoms of retardation can be eliminated by a vaccine, medication, or therapy. The condition is not likely to be stamped out as a result of a scientific breakthrough. People with mental illnesses have generally lived at least some part of their lives in mainstream society. With medication and counselling they are often able to return to their “normal” lives. Developmentally disabled individuals have been introduced into their communities only within the last twenty years and are still fighting daily for access to mainstream society. Their disability is life-long.

Indeed, the interplay of value and economic decisions in Canadian society today is changing the nature of work in the field of developmental services. The funding that the agencies are given is meant to ensure that each person “in service” receives what they need to sustain life. This is translated into food, shelter, clothing and
medications. The guiding philosophy is currently based on the principle of normalization, which succeeds in raising awareness within the field, but unfortunately, like many innovative ideas in our society, has made less progress in practice than in writing. Normalization refers to the restoration and/or maintenance of a valued social status for persons with developmental handicaps within the community. Service provision should include individuals with developmental disabilities into activities that are appropriate to their age and culture, that also protect their personal integrity, while allowing them the opportunity to take the risks that accompany normal living (Heal, Sigelman and Switzky, 1980).

The words normalization, humanization, service coordination, and community-based services are being emphasized in professional and government documents, yet the actual functioning of these services continues to be restrictive and contrary to both the spirit and the principle of normalization. Movements for change face an ongoing struggle in our society. During the last three decades, the mental retardation movement has been a progressive force in seeking social change for persons with developmental handicaps. The goal of this struggle has focused on asking communities, governments, professionals, and policy makers to change their

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priorities, policies, and values to ensure that persons with a disability can live, work, and play in the community with dignity.

However, the ability of service organizations and of those working in the field to meet the goal of normalization for the individuals that they support, the funding sources have to recognize the financial requirements involved. Developmentally disabled individuals cannot strive towards integration and normalization when the funding that they are given limits their existence to isolation and segregation. The socioeconomic reality in the field of developmental services is that one devalued group is used to control and service another devalued group. This cannot result in anything but custodial care. In order to rectify this situation even the lower echelons of human service workers must be guaranteed appropriate incomes and offered opportunities to advance (Bercovici, 1983).

The women-dominated professions have been undervalued and under-rewarded since their inception. Unfortunately, women themselves have begun to believe that the work that they do in these fields has little value (Baines, 1991; Daniels, 1987; Finklestein, 1989). Each of the three “caring professions,” nursing, teaching, and
social work has sought professionalization as a means to formalize their training programs and increase the value placed upon their work. Baines (1991) contends that a tension between caring and professionalism has evolved for many women. No easy way exists of resolving the contradiction between maintaining and promoting an ethic of care at the same time as women seek to have increased autonomy and equality within these professions.

Dalley (1988) argues that if one cares about another person, it is difficult not to care for them. However, professionalization has been accompanied by or is the result of attempts to “objectify the cared-for and has led to blaming the victims” (Baines, 1991: 67). Critics of professionalization contend that the distance has increased between women teachers, nurses, and social workers and those that they provide service to. Reverby (1988) has concluded that nurses lack the power to implement an ethic of care as they define it. Nurses are not able to make autonomous decisions about the kind of care that patients should receive. What is needed is a feminist ethos of professionalism based on “an ideology that integrates an ethic of care and forms a more equal partnership with the cared-for” (Baines, 1991).
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Since the focus of this study was to get a better understanding of women leaders’ experiences in a social service organization, a qualitative research approach compatible with a feminist philosophy was undertaken. Ethnography is a research method aimed at understanding and describing that which influences and molds people’s behaviour and their own interpretation of their behaviour. As Tayor and Bogdan (1984: 6) state, “qualitative researchers try to understand people from their own frame of reference ... to experience reality as others experience it.” It is a form of qualitative research that is concerned primarily with process, placing less emphasis on outcomes. Merriam (1988: 19) contends:

Qualitative researchers are interested in meaning -- how people make sense of their lives, what they experience, how they interpret these experiences, how they structure their social worlds. It is assumed that meaning is imbedded in people’s experiences and mediated through the investigator’s own perceptions. A researcher cannot get outside the phenomenon.
Feminist research methods are still evolving and there continue to be many doctrines of feminist research principles and techniques. However, a consensus exists that acknowledges the personal and political aspects of research methods and processes. Feminist research is contextual, experiential, and aims for egalitarianism among the researcher and the respondents. Furthermore, it explores women’s lived experiences by examining social, political and cultural factors.

Smith (1987) has stressed the importance of giving individual women a voice in describing their experiences. In this study, I elicited the views of the participants through a semi-structured interview process intended to seek out specific themes, such as potential stresses and coping strategies used to deal with them. In addition to the pre-set questions, the participants were encouraged to engage in a less structured dialogue which enabled them to share experiences and views that may not have surfaced through a more regimented process.

Stanley and Wise (1983: 178) contend that in doing feminist research, the researcher should state within her work “why and how particular research came to be carried out, why and how the researcher came to know what she knows about
that research.” They argue that:

Research is a process which occurs through the medium of a person -- the researcher is always and inevitably present in the research. This exists whether openly stated or not; and feminist research ought to make this presence open ... researchers must “come out” in their writings.

Therefore, it was critical that I locate myself in the research process and identify the various roles that I assumed during this process.

LOCATING MYSELF IN THE RESEARCH

Shortly after I joined Longview Community Living as a Residential Supervisor, the organization initiated a complete “overhaul” of its systems, processes, and personnel. The Ministry Review had brought to the surface a variety of problems that required immediate action. In addition, a severe cut in funding dollars occurred with little notice and a very brief period of transition. As a result, many employees were laid off, services were restructured, and the organization began a process to accomplish the newly established, reality-based goal to “do more with less.” As an employee who had been hired in a supervisory capacity, the results of this change affected me in a variety of ways. The experiences that I developed over the past two years became the impetus for my research.
In keeping with feminist research principles, I must acknowledge that this thesis inevitably reflects my position as a white, middle-class, academic researcher. I brought to the research my experiences as a woman with undergraduate and graduate training in sociology and education, experience working with individuals who are labelled as developmentally disabled, and experience as a supervisor of residential placements for developmentally disabled individuals in the agency that I chose as the subject for this thesis.

At the onset of my research, I had some reservations as to whether or not the participants would feel comfortable disclosing their opinions and experiences to me. The role of researcher that I assumed for this project could not be separated from the paid position that I held as an employee of the organization or from the collegial role that I continued to have as a member of the supervisory team. My concerns with regard to this very sensitive situation were twofold: 1) would the participants feel comfortable enough to share their personal feelings during the interviews?; and 2) how would I ensure the ethical merit of this research? Several of the ways that I dealt with these two concerns are described in more detail later
on in this chapter. What follows is a brief summary of how I attempted to address
the above concerns.

Consent was given by each individual participant after reviewing with them a
description of the study and the process that would ensue. Anonymity was assured
in a variety of ways including the use of pseudonyms in all transcripts and collected
information, the storage of all data in locked file cabinets, accessibility to the
original documents limited to myself, the removal of any potentially identifiable
quotes (inside or outside of the agency), and the avoidance of pseudonyms in the
completed thesis to ensure that statements could not be linked together for the
purpose of determining the identity of the speaker. In addition to the foregoing, the
participants were assured that this research would contain no evaluative elements,
including that of their work or behaviour in their job roles. Since the research was
focused on descriptions of women leaders’ experiences of stresses in their work
role and strategies they employed to cope with the stress, the supervisors were not
evaluated in any way.
During the course of the study I used a personal journal to record descriptions of what I was doing and experiencing as well as my observations of the participants and the situations they were in. The journal served to provide me with a forum to disclose and document my own subjectivity throughout the study. It is because I was the “principal instrument for data collection” (Lancy, 1993: 2) that it was essential that I be aware and make the readers aware of my own biases. My journal allowed me to record many different nuances, producing a broader look at the surrounding contexts within which I was completing this study.

Bogdan and Biklen (1992) state that a personal log helps the researcher to track the project’s development, documents, and the ways in which the data collected throughout the research has affected the research plan and it aids the researcher to remain conscious about how she has been influenced by the data collected. A journal can include two types of information. The first is descriptive data, which tries to “capture a word-picture of the setting, people, actions, and conversations as observed.” The second type of journal entry is reflective, which “captures more of the observer’s frame of mind, ideas, and concerns” (Bogdan and Biklen, 1992: 108).
I collected descriptive data when conducting participant observation, participating in casual encounters, and recording key words and phrases during the interviews. I attempted to record as much information as I could about what was occurring, using as much detail as possible. Yet, even in the simple act of recording events, subjectivity succeeds in permeating the data. My descriptions included choices and judgements about what to record and what to ignore. In an attempt to minimize this selectivity I used the participants' own words whenever possible.

Reflective data, which is based much more on speculation, ideas, impressions, concerns, analysis and plans for future research, became an equally important source in this study. Recording my thoughts and feelings helped me to be more self-conscious about my relationship to the women and the issues, thereby decreasing my own subjectivity. During the course of the fieldwork I analyzed each interview and observation session, documented my impressions of changes that were taking place within the organization, and analyzed the way in which the study was being affected by each additional piece of information. For instance, each interview participant described specific “stresses” that she experienced as a manager. Subsequently, I was able to ask the other participants to describe their
experiences with these specific stresses rather than relying on their ability to detail every significant aspect of their work. This type of data collection involves much more subjectivity on the part of the researcher. However, it was the act of recording my feelings and prejudices that served to make myself more aware of bias within the study. Scott (1985: 73) states that previously “we were treating ourselves simply as receptacles for the experiences of others and often ignored as data our own experiences of the process.”

PROCEDURE

The sources of information available when using ethnography include interviews, participant observation, and the collection of relevant documents. These methods provide a descriptive context by illustrating, through direct quotations as well as a summary of observations and data collected during the course of the study, the ideas that are being presented by the participants. Interviews and participant observation produced an in depth depiction of the supervisors’ own interpretation and understanding of their experience as leaders within their own unique organizational culture. For these reasons, ethnography was chosen as a suitable method of data collection for this research.
I generated my own research questions through my experiences and the assumptions I had made within my role as a supervisor. These questions included asking how does the organizational culture shape the experience of managing, are the women’s understandings of their environment and the stresses that they identify congruent in any way with the current literature on women leaders, and what coping mechanisms are utilized in response to the stresses? I used the following methods to collect information; 1) semi-structured interviews with five women; 2) participant observation; 3) personal experiences as a supervisor; 4) journal of personal thoughts and reflections throughout the study. My personal experiences as a supervisor provided me with the motivation to complete this study, the background information I needed, as well as some ideas about the types of questions to ask the women.

