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Bridging the Gap: Exploring the Information Needs and Information Use of Front Line Child Protection Intake Workers.

by

Steven Davis-Mendelow, M.S.W.

A Thesis Submitted in Conformity with the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of Toronto, Faculty of Social Work

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ABSTRACT


Degree: Ph.D., Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, 1998.

Author: Steven Davis-Mendelow, M.S.W.

This is a study of how front-line child protection intake social workers (front-line workers) at selected Children's Aid Societies in Ontario perceive their information needs, and how they use information and information systems in relation to these needs. This study employs a qualitative, ethnographic approach to examine the experiences of 25 front-line workers in the context of the following questions:

i) How do front-line workers perceive their information needs in the context of their assessment-related tasks?

ii) What are the gaps, barriers and helps that front-line workers encounter in attempting to meet these needs?

iii) What is the information-seeking behaviour of front-line workers with respect to information sources and systems?

Applying the "sense-making model", which emphasizes as critical the perspective of the information-user and provides a useful analytical framework in its vocabulary of "gaps", "barriers" and "helps", this study finds that front-line workers perceive a profound disjunction between their information needs and the formalized information systems at their disposal.

In order to effectively perform their central gate-keeping functions of initial client assessment in the time and resource constrained realities of present-day child protection work, front-line workers require case-relevant information in a timely, highly accessible and "user-friendly" format. The information base of the agencies investigated, however, appear to fall far short of this ideal, serving as they do several masters in the competing and sometimes conflicting information requirements of a variety of legal and administrative stakeholders within and outside of the agency. The result of this "top-down" design is a monolithic and bureaucratic information system that front-line workers consider for their purposes as remote, unwieldy and largely unresponsive to their assessment-related needs.

Observation of front-line workers in the performance of their tasks reveals that an alternative and informal information system appears to have evolved organically and spontaneously alongside the formal. This loosely-structured, system appears to represent a grassroots, "bottom-up" response to the perceived shortcomings of the formal one. Its main method of information transmission is oral rather than written, and the narrative vehicle is of critical import as a mode of information transfer. Significantly, rather than hub and centerpiece of the information system, the computerized information base is, to a large degree, marginalized.

Unless the gap is bridged between what the front-line worker perceives as his or her information needs in the context of assessment, and what is formally provided by the agency, an ever increasing reliance on computerized information systems threatens to perpetuate, or exacerbate, this gap.
I would like to take this opportunity to thank those people who made the completion of this dissertation possible. First and foremost, Dr. Rob MacFadden, my Ph.D. supervisor. Rob's enthusiasm for the subject and his willingness to exchange ideas have been invaluable.

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To my son Jacob who was born just before this project began, and to his brother Sammy who came two years later, thank you for filling my every living day with treasured memories and a constant reminder that life is what you live while writing a Ph.D. I love you both, let's go out and play!
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my sister, Kala.

Although she did not live to see the completion of the manuscript,
she always knew that I would finish it.
She encouraged me through her faith in me,
and in herself.

In her brief time here on earth,
she saw and did more than many of us dream of
including
traveling the globe,
living among the whales,
and raising two wonderful children.

In her struggle against cancer
Kala taught me about
the value of love, life, family and dignity.

She was a strong, willful and loving sister,
sister-in-law,
aunt,
daughter,
mother,
wife
and
friend.

I will miss her always
and
love her forever.

***


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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Title Page
Abstract
Acknowledgements
Dedication
Table of Contents
List of Tables
List of Figures

## CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1 The Practice of Social Work: An Information-Intensive Profession........................................3
1.2 The Knowledge Base of Social Work: Moving toward Empiricism........................................5
1.3 The Child Protection System: Identifying and Protecting "At Risk" Children...........................8
  1.31 Roles of the Child Protection Worker: Information Gathering and Transmission..............................8
  1.32 The Assessment Function: Critical Information Processing..................................................10
  1.33 Trends in Child Welfare: Diminishing Resources and Increasing Responsibilities..........................12
  1.34 The Child Protection System in Ontario: The Challenge of Managing Information......................14
1.4 Social Work and the Advent of Information Technology..................................................15
1.5 Information Systems and Information Technology..........................................................18
CHAPTER TWO
THEORIES OF INFORMATION USE AND NEED: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

2.1 Paradigms of Information .................................................. 22
   2.11 The Traditional Paradigm: Buckets and Bricks .................. 22
   2.12 The Alternative Paradigm: Hands and Clay ....................... 24
   2.13 The Paradigms Compared ............................................... 25
       2.131 Point of Emphasis: The Information System versus the
           Information User .................................................. 26
       2.132 Perception of Information: Static versus Dynamic Information .... 29
       2.133 Role of the User: Object versus Subject ..................... 35

2.2 Information Needs: Top Down versus Bottom Up .................. 35

2.3 The Sense-Making Model .................................................. 39

2.4 The Research Questions .................................................. 43
CHAPTER THREE
METHOD AND DESIGN
3.1 Qualitative and Ethnographic Method.................................................................44
3.2 Research Design....................................................................................................45
  3.21 The Design and Pre-Test Phase............................................................................46
    3.211 The Research Instruments.............................................................................46
    3.212 The Recording Instruments...........................................................................48
    3.213 Refining the Interview Guide.........................................................................51
  3.22 The Data Collection Phase..................................................................................53
    3.221 Observation ..................................................................................................54
    3.222 Interview .......................................................................................................56
    3.223 Documentation...............................................................................................57
  3.23 Site Selection and Sample Population...............................................................58
    3.231 Agency Y .....................................................................................................59
    3.232 Agency Z .....................................................................................................60
    3.233 The Sample ..................................................................................................61
  3.24 The Data Analysis Phase....................................................................................62
    3.241 Computer Analysis.......................................................................................62
    3.242 Cross-Validation...........................................................................................63
    3.243 Front-Line Worker Feedback.........................................................................64
3.3 Ethics and Confidentiality.....................................................................................65
3.4 Limitations and Generalizability..........................................................................66
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

4.1 General Observations .............................................................................................................68
  4.11 The Research Plan Reviewed .................................................................................................68
  4.12 Overview of the Intake Assessment Process ...........................................................................69
  4.13 The Office Environment .......................................................................................................71
  4.14 The Language of Assessment ...............................................................................................72

4.2 The Intake Process Observed ..................................................................................................74
  4.21 The Initial Call and Pre-screening .........................................................................................74
  4.22 The Screening Process: Record Searches ...............................................................................77
    4.221 The Fiched Files ..............................................................................................................79
    4.222 The Child Abuse Registry ...............................................................................................81
    4.223 Computer Screening .......................................................................................................82
  4.23 Opening and Tracking Cases .................................................................................................84
  4.24 Closing Cases: The Challenge of Closure ..............................................................................88

4.3 The In-Depth Interview Results ............................................................................................90
  4.31 The Interview Process Reviewed .........................................................................................90
  4.32 Job Perceptions versus Job Descriptions ............................................................................90
  4.33 Conflicting Agendas and Information Priorities ..................................................................92
  4.34 Expediency: Protocol and Process versus Front-Line Expertise and Intuition .....................103
  4.35 Agency Information Gathering versus Personal and Professional Values ............................111
  4.36 Peers as Information Sources .............................................................................................114
  4.37 Informal Aids to Information-Gathering, Recording and Transmission ............................118
4.38 External Information Barriers: Police and School Interaction.................123
4.39 The Computer Information System..........................................................127
  4.391 Front-line Worker Attitudes..............................................................127
  4.392 Formatting and Information Preferences...........................................129
  4.393 Computer Training............................................................................134
4.4 Review of Documentation and the Recording Process.................................136
  4.41 Classification of Documents Reviewed: Instructive and Operative.........136
  4.42 Agency Standards and Recording Objectives........................................137
  4.43 Legislated Recording Responsibilities................................................138
  4.44 Litigation-Driven Information Standards............................................138
  4.45 The Recording Process Reviews.........................................................139
  4.46 Front-Line Worker Input in Information System Design.......................141
  4.47 The Face Sheet: The Family Profile and Change Form..........................143
  4.48 Brief Calls and the Telephone Log.....................................................148
4.5 Problems Identified in the Recording Process...........................................149
  4.51 Duplication..........................................................................................149
  4.52 Conflicting Priorities............................................................................152
4.6 Case Study Reviews..................................................................................156
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Information Use: The Informal System Described ........................................................................... 161
  5.1.1 Formal Information Base Marginalized ...................................................................................... 166
  5.1.2 Peers as Information Sources .................................................................................................... 167
  5.1.3 Experience and Intuition as Information Sources ...................................................................... 169
  5.1.4 The Manual Recording Aids .................................................................................................... 171
  5.1.5 Oral versus Written Communication ....................................................................................... 173
5.2 Information Needs Revisited ............................................................................................................. 176
  5.2.1 Story-Telling: The Primacy of the Narrative Ethic .................................................................... 177
  5.2.2 Experience: The Interpretative-Intuitive Ethic ....................................................................... 180
  5.2.3 Sense of Ownership .................................................................................................................. 182
  5.2.4 Expediency and the Reality of Time and Resource Constraints ............................................. 183
5.3 Suggestions for Further Research .................................................................................................... 184
  5.3.1 The Power of the Sense-Making Methodology for Social Work ............................................. 184
  5.3.2 The Bottom-Up Design .......................................................................................................... 186
  5.3.3 The Role of Narrative .............................................................................................................. 188
  5.3.4 Knowledge and Intuition .......................................................................................................... 188
5.4 Information Technology and Social Work: At the Crossroads ....................................................... 189
APPENDICES.........................................................................................................................192

A: The In-Depth Needs Assessment Interview
B: Measurement Forms Assessed and Rejected
C: Physical Details of Environment Form
D: Participant-Observation Reference Guide
E: Example of Form Tried During Observation
F: Final Draft of Interview Guide
G: Letter of Consent
H: Example of Time-line listing all gaps/barriers/helps, Agency Z
I: Example of Time-line listing all gaps/barriers/helps, Agency Y
J: Sample Letter of Introduction and Attachments for Intake Supervisor
K: An Example of Telephone Log, Agency Z
L: Job Description, Agency Z
M: Job Description, Agency Y
N: An Example of Workers' Own Separate List of Cases, blank form
O: Face Sheet Fields of Information
P: Data Analysis: Two levels of NUD*IST Nodes

BIBLIOGRAPHY.........................................................................................................................233
LIST OF TABLES & FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES
Table 1: Summary of Differences Among Paradigms of Information ........................................... 26
Table 2: Asking Different Questions: A Comparison of Paradigms of Information Theory ........................................................ 38
Table 3: Preliminary Information Taxonomy ........................................................................ 49
Table 4: Format as a Factor in Information Systems: Telephone Numbers ............................. 129
Table 5: Information Needs and Wants: Date of Birth ......................................................... 131
Table 6: The Formal and Informal Information Systems Contrasted .................................... 163

LIST OF FIGURES
Figure 1: The Information Continuum, An Alternative Perspective ........................................ 30
Figure 2: Front-Line Worker's Information Uses and Needs: A Sense-Making Approach .... 42
CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

[It] is not that people are, indeed, disinterested in information but, rather, that systems and researchers have been looking at something they call information rather than something users call information (Dervin, 1983, p. 158).

Social work is an information-intensive profession. Yet very little is known about the actual information needs of social workers in general, and front-line child protection workers in particular.

In the current system of child protection in the province of Ontario, it is the front-line intake social worker (hereinafter, "front-line worker") of the Children's Aid Society (hereinafter, "CAS" or "agency") who is charged with the crucial gatekeeping functions of information gathering and initial client assessment. In order to effectively perform these time-critical roles in the resource and time-constrained realities of present-day social work, front-line workers require case-relevant information in a timely, highly accessible and preferably, user-friendly format. These information needs are particularly acute in the instance of alleged or suspected child abuse or neglect.

Despite millions of dollars spent annually on developing computerized information systems much criticism exists about the relevance and utility of these information systems for the end user. Indeed, one of the most consistent findings to date in the research on computerized information technology in the human services is that existing information systems development have not involved the end user, the front-line worker, in any meaningful way (Glastonbury, 1996; Schoech, 1990). The introductory quote above highlights this discrepancy and
underscores the importance of focusing on the end users in order to develop systems that are meaningful, relevant and effective.

This thesis is unique in its focus on the exploration of the information needs of front-line child protection workers. This exploration commences not from a computerized information system perspective, but from a fundamental information needs perspective.

It is the intention of this thesis to explore the uses of information by front-line workers in the assessment process, with a view to better understanding their information needs. A central and underlying assumption is that the experienced front-line worker is the essential arbiter of what information is necessary to perform client assessment; accordingly, his or her own perceptions of information need are of great relevance and interest. The thesis adopts as its analytical framework the sense-making model of information use that likewise emphasizes as critical the perspective of the information user, and provides a convenient structure, in its "gaps", "barriers" and "helps" terminology, for better understanding the information-gathering process (Dervin, 1997a). No other model of information use in social work appears to provide as powerful an engine of research for exploring information needs from the perspective of the user as does the sense-making model, borrowed from the field of library and information science.

This introductory chapter seeks to place the reader in the context of social work in general and child protection work in particular. Emphasizing information needs and information use in social work, the chapter provides the following background material: a brief overview of the profession and practice of social work, with a further look at its operative knowledge base and its relationship to information technology and empiricism. A description of a typical child protection system in the province of Ontario then follows, as well as an examination of general trends in child welfare affecting the information needs of front-line workers. Finally, this chapter ends with a brief discussion of the advent, status and impact of
information technology in the social work realm, with a definitional framework of relevant terms for the discussion to follow.

Chapter Two presents a review of the relevant literature in library and information science and related fields, examined according to a dichotomy drawn between traditional and alternative information paradigms, and with a view towards establishing the theoretical underpinnings of the sense-making model. Chapter Three describes the design and methodology of the field research, as inspired by that model: specifically, the processes of observation, in-depth interviewing and documentation review. Chapter Four presents the findings of this research. The fifth and concluding chapter describes the workings of the informal information system which illustrates how front-line workers actually pursue their information needs. It describes what some of these perceived information needs appear to be; and finally draws some tentative conclusions about the issues in harmonizing the formal and informal information needs associated with the assessment process particularly in the context of information technology.

1.1 The Practice of Social Work: An Information-Intensive Profession

The profession of social work operates in a manner which links people and their environments (Compton & Galaway, 1984; Irma, 1984). That is, social workers strive to help people better understand themselves in their social relationship for the purposes of making changes in themselves and/or their situation. By their own definition:
Social workers are engaged in planning, developing, implementing, evaluating and changing social policies, service and programs that affect individuals, families, social groups, organizations and communities.  

Social work is an information-intensive profession, with the social worker collecting, sorting, and transmitting information on behalf of his or her client constituency. Social work is often categorized according to three levels of practice: micro, mezzo and macro, corresponding to direct practice, community practice and policy, respectively. At each level of practice, the primary focus of activity or intervention is generally identifiable: direct practice workers work with individuals and family behaviour; and community practitioners work with groups to effect changes within defined communities. At the policy level, intervention is focused on effecting policy, legislation and related regulations. Any individual practitioner may have knowledge of, and work at all three levels of intervention. Current social work education emphasizes the ability of practitioners to be able to practice at all levels. One field of social work activity where social workers routinely operate on all three levels is in child protection. At a children's aid society, front-line workers intervene with individuals and families where abuse is suspected or has occurred with the goal of preventing further child abuse and neglect, and linking clients with appropriate community resources. Senior managers at these agencies are responsible for information technology and the application of administrative regulations, while executive directors determine the shape of these regulations as well as lobby and militate for changes in child welfare legislation and policy. A wide range of information is received and processed from numerous sources including:

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social service professionals, Children's Aid society records, police, lawyers, school administrators, families and neighbors of victims. Aspects of this information is used for the following tasks: assessment, intervention, counseling, management, data collection, record keeping, legal and court services, and research.