Interviews

I interviewed five women, selecting a mix of women from the various program areas within the agency being studied, ensuring that the various programs were represented. None of the supervisors refused my request, and several of them voiced their eagerness to be a part of the study. Their willingness suggested that
The women welcomed an opportunity to voice their concerns and frustrations in an anonymous forum. The women interviewed varied in age and experience supervising in this organization. Age ranged from late thirties to early fifties. Length of experience supervising ranged from two to nineteen years, while the number of years of service at Longview varied between six and nineteen years. Two of the women interviewed were chosen because of their lengthy affiliation with the agency. These women added an invaluable historical perspective to the research. The remaining three participants were also able to add their knowledge of the agency's history, as they had also been employed by the association as direct support staff for a number of years before becoming supervisors.

The interviews were semi-structured and based on a list of questions that were asked of each person. A tape recorder was used, with the consent of each participant, so that I would have a full and accurate record of the interview. The recordings also increased my ability to use quotations to illustrate their points of view and allow their own voices to be heard. Each participant was given a consent form (Appendix A) that gave a description of the study, included a request to tape the interviews, and assured them of individual as well as agency anonymity. The
form also assured them that the study was not intended to evaluate the work or views of its participants and explained the option to withdraw their participation from the study at any time. To begin each interview, I reviewed the consent form with the participant and gave the opportunity to ask any questions.

Although this research contains no evaluation of the supervisors’ ability to do their jobs, it was impossible to completely convince the participants. They appeared to be quite guarded in their responses to questions toward the beginning of each interview. They seemed to relax in the latter part of the interview and were much more open and provided more lengthy answers in the second interviews. Nevertheless, there was an air of caution shown by the participants, one that I feel was inevitable given my employment as a supervisor within the same agency.

The first interviews took approximately two hours each and were conducted in private meeting rooms located at Longview’s head office, where the women share an office. The interview schedule (Appendix B) included several themes. During the first stage of the interview, the questions focused on background information.
These questions sought to determine how long they had held a supervisory position, their length of employment at Longview and their educational/job training history.

The second stage of the interview focused on the supervisors’ descriptions of their roles and responsibilities, how decisions are made, and positive or negative factors that have impact upon their roles. During this section I asked the participants to describe the history of the agency and their view of how it has influenced the present culture of the agency, to describe the critical issues that Longview is facing, as well as provide a description of the organizational culture. I also asked the women to comment on the formation of the union and to discuss whether it had helped or hindered them in their supervisory role.

The interview then moved into the third section during which time I asked questions regarding their management role, if they believed their gender has influenced the way that they function as supervisors, and their level of satisfaction within the agency.
Using the interview as a means to gain information for this study was particularly valuable as it allowed both myself as the researcher and the participants to explore the meaning of the questions and answers involved. The participants were given many opportunities throughout the interview to request further information with regard to the interview process or to seek clarification about specific questions. Allport (1942) points out that if you want to know something about people's activities, the best way to find out is to ask them. The semi-structured interview also allowed me to probe into areas that were of particular interest and evoke rich information that may not have been elicited using a more structured approach. From each interview I unravelled different pieces of information that I incorporated into the next interview. The knowledge and experience that I gained as a supervisor at Longview provided me with an in-depth understanding of developmental services. Because of this, I did not need to seek clarification with regard to terminology, types of services, or models of support, allowing the women managers more time to detail their experiences.

**Participant Observation**

I spent approximately ten hours with each of the five participants, to observe their
routines and responsibilities. I also observed the weekly supervisory meetings and monthly management planning meetings to document the interaction and group dynamics of the supervisors. Consent was obtained in a similar fashion to that received for the interviews. The form assured the participants of anonymity, the option to withdraw from the study at any time and the absence of evaluative intent in the research. Beyond this time, I was able to spend many hours of casual contact with the women within my role as supervisor.

Documents

Both an Organizational Review conducted in 1994 and Employee Opinion Survey results from 1995 contributed to the information I collected. The Review, written by a Ministry of Community and Social Services employee and a professional in the field of developmental services, detailed many concerns that had formulated during their review of the agency, which provided a look into the agency in 1994. The Employee Survey also gave insight into the viewpoints of the employees from all of the various levels and departments within the agency. This information gave a broader look at the way the employees outside of the management team experience and define the agency that they work for.
After I conducted each interview I transcribed it and wrote out my notes on impressions and personal feelings. I also jotted down specific areas to focus on in subsequent interviews. Often a topic rich with information in one interview would lead to further information in the next, as I had learned to ask a question in a different way or use probing words to encourage greater depth into a topic.

DATA ANALYSIS

After the interviews and participant observations were transcribed, I read and re-read the transcripts to refresh my memory of all the information. I then coded the data by going through each interview and establishing categories of subject areas which were drawn from the information. Taylor and Bogdan (1984: 136) define coding as:

A systematic way of developing and refining interpretations of the data. The coding process involves bringing together and analyzing all the data bearing on themes, ideas, concepts, interpretations, and propositions.

I sorted the women’s responses according to the various ways that they said their work affected them, the ways that they dealt with their work and the suggestions that they gave for positive change. To further organize the data, I matched
responses and brought them together under a heading that best described the information contained within it. In order to preserve the women’s experiences in the research document I kept the information in direct quotations whenever possible. After much reflection, the findings were divided into two sections: “Stresses Identified” and “Coping Strategies.” The following two chapters report these findings.
CHAPTER FOUR
STRESSES IDENTIFIED

The women that participated in the study identified a number of stresses that they experience as managers of a social service agency. What follows is a presentation of the most common responses given by the supervisors and a description of each.

CHANGE OF JOB DESCRIPTION

All of the supervisors stated that their job description had evolved and was continuing to change. They described changes in their roles and responsibilities and in decision making processes.

Roles and responsibilities

Each of the women indicated that the position of supervisor had evolved to include many additional roles and responsibilities. The bulk of the changes were described as occurring in the past two years. The position became “all encompassing” as tasks that were previously a secretary’s or director’s responsibility were assigned to the supervisor:
I do a lot of administrative things, a lot of management planning . . . it has so many components and the job has changed significantly since I started. Before, it was more focused towards providing care and support, now it’s much more involved.

We get involved in all of the different departments and if nobody’s really sure who should be doing it, they put it through to a supervisor.

As new tasks were added to the position the job’s function broadened which left considerably less time to dedicate to previous responsibilities. Of primary concern for the participants was the decrease in time spent at the locations as they were forced to supervise from a distance:

We’ve added to it. The degree of care and support has lessened. We have additional duties of scheduling, working on Policies and Procedures, working on training for staff. The staff have noticed and tell you about it.

Underlying the evolution of the supervisory position were two primary factors: severe cuts to the agency’s base budget and a new senior management team that had begun to lead the agency by incorporating Total Quality Management which focuses on continuous improvement, customer satisfaction, employee empowerment, and quality control. The funding cutbacks resulted in administrative layoffs and a subsequent hiring freeze. Workloads were restructured as managers
and administrative staff left the organization or were transferred within it. Very few vacant positions were filled. The restructuring process was initiated on two different occasions, increasing the responsibilities for the remaining employees:

When I was hired there were ten residential supervisors. If you look at the numbers that we have now, just within the supervisory team, the responsibilities that we have, they’ve been added to; as well as all the cutbacks in all the other departments within the agency, and we’re asked to pick up those things as well.

We’ve had an incredible amount of change happen with regards to job descriptions for all staff within the agency . . . largely due to the layoffs that have occurred as a result of cutbacks in funds. Six of twelve administrative personnel were laid off a year ago. In two years we have lost four supervisory positions, not by layoff, but by not replacing their positions when they leave. We have one Director of Operations, where there were three directors that were responsible for those duties. We no longer have a Director of Human Resources. Also, we got rid of the scheduling department that was responsible for all of the scheduling and budgeting for the residential locations. As supervisors, we now have to help to complete the tasks that are left . . . the extra workload makes a big difference.

On several occasions women indicated that there was a lack of clearly defined roles and responsibilities as a result of the restructuring. This situation affects the supervisors, as well as all staff. Although inter-departmental planning had occurred to reassign tasks, there was clearly a need for ongoing clarification with regard to specific responsibilities that lacked a clear process of completion. The
cutbacks and restructuring were partly to blame for this problem. However, very few of the supervisors looked outside of the agency for a possible contributor to this common concern.

Many social service agencies, by their very nature, produce a long paper-trail for even the smallest of acts. This is due, in part, to the need for accountability to the Ministry which is the source of funds. It is also a result of a focus on quality care and support of the consumers, prompted by the Ministry, the consumers, and the communities (taxpayers) that requires records of all services provided.

Documentation is often completed by more than one person, on more than one form and passed on to various departments. For instance, a single doctor’s appointment may require the following documentation: a clinical form that records the visit to the doctor and the outcomes; an entry in the consumer’s personal log book summarizing the appointment; adjustments to the medication administration record and the personal data sheet; contact notes recording communication with the consumer’s family; a memo to the supervisor of the location and to the staff at the day program; a mileage claim form which is sent to the supervisor for approval then
passed on to the finance department to pay the employee and allocate the funds from the appropriate budget; and so on. It becomes obvious that one event causes a series of tasks that can potentially be completed and recompleted. Duplication of responsibilities causes unnecessary work for employees which is costly and time consuming. Unfortunately, in an environment where duplication exists, there is the potential for gaps to be created when “everyone else thinks that someone else is doing it and it just doesn’t get done.”

**Decision making**

The women indicated that decision making was an area of concern for them in their positions. Once again, lack of clarity around whose responsibility it is to make certain decisions was discussed:

I don’t know if there’s a clear definition on how many decisions a supervisor can make. Is it mine or is it yours to make? How much is human resources involved? I wanted an item for one of the houses so I went to the finance director to get her opinion on it. Maybe it wasn’t really her decision, but I asked her if we have the money and where I could take the money from. Sometimes you’re looking at decision making being a team effort.

A lack of clarity with regard to who has the authority to make decisions was
confusing and stressful. The supervisors, by the very nature of their jobs, were often expected to make "on-the-spot" decisions with little to no support. The repercussions of a "bad" decision could involve discipline or financial hardship, which is the case for most organizations. However, the supervisors had to live with the fact that a bad decision had the potential to result in harming someone that they supported and cared about.

Sometimes you’re out there alone. That’s why you have to be confident in the decisions that you make and realize that you’ve been given that responsibility by being hired for the job. Sometimes you make the decision by the seat of your pants . . . but you realize that sometimes you have to make that final call.

Two of the women indicated concerns with the way the decisions made at the Board or Senior Management level are shared with the Middle Management team:

Some decisions are made purely based on role. It’s a Board decision or an ED decision or a Director’s decision. One of the faults of this agency is that there are decisions that are made that are not necessarily communicated throughout the agency. If they are communicated it’s not effectively and it’s not quickly.

Decisions are made behind closed doors. When they are presented to you, usually you’ve already heard it through the grapevine . . . or the whole story isn’t given to you. You only get little bits and pieces at a time, and that really colours my opinion of it. As positive as the change might be my attitude is already coloured.
It's "let's only tell them what they need to know." I'd rather hear "this is all we can share with you right now" then little bits and pieces. It makes it difficult when you're going to your staff with those bits and pieces . . . you feel like you're going to have egg on your face when the full story comes out.