1.2 The Knowledge Base of Social Work: Moving toward Empiricism

As with other areas of human activity, social work operates from, and according to, its own particular knowledge base. How the profession forms, defines or contributes to that base of knowledge fundamentally impacts its behaviour and its use of information. Webster's unabridged dictionary defines knowledge broadly as "a clear and certain perception of something: (i) the act, fact, or state of knowing and understanding", and "(ii) learning: all that has been perceived or grasped by the mind." Many of the issues concerning "knowledge" and "information" that this thesis addresses are implied in these definitions: What are the perceptions of "acts" or "facts" which front-line workers have? Are facts certain? Are they linked to the transmitter and receiver of information? How do front-line workers communicate and convey internal knowledge, or "knowledge that is perceived or grasped by the mind" to other child abuse stakeholders?

For decades, social workers and academics in related fields have engaged in debates revolving about the nature and validity of knowledge as it pertains to social work (Compton and Galaway, 1984). The professional knowledge of social work may be broadly defined as consisting of two categories of knowledge: assumptive and empirical.

Assumptive knowledge may be described as "knowledge that has been accepted and acted upon as if it were true". "Practice wisdom" or experiential

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2 Websters New World College Dictionary, 1996, p. 748.
3 Compton & Galaway, 1984, p. 40.
knowledge, the learning built up by an individual in the course of practicing social work, falls into this category (Bickman & Bogs, 1998). This concept of wisdom reflects the notion that knowledge is something that is primarily internal, or "grasped by the mind".

In contrast, empirical knowledge may be defined as "knowledge that has been confirmed by scientific testing which can be consistently replicated" (Compton & Galaway, 1984, p. 40). This type of knowledge may be best understood as external and provable through the examination of facts.

In The Social Work Revolution, Fischer (1981) argued that for social workers to be seen as professionally credible, the profession must undergo a paradigm shift away a traditionally heavy reliance on assumptive knowledge as its foundation and towards a more scientific and empirical knowledge base. Embracing an empirical knowledge base, Fischer argued, will establish the profession's legitimacy and professional credibility through use of purportedly value-free scientific methodologies.

Critics have countered that moving towards a single empirical base of knowledge is ill-advised for a profession that is itself so broadly based, straddling as it does so many areas of human activity, on so many levels. Far preferable, they argue, is a diversified and eclectic base of knowledge, marrying the empirical with the assumptive (Gordon, 1983; Ravetz, 1996). They express concern that the movement toward a more empirically-grounded paradigm of social work will substantially change the profession's image of what knowledge is valid and professionally acceptable. They fear this move will come at the expense of research and practice that tend to address process issues such as assisting clients to alter their behaviour and develop healthy relationships. Critics express concern that the field of social work research will be narrowed to topics that have clear,

---

4 See also, Rubin and Babbie, 1993, Chapter 6.
quantifiable outcomes, and that less tangible concepts such as feeling and empathy will be neglected (Gruber, 1991; Heineman, 1989). Furthermore, they argue that this effort will extend to the very practice of social work itself, favouring more rigid, quantifiable outcomes, and contributing to a "bean-counting" mentality, such as counting the number of cases opened or closed over a period of time. Other critics argue that social work knowledge may be seen as moving away from an empirical-base towards a post-constructivist philosophy which emphasizes the role of individual interpretations of knowledge and the examination of information and knowledge through narrative story-telling. (Machlup, 1993; Reamer, 1993).

While philosophical debates concerning the most appropriate knowledge base for the social work profession continue (Murphy & Pardeck, 1986; Steyaert, 1996), the "real world" has intruded in the form of certain factors that appear to be accelerating this movement toward scientific empiricism. One factor is the service constraints in social work agencies which lead to, and in some cases, are generated from, stakeholders demands for greater accountability, efficiency, more data collection, and proof of effectiveness. These constraints include time, service and economic constraints and diminishing human and physical and service resources. Another factor is the availability of powerful and inexpensive computerized information technology.

Both service constraints and sophisticated information technology have already led to changes in social work practices, including the demand for greater standardization of information and knowledge across social work agencies (Office of the Chief Coroner, 1997). These developments raise important questions concerning the front-line practice of child protection, such as the implications of standardization for examining abuse and the role and effects of computerized information systems in intervention.
1.3 The Child Protection System: Identifying and Protecting "At Risk" Children

A child protection system is designed to serve and protect a broad range of children identified as "at risk" in the social setting. Although the determination of at risk status varies amongst jurisdictions, the sort of risks to such children range across the spectrum from physical or sexual abuse or abandonment, to emotional neglect. Those receiving services from the child protection system include: clients with behavioural problems, unwed single mothers, adolescent runaways, families with special needs children, families of mothers who have been or remain in abusive relationships and families ordered by the courts to be under the care of child protective services. Although child protection is largely the province of the social worker specializing in child care, it also involves co-ordination, gathering, transmitting, and disseminating information from police, school officials, and various community service workers.

1.31 Roles of the Child Protection Worker: Information Gathering and Transmission

Direct practice, or front-line, child protection workers may ordinarily be classified according to one of two categories:

- intake workers;
- family service workers.

In most agencies, these two roles are quite discrete; that is, a sharp distinction is drawn between the roles of intake and family service workers, while in others the categories are non-exclusive and the titles and responsibilities blur. What follows is a breakdown of the two roles common to many jurisdictions, including the one selected for this study.
Intake Workers are responsible for the initial case and client contact. They are legally obliged to interview alleged victims within a short time-frame\(^5\), to formally record and make an intervention decision within twenty four hours of the initial complaint.\(^6\) Their work may be described as crisis-oriented, requiring quick decisions within such legally prescribed time-frames. Formally, these decisions are made in consultation with their social work supervisor. Front-line workers also perform a critical public relations function by professionally advising the public about community resources, and responding to community concerns regarding the role of the agency in the network of protection services available. Like a social work fire-fighter, the intake worker is at the front-line, coming face-to-face with real and potential emergencies, acting, reacting and rapidly assessing the alleged abuse. In order to make this assessment, front-line workers require rapid access to case-relevant information in order to help them to make an appropriate assessment of an alleged abuse. It is the front-line workers' responsibility to transmit all relevant information to the agencies' (manual or computerized) information systems.

Family Service Workers, by contrast, are responsible for the process of follow-up on the case file, long term case management and counseling, and for updating relevant information on the various cases. Their general role may be best described as ongoing case management.

Front-line intake workers generally view themselves as distinct from the family service worker, focusing on their role as gate-keepers to the agency and the crisis-oriented nature of their tasks. They are generally not responsible for long-term counseling, or case monitoring.

\(^5\) Within twelve hours in the province of Ontario, but similar requirements are set in other provincial jurisdictions (see Falconer & Swift, 1983).

\(^6\) Within twenty-four hours in the province of Ontario, but similar requirements are set in other provincial jurisdictions (see Falconer & Swift, 1983).
1.32 The Assessment Function: Critical Information Processing

In this study, front-line intake workers are understood to be those workers responsible for making the crucial initial judgment of whether to accept a case for child protective services. The initial assessment of allegations of abuse is a critical responsibility in the field of child protection, fulfilling a gate-keeping role that establishes the flow of cases of abuse or neglect into the Children's Aid Society. This is the point at which information is gathered, evaluated, and action taken. The front-line worker and supervisor determines which allegations merit further consideration by child protection agencies, and those which need not be further pursued. Often the front-line worker is the sole source of contact for clients and potential clients with the child protection agency.

These tasks are accomplished through gathering, interpreting and transmitting information. The questions concerning what information workers seek, how they communicate that information, and what aspects of their professional knowledge is used, however, appear to not yet have been thoroughly investigated (Auslander, 1996; Wilson, 1981) and serve as important inspiration for this study.

The protocol of assessment that a front-line worker must follow in Ontario, as carefully enumerated in that province's Child and Family Services Act, (1985), reveals that:

Any investigation shall include all of these steps:

(i) telephone or personal interview with the person who reported the alleged abuse and any other who have relevant information;

(ii) search of existing society records for any present or past contact involving the family, alleged abuser or child;
(iii) contact the Child Abuse Register to ascertain if the alleged abuser has been registered in the past;\(^7\)
(iv) contact any child welfare authority which has previously registered the alleged abuser;
(v) see the child alleged to have been abused and interview the child;
(vi) ensure that the alleged abuser is interviewed by police and/or society worker pursuant to the protocol in place between the society and the police;
(vii) interview the parent or person having charge of the child;
(viii) interview other potential child victims;
(ix) gather evidence from other professionals involved in the investigation;
(x) gather information from other witnesses. \((Revised\ Standards for the Investigation and Management of Child Abuse Cases Under The Child and Family Services Act\(^8\), 1992, p. 14).\)

Falconer & Swift (1983), however, outline the roles of the front-line worker in similar terms:

(i) talking to the person who makes a complaint (the reporter) and taking information;
(ii) evaluating whether a situation reported belongs with protective services, or should be referred to other resources;

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\(^7\) The Ontario Child Abuse Register is a confidential, centralized index and repository of information about child abuse cases in the province of Ontario. Almost every jurisdiction in North America has some form of register \(^a\) (Bala, 1987, p. i). The Ontario Child Abuse Registry is a creation of the Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services and is governed by sections 68, 71 & 72 of the \textit{Child and Family Services Act (1985)}. \(^a\)

\(^8\) Hereinafter referred to as the \textit{Revised Standards}, 1992.
(iii) investigating and verifying the situation as reported, assessing to determine the severity and areas for service;
(iv) contacting community reporters to advise them whether the complaint will be actively pursued;
(v) bringing identified problems to the client's attention. (Falconer & Swift, 1983, p. 77).

As discussed below, the front-line workers interviewed perceive their role in even more basic terms, emphasizing the crisis-solving aspect of their responsibilities, over the administrative. These tasks may appear simple, but reflect a complex iterative process of gathering and assessing information, determining the accuracy, veracity, and relevance of information based on the originating source, and then transmitting that information to other child protection stakeholders.

1.33 Trends in Child Welfare: Diminishing Resources and Increasing Responsibilities

The social work literature highlights a variety of factors likely to have significant impact on the nature and practice of child protection work especially as this relates to the volume and complexity of information:

(i) the increase in mandated responsibilities of child protection agencies (Hutchison, 1989);
(ii) the increase in the number of suspected cases of abuses (Bala, 1987);

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9 See Chapter Four, the front-line workers' perceptions concerning their job compared to the agency job description.
(iii) the emphasis on serving only the most severe cases, (Johnson & L’Esperance, 1984);
(iv) the demands for more screening (gate-keeping) and detailed assessments through the collection of more information (Hutchison, 1989);
(v) agency economic constraints and staffing reductions; (Bala, 1987, Hutchison, 1989)
(vi) high staff turnover (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, 1992);
(vii) lack of community services to meet the needs of families (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, 1992);
(viii) limited staff knowledge of existing community resources (Pecora, Whittaker, Maluccio, 1992).

Taken together, these factors illustrate the ever-increasing pressure on the process of assessment for the front-line worker. They further suggest that diminishing resources and increased responsibilities will lead to less time for thoroughly investigating and recording each case. Paradoxically, this decrease in time is accompanied by agency demands for the front-line worker to gather more information to justify their decisions. Carniol (1990), for example, discusses how various pressures have combined to adversely impact on the front-line social worker in Alberta:

The [Alberta] provincial department [of Social Work], decided arbitrarily to cut back on their overtime allowances—but not on their caseloads. The explanation given to these social workers was clear: The department's budget had to be cut back; therefore do the work within regular working hours; if you can't we will have to conclude you
are incompetent...In other words, the social agency's managers had decided that the way to deal with the situation was to force the social worker into a classic speed-up, akin to the assembly line. Those workers who couldn't or wouldn't conform were deemed inefficient (1990, p. 66).

In such time and resource constrained environments, user-friendliness and information accessibility become even more critical factors in information system design.

1.34 The Child Protection System in Ontario: The Challenge of Managing Information

In Canada, the practice of social work falls generally under provincial jurisdiction. In the province of Ontario, that role is held by the Ministry of Community and Social Services. The governing piece of legislation relating to child protection is the Child and Family Services Act (1985). Its stated function is to keep the family unit together, and its underlying philosophy appears to be one of minimal intervention.10

There are fifty-five children's aid societies across Ontario. In 1996, approximately 100,000 Ontario families were served by children's aid societies. The societies investigated approximately 47,000 reports of maltreatment of children.11 In 1994, the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto, one of the three agencies responsible for child protection in Greater Toronto, served a total of 8,624 families, and 17,521 children .12

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11 Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies, Web Site, 1996.
In Ontario, research shows that over a two year period\textsuperscript{13} 100 children receiving services from the Ontario CAS died of abuse or neglect. Of these the Office of the Chief Coroner has determined that; 31 were in the care of a children's aid society at the time of their death; 10 children were living with their families under court-ordered supervision and; 59 were living with their family and receiving support services or investigation and assessment services from a children's aid society at the time of their death.\textsuperscript{14}

While a variety of factors contributed to these deaths, several task forces have independently determined that increased sharing and standardization of information within and between agencies, and the development of a province-wide computerized information system (CIS) may help to prevent further deaths. Additionally these task forces were critical of the lack of information available for generating broad statistics about child victims of abuse across Ontario (Office of the Chief Coroner, 1997). \textsuperscript{15}

1.4 Social Work and the Advent of Information Technology

A potentially significant engine of change for child protection workers in the performance of their assessment related tasks is information technology. Presently the primary intersection of information technology and social work in general remains the administrative uses of technology.\textsuperscript{16} The computer may be used as a tool to provide a means of measuring, analyzing, and evaluating standards that have been defined through an accountability framework. Technology has been used to supplement or replace secretarial staff through software tools as voice mail,

\textsuperscript{13} 1994 and 1995.
\textsuperscript{14} Office of the Chief Coroner, 1997.
\textsuperscript{15} The current information project involving the development of a province-wide CIS stated that this CIS must meet the particular information needs of the front-line worker, and that it should be "user friendly". What these needs are, however, have yet to be clearly identified (Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies and The Office of the Chief Coroner of Ontario, 1997).
\textsuperscript{16} More specifically, within the realm of administration, it is used for the generation of statistics (Recording Project, Final Report, Agency Y, 1992).
word processors and on-site computer records. It is also increasingly used to generate statistical information pertaining to efficiency, such as the number of clients served on a cost/service basis. It can also track income, religion and other demographic statistics on victims of child abuse and their families.

Overall, however, computer technology in the human services has generally lagged well behind its introduction in the business world (Savicki, 1989). With few exceptions, application of information technology at the direct practice level is still limited to the replication of intake forms on computer screens (Gandy & Tepperman, 1990), while advanced direct practice design applications are still more speculative than real (MacFadden, 1989; Steyaert, 1996). In this respect, information technology remains in its relative infancy in the context of direct practice, but appears poised to effect some future fundamental changes there.17

Critics of the use of computerized information systems in social work tend to emphasize the potentially damaging or disruptive effects of technology on certain ethical standards prized by the profession, such as confidentiality, information security, and the spending of scarce resources on computer hardware and software instead of on service provision (MacFadden, 1997). Researchers have resorted to coining new terms to describe various ethical or practical dilemmas posed by the advent of information technology: for example, they refer to the "de-animation of society" (Murphy & Pardeck, 1989), the "lightning-fast eradication and theft" of confidential information (de Groot, Gripton, Licker, 1986), and "computer-illiteracy" (Butterfield, 1986).

Currently there is little hard evidence to support or refute claims concerning the prospective benefits or liabilities of computerization of information for social work.18 In fact, as with the use of information in the child protection process

17 For discussion of such changes see, MacFadden & Pietersen, 1997; Steyaert, 1996; Glastonbury, 1996.
18 Such claims include: the "deprofessionalization" of the social worker, replacing master level social workers with bachelor level social workers, and bachelor level social workers with college trained social
mentioned above, a dearth of research on the impact of the technology on the practice of social work is the only fact that appears to be well established (Gripton, Licker, de Groot, 1988; Smith, 1985; Cnaan, 1989). Gandy and Tepperman (1990), have commented that:

There is a shortage of careful empirical research on social service organizations that have adopted and used computers. Little work of any quality has been published. On the other hand, quite a lot of speculative and prescriptive work has appeared (p. xi).

On the strength of his research on child welfare in Ontario, Trocme (1991) would appear to warmly welcome any statistical tools which inform stakeholders quantitatively about child abuse and neglect; he observes:

...the poor quality and, in many cases, complete absence of service statistics make it impossible to determine how...quantitative changes [to the child welfare system] have affected the quality of services (1991, p. 85).

Even without benefit of academic research, however, it would seem from a common-sense perspective that the computer is a powerful resource that has considerable potential to add legitimacy and credibility to the practice of social work in general, and social work research, in particular. Computers seem to possess the capacity to greatly enhance the decision-making capacity and process of front-line workers (Kling, 1996a; Steyaert, 1996), and/or to provide information service workers (Hough, 1996), claims of increased efficiency and effectiveness through the use of computers (Nurius & Hudson, 1993).
directly to clients, workers and agencies (Kling, 1996b; Steyaert, 1996). Its introduction and use at the direct practice level of social work has the potential to change the very nature of the profession. Additionally, the use of computers to analyze data in child protection services may be used to fill a recognized gap -- in the generation of statistics that might be considerably useful to understanding the nature and content of the plight of abused children.

In Ontario, child protection agencies have been developing local area networks, and wide-area networks within their own agencies. On a broader scope, in 1992, the Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies (OACAS) developed CASnet, an electronic networking project linking children's aid societies for the purposes of improved inter-agency communication. A recent survey of the 55 agencies determined that 49 of them have administrative computerized information systems designed for recording demographic information and generating statistical reports. These systems have been developed over the last 10 years. A handful (less than 5) of agencies are currently attempting to develop systems which the agencies themselves have stated are "designed" to meet the information needs of front-line workers and their supervisors (Report of the Steering Committee, Child Welfare Information Project, Oct., 1997).

1.5 Information Systems and Information Technology

Although the concepts of information and information needs will be more fully discussed in Chapter Two, it may prove useful here to further define several important information-related concepts, namely: information systems, information base and computerized information system. Such relatively accessible terms are frequently and loosely used, and subject to widely varying interpretations; for the purpose of this research, they will be understood as follows:
(i) Information System: Most definitions of an information system include two key elements, people and equipment. In a number of ways, these two elements interact with data. For example, Schoech (1990) describes an information system as one which collects, manipulates, retrieves, and reports data.\(^\text{19}\) Caputo uses almost identical terms in his definition of an information system being comprised of all the people, equipment, software programs and data as well as the procedures and practices necessary to efficiently and accurately collect, store, process and report information (1988, p.7). These elements -- people, hardware and software, policies and procedures -- embody the essence of most definitions of an information system. Glastonbury (1988, p. 3) elaborates that an information system would also be able to "transmit, process, update, analyze and present data".\(^\text{20}\) For the purposes of this thesis, an information system consists of any combination of people and physical resources which combine to gather, store, manipulate, transmit or otherwise communicate information.\(^\text{21}\) This system may or may not involve computers.

(ii) Information Base: Take away the human element from the information system, as well as the hardware and software, policies and procedures, and what remains is an information base, or data-base.\(^\text{22}\) Caputo's defines a data-base as: "A collection of data, usually in the form of records and files, where the data is stored and managed to minimize redundancy and to allow for easy manipulation and access (1990, p. 599). For the purposes of this thesis, an information base may be considered data that is gathered, stored, manipulated, transmitted or otherwise used to communicate information.

\(^{19}\) Schoech, 1990, p. 604.
\(^{20}\) Schoech defines data as: a character or group of characters (numbers letters or symbols) which represents facts or events (1990, p. 599).
\(^{21}\) See Chapter Two for a discussion of information.
\(^{22}\) The information base may be understood as the corpus of information which is stored in the hardware of an information system.
(iii) **Computerized Information System:** Glastonbury, LaMendola, and Toole (1988) provide a definition of information technology that also challenges a concern frequently expressed in the literature; that is, that information technology is designed to support, rather than subvert or replace workers:

Information Technology (IT) is widely understood (or misunderstood), with no cross-cultural nuances. IT is the use of computer and communication technologies to receive, handle, store, retrieve, transmit, process, update, analyze, and present data for the purpose of deriving meaning from it; in other words, IT supports the human acts which surround the activity of informing ourselves (p. 3).

Glastonbury, LaMendola, and Toole's complaint that technology has been understood without reference to cross-cultural content, deserves underscoring. There are implicit biases in all technologies, particularly in their software design and implementation. For example, despite the relatively recent arrival of information technology in social work, authors have already identified populations which have been ignored, or may be placed at a disadvantage through the introduction of the information technology. 23

The academic literature has produced a variety of terms to describe the new technology of information systems: management information systems (or "MIS"), information technology (or "IT"), automated information systems (or "AIS"), computers, and computerized information, to name just a few. Some of these terms,

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23 Such constituencies may include front-line workers as well as their clients (Hough, 1996). For clients, the concern is expressed in terms of the this population being divided into "haves and have-nots"; those who can afford new technologies and those who can't (Erdman & Foster, 1988; Eastman, 1991), and those who have the skills or knowledge to learn the technology and make the "transition to the new world of "bits" and "bytes" " (Stewart, 1988).
such as MIS, imply that the ownership of the technology and the information stored and manipulated therein, belongs to, and is generated for, a particular stratum of staff, in this case, management. Alternatively, other terms, for example, AIS, may imply a more neutral perception of information and ownership.

For consistency, this research will refer to any system that uses a computer, mainframe or personal, for the purpose of recording, collecting, communicating, or storing bits of data, as a "computerized information system". Other non-computer directed information systems, such as pad and paper, or facsimiles, or day-at-a-glance calendars will be thought of simply as "manual information systems". As social work increases its use of computerized information systems at the front-line of practice an examination of the information needs of the end user, the front-line worker, becomes critical in order for these computerized information systems to effectively help the worker to meet these needs.

Information need is a crucial aspect of most social work, and information technology is a predominant engine of change in social work today. However, the social work literature focuses on discussions of the philosophical implications and potential practical applications of information technology. It does not provide a strong foundation for the design of research examining information and information technology needs. This foundation is found in disciplines that deal with information and information theory. Chapter Two, therefore, continues to explore information needs through a discussion of the literature in the field of library and information science which emphasizes the dichotomy drawn between traditional and alternative paradigms of information, with a view towards establishing the theoretical underpinnings of the sense-making model.
CHAPTER TWO
THEORIES OF INFORMATION USE AND NEED:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This thesis finds much of its theoretical inspiration in library and information science and communications studies. It is in these fields that research and ideas concerning information and the introduction and use of information systems have been developed and most critically examined. This chapter thus reviews the existing literature in library and information science and related fields with specific reference to the subject of users of information and their needs in application to the practice of social work. As a framework of reference for this review, a dichotomy of traditional and alternative information paradigms, identified by Brenda Dervin (1983, 1992, 1994, 1997b) will be employed.24 These two profoundly different interpretations of information are compared and contrasted according to their central assumptions. The sense-making model, derived from the alternative paradigm25, is then discussed as an analytic framework for research concerning the front-line worker and his or her information needs, uses and behaviour.

2.1 Paradigms of Information

2.1.1 The Traditional Paradigm: Buckets and Bricks

In Information as a User Construct: The Relevance of Perceived Information Needs to Synthesis and Interpretation, Brenda Dervin (1983) characterizes the

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24 Dr. Dervin, is pre-eminent in the field of alternative information theory, and the creator of the sense-making model; as a result her work features prominently in the discussion below.

25 Dervin comments that her use of the term "alternative" does not imply the approach is designed to replace existing ones, rather "to enlarge the options available for assessing needs" (Dervin & Clark, 1987, p. 1).
traditional paradigm of information as one in which information is essentially a fungible commodity, like grains of sand, or as Dervin prefers, like bricks in a wall. In this traditional mode of information use, these bricks of information are static, or fixed in value and meaning. Similarly, people as information users, can be likened to empty vessels or, in her metaphor, buckets into which these bricks are placed, more or less indistinguishable in unit value from one another. Thus, in the discussion of information receptors, these buckets are essentially identical, in dimension and in function.

From an information systems perspective, the operative value of this concept of information lies in the very simplicity with which information technology systems can then be designed. If information is both fungible and immutable, and all information receptors are identical, then the primary purpose and ambition of an information system is merely logistical and organizational: that is, as a system, it need only gather, store, classify and transmit information. It follows that no interpretation of the information is required, nor any consideration that the information may be inaccurate, value-laden or in some way qualitatively distinct. In the traditional model, an information system might thus be likened to an array of buckets, much like postal pigeonholes. In the words of Streatfield and Wilson, it is merely an "information service delivery system" (1980, p. 1)

In the traditional paradigm, a "top-down" information system design strategy makes perfect sense, for the system design may rely on a narrow and predictable set of user responses to information cues. In other words, in an information-static world, frontline workers should respond to, and interpret, inputed information more or less identically. This does not comport with a conventional sense of everyday reality, yet this conclusion is a reasonable inference of the traditional information paradigm and in a sense, of a purely-empirical notion of information. Dervin writes:
Since information is assumed to describe a knowable reality, then each bit of information has some necessary isomorphic relationship with that reality. Information can be seen as cumulative. And, since it describes a knowable reality, different people observing the same reality should, given proper controls, generate the same information. Conversely, the same bit of information in the hands of different users should lead to the same results...[T]hese assumptions may seem like an oversimplified view of what science is about. Yet, when we examine the major conceptual and methodological approaches applied to the study of information-related human behavior, each of these assumptions plays a major role in guiding the work (1983, 160).

2.12 The Alternative Paradigm: Hands and Clay

In Dervin's (1983) alternative theory, the bucket is not quite so empty. In fact it is not so much a bucket as it is the cupped pair of hands of an information user. Likewise, information is described, not as a brick, but rather as a malleable lump of clay. This clay is altered, subtly or substantially, each time it is passed from one user's hands to another. The reality of this transformative effect represents a fundamental tenet of the alternative information paradigm and the sense-making model that derives from it. According to this view, information is neither fixed nor fungible, but rather each person who touches it, transforms and re-defines the information. Dervin writes:

[T]he empty bucket has evolved into a thinking, self-controlling human being. And information changes from brick to clay, moved and shaped in unique ways by each perceiver” (Dervin, 1983, p. 169).
Each passing, each touch, molds and reshapes the data, and the "thinking, self-controlling human being" reinterprets the data as meaningful information (p. 169). In this paradigm, each and every user of information plays a critical role in its formulation.

From an information systems perspective, the implication of this alternative conception of information is that system design takes on a whole new order of complexity. The complication arrives in the fact that information is continuously re-defined according to the time and situation-specific needs of each user. Thus, an alternative information system, in addition to simply delivering information, by definition, transforms and interprets that information in its very handling of it. In a sense, the information system acts as the repository for collective interpretations of information. The metaphor becomes a group of storytellers gathered around a campfire; and the first camper whispers a story into the ear of the second, the second to the third, and so on. By the time the story returns to the first user, of course, it has likely been transformed, in form, content and meaning.

Designing an information system from this perspective would conceivably require considerable versatility and creativity. Such a system would likely be more evolutionary in nature, developing over time in response to users' changing needs. In an alternative information system, a "bottom-up" direction of design becomes critical, grounded upon an end-user constructed structure.

2.13 The Paradigms Compared

The traditional and alternative paradigms of information as described above, differ in at least three fundamental respects: the point of emphasis, the perception of information and the role of the user. Table 1 below presents a summary of these differences.
Table 1
Summary of Differences Among Paradigms of Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Differences</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
<th>Alternative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Point of Emphasis</td>
<td>the information systems, the information technology (hardware)</td>
<td>the information user</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of Information</td>
<td>static, objective; the quantity of information is important</td>
<td>dynamic, interpretative; subjective, qualitative information is favoured over quantitative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the User regarding Information</td>
<td>user as object of information, receives predefined information</td>
<td>user as subject, transfers and transforms data into meaningful information, defines and redefines information</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.131 Point of Emphasis: The Information System versus The Information User

The point of emphasis refers to whether the predominant concern of the information paradigm lies with the information system itself and its technology, or with the end users of the information provided by that system.

Examples of research indicating that the information system itself tends to be the central and primary focus are numerous. A casual sampling of such research topics from the literature of information and computer sciences includes: the processes surrounding the introduction of new information systems; compiling and building databases; measuring speed and accuracy of information input; the best means to train
employees to operate the computerized information systems; measuring the frequency of computer usage; and helping the user adapt to new systems (Kling, 1996a; Laudon & Laudon, 1991; Viswanath, 1996). Taken together these studies tend to emphasize the influence of the physical "hardware" and the structure of information systems, and often focus only on assessing the "success" of their introduction other than, say, their appropriateness. Critics argue, that this perspective fundamentally neglects the important role that the users of technology themselves play in the process:

Previous studies of new technologies have often focused on the hardware components, even when it is the social embedding of the hardware into human work or experience that deserves primary attention (Marshall, 1987, p. 43).

In the field of computer science, Kling (1992) makes a similar observation when comparing the "discrete-entity" paradigm with his alternative "web" paradigm. Kling posits these two paradigms for understanding the development and introduction of computerized systems into the workplace. The discrete-entity paradigm emphasizes the computer technology that manipulates data, while the web paradigm helps people identify their needs, and place the introduction of computerization within a larger social and organizational context. He suggests that the emphasis should be placed less on the physical components of a computer-based system, and more on its function or on the array of activities that people actually engage in while pursuing a task. (Kling, 1996a; personal communication with Kling, 1995).

An undue emphasis on the hardware, structure and system, combined with a corresponding lack of interest in the role of the users in traditional information technology has been similarly cited by others as a contributing cause of certain observed failures of existing information systems. Dunlop & Kling observe:
The dominant paradigms in academic computer science do not help technical professionals comprehend the social complexities of computerization, since they focus on computability rather than usability (1992, p. 9).

Thus, the successful introduction of an information system in a traditional context appears to be measured by the adaptation of the users to the system, rather than whether the system has adapted to, or satisfied, the needs of the information user. (Zuboff, 1988).