The supervisors generally spoke very highly of the leadership, identifying changes that occurred within the past two years, making the above comments intriguing. There were times when the supervisors felt excluded from the process of decision making and yet many more situations when they were quick to praise the new inclusionary style of the present Senior Management team. The agency's reputation of being punitive, authoritative, and secretive in decision making had been defined by the employees of the organization and was reiterated in the Operational Review. Although the supervisors unanimously agreed that significant changes had taken place with the present leadership, a cloud continued to hang over senior management, regardless of the fact that they referred to as "different." Unfortunately, the supervisors were painted with the same brush by their staff. They too were often referred to by their employees as being punitive and secretive.

The agency's employees seemed to be hanging onto the past and experiencing the
present with "old eyes."

The supervisory team also faced its own issues. Situations often required immediate decisions to ensure safety and keep the organization running. Supervisors who were absent due to vacations, meetings, or sick time often returned to find changes in the organization or their own locations that they had not had the opportunity to be consulted about. Although this is a problem that many organizations face, the participants were uncomfortable with this and spoke of a particular issue with the way that this information was disseminated:

One of the problems that I have with decision making is that the decision is made for you sometimes and then you’re supposed to comply with it and not question it. If you question it, you get smart comments rather than an informed discussion.

BEING THE "MIDDLE" IN MANAGEMENT

The women stated that they are responsible to both senior management and their support staff within the context of their position. The women spoke of this difficulty, at times creating a lack of true belonging to either group and demanding that they balance the two:

As middle management we’re the buffer between the two extremes, upper management and the masses. It’s a conduit role. Making sure
that the wishes and directions of management and the board are made
clear to staff and followed through on.

Just by virtue of where our position sits in the organization we’re kind
of in the middle . . . between a rock and a hard place.

CARE AND SUPPORT

Providing care and support to individuals with developmental disabilities is the
primary reason for the agency’s existence. However, the provision of care and
support requires the completion of many tasks that are not directly identified as
such. For instance, budgeting, scheduling, strategic planning, human resource
management, maintenance of locations and buildings, payroll, and many other
functions are necessary elements of small and large scale service organizations.
These responsibilities must be completed to ensure that the organization and the
employees within it are able to effectively provide quality care. The funding
cutbacks resulted in a loss of many of the employees that were responsible for
“running the organization” because the agency deemed direct support positions as
the priority. The remaining employees, and in particular the administrative and
management personnel, were left to complete the required tasks. For the
supervisors this meant responsibility for more locations, heavier administrative
workloads, and additional tasks. They were expected to develop, implement and
monitor budgets for their locations, complete monthly and daily scheduling, do their own typing, take minutes for meetings, assume membership on additional committees and task forces, and so on. As mentioned earlier in this thesis, the new leadership of the organization began a strategic planning initiative during this period of time that resulted in increased planning meetings involving the supervisors. The planning evoked many additional tasks that were often assumed by the supervisors. Quality assurance, improved labour relations, compliance with all legislation, increased accountability, revised policies and procedures, and up-to-date training and development were just a few of the initiatives adopted within a one-year period.

The supervisors' additional responsibilities contributed to the creation of a revised role in the provision of care and support to the consumers. Until two years ago, they assumed a much more "hands-on" supervisory style. Increased responsibilities no longer made this possible. Although the supervisors all welcomed the new inclusion in decision-making and strategic planning for the organization, they struggled to redefine their position within the context of
providing care and support.

The following two quotations illustrate the women’s belief that they are not able to be as much of a support to their direct support staff when they are unable to get into the homes as frequently and are unable to get to know the individuals supported in those homes as well as they need to in order to be a more useful resource:

I have so little time to go out to my group homes to do hands-on work. I need it so that when staff are saying, “well, we can’t do this and we can’t do that,” by doing it alongside of them you can see that they really can’t do it, or maybe give them suggestions. Where now it’s more a lip service where you sit on the phone and say “well, geez, I was coming to your house.” When I was first hired I had no problems getting to my group homes every night.

One of my issues a year ago (during the restructuring process) was changing locations. You can’t supervise a location that you don’t know. For me it’s very easy to walk in and see somebody at one of the houses I supervise and know what they’re talking about.

Knowledge of the consumers and their needs provides the supervisor with a more informed position with regard to required support, scheduling, health and safety issues, medical needs, and maintenance of the house. The staff working in the location benefit more from a supervisor who knows the location well and is able
to contribute effectively to problem solving that is based on in depth knowledge. This is particularly true given the frequency of lateral transfers that occur within the residential program. Transfers occur as a result of a variety of circumstances including seniority bumping, leaves of absence, maternity leaves, and short- and long-term disability claims. The continual movement of staff breaks relationships between the consumers and their support staff. New staff entering the location rarely know the people that they will be supporting very well. Although orientation is provided to all staff entering new locations, it is not possible to learn much about four or five people in the span of a week and equally impossible to build a trusting relationship with them. Therefore, supervisors need to be able to fill the gap and provide important information while the staff and consumers get to know each other. One of the supervisors provided a perfect example of this during her interview. She described a situation in which a staff member, who was fairly new to the location, called her about a consumer who was upset because she had lost her gloves. In an effort to find the gloves, the consumer “refused to go to work . . . turned the house upside down . . . checking people’s pockets for her gloves.” This particular supervisor had worked as a direct support staff with the consumer before she had been promoted to her current position. She was able to assist the
staff by giving them specific information and advice because she had experienced similar situations with this person.

The women experienced their inability to provide direct care and support as a failure to do their jobs adequately:

I’d like to have more involvement in the houses. More hands-on. I try to get on outings with them, but it’s not always possible. We need to reduce the workload to get into the houses more.

I don’t feel able to accomplish many of the things I’d like to do because of the amount of work. Staff would like to see me on-site and just assist, even if it’s just to talk. But, I’m so busy, I just can’t do it . . . I’m not as effective as I’d like to be.

The supervisors noted on several occasions that they felt that staff judge their absence in the homes as failing to do their jobs. This woman stated that the support staff are unclear as to what the specific responsibilities and day-to-day functions of the supervisors are:

You’re never really sure what people are thinking. You hear the message that the staff never see their supervisor. But, if you actually go and talk with different group homes and ask them how often they see their supervisor, they’re very satisfied with them. Some staff would quickly acknowledge that they wouldn’t want our job, they don’t know what we do, but they don’t want it.
Not only did the supervisors have to deal with their own internal struggles with regard to the changes that had taken place with their roles and responsibilities, they also had to defend their position to the rest of the employees, consumers and their families, the Board of Directors, and most ironically, to the senior management team. Although the process for redefining the supervisors' roles was initiated by the leadership in an effort to move the agency forward, the change had not been formally shared with the employees. As a result, the supervisors were seen as unnecessary to the care and support of consumers, as they no longer provided the “hands-on” supervision that staff had become accustomed to expecting. The question that many employees’ raised was “if they’re not in the houses, then what are they doing?” Because the work that the supervisors had assumed over the past two years was not directly visible to the majority of staff, it was quickly labelled superfluous. The supervisors continue to be placed on the defensive about what they do and how it helps the consumers:

The difficulty I have is with the politics around this field. We all love the people that we’re here for, but it’s all the political pressures that we have, that we could all do without.

In addition to the time consumed by the new roles and responsibilities, the
supervisors identified crisis management as another obstacle in the completion of day-to-day supervision.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT

All of the women spoke about the crises that arise on a daily basis. They referred to the nature of their work as being a twenty-four hour business. When a crisis occurs, all other forms of work must be put on hold in order to deal with it. Frustration is experienced on a day-to-day basis due to the crises that arise that add to their overall workload:

It’s really difficult to get your work done. You have a day planner and you’ve got this to do and this to do and you have ten things on your list and that has to go on hold because you’re dealing with something that’s an issue. Something that has to be dealt with right away.

The stress that crisis situations created on their own was difficult for the women to manage. They wanted to handle problems that arose in the best way possible and had to consider the financial implications, policies and procedures, relevant legislation and most importantly “the best interests of the consumers that they cared about.” In addition to these considerations the supervisors had to continue to
complete their overall responsibilities and ensure the safety and well-being of all of the consumers:

You have to be able to respond to issues and needs right away. Something that happens today tends to take away from the time of your basic day-to-day functions and things that you need to act on. You can spend your whole day covering a serious occurrence, following up on it. Everything else . . . has to wait and be on hold.

It's frustrating because I feel like I never finish anything. Something else comes up that overshadows what I was working on. As critical as it might be at this moment, something else overshadows it tomorrow. I have to put things on the back burner. Even in a crisis, X, Y, and Z still have to be done. I have difficulty doing that, but there is an expectation that I must.

Another difficulty is created by the expectations that the supervisors focus on making positive changes and participate in planning for the future of the agency when there are crisis situations that take up time and energy in order to deal with them:

Due to the nature of the work you can’t sit down and do strategic planning when four people are in crisis. Someone has to deal with those situations right there and then.

**TRAINING AND ORIENTATION**
None of the women interviewed had received formal management training before becoming a supervisor. Four of the five women were promoted to management from direct support positions. They described the difficulties that faced them in their upward move and the lack of training and orientation to their position through the years:

As a direct support I was able to recognize what some of the job requirements for a supervisor were. But my formal training happened two years later, at a management training course.

In an attempt to improve upon her management skills, one woman did reading on her own time to learn “how to deal with people” and to “improve communication.” Others referred to their strategies to survive in a job that they had no formal training in:

I received no orientation. I learned hands-on and from coworkers. Mostly, just fly by the seat of your pants.

Orientation was just picked up by asking questions, by other supervisors. They were always good at giving you information, but, actually, to do my job, for that first year, there wasn’t a lot of direction in what was required.

Throughout my time as a supervisor I’ve had tidbits of courses here and there. Mostly it has been just trial and error.
Orientation to the position of supervisor was scarce and for some it was not available at all:

When I started, there was an overhaul. A reshuffling of management. Most of the supervisors had left and we were all a whole group of people who were brand new supervisors at the same time . . . other than the directors, there was nobody to learn from on how to do the job. So it would have been helpful to have come in and then at least had somebody who had been there for a year to give you some background and some help.

The women indicated several areas of training that they felt would better equip them to successfully complete their job responsibilities. All of the supervisors were sent to a five-day management training course last year, but felt that specific tasks required further training. For instance, “training on a Lotus program” for the development, implementation, and monitoring of budgets, “program training in the facilitating of Lifestyle planning,” the new mission, values, and philosophy of the agency, and “who we are, what each of our new roles and responsibilities are so that we can work better as a team.”

The supervisors also indicated that they felt that they needed training that would
help them with the role of managing people:

We need to clean up our human resources. How to do an effective supervision, an effective evaluation. Using a consistent approach.

FRAGMENTATION

The women referred to the disjointed nature of the organization as being problematic. The employees work in many different locations. They are geographically scattered across the region that they are funded to serve. There are three day programs in different buildings, two separate office buildings which are several miles apart, and group homes, apartment programs, and family homes spread all over the city. According to the women, this leads to feelings of isolation, detachment, and fragmentation as well as creating a barrier to effective communication.