If a traditionally constructed information system does focus on any information user's needs, it is usually only on those who are responsible for running or implementing that system: that is the administrators or managers, rather than those who are at the front-lines, gathering and transferring information. As a consequence, information technology frequently appears to have been designed and applied with the needs of administrators in mind, rather than the needs of the end users (Schoech, 1990). Both Schoech (1990) and Naisbett (1984) have identified this top-down administration-driven introduction of technology as a classic pattern in organizations. Schoech identifies three phases relating to the introduction and development of innovations such as computerization in society:

Phase One: technology is applied to things already in existence.
Phase Two: existing things are rethought with the new technologies in mind.
Phase Three: things are invented using the new technology which were not considered or not possible before the advent of the technology (Schoech, 1990, p.2).
In 1990, Schoech posited that social work's current relationship with information technology found its locus somewhere between Phases One and Two (1990, p. 2)\(^{26}\). Schoech asserts that in the practice of social work, the introduction of technology began in the accounting and data management departments. Similarly, in government, mainframe computers were first used in the social welfare field to generate economic statistics, print cheques, and track expenditures. In general, when personal computers were introduced into an office environment, the next beneficiaries were secretarial staff, who shifted from typing to word processing. It is only recently that computerization at the front line of social work has been introduced (Steyaert, Colombi & Rafferty, 1996; Cnaan, 1989).

2.132 Perception of Information: Static versus Dynamic Information

Perception of information refers to one's definitional perspective on the nature of information as static or dynamic, fixed or malleable. In short, is it a brick or a lump of clay? One's perception is important as it tends to influence how information users make sense of their working world, how they develop knowledge and how they communicate the information they have collected.

Information is a notoriously elusive concept to define. The *Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science*, for example, decries this lack of clarity and offers instead a range of meaning for the term:

\(^{26}\) Although certain electronic networking projects initiated in the late 1980's in Canada, by their potential for computer-mediated communication and rapid access to local, national and international consultants and information systems, may indicate that some social work professionals are using computers in a manner consistent with Schoech's second phase of innovation.
Information is the most used, and the least precisely used term in the library and information world, best seen as holding the place in the spectrum between raw data and knowledge. (1997, p. 184).

Information may thus be perceived as on a continuum between raw data on one end of the range and interpretative data on the other. As one trends right across this spectrum, increasingly more meaning attaches to the data; that is, successively greater amounts of evaluation, classification or interpretation are applied to or bundled with that raw data to produce what is thought of as information. As a traditional interpretation of information trends toward the left of the range (i.e. information as data), an alternative interpretation trends towards the right (i.e. information as interpreted data), (see Figure One). A mid-range definition of information as "an assemblage of data in a comprehensive form capable of communication and use; fact to which meaning has been attached", (Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science, 1997, p. 184), nevertheless tends toward an alternative view of information.

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THE INFORMATION CONTINUUM
AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE

FIGURE ONE
A traditional interpretation of information, thus, perceives information as static, objective and quantifiable. In critiquing the perception of information observed in a social service department, Streafield and Wilson observe:

[The] underlying assumption is that information is inert, is simply data, and that once the appropriate category of information can be established for the director or social worker all that is required is the right information service delivery system (1980, p. 1).

Wilson himself offers a menu of conventional meanings of information, emphasizing its physical and process aspects:

The word 'information' is used...to denote a physical entity or phenomenon (as in the case of questions relating to the number of books read in a period of time, the number of journals subscribed to, etc.), the channel of communication through which messages are transferred (as when we speak of the incidence of oral versus written information), or the factual data, empirically determined and presented in a document or transmitted orally (1981, p. 3).

The perception of information as inert and objective, relegating the role of the user in the traditional paradigm, to a dependent and subordinate role, offers both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of this perspective of information over

27 While standing within a traditional perception of information, his definition of "information needs" in the same article, and discussed below, moves ever further away from traditional notions and toward more alternative ones.
the alternative lies in the ease of measurement of information. Statistics on the incidents of child abuse, for example, are quantifiable, and temptingly easily collated once they are collected. By way of contrast; developing a qualitative understanding of the reasons for child abuse is obviously less quantifiable by definition, and information gathering may be problematic. Another advantage is the binary nature of statistical data, either a victim has been abused, or they have not. The disadvantage of this perception of information is that it may tend to narrow its scope to topics that have clearly quantifiable outcomes, and omit less tangible but equally critical topics such as the emotional and social impact of child abuse on the individual or family, or the broader questions relating to the contributions of socio-economic factors to child abuse.

While not describing information as ranging along a spectrum per se, Forest carefully distinguishes between raw data, which is "unevaluated material", and information, which "is processed, evaluated material that is judged at least nominally useful to users" (1974, p. 5). Introducing the concept of the utility of information into the definition appears to move it closer to Dervin's alternative concept of information as being determined by the user. Similarly, introducing the concept of evaluation into the definition suggests that the line between data and facts and various concepts of information, and even knowledge itself, is drawn by a subjective and external evaluator. In other words, the transformation between fact and information, and information and knowledge, resides in the interpretative meaning that an individual subjectively assigns to them.

Krikelas (1983) suggests that beyond being simply data, information is a stimulus that reduces uncertainty, this stimulus is essentially an internalized process that cannot be observed. He suggests then that the emphasis should be on observable, information-seeking behaviour. This behaviour begins when someone perceives that their current

28 Within those options, it may be argued that a range of degrees of severity may be numerically scored.
state of knowledge is less than what is needed to deal with some issue or problem (1983, p. 7).

Information, for the alternative theorist, then, is viewed as a construct of the individual. It is fixed neither in time, nor space, nor even necessarily in the mind of an individual user. This latter point is emphasized by Dervin in her assertion that:

One human may wish to judge a moment of information use by a standard he or she calls accuracy, while another may wish to judge by expediency or familiarity or comfort. Further, the order that humans live within cannot be seen as given. It is made (Dervin, 1992, p. 63).

Wilson (1981) identifies this subject-centric attribute of information in his finding that for many definitions of information, the critical elements comprising information are "facts", "advice" and "opinion". He states that the differences between these terms is that "the first of these [facts] is assumed (not always correctly) to be free of value judgments, whereas value judgments almost certainly affect advice and opinion (1980, p. 3). 29

Challenging the underlying assumption of information as essentially static in nature, Dervin (1997a) asserts that current paradigms of the information sciences assume that what researchers define as information is not the same as what users define as information. She argues that it is wrong to assume that the perceptions of information needs by researchers and information system designers are the only

29 Dervin (1996) does not offer her own definitions of information, knowledge, knowing, data, and truth. Rather she states that there is nothing natural about information regardless of what we call it, it cannot be isolated, or separated from the individual sense-maker, whether that sense-maker is a researcher, administrator or front-line worker, information does not exist alone (Dervin, 1996). She might in her relativism, argue that a tree falling in the forest would make no noise without a sense-maker there to hear it.
relevant information needs. Assuming that only one collective set of information needs exists have led to the following errant conclusions: that most people are not interested in information, or alternatively, that people have no individual or specific information needs. Rather, she suggests that information needs are subjectively defined by the individual, and if asked in an appropriate manner or observed in pursuit of their needs, people would be found to have a particular set of information needs, likely different than what researchers and designers might assume. In his study On User Studies and Information Needs, Wilson (1981) makes a similar argument, finding that previous user-needs research studies have suffered from an over concentration on the "means by which people discover information, often analyzed in terms of the information researcher's view of how the user ought to have been seeking information, rather than upon the ends served by the information-seeking behaviour" (p 10).30

In her examination of the information needs of people involved in daily circumstances (such as using public resources), Dervin asserts:

[It] is not that people are, indeed, disinterested in information but, rather, that systems and researchers have been looking at something they call information rather than something users call information (1983, p. 158).

While something called 'information' is being collected, this information in most instances does not necessarily reflect a working definition of information from the perspective of the user.

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30 Standing on the far end of the spectrum from Fischer (Chapter One, p. 10), Wilson suggests that one aspect of addressing this issue methodologically is to move away from a "relatively crude conception of the scientific method", and toward more qualitative social science methods (1981, p. 11).
2.132 Role of the User: Object versus Subject

The point of emphasis and the perception of information relate directly to the role of the information user. If the point of emphasis is on the information system, and the perception of information is that it is fixed, and 'objective', then the role of the user is necessarily minimal. Hence, the user may be treated passively as an "information-taker". Conversely, if the point of emphasis is on the end user, and the view of information is that it is malleable and continuously redefined by the end user, then the role of the user as a handler and interpreter of information becomes critical, and the user is considered an active subject. This distinction between user as subject and object in the information process has obviously profound implications for research into information use and need.

In other words, information needs are not the same for various stakeholders in a system. In a system as complex as child protection, a partial list of the stakeholders includes: the government, funders, agency board members, police, school administrators, other professional child protection organizations, agency management, supervisors, family service workers, front-line workers, clients, and parents -- all with their particular information needs, as a constituency, and as individuals.

2.2 Information Needs: Top Down versus Bottom Up

Dervin (1983, p. 156) offers that "the word need implies a state that arises within a person, some kind of gap that requires filling". In application to information, as in information need, what is implied is a gap that can be filled by something that the needful person calls "information." It is this broad sense of information need that will be adopted for this thesis.

Notions of information have suggested that the absence of consideration for the user's need is a direct, if inadvertent, consequence of the nature of the rational-scientific, empirical perspective, now the prevailing paradigm in information and
communications research (Wilson, 1980; De Montigny, 1995). Dervin and Nilan's (1986) analysis similarly suggests that ignoring the individual needs of the user is an inevitable outcome of the traditional information paradigm. From a traditional, scientific perspective, subjectivity is problematic and carries a pejorative connotation; that is, having to account for the idiosyncratic acts and behaviour of individuals tends to complicate the work of 'clean', 'objective' rational research. Hence, idiosyncratic behaviours have been dismissed as "outliers," and considered unimportant. Critics have further suggested that as a consequence of omitting any serious consideration of a user need perspective, the application of information science theory to practical situations has frequently yielded poor results (Zuboff, 1988; Kling, 1996a).

One study investigating information systems in social welfare agencies emphasizes the centrality of human action and behaviour, however elusive, as a critical factor for aspects of successful information systems design:

Successful application of this technology depends on achieving greater understanding of how people actually use information in their work and how far their 'information behaviour' can be adapted to computer limitations (Wilson and Streatfield, 1980, p. 1).

Wilson and Streatfield refer to information need as a "Holy Grail", ever elusive, forever pursued. Ironically, they themselves set out in their own research to "discover the ...information needs" of workers and social administrators (Wilson and Streatfield, 1977, p. 277). On their search, they refine and broaden the definitions of information and information needs. In doing so, their language shifts into terms suggestive of the alternative information paradigm:
People don’t have ‘information needs’; they experience a problem, a difficulty, or are under pressure, and these cognitive or emotional needs may be met, or partially met, by obtaining and applying information. What these problems, difficulties and pressures are should be the real field of study (1980, p. 1).

This conceptualization pre-dates Dervin’s similar description of information needs:

The individual, in her time and place, needs to make sense, by definition. But the sense she needs to ask is for her world, her time and place. She needs to inform herself constantly. Her head is filled with questions. These questions can be seen as her “information needs.” These questions deal with the here and now of the world she sees herself as being in, the places from which she has come, and the places she sees herself going to (Dervin, 1983, p. 170).

What occurs then, is the elusive concept of the Holy Grail of information needs distilled to a manageable, measurable and user-defined concept of information needs. According to alternative theory, information is considered neither static, nor fixed, but dynamic and fluid, based as it is on the user’s perceptions and interpretations. In this respect, information is not just about transmission, but about constructing meaning and interpretation. Table 2 outlines key operative differences between traditional and alternative paradigms, and provides examples of the types of research questions that can be posed using these respective paradigms.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TRADITIONAL PARADIGM</th>
<th>ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Starts with system:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Emphasizes demographic and observable sociological dimensions of people's lives to predict system use.</td>
<td><strong>Starts with people:</strong>&lt;br&gt;How do people construct sense? In the search for universal dimensions of sense-making it focuses on understanding information use in particular situations and is concerned with what leads up to and what follows these intersections with information systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typical Questions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;What people use which systems and what services do people use?</td>
<td><strong>Typical Questions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;How do people define their needs in different situations; how do they present these needs to systems and how do they make use of what the systems offer them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong> on information as if it exists apart from human construction.</td>
<td><strong>Focus</strong> on information as a construct of the people it touches.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Typical Questions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;How much information did someone get?&lt;br&gt;Was the information they got accurate?&lt;br&gt;What can we do to be sure people get more accurate information?</td>
<td><strong>Typical Questions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;What strategy did that individual apply that led him or her to call that information accurate?&lt;br&gt;What strategy did he or she apply that led to rejecting information another might call accurate?&lt;br&gt;How can we design systems that allow people to apply the criteria they want to their information searches?</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Focus</strong> on the observer's system perspective wherein the user bends to meet system design.</td>
<td><strong>Focus</strong> on the user's perspective where the system bends to meet the user's needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typical Questions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;What of the things we can do would you like us to do?&lt;br&gt;What of the things we now offer do you use?&lt;br&gt;Do you like us? Which of the things we do do you like?&lt;br&gt;Are we convenient for you?&lt;br&gt;How much of what we have is good for you?&lt;br&gt;Would you use this service if we provided it?&lt;br&gt;Are your skills sufficient to use us?</td>
<td><strong>Typical Questions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;What do you need in order to perform your job? Is this system meeting those needs? How do you manage?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definitions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Information: any data or facts that the researcher calls information.</td>
<td><strong>Definitions:</strong>&lt;br&gt;Information: the organization and interpretation of data or facts by the user for the purpose of understanding an issue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information need: often defined in terms of what data, or facts, the information system needs.</td>
<td>Information need: what workers think they need to complete their tasks, or alternatively, what they think was missing that prevented them from moving forward in completing their tasks.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Dervin & Nilan (1986)*
In summary, the traditional and alternative paradigms of information may be best distinguished according to three important criteria: the point of emphasis, the perceptions of information and the role of the information user. In respect of the crucial role as gatekeeper in the assessment process, the front-line worker's perception of his or her information needs appears critical for better understanding this process.

In this thesis, user needs are defined by asking the user what problems and difficulties or gaps and barriers they encountered and actually observing how they go about pursuing such needs. With this perspective on information need and information users in mind, the sense-making model, as was formulated by Dervin, appears a useful framework for analysis.

2.3 The Sense-Making Model

Dervin draws a set of conclusions about information use and need, which act as the theoretical foundation for what she terms the "sense-making" model:

(i) information should not be treated like a brick being tossed from system to user, rather as a lump of clay the user molds for constructing his or her own sense;

(ii) the questions people have about the situation they find themselves in constitute their information needs;

(iii) information needs are always personalized, or individualistic in nature;

(iv) information-seeking and use can be predicted more powerfully by knowing the kind of situation users are in, rather than knowing their personality or demographic attributes; and,

(v) individuals ultimately determine how they will use the information they have available (Dervin, 1983, 1997a).
The sense-making model, then, asserts that the individual is the only meaningful sense-maker, by virtue of the nature of the human condition, as:

No judge exists of what really is; our perceptual equipment is limited and controlled by our minds so that what is observed is constrained by what our minds envision (Dervin, 1983, p. 169).

That is to say, if the individual is the key to any definition of information, then his or her behaviour around information needs and information use must be examined in order to better understand how information is perceived. Introducing a variable as dynamic and elusive as individual behaviour may raise problematic questions such as: How does one get inside the head of the user? Are there any generalizations which can be made about user behaviour? What are the perceived information needs of users?

However, the issues these questions raise must be addressed, and the sense-making model provides a means for addressing these issues. As discussed above, Dervin's (1983) concept of need implies a gap that can be filled by something the needful person calls information. The sense-making model asks people, or "sense-makers", to visualize themselves on a path through life, or through an event, and to identify any gaps, barriers or helps that they encounter on the way.

Gaps are defined as anything which the sense-maker perceives as preventing movement forward along the path. Barriers refer to things which stand in the sense-makers way, with the same effect on forward motion as a gap. Helps are anything along that path that the sense-maker found useful in overcoming the gaps and barriers.31 It is these three simple and relatively accessible concepts that form the essence of the sense-making methodology.

31 Dervin states that the distinction between gaps and barriers is not critical for the respondent being interviewed (1987, p. 364). Hereafter any references to gaps or barriers, should be understood to mean gaps and barriers unless stated otherwise.
In the sense-making model, the emphasis is on points of discontinuity. In this working metaphor of a journey, the sense-makers' progress toward meeting their information needs until or unless impeded by a gap or barrier:

There are discontinuities in all existence—between entities (living and otherwise), between times, and between spaces...Discontinuity is an assumed constant of nature generally and the human condition specifically (Dervin, in Glazier and Powell, 1992, p. 62).

The discontinuities, then, may occur between elements that are wholly or partially internal: within one person for example, between mind and tongue, mind and hand; or they may occur between two entities; person and computer, spoken word of one person to the ear of another, and then to that listener's mind, or to hand to paper et cetera.

Dervin (in Glazier and Powell, 1992) states that the recognition of the importance of the points of discontinuity will allow researchers to begin to assess, in an organized fashion, the internal behaviours and thoughts behind individuals' information use without the need to actually "get inside their heads".

Information users interviewed for this thesis are asked to describe the three key elements of the sense-making model:

(i) the situation: What, in your situation, was stopping you from moving forward? What gaps or barriers did you encounter?
(ii) the gap or barrier: What questions or confusions did you have? What was missing that kept you from moving forward?
(iii) the help: What kind of help did you get, what kind of help did you hope to get? (Dervin & Clark, 1987).

Figure 2 applies the journey metaphor to the information needed by the front line child protection worker in assessment-related tasks.
3. Various information sources are used to gather information pertaining to assessment.

4. Intake assessment is completed. Worker is asked to reflect on gaps and barriers encountered, and how (if) they were overcome, using what helps.

Figure 2
Front-Line Intake Worker's Information Uses and Needs: A Sense-Making Approach

adapted from Dervin & Clark, 1987.
2.4 The Research Questions

As stated above, it is the intention of this thesis to better understand the information needs of the front-line worker in the performance of his or her assessment-related tasks. This study adopts the above-described alternative sense-making model to gain access to front-line workers' perceptions of information need, their use of information resources and their perceptions of the value of information collected.

Thus inspired by the sense-making methodology, the following research seeks to address these theory-related questions:

i) How do front-line workers perceive their information needs in the context of their assessment-related tasks?

ii) What are the gaps, barriers and helps that front-line workers encounter in pursuit of those needs?

iii) What is the information-seeking behaviour of front-line workers with respect to information sources and systems?
CHAPTER THREE
METHOD AND DESIGN

This chapter describes the application of the ethnographic and qualitative methodology selected for this research. Observation, in-depth interviews with front-line workers and a review of agency documentation provide a context for analyzing front-line workers' actual information use and their perceived information needs. Finally, the sample selection, confidentiality and limitations of the study are discussed.

3.1 Qualitative and Ethnographic Method

Since minimal research appears to have been done in the area of the information needs of front-line child protection workers, an exploratory, qualitative approach has been selected for this study (Patton, 1987). Ethnography seeks to describe a group or culture through the examination of the routine and daily lives of people (Fetterman, 1998). This approach is particularly well-suited to research in areas of study where there is limited existing data on the information user's perspective:

[Qualitative] data are perceived as more personal because they are open-ended (and therefore do not categorize people willy-nilly); the evaluator has established close contact with the program and therefore has made the evaluation more personal; and the procedures of observation and in-depth interviewing...communicate respect to respondents by making their ideas and opinions stated in their own terms the important data source for the evaluation (Patton, 1987, p. 34).
An ethnographic methodology emphasizes the need to understand and immerse oneself in the perspective and culture of the selected research population (Fetterman, 1989). This approach is particularly appropriate for the sense-making model, discussed above, as it shares the common goal of exploring the culture of a specific population for the purposes of understanding that population's overall perspective. An ethnographic, qualitative and exploratory approach, then, entails the collection of in-depth information on a few subjects, rather than broad, quantitative data collection.

3.2 Research Design

This research involves the following:

(I) Design and Pre-Test Phase;

(II) Data Collection Phase:

(a) observations;

(b) interviews;

(c) documentation review32;

(III) Data Analysis Phase:

(a) coding and analysis of interviews

(b) analysis of documentation and field notes

(c) validation through feedback from respondents and social work intake teams.

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32 Patton (1987) recommends that qualitative research use multiple methods of data collection, and that a pre-test of instruments, whenever practicable, should occur.
3.21 The Design and Pre-Test Phase

Two recording instruments and an interview guide were designed for the purpose of examining front-line workers' information needs and use of information sources. This section describes the rationale behind the design and the modifications made as a result of pre-testing the research methodology.

Dervin and Clark (1987) provide eleven generic modules for asking questions that encourage respondents to reflect on the barriers, gaps and helps they encounter. The range of modules varies according to three criteria: the amount of time available for interviews, the type of interview (in-depth or brief) and the type of outcome desired, assessment or accountability.33

This research employs a series of in-depth interviews with front-line workers, each approximately two hours in length. The front-line worker will be asked to tell their own stories in their own words. This approach favours an open-ended interview design.34

3.211 The Research Instruments

An interview guide is a rough, semi-structured outline used to establish the broad context of interview. Its aim is to yield rich, detailed information by providing an outline, while allowing the interviewee to determine the order of the story telling. It encourages the exploration of issues that the respondent identifies as important, and allows both the interviewee and the interviewer to delve in issues that develop, and to explore themes and patterns which suggest themselves, along the way. The

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33 While Dervin & Clark (1987, p. 38) refer to the differences between accountability and assessment themes as the opposite sides of the same coin, the research goal of understanding user needs favours a needs assessment module over an accountability module.

34 Dervin and Clark state that a needs assessment emphasizes identifying the needs by asking, "What gaps were faced? What helps were sought? Whereas, an accountability assessment focus emphasizes whether these needs were met.
interview guide, thus, allows for a greater freedom to explore unanticipated issues that the worker may raise. 35

The interview guide developed for this research was critiqued by two library and information science researchers, and two former front-line workers.36 The resulting draft was pre-tested by interviewing a former front-line worker, and revisions were then effected.

The interview guide, and the potential measurement instruments, discussed below, were pre-tested again with front-line workers at a Children's Aid Society outside of Toronto (see Appendix B). This agency was not used for the remainder of the study, nor were the results from the pre-test included as a part of the formal analysis. Two front-line workers at two branches of this agency were observed for three hours, instruments tested and field notes taken, and revisions were made. 37

After the pre-test observation, tape-recorded interviews, based on the draft interview guide, were conducted with the observed workers. The interviews and field notes were transcribed. Additionally, a tape-recorded diary of personal impressions was initiated immediately following the end of the research day at the agency, and these supplementary notes were typed up.

The process of taping impressions immediately after a session (observational or interview-based) is believed to be an important aspect of exploratory research and analysis, and continued throughout the research process (Patton, 1987).

35 This is consistent with the evolutionary philosophy of instrument design (Lincoln and Guba, 1988), in which the interview guide and other instruments evolve as the research proceeds, creating a more relevant qualitative research outcome.
36 The module from which the interview was designed can be found in Appendix A.
37 One worker was observed handling all incoming phone calls to the intake department of the agency. The other worker was observed while backing up the primary worker, who was responsible for taking incoming calls.
3.212 The Recording Instruments

In keeping with Patton's (1987, p. 83) emphasis on the importance of the details of the physical environment, a recording instrument was developed that would allow for the representation of physical details of a setting to be recorded (Appendix C). 38 This instrument, included an area to sketch in the desk layout of the front-line worker, and his or her immediate environment, including filing cabinets, windows, shelves and wall maps, et cetera. It also included a written note to check for and indicate changes to the layout over the period of observation. Additionally, room was left on the instrument to record other aspects of the office environment, including: internal and external noises (one branch was located near a train station), people traffic passing through intake, other telephones ringing, as examples.

A preliminary framework of categories and themes were used in the research design and data analysis to create recording sheets for the observation phase (see Table 3). This design strategy is consistent with the philosophy that exploratory research, however well-grounded, should not pretend to develop entirely from the research setting itself. Rather, "...a rough working frame needs to be in place near the beginning of the fieldwork. Of course it will change" (Miles, 1979, p. 591). The framework draws upon the work of Carey (1988), who identifies a number of key characteristics that, he states, must be considered in order for an information system to be considered "successful," including: information accuracy, information timeliness, information relevancy and correct information format.39

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38 Patton's caution not to ignore the physical setting immediately took on particular relevance during the pre-test phase: after three hours of observing a worker and taking detailed notes of his particular office setting, the worker casually mentioned to me that this was, in fact, not his normal office or normal office environment. It turned out that not only was his Branch moving to a new location, but also he was just returning from vacation, his office had been converted into a storage area, and all his usual manuals and reference documents (except case files) had already been packed up.

39 The others are: appropriate level of information scope, speed of performance, reduced error rates, user satisfaction, ease of learning, system responsiveness, system reliability.
Table 3

Preliminary Information Taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS ¹</th>
<th>Flexibility</th>
<th>Importance</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
<th>Formality/Informality</th>
<th>Standardization/Portability</th>
<th>Redundancy</th>
<th>Frequency of use</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Relevance</th>
<th>Physical Location</th>
<th>Utility</th>
<th>Other:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy (confidence)</td>
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<td>Completeness</td>
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<td>Timeliness</td>
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<td>Verifiability</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TASKS²</th>
<th>Management</th>
<th>Gross Data Collection</th>
<th>Record Keeping</th>
<th>Administrative</th>
<th>Legal</th>
<th>Court</th>
<th>Research</th>
<th>Other:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interventive Tasks</td>
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<td>Counseling</td>
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</table>

INFORMATION SOURCES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External:</th>
<th>Internal:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>Prior CAS reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Medical</td>
<td>-previous on-site visits</td>
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<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>- assessments</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighbour/non-family reporter</td>
<td>-counseling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>Colleague</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newspaper/Media</td>
<td>Black Book Notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Child Abuse Registry</td>
<td>Computer reports</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Service Professional</td>
<td>Regulations</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other:</td>
<td>Guidelines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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¹ Characteristics are not mutually exclusive.
² One piece of information may be used to fulfill multiple tasks; tasks are not mutually exclusive.
Significantly, Carey emphasizes that of his eleven characteristics, all of them save one -- system responsiveness -- either directly relate to the user, or cannot be defined without user input (Carey, 1988, p. 2).

In addition to Carey's information characteristics, the recording instrument included a list of tasks and information sources drawn from *Preparing for Practice: The Fundamentals of Child Protection* and feedback from a select number of current and former child protection social workers interviewed during the pre-test process of this research design.

The recording sheet (Appendix D) was designed to be used as a supplement to note-taking, and as a means of verification of observed events. Observing an exchange of information over the telephone, it was hoped that the exchange could be quickly coded on this form, and then written in detail in field notes. Hence, one incoming telephone call would be recorded on both recording forms. Trials of this method, however, quickly exposed the difficulty of measuring the information users and needs of the front-line worker. There were points at which information events occurred much too rapidly to be analyzed and understood by an observer, without feedback from the front-line worker. However, feedback from the worker was problematic because in many cases, as soon as the telephone was hung up, it rang again, or the front-line worker needed to dial out. Additionally, the idea of being able to categorize an individual information "event" belongs more in the realm of theory than practice. There are few activities at the front-line that are so specific that they can be said to have only one purpose for the front-line worker.40 The elaborate coding sheet was quickly reduced to an attempt to measure only the observable, fixed events, such as a call in, a call out, writing in

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40 For example, a telephone call with a police detective touches on three or four cases, potential new clients, personalities of clients and staff, casual conversation and rapport building, as well as "data" exchange.
the Case Note form, et cetera (see Appendix E). The reduction of the instrument to these terms also reduced its value and created unnecessary duplication, as the same events were also recorded in the field notes.

3.213 Refining The Interview Guide

The interview guide went through a number of iterations. One key aspect was the addition and refinement of a series of open-ended questions which followed the narrative of the respondent and resulted in the final version (see Appendix F). These questions focused more specifically on issues that arose during the pre-test and inspired through observation. For example, the pre-test resulted in the unanticipated discovery that both of the front-line workers observed kept their own set of notes. These notes were very cursory, one line per case, but front-line workers emphasized the importance of maintaining their "own" records. The notes included summary information on the clients that they dealt with, case file number and a very concise description of the call or meeting. These front-line workers indicated that their note taking was part of a strategy which helped them to cope with the pressures of front-line work, as well as a means of keeping accurate personal records on their cases. As a result, two open ended questions were added to the interview guide:

Are there bits of information that you would like to record but don't; or conversely, that you don't want to record, but do?

What strategies do you use to keep a perspective on your work?
During the observation phase at the branches studied, front-line workers also discussed the loss of many information resources which used to be available to them.\footnote{One such resource was access to "quick-fix" case summaries where the front-line worker previously would have called up the records department staff and simply ask them to provide a summary of a case file.}

Additionally, front-line workers stated that the formal case summary— a brief, written or typed description of how the case began, and its disposition— often did not contain the information they wanted or needed to help with their case assessment. The following open-ended questions were added in order to gain further understanding on what information front-line workers felt was important:

*If someone were to read this case file [of the case the worker was responsible for] to a new social worker [reviewing or picking up the case] over the telephone, what would they ask to have read to them?*

*What would you like them to read?*

*The role of intuition was also raised during observation and during worker/supervisor case review meetings. In these review meetings, the supervisor would often ask the worker, "What is your gut sense of this or where do you feel it is going?" Thus the following question was added:*

*Can you tell me about the intuitive part of an assessment?*

Workers complaining openly about agency protocols and the limiting effects of confidentiality rules surrounding the sharing of information among professionals, prompted the following question about the mandate of the Children's Aid Society:
Children's Aid Societies seem to be agencies with clearly legislated mandates? How does this affect your job?

Finally, one general open ended question about information systems was added:

If you woke up tomorrow in a perfect world and found the perfect intake system designed specifically for you in your role as a front-line child protection worker, what would it look like; what would it do; what would it do differently?

The purpose of this question was to get a sense of how workers perceive their needs and solutions to these needs.

The respondent was also asked to explain discrepancies among comments during the interview phase, agency documentation and comments made during the observation phase relating to information needs and use. Discrepancies between comments made between observed behaviour and stated behaviour and information needs were used to help categorize data and organize themes for analysis.