Geographical fragmentation

The geographical fragmentation of the agency was described as creating a rift among all of the employees. This is a result of the direct support staff working in different locations then their immediate supervisors, the administrative staff, and the rest of the management team. Once again, the supervisory role is called into
question when they are not “on-site:”

Geography plays a big part in it for all of us. We’re not there at the location. It’s important that we’re not there all the time, people have to have the opportunity to think for themselves. But by not being there, enough staff question what we’re doing when we’re not.

Also identified were the particular issues that residential supervisors face. They each supervise an average of three to four locations, making it impossible to be at all of them at one time.

In some sense, because residentially we’re leading small groups, our leadership doesn’t connect to the whole bigger leadership of the whole organization, because you have ten people following you. One supervisor, but they’re working six miles away from the rest of the main hub of the association.

In addition to the above fragmentation issues, the women described a lack of one “overall culture” but rather “segments and pockets of culture.” They described the organization as being “very split, very departmentalized.” None of the participants referred to the fragmentation as a widespread problem in the field of developmental services. Yet, this is an issue affecting all residential service providers. Regardless of the agency, if supervisors are responsible for more than one location and have their offices outside of that location, then fragmentation will occur. This is not to
say that there are no methods available to decrease the isolation, detachment and fragmentation. However, the stress that the supervisors experience around this issue may well be lessened by a sense of acceptance of a widespread issue.

**Communication**

The agency’s communication systems failed to distribute all information in an effective and efficient manner. All employees of the organization seemed to be affected by this. Although senior management generally took the blame for the agency’s inability to disseminate information in a timely and inclusive way, part-time staff complained about full-time staff, full-time staff complained about the supervisors, day program staff complained about residential staff, and so on. No single employee or group of employees escaped the finger-pointing. In particular, the supervisors contended that ineffective communication was one of the most critical concerns:

I think if we started with better communication, then a lot of other things would fall into place.

Within the supervisory group, information was difficult to share in a timely fashion
with each member of the team. Unit meetings are held once weekly, during which the supervisors gather for two hours to discuss important issues. According to the women it is not nearly enough time to relay all pertinent information to their colleagues. However, the supervisors clearly indicated that their coworkers need to be more responsible for receiving important information:

It’s hard to communicate to all the supervisors. People aren’t reliable about reading things that have to be read, keeping up-to-date, knowing the correct information.

The supervisors’ positions demanded that they be knowledgeable about their own programs, the other programs, and be continually informed with regard to agency-wide changes. In order to complete their responsibilities, this information is critical. Yet, the women seemed unaware that the heavy workload that the supervisors, senior management and the rest of the employees each have may be one of the reasons why information often goes unshared or unread. Once again, the supervisors didn’t have the time to observe other staff closely enough to gain a better understanding of the intensity of others’ workloads. The supervisors needed to prioritize their responsibilities each day. The most important tasks were completed and the others, regardless of whether or not they should have been done
that day, were left until the following day. Communication, including memos, sharing information with a colleague, the Director, or Human Resources was seen as a priority. Unfortunately, several other "priority" tasks often needed to be completed first. This is a common concern for middle and large size organizations. Yet, the supervisors again seemed unaware of this. Instead, they seemed to view the communication problem as an agency problem, specific to their place of work and the people employed there, which seemed to intensify the stress resulting from it.

Regardless of the efficiency or effectiveness of formal and/or factual communication, gossip exists to some degree in every organization. The strength and scope of the "grapevine" within this particular agency may be the result of several factors. Gossip is seen as "the only way to get the real facts." The supervisors and other employees openly admit that the grapevine provides them with information that they would not normally have had access to. The accuracy of this information is not frequently questioned by those providing it even though the "facts" are often untrue or exaggerated. Another factor is the geographical fragmentation of the locations and the employees. Gossip tends to travel faster
than information provided in a memo or at a team meeting. This could be due to the fact that staff believe that their supervisors or senior management are not giving them the “whole picture” when it is contained in a memo or shared directly. The staff seem to assume that the “truth” is being manipulated or hidden behind the information that is actually being shared. However, gossip is seen by staff to provide them with the “real dirt.” Regardless of the reasons, gossip is far more powerful and tends to be more easily spread than factual information:

Residentially you’re out on a limb with regards to receiving information. The agency thrives off gossip. There needs to be some other way of communicating so that people are up to date, so they know what’s going on. It’s hard to share information with 18 homes, all of those staff members and not everybody is there at the same time.

LACK OF SUPPORT

As supervisors, the women had challenging roles and responsibilities. In addition to this, they also had to learn how to cope with a lack of support from their colleagues, their staff and their superiors. Two causes for the lack of support emerged from the study: the heavy workloads that all of the staff were responsible for and an unsupportive environment that sometimes existed amongst the
supervisors:

I think it would make it a lot easier if there weren’t so many people reporting to the director. There is a large base of us and we’re reporting to one person who has to be on overload. Below each one of us is a whole bunch of people and although it makes it a bit more consistent because there’s only one person at the top, it also makes it very difficult for her in her interactions with us.

Ironically, the women seemed to recognize that their current superiors also had an intensified workload due to the cutbacks and restructuring. However, they did not label their understanding of others’ time constraints as contributing to a supportive environment.

Additional responsibilities assumed by the supervisors also contributed to an environment that made supportive relationships more difficult:

I feel that the support isn’t there that we used to get. From each other, from our director. And I see a lot of that is because no one has the time. There’s so much put upon you from all levels that it’s hard to support anyone when you can’t support yourself.

Everybody within the whole agency is feeling overwhelmed. You can’t turn and say “geez, could you do this for me” because you feel guilty to ask because you know what’s on that person’s desk. You know that your coworkers would do it, it’s just that you feel worse giving it to others to do.
Another area where the women indicated that support was sometimes lacking was in their day-to-day interactions with families. In the field of developmental services, at a time of financial cutbacks, there is sometimes a need to share difficult information with the people who will be most affected by the changes. The women stated that in the past they were rarely supported by senior management and the board when families complained about the information presented and the supervisors often took an unfair piece of the blame. Although the women indicated that they feel more supported in this area than they did previously, the fear of reprisal is still evident:

We’re asked to have more contact with families and explain decisions that are made. You’re calling them up and once again you’re flying by the seat of your pants. You’re hoping that whatever you’re about to say will be supported tomorrow, because, there’s always one parent that is going to eat your words up and take whatever they want from it and call the director tomorrow.

The second factor that contributed to a lack of support within the team was identified as an unsupportive team. The group of supervisors “don’t let go of things, they hold on to them.” “They don’t let you forget if you’ve messed up.” One woman contended that the problem was founded in disrespect and felt that the
supervisors needed to model professional, respectful behaviour:

As a team of supervisors should be responsible for giving out a message of what the organizational culture should be like and I don’t think it should be a culture where people are waiting for the axe to drop or a place where moaning and complaining and bashing each other is acceptable. We all do stupid things, but we don’t give anybody a clean slate.

Another woman indicated that respect was not easily found in any of the levels within the agency. She stated that the lack of respect she experienced from different people made supportive relationships difficult:

You want to be respected but you also want people to understand what the word respect means. I think that’s one of the unfortunate things here. Respect hasn’t been a critical component of all facets. Sometimes trying to balance your management style with what’s the general culture here poses a difficulty.

STATUS QUO

The existence of a status quo within the team of supervisors was evident.

According to the participants of the study the status quo has presented a barrier to change and moving ahead towards the future:

There are diverse backgrounds in leadership roles on our team that makes it hard to move ahead strategically. Until everyone is at the
same level it won’t be possible. The emphasis is on the status quo.

It appeared that some of the supervisors that had been with the agency for many years had experienced many different ways of getting the job done. They had a lot to contribute to the organization due to their knowledge and history with the agency and in particular with the consumers and their families. However, there were times when “they didn’t want things to change, they wanted things to be a certain way.” Status quos are generally most comfortable when change develops. This is a normal response to fear and anxiety that is created by change. Altering methods of task completion or philosophical attitudes are critical elements of strategic planning. Employees must be willing to “do things differently” in order for the agency to continue to grow and improve.

CONSISTENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

All of the women indicated that consistency was lacking within the team of supervisors, making it difficult to supervise their staff in a common manner. This resulted on many occasions with staff complaining of unfair or unequal treatment. The language in the collective agreement now protects the staff from many decisions that are made that are person specific. Unfortunately, inconsistent
practices exercised by the supervisors have not yet been eliminated:

Consistency within the supervisors’ unit is going to be hard to maintain because we don’t have consistency and we will have people saying “well, I don’t want to work with this supervisor because they do things this way.” That’s hurtful to us as a team. Everybody does supervise differently. We’re not the same person. But, we do have to have some basic rules.

We’ve all got our own style. So, I may handle a situation one way and you may handle it another way. And you’re going to get conflicts. That’s the biggest hindrance. My decision making may be different than yours. How would we get consistency when we have those factors?

It’s pretty hard to work in an environment where you can go to one supervisor and get one answer and go to another supervisor and get a completely different answer. Everybody has a different way of doing it and it’s not written down on how to do it.

Inconsistency was also identified by the women in terms of acting on decisions that were made. Follow through was not automatic. The women referred to a low level of accountability to the group to complete the actions decided upon:

We make decisions as a team and at times we are really bad at not holding ourselves accountable. We make a decision, we even say this is when we’re going to have it done by, and then when it comes up two weeks later, we all look at each other and say “oh, really, we said that.” So, we’re good at having a lot of ideas and saying what we should do, but we’re not really good at actually doing it. We sometimes play the “wait and see” game. We get a decision and if
we wait and see long enough, that’s OK because next week the decision may change anyway. So, it’s a good thing that we didn’t waste our time because the focus has changed.

Another woman indicated that the lack of consistency and accountability led to more paperwork in order to work toward solving the problem. This has led to an increase in workload:

There’s more paper shuffling because the accountability in so many departments is not there. So you’re asked to send more things forth so that there’s something documenting that it was done.

THE UNION

Supervisors’ Union

The supervisors unionized in 1993 due to an immediate loss of job security brought about by board involvement in operational issues. According to the women, there have not been many instances where union status has helped them in their jobs since then. Unionization of the supervisors was seen to create its own layer of complexity in roles and relationships with few apparent benefits:

The supervisors unionized in 1992/1993. Some of it was the Board’s involvement, getting rid of different members of senior management. They were sort of on an attack. There wasn’t any rational thinking.
It was one way to get job security. The previous Executive Director was here one day and gone the next. Our union helped to protect us.

Union membership was also said to have created some disadvantages. The collective agreement was seen to restrict the supervisors in areas where they had been given far more freedom previously. For instance, it clearly identified hours of work and periods of rest. Although the supervisors rarely took breaks (aside from cigarette breaks) and almost always ate lunch at their desks, they spoke of feeling that the parameters around break times took away options that they had enjoyed before unionizing, regardless of whether they chose to exercise the option on that particular day. Job security improved for those supervisors with high seniority. However, the staff layoffs affected everyone, including those who were left behind with a heavier workload and a different structure to work in:

I felt I lost "scratch my back and I’ll scratch your back" and I think that’s part of having somebody feel good about their job. I didn’t see it getting me anything. Maybe it’s gotten me security, but if there’s layoffs I’m going to be out the door anyway . . . I really had a hard time last year with all the layoffs. I really felt that I wanted to be laid off, because I didn’t want to be around to see where the pieces were going to be going. I didn’t feel good about it.

Another issue that evolved directly from the establishment of the supervisory union
was the problem of supervising staff who belong to the same union as oneself:

I find myself as a supervisor supervising people who are supposed to be your union brothers and sisters, what that does is sometimes put you in a very compromised position. There are those decisions that you have to make that may not necessarily go along with the union dogma. I think that’s why I get so many grievances, because I am the type of person that I must follow my conscience in decision making, be able to look at myself in the mirror after. So, I can’t and I will not cater or bend decisions to form into the union practice.

Membership in the same union as the direct support staff has created the dilemma of divided loyalties in some circumstances:

Our union is present but it’s made no impact on me yet anyway. It may be different with a strike over our heads. We may be stuck between a rock and a hard place, coming into work and our union brothers and sisters are saying, “you’re crossing our picket line.”

Supervising the staff that are members of the same local makes it quite difficult at times to see the issues clearly. A common response to problems that arise is to say to the staff “well, it’s your union, you can change it if you don’t like it the way it is now.” The reality is that we’re all union members, we have different and distinct collective agreements, but we are all members to secure our jobs and get what we feel we deserve. As supervisors, we sometimes question certain staff’s motives for doing things that they do. We suggest that maybe they’re not keeping the individuals’ best interests as their number one priority, which is the reason that we’re here. But, we don’t use the same measurement stick on ourselves.

Direct Support Staff’s Union

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All of the women indicated that supervising unionized staff was an added stressor in their jobs.

**Bumping**

"Bumping" was identified as one of the most serious problems affecting the agency. Bumping occurs when a staff is laid off from her position and is then given the opportunity to move into another position within the same bargaining unit that is held by a staff of lower seniority. This process triggers a series of moves by several staff, depending on how high the initial person’s seniority was, and how many people were displaced by the bumps. Many of the supervisors and staff have indicated their concern with the process because it breaks up relationships between staff and the people that they support, causing disruption and chaos in everyone’s lives:

The most important thing about supporting people is relationships. We have a system in place which just scraps that right under the table. It’s the bumping, seniority, the end result being a layoff. Why do all of these people have to be affected? Families are affected, staff are affected and the people we support are affected.

Good, consistent relationships are the number one thing. Especially in this last year when a lot of staff changes have happened. I’ve got
completely new staff at one house. At another house I have one, maybe two staff left that have been there for a year. And another house, two staff as well. So, we’re only talking about maybe six staff that I had last year at this time. That’s a lot of change-over.

One woman indicated that although the staff are generally against the idea of bumping, they feel it is a necessary evil because it provides them with job security and the ability to have some control over where they chose to work when they are laid off from their position:

At my last unit meeting two weeks ago, all the staff were talking about the low morale and the bumping. I agree with them. I told them “you guys can do something about it. It’s your collective agreement. If you don’t like it, you need to change it.” I’ve been trying to emphasize this to staff. They can do something about it. We need to look at another way of changing the system, because it does break up relationships. I’m not going to work well with everybody. But, there’s a few people I know how to work well with . . . they feel the trust and respect. They respond well. But then you break that up and you almost have to start at square one. We’re perpetuating a lot of problems, by moving and rotating staff. It doesn’t make for a good service.

The language in the present collective agreement allows for this process to occur. Although the supervisors agreed with the principal of seniority and the need to protect jobs of senior staff, they felt that seniority could be protected in a way that
was less harmful to consumers. Revision of the bumping system would allow for job security and better implementation of the organization’s mandate. Unfortunately, the union and its members were not collectively in favour of this kind of change.

*Other Issues*

At times the collective agreement made it impossible to support people according to their unique needs:

> We are working with people with diverse needs. Yet, the contract is black and white. The needs of those we support should be a priority. The biggest problem is the union personnel not having an idea of what the contract says.

Positive, respectful, long-term relationships between staff and supported individuals are crucial to the provision of quality care. Unfortunately, the collective agreement can impede this process:

> The union has hindered with regards to relationships, definitely. Relationships between the support person and the people in the house. Sometimes you wish you could just pick the supported people up and put them in a vacuum away from a particular staff. You know that no matter what that staff does, they’re just not good at relationship building . . . that’s the number one issue. I’m not going to get a good response when I’m asking someone to have a bath and
they don’t like me. If they’re not responding well to me then I shouldn’t be there. But, we can’t protect against that with the collective agreement.

Unions can serve their purpose, but they also need to be put into perspective. I feel that when there isn’t something that is fair, that it can make a standard of fairness. But it shouldn’t take over the leading role of the organization. We wait and see what the contract says before we do anything.

The collective agreement was said to be “weighted in the staffs’ favour.” There were times when it would “tie your hands in dealing with issues, especially around scheduling issues, time off, overtime.” The impact was seen in financial costs to the agency as well as in terms of the care that the consumers were receiving.

Philosophy

The women referred to specific staff and their philosophy within the union. They made it clear that their difficulty was with the way that some staff deal with issues that arise:

It has depended on which unionized staff we’re dealing with. I’ve worked with some people who say “I do have a union with me, but I do need to work it out with you first. You and I are the people working together everyday. You’re the supervisor of this team. Let’s just figure out what we can do and how we can work it out
differently.” And then I’ve worked with other people who seem to think that the union is first and foremost and their loyalty to it stands second to none. They give it all the power when they shouldn’t.

The supervisors spoke about the unionized environment with a lot of passion and intensity. They acknowledged that the “union” was not the problem, but rather the way that the collective agreement was being enforced by the stewards, in an organization that supports people with diverse and changing needs:

The union is a complex issue. The lack of education that is coming down from the union itself. One of their roles should be to educate people to the collective agreement so that they understand. It should be respectful. Your supervisor should be seen as having rights and responsibilities . . . if they have difficulty they would rather go to their union steward then come and talk to you about it. That is a difficulty.

Different departments have different union focuses. One particular department is bent on challenging the establishment. Not all of them, but you predominantly hear “let’s fly the union jack and beat the management.”

Many of the problems appeared to be created by specific union leaders within the organization. Their approach was at times very “negative.” One particular steward was singled by all of the respondents as “destructive to the agency and the staff’s
and consumers’ interests:”

Searches for issues if there aren’t any at the time . . . twists things and turns things to make management look like they’re not trying to follow the agreement, but instead are out to screw the staff. That’s simply not true. We are working very hard to include the direct support staff in all committees and decision making forums. Yet, the message is still being sent out to staff that “you have to watch your back.” It just does not lend itself to collaborative efforts to get the job done in the best possible way.

The upcoming negotiations for contracts is really going to challenge people and their philosophical approaches. Who comes first, me or the people I support? It is money or benefits over support to people?

PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE

The agency’s history was an important dimension of the culture for all of the women that were interviewed. The history has had an effect on all levels of the agency: the supervisors, the direct support staff, the families, the leadership and the agency as a whole. It has shaped the current experiences of the women as managers at the agency, as well as playing a part in the move toward the future.

Direction of the Agency

A few of the participants described the agency’s history as a time of financial soundness, strategic planning, family involvement, and a focus on the individuals
being supported:

When I read the thirty year perspective of the agency I looked at the agency and thought they were really cutting edge. They had little businesses going. People supported came first in everything. Their needs were being met and the agency itself seemed to have vision and focus. They had things in progress. That’s someplace that we can perhaps get back to and continue to do.

The leadership of the agency twenty years ago was inspiring. They had the skills to do strategic planning. After they left the culture was much different. It was hard to be enthusiastic. Now, the leadership is ethical, fair and treatment is equitable. They are open to new directions and methods of support.

According to three of the women the past years in the agency were painful. They talked about a lack of job security, a feeling that they were not wanted in the agency and could be easily gotten rid of, a time when relationships within the supervisory group were full of rifts:

The history of the agency since I’ve been here has always been taboo to talk about. The past has always been negative. They say that history repeats itself and that’s true for this agency. There’s still so many wounds from the past that have not healed. I think we need to talk about it and then we can move on and learn from it. The longer you’ve been here the more personally it affected you.

Another woman adds:
A lot of the negative things had a big impact on us. With our previous director being fired for instance. We have had so many Executive Directors. When the previous ED was terminated in the manner that he was it had an impact on all of us, no matter if you liked his style or not. If it can happen to him then it can happen to me. There was no sense of security which is why there is a unit 10. The word in the agency was “his job is gone today and yours will be gone by Monday. All of the supervisors will be cleared out of here.” The Board was asking to go through our personnel files and they were refused.

**Recent Cutbacks**

The ministry cutbacks were referred to by all of the women as one of the most predominant stressors on their jobs. The large cuts in the agency’s funding base over the past two years has had quite an impact on all involved:

With the cutbacks we’re expected to do more with less. The new directions require more money because we’re not congregating and segregating people. Has the ministry considered people? Quality doesn’t seem to be an issue. The trend to privatization of services lacks accountability.

With the shortfall of monies it’s difficult to continue to support people in the style in which they’ve become accustomed. Every time you make a decision you have to be cognizant of budget dollars.

The continued existence of the agency given the tough economic times was described as questionable. The participants saw this as a “critical issue.” Not only
was the future of the agency considered stressful due to the direct ramifications on people’s jobs and livelihoods, it was also difficult for the women to deal with the possibility that people that they had supported for many years might lose their homes, their friends, and their way of life.

Families

All of the women indicated that the decreased involvement of consumers’ families over the years coupled with the tough financial times has led to a need to clarify the role of the families in their children’s lives:

We’ve lost touch with families. They aren’t doing things that they used to do . . . don’t have a lot of support for each other, families supporting families.

One woman discussed the need to look at alternative ways of supporting people, making the best use of all of the resources and forming a team with the families to accomplish this:

We’re taking a lot of the burden on. We’re wasting dollars and support in actual bricks and mortar that we could be giving where it counts. Families taking a more active role in the housing part of it. I can see the association as being more of a resource, a staffing pool, rather than an actual place to come and live. There must be more of a system to include families. I think we’re going towards that
direction. But, there’s going to be a group of older families whose kids started in a group home, years ago, and that type of situation is not going to change. They’re going to fight that change.

The lack of family involvement in the lives of their sons and daughters or brothers and sisters is not an issue that exists only within this particular agency. Historically, families were told that the institution or agency (the government) would take care of their developmentally disabled family member. They were discouraged from taking on an active role in the individuals’ lives. With a more inclusive, family-oriented philosophy and financial restraints, the families are now being expected to be more involved:

We need to get families to realize that they need to participate in their sons’ and daughters’ lives. It seems that society made a really bad mistake when they said “here’s an institution, put them here and we’ll take care of them.” We’re going to have to get back to the whole idea that you need to get involved and volunteer and contribute in whatever way you can.