3.22 The Data Collection Phase

Observation and interviews took place over a seven month period commencing in April 1995, and completed at each branch before they began at the next one. The interviews occurred as soon as practicable after the observations, and as allowed by the schedule of the observed worker. Interviews were tape
recorded (and later transcribed), and notes were taken. Document collection began as soon as approval for the research was obtained from each agency. Three case files which had been discussed during the in-depth interview were then closely examined.

3.221 Observation

Whereas the design of the interview asks workers to focus on the specific task of assessment, the participant-observation phase adopts a broader approach that includes not only the assessment time with the client/reporter, but the activities and discussions which occur out of sight and earshot of the client/reporter and activities between telephone calls.

Patton (1987) defines five different criteria through which field observation can be analyzed: the role of the evaluator-observer; the portrayal of the evaluator role to others; the portrayal of the purpose of the evaluation to others; the duration of the evaluation observations; and the focus of the observations. What follows is a discussion of the observation phase, with respect to these criteria.

In keeping with the ethnographic methodology of this research, the role of the evaluator-observer was primarily as an onlooker, observing and recording as an outsider (Fetterman, 1998). While as a professional social worker, the researcher could have legally accompanied workers on home visits, the design decision not to do this was based on the importance of obtaining the workers’ impressions of the client and their environment. The focus of the research was the front-line worker’s use and initial perception of the information and information needs, rather than the accuracy of the extra-office information. This perspective is
consistent with a passive, rather than active, observer role, and focused on recording actions and comments from the workers about their tasks.\textsuperscript{42}

The role of the researcher was portrayed to all participants in an open and overt fashion. In all five agency branches the intake supervisor was contacted in advance, and provided with preliminary information describing the research. A copy of the letter of consent was provided well in advance of observation (see Appendix G). In most cases, the researcher attended a weekly team meeting of intake workers and their supervisor. During that meeting, the research was outlined and questions or concerns were addressed. Where team meetings were not formally held, branches were visited in advance of the beginning of the observation phase of the research, introductions made, and goals outlined. Front-line workers discussed the research and their roles, expressed interest in being observed and getting feedback on the research. No concerns about the research were identified by front-line workers during this period.

The focus of the observation phase was to capture front-line workers' actual use of information and information systems. Actions, verbatim comments, questions to reporters on the telephone, and conversations among peers with the on-call front-line worker were observed and recorded. Between calls, and when appropriate, front-line workers were asked to explain the reasoning behind their questions to callers. As mentioned above, questions were purposefully open-ended, "What were you trying to find out, to convey? Was there a problem you were trying to address?"

\textsuperscript{42} The issue of the role of the observer status was specifically raised in only one agency branch where the Supervisor suggested that the researcher could accompany the worker on a home visit. However, the "in office" observer status restriction was a stated condition of the ethics review (Review Committee on the Use of Human Subjects) in proposing this research, as well as a stated condition of administrators at one CAS when granting research access.
Field notes included: tracking the time of incoming telephone calls and computer usage, types of forms being used and when and files sought, requested and located. Interactions and discussion with all agency staff, and the location of these discussions, were also noted.

The goals of the observation with the front-line worker during these periods were to:

(i) identify the multiple information related tasks of the front-line intake worker;

(ii) identify the types of information systems in use and the specific tools of information collection;

(iii) identify barriers to information use;

(iv) identify how workers bridge these gaps, barriers, what helps they use; and

(v) identify how workers make sense of the information obtained.

3.222 Interview

As discussed above, the approach to the qualitative interview for this research was a combination of interview guide and open-ended questions. Patton (1987) suggests that a combination of these two approaches permits the interviewer more flexibility and freedom to probe topics raised by the respondent in depth and to pursue whole new areas of inquiry that were raised but not anticipated. At the same time, it allows for a number of areas to be explored in a predetermined fashion through precisely worded open-ended questions. (1987, p. 114). The determination of who was interviewed is discussed below in Section 3.23.
3.223 Documentation

Patton (1987) maintains that documentation is a rich and often overlooked source of valuable information and contextual data. In addition to generating ideas about themes to pursue during the interview, the documentation provides a source of information and background about agency requirements and procedures.

In the above spirit, as much written material as possible was collected during the observation, interview and feedback phases. Interviews with key informants were valuable sources of orientation, permitted cross-validation of data, as well as variety of perspectives on front-line workers' information needs and information use. Key informants, such as information technology managers, provided a wealth of formal written agency documentation, including a history of each agency's goals and policies concerning the computerization. Intake supervisors provided formal job descriptions for front-line workers. Blank copies of all the information recording material (i.e. case note file paper, intake forms, etc.) were requested for the purposes of research analysis.

Agency documentation was also used to compare front-line workers' stated and observed information needs against written or formal agency guidelines and statements of information need. The documentation provided a larger, organizational context for issues which emerged, and supplied additional information on existing information systems.

Documentation which was analyzed for this research include:

(i) the paper and fax forms front-line workers use during an assessment;
(ii) manuals, studies and memoranda regarding the computerization of the information systems;

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43 From April 1995 through to May 1996.
44 While some of the information recording material was provided through this request, it was surprising to discover how much additional material was actually used by front-line workers during the weeks of observation.
(iii) detailed job descriptions for the positions of front-line social workers;
(iv) Police, school board and Children's Aid Societies' joint protocols with regard to investigations of child abuse allegations;
(v) Ministry guidelines and regulations including the *Child and Family Services Act*, (1987), and the *Revised Standards*, 1992;
(vi) *The Ontario Coroner's Report Into Deaths Of Children Under The Care Of Children's Aid Societies*; and
(vii) memoranda, and other branch and agency documents provided during research.

**3.23 Site Selection and Sample Population**

Two children's aid societies were involved in this research. 45 For purposes of confidentiality these agencies are referred to as Agency Y, and Agency Z. Out of the total of 55 CAS's across Ontario, only three of them were known to be addressing issues of information system provision at the front-line of practice through the use of new information technologies. 46 Both agencies selected had undergone a review of their information systems, introduced a computerized information system at the front-line of practice, and were willing to undergo a critical examination of their information systems with respect to the perceptions of information needs and use by front-line workers. The third agency did not respond to initial requests for permission to conduct research at their agency.

Research was conducted in three (of five) branches of Agency Y, and two (of two) branches of Agency Z. Permission to conduct research was explicitly denied at

45 The pre-test agency, as discussed above, was a separate site.
46 As discussed in Chapter One, in 1997 the number of agencies currently attempting to develop systems "designed" to meet the information needs of front-line workers and their supervisors remains at less than five (Report of the Steering Committee, Child Welfare Information Project, Oct., 1997).
the other two branches of Agency Y: internal difficulties within those branches were cited but not elaborated upon.

3.231 Agency Y

This agency has five branch offices, with a total of 242 social work positions. The total number of children it served in 1994 (then the most current year) was 17,521 (Agency Y, Annual Report, 1994). In 1993, this agency investigated 1,235 cases of physical abuse and 1,081 cases of sexual abuse, another 11,523 calls were handled by after-hours staff, resulting in 539 emergency admissions to the care of the agency.47

In 1991, this agency formed a working committee to address the problems of duplication throughout the information recording process. This committee's recommendations included the computerization of the agency's information system. At this agency, this computerized system was designed in-house. Stated reasons for this design strategy included maintaining control over the design, retaining the flexibility to alter programming, and the flexibility to create new output tables as, and when, necessary. The agency decided that nine new agency recording forms would be designed for the computer and phased in over a five year time span. 48 The ratio for the initial distribution of computers to agency staff was: managers 1:1, secretaries 1:1, team leader 1:1, case workers 1:3, front-line intake workers 1:2. 49

47 One information manager stated that the agency's data base, which contains all cases from 1987 to the present, is huge, "bigger than all of Manitoba's".
48 The chair of the committee later acknowledged that one drawback to an in-house design was that "...the payoffs are late in coming...managers are not [presently] getting any information out of the system" (as of October, 1995).
49 During observation, on site allocation of computers to front-line workers at this agency varied from 1:1 to 1:2.
3.232 Agency Z

This agency has two branches which provide child protective services to a population of approximately 850,000. In 1995, this CAS opened 361 new cases, and dealt with 751 ongoing cases of alleged physical and sexual abuse. 50 This agency bought its computer information system externally, after extensive modifications were made to the system in order to meet the design criteria of the agency. This system records and tracks service provision to clients, provides prescreening information to front-line workers, and manipulates and generates statistical data for agency analysis. According to the agency literature the system provides timely, up-to-date information for front-line workers (Working Online, 1995). In this agency, each intake worker has been provided with a desktop computer.

3.233 The Sample

Observations at each branch were made for four consecutive days, Monday through Thursday. The four day period of observation at each site allowed for the processing of follow-up work on cases that had been started by the "on-call" worker during observation. This period of observation was jointly agreed through discussions with the front-line supervisors, front-line workers and the researcher. 51 Each worker responsible for the incoming intake calls on a particular day was observed for the full time that they were in the office.

In total twenty-five front-line workers were observed on-call, 15 in Agency Y, 10 in Agency Z. The front-line worker "on-call" was observed both in the intake area, and when he or she left intake but stayed within the building for purposes

50 This agency is one of the leading agencies in information technology, development and utilization in child welfare in Ontario.
51 "On-call" refers to the process of being responsible for taking the phone calls which come into the intake department during a shift, and addressing the concerns of the caller. This is described in more detail in Chapter Four.
related to their assessment tasks. When the primary worker left the building, observation switched to the back-up front-line worker, now on-call. 52

Following twenty days of observation of twenty-five on-call front-line workers, a small, purposeful sample of ten front-line intake social workers were interviewed in depth: two workers at each of five agency branches. Additionally, four intake supervisors, two from each agency, were interviewed.53 The sample of front-line workers interviewed within this study was based on availability: only workers who were on-call during the observation period were considered candidates for the follow-up, in-depth interviews. 54

Of those workers who were candidates for in-depth interviewing, one factor taken into consideration was the length of their employment at intake. The literature suggests that this may be one of two factors which may affect the impact of the introduction of information technology (Johansen, 1984; Rogers, 1983; Gandy & Tepperman, 1991)55. Eight female and two male front-line workers were interviewed.

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52 As a result of the open concept design of many of the office branches, the on-call workers' interaction with other front-line other workers was relatively easy to observe.
53 The supervisor from the fifth agency was an interim supervisor who had been brought in to temporarily fill the gap until a permanent supervisor was hired. The supervisor declined the opportunity to be interviewed, citing time constraints.
54 Only one worker refused to be interviewed on tape for this research, citing discomfort with being tape recorded.
55 The length of time in the job may be related to a persons willingness to change the manner in which they perform their tasks (Rogers, 1983). In this research, of those front-line workers interviewed in depth, 4 had less than two years experience, while 6 had more. A second factor was gender, however at the time of this research some branches had only female front-line workers, while others had both, but only female front-line workers were on-call the week chosen for observation.
3.24 The Data Analysis Phase

As interviews were completed and transcribed, qualitative data was read and reread in order to identify themes and patterns as suggested by Patton (1988) and Fettersman (1998) and a case record format was employed that included:

(i) assembling the data provided by each worker, including data provided during each phase of research (documents, private lists, CAS memos and directives to the worker);

(ii) creation of written case study reports; in this instance, a time-line report listing all the potential gaps, barriers, helps and events (see Appendix H, Appendix I);

(iii) organization of records by demographic variables.

3.241 Computer Analysis

A qualitative, computer research package was used during analysis. The Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorizing (NUDIST, 1995) computer program is a powerful package that encourages ideas and theories to originate from the data with little or no preliminary structure, and it allows for “system closure”; that is, the feeding of analysis results back into the project for further exploration (Richards & Richards, 1994). NUD-IST supports the grounded theory methodologies through its support of ongoing theory development during analysis. 56

This package also allows for both on-line and off-line data to be managed and combined. In this research, photographs were taken of the intake department areas. These photographs served as a visual aid regarding the location of files, forms, people, and computers in the intake area. The photographs were available

56 As one example, all reports generated by the NUD-IST data can then become an integral part of the database, available for further analysis and examination.
for indexing against the interviews at the specific point that the respondent mentioned them.

NUDIST was used primarily to analyze the content of the in-depth interviews with front-line workers, however, off-line data (such as field notes and taped notes following a day of observation and photos of the physical office design) were appropriately indexed with on-line data.

The NUDIST program was used to identify and isolate into "nodes", all respondent discussion of events, gaps and barriers and helps.

NUDIST was also used to gather all responses to the open-ended questions. Each such question was assigned a node, and the responses at that node were then available for further analysis. Responses to the question which asked workers what else they would like more access to during an intake situation, were placed at a node labeled "More Access". This node was then searched for mentions of information sources such as computers, police records, CAS records, portable telephones and supervisors. 57

3.242 Cross-Validation

As discussed previously, documentation and interviews with key informants such as intake supervisors and information systems personnel were used to discuss and contrast front-line workers' perceptions of their information needs and their use of information sources. 58

Additionally, statements and perceptions of workers regarding information use and information resources were cross-checked and verified against the following alternative sources:

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57 NUDIST also provides a text search, and an index system which allows for Boolean examination of 'nodes' and other variables.
58 All client-related documentation leaving the agencies for this study was reviewed and approved by the supervisor with the goal of maintaining client confidentiality.
(i) Collection of telephone logs;\textsuperscript{59} 
(ii) Discussion with workers during the interview of 'contradictions' between observed and stated (during the interview) behaviour; 
(iii) Interviews with four of the five intake supervisors. These interviews focused on worker's actions and comments during observation and interviews and discussion of the particulars of cases, which workers recounted during interview; 
(iv) Taped, personal and impressionistic observations and notes of key events which occurred. These tapes were made immediately after each visit to an agency, and later transcribed; 
(v) Attendance at intake worker-supervisor meetings; 
(vi) Examination of written case files, including case notes of select cases that workers recounted during interview; 
(viii) Post-analysis follow up meetings to discuss and amend preliminary thesis findings with front-line workers and supervisors.

3.243 Front-Line Worker Feedback

Feedback sessions were held at four of the five CAS branches that took part in the study. Supervisors and front-line workers attended. Three-quarters of the front-line workers in attendance had been involved in the observation phase of the research, while the other front-line workers had joined the branch since the completion of the research. A preliminary summary of the findings were presented at that time and questions and discussion were elicited. The goal of these meetings was to give feedback to the subjects and to receive feedback from them before drawing final conclusions.

\textsuperscript{59} These are logs of all telephone calls which came in during the period of observation. These logs permit brief summaries of the calls which were then contrasted against researcher's field notes and worker's statements dealing with these calls.
3.3 Ethics and Confidentiality

This study was conducted in accordance with the protocol set by the University of Toronto, Review Committee on the Use of Human Subjects. Permission to perform the research was initiated through contact with the executive director (or designate) of the two agencies. Directors were also asked to participate in the identification of agency branches that might be willing to cooperate. In one agency, a letter was sent out from the director asking for branches which would volunteer. In the other agency it was suggest that the branch intake supervisors be approached directly, after they had been informed by directors of the nature of the research.

Letters of intent outlining the research (Appendix J), and the Letter of Consent which workers were asked to sign, were sent out to the intake supervisors following initial contact. These letters outlined the procedures for storing the documents in a secure location, and the commitment to erase all taped interviews at the end of the thesis process.

In all cases it was made clear to front-line workers that the interviews were for the purpose of eliciting information from the perceptions of the front-line worker about what information is collected, needed and why. Front-line workers were assured that the study was not related to their work performance and participation and that a refusal to participate would not in any way affect their standing in the agency.

Participation in the study by any agency personnel was entirely voluntary, and consent could be withdrawn at any time. Personnel agreeing to be interviewed were assured that they would not be identified by name, and that information provided to the researcher would not be attributable to any individual. Letters to this effect were signed by both the interviewer and the interviewee, and discussed with
the intake supervisors and interviewees prior to the beginning of the observation phase.

As mentioned, for the purposes of confidentiality, the two agencies in this study are referred to as Agency Y, and Agency Z. Agency identification may be deduced by readers familiar with the child protection network in and around Toronto. However, specific identification of a particular agency branch has been masked. Anonymity has been maintained at the branch and individual worker level. An identification code was assigned to each respondent to assure confidentiality and to link demographics with coded responses.

3.4 Limitations And Generalizability

The emphasis of qualitative methodology is on depth and detail, not quantity. However, since this sample is not random, the findings will not be representative of the population of child protection front-line staff. Rather, this will provide a cross-sectional snap-shot of a small number of individual workers and their perceptions of their information needs. Similarly, the findings from this research may not be generalizable across the population of social workers within the agencies themselves60, or to the broader group of children's aid societies in Ontario and elsewhere in Canada.

60 One Agency would not permit research access to specific branches. The reasons given for not permitting access ranged from the branches being reorganized at the time, having difficulty with their computer system, and workers being under too much time and workload pressure.
As with many exploratory studies, it is anticipated that the findings from this small sample of respondents may suggest some broader themes that might be tested in later studies. In this research the themes related to: the gaps and barriers front-line workers encounter in pursuing their information needs, the means by which they overcome these gaps and barriers; and the relationship of information technology to their information needs.

The findings which resulted from the observation of front-line workers, interviews and documentation review are discussed in Chapter Four.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

4.1 General Observations

4.1.1 The Research Plan Reviewed

The research plan, as outlined in Chapter Three, consists of the following phases: observation, interviews with front-line workers, document collection and analysis.

Observation of 25 front-line workers took place over 20 days, at five different branches of two agencies. Its primary purpose was to identify how and which information sources were used during the initial stages of their assessment process.

Ten front-line workers, two per branch, were then interviewed in-depth regarding the overall assessment process. They were asked to walk through a typical assessment and to identify gaps, barriers and helps that they encountered along the way. Front-line workers were asked for comment on any discrepancies between their observed assessment, their self-described assessment experiences, and the written, formal assessment processes.

With respect to the documentation two types of documents were collected for review: instructive documents, which include legislative, policy and office memoranda relating to the front-line workers tasks; and operative documents -- the actual forms that front-line workers routinely use in the performance of their tasks. Both sets of documents were used to compare what front-line workers are required to do as against their observed and self-described situations. Finally, as part of this documentary review, a small sampling of closed case files were examined. These cases had been referred to by the front-line worker during their in-depth interview and were thus examined in regard to both their content and completeness.
As interviews were completed and transcribed, qualitative data was read and reread in order to identify themes and patterns, and a case record format was employed. Taped, personal and impressionistic observations and notes of key events and interviews were transcribed and analyzed, as were follow-up interviews with intake supervisors.

The ten in-depth interviews with front-line workers were each transcribed and indexed at "nodes" into NUDIST\(^6\). Front-line worker's statements about "events" -- specific and brief points at which they were unable to move forward on their journey toward completing an assessment -- were coded. Within these events, worker identified "gaps", "barriers" and "helps" were coded for separate analysis. Working from within these four nodes, NUDIST 's word-search function was used to examine ideas and topics which had been identified during observation: positive and negative mentions of hardware such as computers and faxes, and mentions of process related issues including, positive and negative mentions of time; information; and accuracy, as well as mentions of interaction with the police, and other members of the social services community.

4.12 Overview of the Intake Assessment Process

It may prove useful here to briefly review what is involved in the initial stages of the assessment process. The goal of the assessment initially is to determine whether or not to investigate reports of alleged or suspected child abuse. This

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\(^6\) A node is a place within NUDIST where references to common themes can be found (Appendix P). As an example, all positive mentions of computers by front-line workers could be identified (coded) within the text of their interview remarks, and located at a node labeled "computer, positive remarks". Once basic nodes are designed the level of indexing can be as complex as desired. As an example, during analysis the following questions were examined using NUDIST:

"During which events do front-line worker's refer positively or negatively to the use of computers when explaining how they overcome gaps and barriers? Are police interactions overall viewed as helps or barriers? What is the more critical variables for front-line workers: time, speed, access to information, or accurate information? What do workers view as gaps? What do front-line workers want in a "perfect world" and how does that relate to the helps which they use?"
determination is based, in whole or part, on the information provided by reporters. For example, this process usually begins with an incoming telephone call transferred to intake from the switchboard receptionist. The front-line worker on-call, if available, talks with the caller on the telephone, asks questions and takes notes. The computer is used to pre-screen and screen the call; that is, to confirm whether the call meets the geographic (and any other criteria) for appropriateness, and to ascertain whether the reporter, or the family under discussion, has had previous contact with the agency. Upon completion of the call, the front-line worker may either: proceed to collect follow-up information on that telephone call, or take or receive another telephone call. A follow-up telephone call may include, for example, talking to school principals or parents for the purpose of making arrangements for a "home visit", or in order to gather further information. Additionally, the front-line worker is formally required to seek approval from the intake supervisor for his or her plan of action. When the front-line worker has made a preliminary determination, he or she consults with the intake supervisor to decide whether to proceed with an investigation and subsequent home visit interviews. It is the supervisor who formally decides whether a home visit is merited based on the consultation with the front-line worker.

Beginning an investigation entails opening a new file on the case. These activities are repeated with variation, throughout the front-line worker's on-call shift, or until the front-line worker leaves for a home visit. It was noted during observation that frequently when front-line worker are on the telephone for a long

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61 Research demonstrates that once an assessment decision has been made in child protection, various agency stakeholders are reluctant to change it, even in light of new evidence (Swift, 1990; De Montigny, 1995).
62 The home visit refers to the process of interviewing clients, families or the alleged abuser, for the purposes of investigating and documenting the alleged child abuse. These visits occur at an appropriate location; the home, school, agency office, police station et cetera. After the home visit, and other interviews, the front-line worker writes up reports of their investigation and recommends a course of action for the client and family.
63 On call shifts usually are four hours to five hours in duration. One in the morning, one in the afternoon starting at 9 a.m. and running through to 5 p.m.
period of time, or when they have been out of the office on a visit, anywhere from five to twenty-five telephone messages may stack up for them.64

4.13 The Office Environment

Office design at the five branches visited falls into one of two categories: either an open-floor plan, or a multiple office design. The newer branches have an open floor plan design: that is, desks grouped around low partitions, with filing-cabinets, and planters used as dividers. Conversations were easily overheard in such surroundings and the various activities of front-line workers were likewise easy to observe. Moreover, front-line workers were frequently observed to speak directly "to the room", asking questions aloud, and eliciting opinions about calls, clients and cases to other on-duty front-line workers. The open floor plan appears quite conducive to this informal type of communication.

In one older branch at Agency Z, and in one branch of Agency Y where the intake area was situated in an annex to an existing building, front-line workers shared office space, usually two or three front-line workers per office. The space within these offices is confined when two or all three front-line workers occupy them. Within these offices, all conversation was easily overheard and activity observed, as in the open-floor plan design.

In Agency Z, desk-top computers were located on all the desks of front-line workers. The desks were designed for conventional computer usage, with a sliding tray below the desktop holding a keyboard.

At Agency Y, however, one branch had a similar set up, while at the other two branches front-line workers shared computers, either by having one computer

64 As discussed above in Chapter Three (see The Data Collection Phase: Observation), this study does not accompany the front-line worker on the home visit level but concentrates instead on the initial office-situated aspect of the assessment process.
per office (and two or three front-line workers assigned to each of these offices), or by wheeling the computers into the office space of the front-line worker.

The intake supervisors' office is located just outside of the intake area. Supervisors frequently enter the intake area or the front-line workers' offices in order to discuss ongoing cases or recent calls with front-line workers. With the exception of one branch in this study, the intake receptionist was also situated in the intake area. During the observation period, the regular receptionist at three of the branches was absent. However, it was observed that at all four of the five branches, front-line workers and supervisors congregated informally around the secretary's desk. Calls and cases which were active were discussed at these central locations, as well as the outcome of home visits and interviews.

The telephone is almost always ringing at Intake and telephone conversations are constantly underway. At any one time, front-line workers are tracking down information pertaining to the current, and ongoing cases. The din of file cabinets opening and closing, front-line workers word-processing, and informal conversations is pervasive. It was observed that Intake becomes relatively silent on two occasions: (i) when the front-line worker is listening very intently to a reporter, and responding in a very low voice and infrequently to that telephone call; and, (ii) when there are no calls coming in or being initiated. More than one front-line worker expressed a certain discomfort with the silence which this latter situation produced; one front-line worker stated that it was foreboding, another stated that it was like the calm before the storm.

4.14 The Language of Assessment

The process of intake assessment appears to generate its own terminology; it may prove useful to acquaint the reader with some of the terms used more commonly. The language of the front-line worker tends to be descriptive: persons calling in to report suspected cases of abuse are known as "reporters"; telephone
calls alleging abuse regarding families with no prior history with the agency are "cold" calls; where there is sufficient evidence to open a new case file a "face-sheet", the primary operative recording document for intake, is filled out. Calls that deal with cases in which an Intake front-line worker, or family service worker is already involved are referred to as "active" cases; calls which take less than one hour of the front-line workers' time, or which are for informational purposes only, are referred to as "brief" calls, or "briefs".65 When a front-line worker finds a reference to a call through a computer search, it is a "hit", and they have found a "match"; when there is no match there are "misses". Microfiche, the medium for storing case-files within the agency (but not necessarily within the branch) are referred to simply as "fiches". A front-line workers "case-load" refers to the number of active cases the front-line worker has "open" at any one time. At the end of each month the computer generates a report of all of the cases open at intake by each worker. One word that permeates the office environment of the front-line worker is "alleged". Every conversation with police, school officials, supervisors, reporters and families uses the adjective to qualify all discussion of physical or sexual abuse, emotional neglect, or domestic assault, drinking habits, et. cetera.

The metaphor of language at the front-line seems to be reserved for the role of information storage at the agency. In instances where a family member, or alleged abuser has been involved with the agency previously, the history of previous involvement is stored in the records department or what is referred to as "the vault". 66

A feature of the language of assessment that rapidly becomes apparent under observation is existence of a "we/they" dichotomy. "We" refers to the front-line workers and "our" Intake supervisor67; "they" refers alternately to other non

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65 In one agency, these calls were also referred to as "NFAs"; or No Further Action.
66 The vault, or records, may be either on-site or off-site, depending upon the agency and the branch.
67 There are also family service worker supervisors.
front-line social workers, including family service workers, the information technology staff, legal staff, senior administrators at the agency and other child protection agents external to the agency, such as police, school officials, and community based-services for children. Clients are usually referred to according to their family position relative to the child-victim; "Father", "Mother", "Sister" (of victim), "Brother" (of victim).

4.2 The Intake Process Observed

4.21 The Initial Call and Pre-screening

"Pre-screening" refers to the process in which calls are screened into or away from intake based upon whether the alleged abuse and its location matches the geographic mandate (and, in one agency, religious criteria) of the agency. Only calls that meet these administrative criteria are to be passed on to Intake. Calls are pre-screened by ascertaining the address of the reporter, the alleged victim and that of the victim's school.

The intake front-line worker's first contact with a report of an alleged abuse usually begins with a telephone call to the intake department. In general, all calls to the agency come through a switchboard. It is the responsibility of the switchboard operator to ask the caller to identify their location to assure that the call has come to the geographically appropriate agency. In some branches, this role is assigned to an intake receptionist, who receives the initial call from the

68 In one case observed, a potential client walked in to the branch and the receptionist called Intake to come and speak with him. In another instance, the police had dealt directly with the supervisor, who then took down some basic information and had the worker telephone the police back.

69 Who is not a trained social-worker.
switchboard, and, where appropriate, also screens the call for the religious status of the caller.

While, in theory, both agencies studied have set up systems to assure that calls are pre-screened according to the geographic location before the reporter is put through to the intake branch, in practice, front-line workers know that this pre-screening process is unreliable and act accordingly: "re-screening" for geographical location themselves.

While waiting for calls, the front-line worker was often observed word-processing reports or handwriting details regarding open cases. When a call comes in, the front-line worker answers the telephone, listens briefly to the reporter, and then begins to ask pre-screening questions. Despite the fact that they are expected to take details down on the computer, front-line workers were observed reaching past or over their keyboards for scraps of paper, telephone message slips and pads of lined paper writing, week-at-a-glance calendars, and file folders, onto which they write the answers to these questions. In many instances, they were observed using the keyboard as a desktop in writing the addresses and names onto the paper. One front-line worker was observed awkwardly stretching beyond her keyboard to write on a lined pad information from a caller.

This process of "re-screening" often entails putting the caller on hold, while the front-line worker refers to an area map guide or to a large map pinned to a nearby wall, with appropriate branch boundaries outlined. Frequently, the front-line worker just asks the room if any front-line workers know whether a street name falls within the agency's boundary or not.

Front-line workers complain that the immediate effect of the pre-screening process is to interrupt the flow of the story that the reporter has already begun. They complain that this barrier implies to the reporter that the agency's internal
administrative agenda has priority over their reportage. Front-line worker appeared hesitant and apologetic in asking pre-screening questions, particularly upon discovering that these questions had already been asked previously.  

Once pre-screening is accomplished, details of the case are elicited. It was observed that front-line workers spend much of their time listening to the reporter, and making brief notes on the same scrap of paper, or on lined paper. These notes included names and addresses, and if possible dates of birth for anyone that the client mentioned. They were collected for the purposes of screening, discussed below, as well as for documentation in the case notes.

Occasionally, the front-line worker repeated verbatim a statement from the reporter in a voice loud enough to draw the attention of their peers. More frequently front-line workers asked reporters questions in order to clarify what they were hearing, taking the initial form as, "Let me understand this better, you're saying...", or, "Can you explain that to me?" Other questions seeking clarity were closed-ended, requiring a limited response, such as "when did this happen; who did you talk to; is she your sister; can you describe that a bit more?"

\[70\] In a few cases, the caller had been passed from one branch to another and back again to the first branch, each time beginning their story, and repeatedly, identifying their geographic location.
4.22 The Screening Process: Record Searches

The goal of the screening process, or record check, is to determine whether any of the people named by the reporter, or the reporter themselves, have had previous contact with the agency. This is, of course, a critical stage in the assessment process: now that the front-line worker as gate-keeper, has determined the reporter has come to the right place, it is his or her responsibility to determine what level of service the call merits: brief service, referral to a family service worker, because the case is still active, or the opening of a new case. This determination is made, in part, based on whether the reporter, or alleged victim or abuser has had prior contact with the agency.

Computer search programs employed at both agencies will search case file records according to three variables: name, address and case file number. A list of all possible matches for the name or address appears on the computer screen. The front-line worker then works his or her way through the possibilities to determine if there is a match. This determination is often confirmed by matching the date of birth of the child listed in the screen file with the date of birth, if any, as given by the reporter.