Some of those affected by the pain and problems of years gone by have painted all caregivers or management staff with the same brush because they have not had other viable explanations available to them:

It really angers me when different families push what’s gone on in their son or daughter’s life back on me or the staff I’m working with.
I feel like saying “wait a minute, we weren’t there, please don’t paint me with the same brush or paint my director with the same brush as the person before her.”

**Staff**

There are difficulties inherent in working with staff that focus on what they have lost rather than attempting to be part of looking toward the future and being part of the solutions. The staff have decreased in numbers within the houses and tend to blame this on management. They see it as a bad decision that affects them and those they support. They tend not to see that there have been intense cutbacks in every area of the organization. Everyone is now being expected to carry a heavier workload:

Staff are disgruntled, especially staff who have been here six or seven years and they used to work at a house with two full-time and part-time during the week. They can’t understand how you expect them to do that much more with so many less hands.

Even amongst the staff they are still very judgemental about who works the hardest and who has it “easy” in the group homes or in the vocational programs. They argue that we’ve taken too much from them . . . but we’ve taken too much more from other areas first. They want desperately to hang on to what they have and they will fight for it . . . we are just going to have to work together to try to make the best out of this situation for the people that we support and for all of us as well.
LIFE OUTSIDE WORK

The women indicated that their lives outside of their job were affected by the position that they hold. In a developmental service agency, the consumers are being supported twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, which causes a need for flexibility from the supervisors to deal with whatever issue comes up. The need to complete one’s responsibilities and be a support to the individuals and to staff require that the supervisors be flexible with their work schedule and subsequently with their home life:

This job can be very consuming . . . I have staff call me at home if there’s something they’re having a particular difficulty with, for the support. Sometimes they’ve already figured out the answer, but it’s more of a supportive role they’re seeking. We do a lot of extra things. We don’t work in a clinical atmosphere where you do X number of things and you’re finished. Our job is continuous -- graduation, birthday parties, get-togethers with family members. Even though it may impact on your Saturday or Sunday evenings, those are the things that you still do.

Another woman adds:

You have to be flexible, really flexible, and not only flexible in the job itself, but as far as you time goes. If you had a really rigid home life it’s very hard to maintain . . . if you wanted to have a structured home life, I guess you would really have to make a commitment and say I’m
going to do it, I’m going to do this for myself on this day.

CONCLUSION

The stresses that the women identified during their interviews and throughout the process of participant observation all contribute to varying degrees of workplace burnout. Stress and burnout are major problems in the modern workplace. Controlling stress is an important factor in disease prevention. Job-related stress and burnout costs human services agencies billions of dollars each year (Gardner and Chapman, 1993).

The impact of stress is determined by how each individual reacts to it and interprets it. Stress is present throughout life. People constantly adjust and readjust to situations. All jobs involve some amount of stress. The work that the supervisors do in this developmental services agency is frustrating, hard work with many stresses. In this specific organization, there are a variety of sources of stress that could potentially intensify individual experiences of stress, including financial cutbacks, restructuring, the nature of caring work, the history of the organization, and the role of the union. The key is to learn how to cope with stress or change the situation. The following chapter describes the common coping strategies used by
the women.
CHAPTER FIVE
COPING STRATEGIES

Given the many dimensions of their job that the women identified as contributing to the stress that they experience in completing their responsibilities, it is important to note the ways that the women deal with these stresses. Coping mechanisms are reactions to changes or ongoing issues that are problematic. They help to combat burnout, reduce stress, and are intended to improve the situation, either on a long-term or short-term basis. The women that I interviewed identified six strategies that helped them to cope with the stresses of managing in a social service agency.

COGNITIVE CHANGES

Some of the women attempted to reframe the way that they conceptualize their work place in order to reduce the stress and continue in their supervisory role.

Contributions

The women referred to their contributions to the direct support staff, the people
they support and their families. They spoke of changes that have occurred in the past two years due to hard work, including others in decision making and their ability to make a difference. It was important for them to find a way to feel effective. As the following quotation illustrates, the women appeared to remain uncomfortable with claiming credit that they deserve:

I see the teams really getting involved. Wonderful stuff happening at one house . . . they’re able to confront their team members about issues that they have with them, open confrontation with resolution. That’s wonderful. I see caring happening at another house. Staff are showing up during the week and they’re going out for coffee with the individuals and they’re coming in for breakfast. I’m not seeing staff becoming stagnant. I’m seeing staff being able to paint one location and it’s looking better. There’s progress. And they’re not feeling like they don’t have any power to do things and make things better for people.

A peer evaluation helped this woman to feel that her participatory leadership style was appreciated and well received by the staff reporting to her:

After my peer evaluation I felt validated. I was right about the importance of participatory management. Acting as a mentor, helping staff to grow and develop their skills.

It was clear that although this supervisor felt validated by the response that she
received from the consumer’s family upon leaving the group home she was not
totally aware of the contributions that she may have made to the home:

Sometimes it’s the little perks, it bounces back and forth. I almost
changed locations that I supervise and let some of the families
know from one group home. They were really upset that I was
leaving and one parent made a point of talking to me and saying
“it’s really nice that you’re not going, we were kind of worried and
we were going to miss you.”

**Why I Chose this Field**

The women spoke passionately about their reasons for entering the field as well
as their reasons for staying. Focusing on these reasons helped them to
reestablish their priorities and made their jobs rewarding again. The supervisors
stated that they working in developmental services “because of the people.”
Even though the “pay is not great,” the women chose their career because it
“impacts on me personally . . . it becomes who you are:”

I do enjoy being a supervisor, because I enjoy getting feelings back
from the people that I work with, staff and the people we support.
If I didn’t get that I wouldn’t be here. That’s why I was here in the
first place, the feeling that you get when something good happens.
You feel really good when people’s lives are improving, when their
quality of life is improving.
Positive Changes Happening within the Agency

Although there were many aspects of the women’s positions that caused difficulties in executing their responsibilities, four of the five women spoke with excitement in their voices about the positive changes that were happening within the agency. They referred to a move toward a new culture, new leadership, caring staff and positive relationships that were being built between staff, families and management. The changes demonstrates the impact organizational changes can have on the well-being of staff members. It is significant that the changes were often initiated and carried out by varying levels of staff.

Moving Towards a New Culture

The women described situations in which they were successful in their quest to encourage support staff to take the initiative to complete tasks and use their power and energy to make positive changes for all involved. The staff worked collaboratively and effectively rather than focusing on negative things, which reflected well on the efforts of the supervisors. This seemed to evoke pride from the supervisors and a sense that they would all work together through the tough times:
Last week I had team meetings without myself present and they were excellent team meetings. Type-written notes and comments like “we all got along.” So, it was really good to see them without me there. I thought “maybe I shouldn’t go anymore.” They did very well on their own. I think that feels good. And if they can do well on their own like that then they’re feeling comfortable with their choices and their direction.

One woman referred to a decrease in union grievances over the past year. She indicated that this could be attributed to staff feeling that they could work things out with their supervisor as well as supervisors following the collective agreement more closely:

I haven’t seen as many petty grievances from staff compared to the number there were two years ago. Supervisors know what they’re supposed to be doing. There has been more communication in the last year between management and employees.

All of the women discussed the many types of quality standards that were being built in to the agency’s procedures. Once again this seemed to evoke pride from the supervisors as they spoke of the changes that they had worked hard to create. For instance, “plans of care” were developed which document annualized planning for each consumer and “location audits” which were established to ensure that each location was up to standard.
During the course of the study the participants stated that the agency was “moving towards a new culture.” The Board of Directors received training from an outside consultant, they’ve adopted and introduced values statements that clarify the direction that the agency is moving in, “the employee opinion survey has been completed two years in a row,” and the recommendations stemming from the survey have evoked changes. In addition, the Board and senior management team have made a commitment to involve the agency in strategic planning:

I know that some people feel that the changes that we’ve gone through are positive. I don’t think we have the concerns like we did in 1992. People were all on edge. What we’ve done in the past year has created moats to get around issues. There are things in place, Program Review, establishing planning teams, there’s time to talk, having the unit meetings together. I think things will improve. People have to be patient. We’re getting positive feedback on things.

The agency seemed to be in a “transitional state . . . moving away from negativity and irresponsibility and disrespectfulness towards inclusion, respectfulness and professionalism.” The “punitive culture” described in the Organizational Review was diminishing:
The light-hearted way that people tend to talk with each other. Sometimes someone who walks in the door and sees all the laughing going on in the back may think that you’re not getting your work done, but you’re still at your desk doing work.

The overall culture is changing. Residential is lagging a bit behind, but I think once we buy into the total approach, it will be cemented. Agency-wide the improvement is going to be dramatic.

One of the women referred to a group activity that the supervisors did together a few times during their weekly meetings. They spent fifteen minutes taking turns identifying what their stress level was on that particular day, using a rating system, and describing what was contributing to the rating that they had chosen. She indicated that this was very helpful for two reasons; 1) she received the opportunity to make herself more cognitively aware of how she was feeling and what was contributing to her stress for that day; and 2) her colleagues were given the opportunity to share their feelings which increased her awareness in their stresses and their awareness in hers. She stated that this exercise decreased her feeling of isolation and sensed that it did the same for many of the others:

There were a couple of times that we spent time in the unit meeting rating our current stress levels. It was great to share the burden of our increasing workloads, even for a few brief seconds with our colleagues. It allowed us to see where we were at and also to relate to where others are.
Another woman indicated that time spent cooperating and working as a team in brainstorming sessions had helped her to cope with difficult issues. The supervisors were included in many different committees and task forces to work on creating solutions to specific problems or determine future directions to move towards:

We have had many more opportunities in the past couple of years to sit at the table with our coworkers, senior management, staff and parents to work toward collaborative solutions to different issues. We’ve also been part of management planning, where we brainstormed around problems. It makes you feel much more included and helps you to feel like you’re part of the solution.

As a team, usually in small informal groups, we have solved a lot of problems, or at least come up with some good suggestions for each other when one of us needs some help. Usually it’s just sitting around someone’s desk, working through the issue out loud. It’s really nice to feel that someone is interested and makes you feel much less alone with the problems.

New Leadership

The current leadership has made significant changes during the past two years. The supervisors spoke of “enjoying my job again” and being “proud to work at the association again.”
The sky’s the limit because senior management is dedicated to providing ethical and fair leadership with a focus on the future.

We’re becoming more strategic. The leadership is focusing on quality standards, accreditation, strategic planning, appropriate Board involvement.

The senior management team has made drastic changes towards inclusive decision making, according to the participants. By altering the structure of the organization, the leadership has flattened the organization and provided opportunity for decision making freedom. The changes have increased autonomy, individual control, and responsibility for the success of the achievement of the agency’s mission, and greater organizational cohesiveness. As Kanter (1977) has pointed out, unless the hierarchical structure of the organization is flattened, there is little opportunity for women to access power. In a study in which women teachers had extensive decision making freedom within their school, the teachers had more interest in administration and in taking control (Jovick, 1981). This point is illustrated in a comment from one of the respondents:
For the most part, decision making is inclusive. You’re given a chance to get your two sense worth in. I think that the things that should be in our forum are. But, I recognize that there are some decisions that we won’t be involved in and that they will come down to us. So that has changed dramatically, because before the decision was made and thrown at you and they told you “get your butt out there and do it.” Now we’re actually part of the process, so that is much improved.

In addition, the supervisors experienced working with leaders that care about what employees at all levels think:

I recognize that certain decisions are made by top management. Wherever possible, there is inclusion, input and feedback opportunities. The current leadership has displayed their focus on wanting to know what people think. For instance the staff survey for 1995 and 1996.

We have someone in the leadership role who really wants to hear what you think and makes you believe that when you say something that it’s important. I think that’s not just at my level, I’ve talked to other staff and they feel that he has had a real positive impact on the total organization.

The ideology has been validated. There is participatory management. It creates a cohesive team. It’s great to have good supportive leadership above you.

*Caring Approach of Staff*

Acknowledging that there are staff working for the agency because they really
care about the people that they support helped the women to feel less alone in their quest to provide quality support:

I wouldn’t want to see the caring approach toward people change.

As bad as we think some of the staff are, there are some of them that are really caring. We need to pull out the best in people instead of everybody going home feeling like “I never accomplished anything.” We need to recognize success. There’s a lot of good things going on here, at all levels, and as small and as large as they are they’re still good.

Positive relationships built

Although some relationships had difficult issues, the women spoke of positive working relationships with their teams:

You can’t know everybody’s happiness or how they feel about the job, but I think that I’m open enough for staff that some of the working relationships I have with staff are good and I feel good about that.

The culture in my location is envied at times, it’s a very supportive, respectful team. We’ve been together for a long time, been through a lot and have come out with a good relationship, general comradeship. We’re in it together.
RECOGNIZING LIMITS

Saying “no” to further commitments

Several of the women indicated that they found recognizing their own limitations helped them to cope with the overwhelming nature of their work. They learned to prioritize job tasks, “balance expectations and accomplishments,” and accept less additional responsibilities when possible:

Time management is important. I’d like to juggle it a little better. I need to learn to say “no.” I don’t do that well. I need to recognized that everyone is a cog in the wheel and that they have to hold their own.

I’ve learned the importance of not sitting on too many committees. Now, I choose the ones that are important to me or that I’m really needed on. Too many committees take up valuable time on office work or time spent in the group homes.

Sharing responsibility

Over time the women learned to ask for help when they needed it and delegate duties that others could effectively complete:

There is a spirit of helpfulness and cooperation that exists among the supervisors. Even though they’ll backbite you and sometimes say nasty little things. When it comes down to the crunch and you really need help, whether it’s filling a shift or how to approach a
difficult staff or just blowing off steam, you can always find someone who will lend you an ear and try to be supportive.

What I would have to do is be more willing to delegate some of the duties and communicate to front-line some of the duties that they could be doing. It’s difficult because we are sending stuff back to them now.

DESTRUCTIVE MEANS

The above methods of dealing with stresses experienced by the women in their work lives appear to be constructive strategies. A few of the women also identified examples where their attempts to deal with their work resulted in increased stress.

Insulating/Isolating

While at times the women used talking and sharing to help solve problems or issues that they have, one woman mentioned that another method of dealing with difficulties was to remain silent:

There are times when one of us has an issue or the group has an issue to discuss . . . but, sometimes people just won’t speak up about how they feel, what their opinion is. And it doesn’t help. Because you know that they have an opinion, and maybe it’s the feeling that how you feel won’t be validated by the rest of the group, so you chose to hold it in. But, it doesn’t get us to the point
where we can be honest with each other and really openly discuss the issue, and find a solution that we can all live with.

**Blaming**

Although the women spoke quite positively overall about their increased role in decision making, one woman referred to the continued presence of a culture of blame. She indicated that blame tends to be a coping strategy as it provides a shift in responsibility away from the supervisors:

> Sometimes we’re no better than our staff when it comes to laying blame. We talk about how they feel that we don’t involve them in decision making, that we don’t listen to what they have to say, we just go ahead and do whatever we feel should be done without consulting them. But we do consult them. And even if we asked them for their input and included them in the process, they can sometimes find a reason anyway to not like the decision. But, we do the same thing sometimes. We blame the agency or senior management or each other for something we don’t like. And we say that they never asked for our input. But, most of the time we do have an opportunity to have our say. We don’t always take full advantage of it. But, if we don’t like the decision, then it’s easy to say that they screwed up all on their own.

**CONCLUSION**

The coping strategies practised by the supervisors provided them with opportunities to experience the positive aspects of their work. They are
beginning to feel very much a part of and contributing to the many organizational accomplishments that have occurred over the previous two years. This insight has provoked encouraging descriptions of increased support and involvement by staff at all levels of the agency, new and exciting challenges and areas of development, and recognition of difficulties and barriers to success and survival. Although the coping strategies have not eliminated those stresses, they appear to have created positive, reinforcing interludes that the women use to energize themselves and their colleagues.
CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

During the course of my study I was able to see the similarities between the signs and symptoms of burnout and those found in the literature focusing on the helping professions. However, the personal testimonies of women managers add two specific causes of burnout that must be further discussed: 1) the women’s need to balance the three major responsibilities inherent in their position as managers: administration/management, care, and teaching of the individuals supported; and 2) the devaluing of developmental services and the work that women do as managers in these organizations.

In Chapter Four I described all of the facets of work that the women identified as problematic, regardless of whether they were referred to as leading to burn out. The findings detail a number of diverse factors that the women experienced as contributing to or causing burnout. The causes differed somewhat from individual to individual as did the experiences that each woman had accumulated. Most of the women interviewed referred to some or all of the
following causes: a sense of failure regarding the ability to accomplish tasks; isolation; feelings of immobilization; a lack of knowledge and training; inadequacy of financial resources; unclear expectations; and a sense of increasing helplessness. Several of the above causes of burnout are clearly related to a feeling of lack of control and autonomy. This may be a result of a lack of a clear criteria for success. Although success is equated with implementation of organizational objectives, the attainment of these objectives depends on external factors, such as Ministry funding, as much as it does on the skill of the individual managers.

A couple of the women also identified anger, resentment, guilt, blame, discouragement, indifference, and negativism as both causes and symptoms of burnout. Because, for the most part, the women were once idealistic, these feelings are enormous. They feel that they should not be feeling this way, which tends to lead them to attempt to mask the symptoms from one another. Although they may all be feeling the symptoms of burnout, they look around and see people who look free of stress, because they too are trying to hide their inner feelings. This increases stress by making them feel inadequate and isolated from
their colleagues. They blame themselves for their burnout, rather than seeing it as a response to a highly stress-producing situation that affects almost everyone in a similar manner.

Acker (1997) points to these mixed feelings of resentment and pride as particularly characteristic of women's work. The caring and service roles that women take on offer little formal reward in the workplace. Frustration builds as women accept more responsibility, bigger workloads, and intensified caring and nurturing roles, while at the same time feeling that their efforts are unappreciated and rarely acknowledged. This type of frustration and resentment increases as women attempt to converge true emotions with cultural prescriptions that detail expectations for caring.

Although the women were able to identify many problems within the agency that led to their feelings of resentment, frustration, and helplessness, they continued to refer to personal and individual inadequacy as a cause. They did not suggest at any time that these issues are or could potentially be difficulties in other organizations. Rather, the problems and the causes of those problems were
described as being agency- and person-specific. An organizational culture, constructed in an effort to ward off offensive attacks on staff's autonomy, sense of self, and pride in their work, continued to exist (Metz, 1986). This culture helped to establish a group understanding of their situation and allowed them to "make sense out of the circumstances in which its members [found] themselves" (Metz, 1986: 207). The new leadership provided the staff with organizational changes that were identified as positive. However, feelings of resentment and frustration continued amongst the supervisors. One possible explanation for this is the ongoing manifestation of the existing culture, which provides a filter through which all new experiences must pass (Metz, 1986). In addition to this, the past two years included drastic cutbacks, intensified workloads and heightened expectations. The new leadership provided supervisors with increased autonomy and control at the same time that conditions were being declared hopeless in the social service field.

The distinction between the causes and symptoms of work stress and burnout could be seen as cyclical in this situation. For instance, unclear expectations produced work stress amongst the women, which created guilt and blame. The
use of this guilt and blame also took the form of a primary cause of work stress for those who experienced the receiving end of it. The causes and symptoms seemed to blend together for many of the women interviewed.

The women said that they felt emotionally and physically exhausted, lacked energy and enthusiasm, and had lost most of their idealism. They described their workloads as very intense, always changing, and unmanageable. Again, personnel inadequacy and a sense of failure were identified by the women. Feelings of isolation and alienation from coworkers were also indicated as profoundly affecting the women in their work. Each of these indicators lend support to the research on job stress and burnout (Pearlin and Schooler, 1978; Greenstone and Leviton, 1993).

The concept of intensification has been discussed in the education literature in reference to teachers. It is evidenced in teachers’ work in increased expectations, greater pressures, a reduction in relaxation time during the work day, a lack of time to update skills, and “chronic and persistent overload” (Hargreaves, 1994: 118). Intensification leads to reductions in the quality of the
service provided, as tasks are completed in less time and with minimal assistance. The women leaders in my study described heightened expectations, broader demands, increased accountability, and increased administrative responsibilities. They also mentioned pressure, stress, a lack of time to relax and little time to discuss issues with colleagues, which are quite similar to the description of the intensification process. In addition, the participants linked their intensified workload with the potential result of a decrease in the quality of service provided. They were unable, in many circumstances, to complete their day-to-day responsibilities due to the increased demands being placed upon them. One of the most difficult tasks to perform adequately was the direct supervision of the staff and individuals in the homes. The supervisors felt that they did not have enough time to visit the locations that they were responsible for. For them, this raised two very important questions: were the staff receiving adequate supervision to complete their duties and care for the individuals that they were supporting; and were the duties being performed in a manner that would ensure the provision of a quality service? It is the role of the supervisor to manage the programs and hold staff accountable for performing their job responsibilities in accordance with the mission and values of the agency. When
this function is not performed adequately, accountability suffers, and in turn, the quality of the service.

My interviews with women managers did not support the literature that states that an indicator of burnout is a change from a caring attitude towards one’s clients to a callous, uncaring one (Brown, 1984; Corey and Callanan, 1993; Eason, 1988; Greenstone and Leviton, 1993; Welch, Medeiros and Tate, 1982).

The women did not indicate frustration with the people supported by the agency. In fact, the supervisors were instrumental in adopting and implementing a newly created method of supporting people who displayed aggressive and/or violent tendencies that focused on respectful and analytical approaches geared towards helping the consumers to help themselves. The adoption of this type of approach was met by front-line staff with criticism and doubt, which seemed to intensify the supervisors’ need to defend the philosophy. The positive effects that began to come out of the new approach appeared to substantiate the supervisors’ position, evoking in them a sense of pride and accomplishment.
The factors that led to a more stressful work environment appeared to be much easier for the women to identify than the ways in which they dealt with stress. The exception to this was found in the difficulty the women had in identifying and/or discussing some of the more sensitive factors, such as blame, anger, isolation, and alienation from the group. It is unclear whether the women chose not to discuss these areas, were unable to recognize them, or felt that they did not contribute to their work stress. Coping strategies can be useful, others can be disastrous, and still others fall somewhere in between, where they serve to delay the inevitable (Pines and Aronson, 1981). Blame, anger and isolation did not contribute to solving problems for the women. Those who used these techniques may or may not have believed that nothing about their situation could be changed, thereby developing a cynical attitude and attempting to just “put in their time.” Others may have had no other coping skills to rely on in those situations, in which case, learning a variety of strategies would be of paramount importance.

A coping strategy identified in the literature as becoming aware of the problems at hand may shed light on the above. For instance, one of the major escalators
of burnout is the feelings of hopelessness, the feeling that there are too many things that "I don’t like or are out of my control" (Pines and Aronson, 1981). Two things are involved in this type of situation: one is the actual reality of the situation and the other is the perception of the situation on the person’s part. Pines and Aronson argue that they have found that in almost all cases people have far more control over at least some aspects of their life and work situation than they realize. When they start to understand that they have some control, the feelings of hopelessness and helplessness begin to diminish even before they begin to assert their control.

Once aware of a problem, there are people who will hide from it and try to avoid thinking about it. They believe that the way things are is the way they have to be. This can evolve into a generalized cynicism. Becoming fully aware of the problem allows for a look into the locus of the cause and the realization that the problem is largely a function of personal inadequacy. In order to effect change, a person must be willing to take responsibility to change the environment. This process is often therapeutic simply because it reduces the debilitating effects of the feelings of helplessness (Pines and Aronson, 1981).
It is also important for the women to discriminate between the concrete demands of the job and the demands they place on themselves. Some people regularly overwork, assuming that this is a demand placed on them by their organization. But, if they examined the situation more closely, they might find that they were much harsher on themselves than their employer (Pines and Aronson, 1981). It became clear throughout the course of the interviews that the women felt that the work was overwhelming and often allowed work to take over other areas of their lives. Maslach (1982) refers to this as “job spillover” and states that what people do during their off-duty hours can be critical to coping with on-the-job-stress. The women referred to several examples of job spillover: working overtime, being “on-call,” and doing work at home. It is very important to determine what is required by the job, what is voluntary and what is beyond the call of duty.

Many of the strategies for dealing with stress that the women identified appear in the literature on coping (Welch, Medeiros and Tate, 1982). The most common strategies that emerged during the interviews with the women were setting limits and focusing on positive changes that emerged within the agency.
over the previous two years. The women indicated that setting limits was often the result of learning that taking on too much meant getting nothing done at all. As the women became increasingly aware of the scope of the additional responsibilities and began to clarify the expectations that were placed on them, they were better equipped to control what they would and would not take on. The positive changes that have developed at the agency brought a glimmer of hope back into the women interviewed. The hopelessness and loss of idealism appeared to dim for the brief periods of time that the women were able to focus on the positives.

Other strategies identified by the women included: the growth and development of positive, supportive relationships with colleagues, staff and senior management; focusing on their own personal contributions to the agency, the staff and the supported individuals; and setting realistic goals.

There are several ways that the organization can facilitate the implementation of these strategies. The women acknowledged that the agency had attempted on several occasions to promote some of these concepts. Examples of this are
sharing stress levels and setting aside time to discuss personal issues. Unfortunately, the time that is set aside isn’t often taken advantage of due to time constraints and the unwillingness of some team members to discuss personal and sensitive issues in this type of open forum. Other ways for the organization to facilitate women’s personal coping strategies are clarifying job roles and responsibilities and providing formalized support such as Employee Assistance Programs. However, what is crucial to the reduction and manageability of stress, is recognition by the organization that this stress is systemic, thereby experienced by everyone. By demystifying stress and decreasing individual blame for its existence, the supervisors may be more apt to acknowledge that they are not alone in their feelings and not individually responsible for its creation or elimination.

Some of the most popular proposals for any type of problem, including burnout, are more: more staff, more money, more time, more facilities, more equipment (Maslach, 1982). It is true that more of these resources would alleviate some of the pressures that produce burnout. Unfortunately, given the economic climate, especially in the field of developmental services, the possibility of increasing
resources is highly unlikely. While “more” may be the ideal, “less” is the reality. At a time when funds are being cut back, the problem becomes how to get by on less, not how to get more. What adds to this dilemma is the focus on reducing the number of managers within the agency. The recent cutbacks left all levels of the agency with an increased workload. The direct care of the individuals supported by the agency must be the first priority. However, this has resulted in severe cuts to the middle management team and feelings agency-wide that further reductions may be necessary. This places a unique stress on the supervisors as they attempt to defend the need for direct support positions as well as defending their own. A reduction in the supervisors’ workload would alleviate some of the pressure, but it may also increase stress, as it would place them in the untenable position of being seen as placing their needs above those of the individuals being supported.

Although each of the above strategies are very important and necessary tools for coping with stress, the legitimization of developmental services as essential service providers requires more than personal and organizational strategies. It requires an unequivocal refutation of the view that developmental services are
solely maintenance and care based services and therefore less important than the change and cure elements of mental health. It is clear that the work of women in developmental service organizations must be upheld and fully valued. It is equally clear that the stress of managing will continue as long as developmentally disabled individuals are considered incurable and in need of only babysitting-type services. Developmental service professionals must continue to advocate on behalf of developmentally disabled individuals’ rights to inclusion and full participation in their own communities. They will also need to educate the public, the Ministry of Community and Social Services, and themselves with regard to the change versus cure debate. Further cuts to funding will result in less front-line staffing, which in turn will reduce opportunities to provide anything more than support that is deemed absolutely necessary to an individual’s basic functioning.

Despite the difficulties of managing in a developmental service agency, not all of the effects that the women discussed were negative. They spoke about the personal growth, enrichment and enjoyment that they get from their work. They view their work as very important, adding that they wouldn’t work in such a
frustrating environment if they didn’t love what they do. The service that they provide is definitely an essential one. They work as part of a team of people that support developmentally disabled people to grow, learn, develop and teach others. They also ensure that the individuals that they support receive safe, individualized and quality service, which makes the supervisors feel very proud.
Appendix A
Jennifer Laidlaw  
The Department of Sociology in Education  
The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

Dear (Name of Executive Director):

I am writing to request your permission to conduct case study research on Supervisors’ experiences of the organizational culture at the (Name of Agency). As well as working as a Residential Supervisor at (Name of Agency), I am a student in the Department of Sociology in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. I am working toward the completion of a Master of Arts degree. This research will serve as the basis for my Master’s thesis.

I am interested in interviewing five supervisors who are currently employed by the agency to explore their experiences as leaders in a non-profit, social service organization. In an interview, I would be asking questions on matters such as how supervisors describe the culture of the agency, in what ways the culture shapes their leadership styles, how they define their leadership styles, and their experiences supervising in a unionized environment.

I am requesting permission to interview five supervisors as well as “shadowing” each of them for a few hours to get a better sense of their experiences, responsibilities, and routines from their own perspectives. I would also greatly appreciate the opportunity to incorporate into my research the results of the Operational Review (dated November 1994) and the Employee Opinion Survey completed in July 1995.

There is no intent to evaluate the work or views of the participants. Each participant will be given a description and explanation of the study and will be asked to sign a letter of informed consent. All interviewees will have the option to withdraw their participation from the study at any time or ask that particular information be kept “off the record.” I will take the following steps to ensure that individuals cannot be identified by any written or oral reports resulting from this research; all names will be replaced by pseudonyms; I will be the sole researcher; raw data will be kept locked up in my possession; and specific management departments will be omitted due to the low number of supervisors.
in several of the departments. Confidentiality of the agency will be protected in a similar nature. Care will be taken to ensure that the name of the agency will be replaced with a pseudonym and that identifying statements cannot be easily traced (ie. blurring the statement and/or avoiding details). I have enclosed a copy of the Ethical Review Protocol, as requested, for your information.

If you agree to grant me permission to conduct the above research, please sign below and return a copy to me. If you wish any further information about the study, please feel free to contact me at work at (---).

Sincerely,

Jennifer Laidlaw
Dear (Name of Interviewee):

I am writing to request your participation in a study of Supervisors’ experiences of the organizational culture at (Name of Agency). I am a student in the Department of Sociology in Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. This research will serve as the basis for my Master’s thesis.

I am interested in interviewing five supervisors who are currently employed by the agency to explore their experiences as leaders in a non-profit, social service organization. In an interview, I would be asking questions on matters such as, how supervisors describe the culture of the agency, in what ways the culture shapes their leadership styles, how they define their leadership styles, and their experiences supervising in a unionized environment.

I also wish to spend approximately ten hours observing the weekly supervisory meetings to get an understanding of the varying roles and experiences of those attending, from the perspective of “researcher.” As well, I wish to spend time with each of the five supervisors that I will be interviewing to observe their individual roles, routines and responsibilities.

There is no intent to evaluate the work or views of the participants. All participants will have the option to withdraw their participation from the study at any time or ask that particular information be kept “off the record.” I will take the following steps to ensure that individuals cannot be identified by any written or oral reports resulting from this research; information about consumers will not be included in the research; all names will be replaced by pseudonyms; I will be the sole researcher; raw data will be kept locked up in my possession; and specific management departments will be omitted.
If after reading the above, you are willing to participate in this research, please sign the attached sheet and return to me. Thank you very much for your help and contributions.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Laidlaw
Statement of Agreement to Participate in Research Project

I have read the letter describing the research to be conducted by Jennifer Laidlaw, understand the procedures and safeguards outline, and agree to participate.

____________________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant                  Date
Appendix B
Interview Schedule

1. Background Information

► How long have you worked in the agency? Field?
► How long have you been in this particular management position?
► Have you been in a management position in another organization, either the profit or non-profit sector?
► What is your educational background?
► What kind of training have you received for this job?
► What other types of training would be helpful?

2. Experiences as a Supervisor

► What do you do as a supervisor within this agency?
► What is your role within the agency?
► What is it like to lead in this agency?
► Describe your level of satisfaction with your position and the roles and responsibilities.

Are there any aspects of your job that you find frustrating/challenging? How do you deal with these frustrations?
3. Experiences of Organizational Culture

- Describe the organizational context in which you lead.

  Anything that you would want to change or remain the same?

- Describe the factors within the agency that either impact positively or negatively upon your leadership role.

  Stress/Burnout?
  Decision making?
  Union membership of staff/supervisors?

4. Agency History/Future

- Describe your knowledge regarding the history of the agency and whether you think this history has a positive or negative impact upon your role.

- Describe what you think are the critical issues that the agency is facing today and will face in the future, both internally and externally.
REFERENCES