While the formal method of searching for previous contact is through a search of the computer record, often the front-line worker will simply ask the reporter if they, or the people they are calling about, have had previous contact with the agency. Front-line workers report that this is certainly as fast, and often as reliable a means of record checking, as resorting to their own computer records. One front-line worker recounted an instance of not being able to find a name

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71 Active cases are immediately referred over to that family service worker. If the case has been closed less than three months, then the caller is referred back to the family service worker. Otherwise the case is considered a new one and is handled by the on call front-line worker.

72 Agency regulations state that the front-line worker shall review existing agency files relating to an allegation as they proceed to the interview stage of the investigation.
which she knew had a prior case history. It turned out the previous front-line worker had misspelled the name when entering it on the computer.

It was observed that front-line workers continue to take notes on scraps of paper and lined paper during the record search process. Logistically, and as discussed in more detail in Section 2.23 below, in most instances, front-line workers are not able to enter more than one name at a time into the computer therefore there is great difficulty in searching for potential case files without the use of written notes.

It was evident through observation, that different types of calls yielded different reactions from front-line workers. During some calls requesting information (for example: how old does my child have to be to be left home alone), and some calls that were to be briefed (one such call focused on what to do about a neighbour’s child being a bully), the front-line worker did not screen the caller for previous contact. That is, call such as these the worker did not leave the word processing package which they were working in, or close the case files they had open on their desk. 73 During these calls, the overall tone of the conversation with the reporter might be described as friendly and relaxed, conversations in the area of the on-call front-line worker continued unabated.

By way of contrast, some calls were observed to result in immediate reactions. Suddenly case folders on the desktop were closed, notes were taken, the front-line worker would reach up and grab a paper copy of the face sheet, the keyboard was pushed in, the front-line worker’s week-at-a-glance calendar was opened, appointments underlined or circled.

Other reactions to calls appear to be more visceral. The tone of the front-line worker shifts to a lower tone, the casual body posture of the front-line worker often

73 The former type of call, many workers feel should not result in a record search, the later call, it turned out, had been searched previously.
changes from relaxed to tighter, more erect. The hand of one front-line worker that was twirling a pen, clicking it open and closed, suddenly stops all movement. It also seems to be accompanied by an alteration in the office environment, wherein conversations continue in low whispers or abruptly end, a new case will soon be opened.

4.221 The Fiched Files

Microfiches, the primary storage medium for historical family information, provide a cumulative record of the family history. However, there appear to be several related barriers that limit the value of microfiched files for front-line workers assessment needs. One such barrier, repeatedly observed, was that access to microfiched materials in most branches took two to three days. The microfiches are stored in the vault and, in three of the five branches under study, the vaults' location was off-site. By the time the front-line workers receive their fiches, they have often completed the bulk of their assessment without benefit of the information contained therein. At such a point, reading the microfiched material becomes an obligation, fulfilling at best, the intent of legislative and administrative policies. These policies state that all case material must be reviewed before an assessment decision is made.

Microfiches cannot be read at the front-line worker’s desk, but must be accessed via a microfiche reader. While the location for the reader varies, it tends to be located within or near the intake area, sitting in the hallway at a small desk, or against a wall. Intake supervisors indicated that the main criterion of location for the microfiche reader was available space rather than accessibility or

74 However, the front-line workers' case notes are not microfiched, and accompany the original paper file, usually, to an off-site storage facility. In one case reviewed for this research, the hand-written case notes were 54 pages in length.

75 In this study, all records were kept off site for one CAS Agency, and in the other CAS the vault was located at one of the two branch offices.
convenience. Often one or two reference books were sitting atop the microfiche readers and, in one case a supervisor spent some time trying to find files she had left on top of the reader. Front-line workers were observed straining to read the fiches and complaining that the quality and quantity of the fiche was difficult to read, not necessarily in chronological order and, in some observed cases, the files were more than sixty pages in length. No microfiche readers were capable of reproduction; as a result, front-line workers were observed taking notes while sitting at the microfiche reader. One front-line worker complained:

The fiche itself was an absolute disaster to read because it had been fished someplace in the wrong order so it was difficult to figure out what had happened...So I was looking at about six pages of fiche that hadn’t been organized or condensed at any point or there was no where that I could look just to say, 'OK this is what has happened so far.'


Front-line workers were observed on several occasions to lament the days when they could simply solve this microfiche barrier by calling down to the vault and requesting that a social worker give them a brief summary of the case file. This need for summary information was the subject of one front-line workers comments when he explained that he didn't want "too much" information, or detail when assessing a call. That is, in some instances, he would rather the details follow his determination of how to act on the reported case.
4.222 The Child Abuse Registry

Cases alleging child sexual abuse need to be screened through the Child Abuse Registry. (hereinafter, the "Registry") 76 The process of calling the Registry was observed at both agencies to be as follows: the front-line worker dials the number and leaves their name, agency name, telephone number and the name of the suspected abuser. That day or in the next two days, a secretary from the Registry will telephone back and confirm whether the person is on the list, and if so, what agency was involved. If the alleged abuser is on the list, the front-line worker then contacts the appropriate agency for further details. Front-line workers report that they rarely get a hit from the Registry.

Front-line workers openly and repeatedly question the value of the Registry in the assessment process.77 A number of front-line workers were particularly blunt, and reacted angrily at any mention of the Registry, elaborating that:

The Abuse Registry is practically useless. Well, they won't give us any information, [the agency secretary] has to call [the Registry] and they use a voice-mail, [then] they call her back but they can't do anything about an offender. If you give them an offender's name they want a victim's name. Well if I don't know who's a victim [they might not tell me about the offender].

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

During the observation period, only one call was observed being made to the Child Abuse Registry, with a corresponding message returned.

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76 This requirement is pursuant to the Child and Family Services Act. The rationale is that known child abusers will be recorded on a province-wide registry; should they move from one community to another, the front-line worker will be able to identify them as abusers through this Registry.

77 Bala’s (1987) research seems to confirm this skepticism: he found that the Registry rarely identified abuse cases that had not already been identified by the agency calling the Registry.
4.223 Computer Screening

A computerized information screening program has been set up for front-line workers at both Agencies in order to help them with their screening tasks, as described above. The aim of this screening process is to identify whether any of the names, or addresses, provided by reporters has a previous history with the agency.

Front-line workers express satisfaction with the opportunity to screen calls through the computer, stating that it is a help to be able to screen calls right at their desks, and that it speeds up the screening process. However, the design of the screening program is not particularly user-friendly: that is, it does not easily provide them with the information they want.

It was observed that front-line workers almost always wrote down names and addresses on scraps of paper as they listened to the reporter's story. They referred to these papers in order to type in the information for screening. Numerous front-line workers explained that it is difficult to screen and concentrate on the story being told at the same time. One front-line worker explained that reporters do not always tell their story in a slow, consistent or linear manner:

We ...hand write...because you can't [type in] "Brown Street" as fast as you can (write it down)....like you can write it faster because sometimes you only put "Brow" because they've [the caller] gone on to, you know, [talk about other information] ...

There were also barriers around the search process itself. Front-line workers were observed typing last names into the computer, screening for prior contact. If they failed to get a hit the first time, they would type in several variations of the names that reporters gave them. This, they later explained, covered two possibilities: that a previous front-line worker had typed the name(s) into the computer incorrectly, or that the reporter did not know the correct spelling of the name(s). One front-line worker commented, "If you don't have the exact spelling of the name, you go around in circles trying to find the stupid thing".

A similar problem occurred with addresses. Front-line workers were observed typing in variations of an address. For example, "999 Queen Street West" might be typed in as, "999 Queen Street West", "999 Queen Street", "Queen Street", or just "Queen". Only the latter iteration, "Queen", would provide a list that included all of the other iterations, but this list would be five to ten screens long. Visually scanning through this long list of addresses for any mention of "999 Queen Street West" is the only means of assuring completeness in the search.

One front-line worker commented, "[You think you have] done a record check, but no you haven't until you've actually wiped out ["Queen"] right off the screen". This problem is exacerbated if the search is narrowed down to a particular apartment number at an address. Again, consistency of process is a problem with some front-line workers not entering apartment numbers in at all, while others use various iterations of the apartment number.

78 One worker was observed typing in a hyphenated last name using a "/" instead of an "-". When asked later to explain, she stated that she didn't believe there was a hyphen key on the computer.
79 Field note, front-line worker comment, August 14, 1995.
80 Front-line workers explained during interviews that they were aware that 'other' front-line workers might not type in street names, or addresses carefully. Some may type in, for example, "Queen W" where others might just type "Queen", or "Queen St.,” or "Queen West".
81 Interview with front-line worker, May 16, 1995.
82 For example, those that did enter apartment numbers into the computer could not identify a common input format; "apartment 2B" might be listed as any of the following: "apt. 2b", "2B", "2b". All of these entries might be right or left justified, resulting in the computer listing them in different order on the screening screen.
Even when a possible match is found, front-line workers use of pen and paper appears to continue. At this stage, front-line workers make a list of possible matches by recording case file numbers, names and addresses. One front-line worker explained that, in some instances, when attempting to investigate a potential match, they had to enter the case file record itself. In doing so, they were not always able to "back out" or return to the screen listing of possible matches. Rather, they had to start the search anew, entering the name or address again. In recording the case file numbers of possible matches before leaving that screen, front-line workers were able to partially overcome this programming barrier; typing in the case file number would pull up one specific case at a time that could be investigated for a match.

4.23 Opening and Tracking Cases

Calls that have reached the stage where they are to be opened have passed through pre-screening for geographical location and religion; and screening for ongoing status. Active cases, and calls referring to cases closed by a family service worker within the last three weeks are referred back to that worker.83 Otherwise, calls at this stage are assigned one of two designations: brief calls or new cases. Opening a new case entails consulting with the supervisor, developing a plan of action, investigating the allegations, visiting and interviewing the appropriate sources—client, family, reporter—searching and reading relevant prior contact records, checking with the Registry, and formally recording the

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83 Should a new case file on a previous client need to be opened, the process of opening is simplified through a computerized system which brings some of the demographic information forward onto a new face sheet. Although, ironically, it was observed that the front-line workers did not seem to trust that information, verifying all such demographic information with the reporter, or later with clients and their families.
incident into the agency's information system within twenty-four hours. New cases become the on-going responsibility of the front-line worker who is on-call that day.  

According to the Child and Family Services Act (1985), the involvement of the supervisor in this decision at this stage is required. One such responsibility is to review the plan of action with the front-line worker. It was observed that this process often took place casually, in a private aside at the on-call front-line workers desk, or as the supervisor was walking through the Intake area.  

It was observed that when the front-line worker decides a call will be investigated, they write less information on scraps of paper and lined paper, and more on agency case-note paper. In many instances, front-line workers also reach for a paper copy of the computerized face sheet, discussed below, placing it beneath the case-note paper and the desk. Alternatively, some front-line workers flip the paper copy of the face sheet over to the last page. On that page, there is a large white box into which front-line workers often write a summary of the reporter's story.  

In most cases observed, however, the computerized face sheet was the last place to record information rather than the first. One explanation for the use of paper at this point, offered by front-line workers, is that the computer face sheet does not reflect the reporter's style of story-telling. Specifically it lists demographic information up front, and has little room for narrative. In contrast, reporters usually present their story in a narrative, and non-statistical manner. It was observed that front-line workers, after listening to reporters and taking notes to record key elements of the story, would seek to clarify the reporter's story, and gather

84 One branch visited, however, assigns workers according to the callers' geographic location, rather than according to who answers the telephone that day.  
85 Revised Standards, 1992, p. 31.
statistical information, asking: "Which event came first, when did that happen? Do you know the date of birth, how old do you think they are, what grade are they in?"

Front-line workers dealing with a "cold" case require very little information to get started on their assessment task. Generally, it was observed that front-line workers routinely seek out the following variables:

(i) the name of the child, children, and or accused;
(ii) the age of the child or children;
(iii) the telephone number of the family;
(iv) the home address of the child or family;
(v) the current location of the child. 86

During the observation period, one front-line worker began a case in which the reporter only knew the street name that the family of the allegedly abused child lived on, and the first name of two of the three siblings. In this case, the front-line worker called a member of the appropriate Board of Education, mentioned that she felt the child was at risk, and encouraged him to contact the appropriate school principal--based on the geographic location of the street name given--to see if the principal could identify siblings based on their first name. This whole process from initial call, to waiting for returned telephone call, to finding the family name, and ages of the children, took less than half a day. Significantly, comparing the priorities of the agency to those of the front-line worker, this front-line worker opened the case by listing the primary caretaker as, first name "unknown", last name "unknown". When this was challenged by an information staff manager later in the week, the front-line worker explained that she felt it was important to record

86 The age of the children allows the front-line worker to determine if the child is under sixteen and thus qualifies for agency attention. It also allows the front-line worker to assess the level of risk to the child, for example, if the child is in school during the day (away from the parent and able to speak for her/himself), or if this is a pre-school, and possibly pre-verbal, child. When appropriate, the telephone number allows front-line workers to continue their assessment process immediately with a follow-up telephone call to the names supplied. Addresses make home visits possible, and also serve to identify area schools the children likely attend.
this case formally, and as soon as possible. She also explained that she didn't want the allegation of abuse to be "lost", being neither a brief service call nor a case that might be formally opened.

When a call is designated as a brief, it is recorded on a telephone log, (discussed further, below) and filed away separately from open case files. In one agency, brief calls are only recorded on a legal size sheet of paper, which allows exactly one line per call and had made provision for only such headings as: date, name, action taken, particulars and front-line worker (see Appendix K). Records of these calls were placed in a filing cabinet, and filed by the month; however, such an informal secondary process poses problems of accessibility; on one occasion, two front-line workers were observed for more than an hour, wading through two months of brief call reports looking for evidence to confirm that a woman had called previously.

At the other agency, brief calls are placed on line in the computer allowing accessibility for the screening process. Due to a quirk in the software, however, when this computerized brief case file is re-opened on line, all the previous information on that case disappears.87

This barrier of inaccessibility was addressed in a straight-forward manner by staff at both agencies: simply asking the room if anyone has heard of the family, or the situation before. Often front-line workers will place a reporter on hold to specifically ask another front-line worker, the supervisor, or the receptionist if they recognized the name or the situation that had just been described on the telephone. Peers, overhearing a telephone conversation, also readily commented to the on-call front-line worker whether or not they knew of the family or the situation.

87 This problem was identified in a 1994 agency document provided for this research, entitled Face Sheet Pilot Test, Second Feedback Meeting. When queried, information staff pointed out that the problem had been resolved recently. However, neither front-line workers, nor intake supervisors had been informed of the change.
In sum, many front-line workers have several information systems and sources available and they use them to help overcome information barriers. The key resources for information gathering and dissemination for the front-line worker remains the telephone and pen and paper notes despite the efforts by management at both agencies to actively encourage and, in some cases mandate, that only the computer be used for recording and opening case file information.

4.24 Closing Cases: The Challenge of Closure

The thrill, the joy, the sheer pleasure of closing a case.

Field note, front-line worker comment, April 25, 1995.

Closing a case for front-line workers refers to the process of either actually completing and closing the case, or passing a case further along into the agency. In either instance the case proceeds to the supervisor who either signs off the closed case, or arranges for the case to be transferred to the family services department.

In the selected agencies, front-line workers were observed routinely juggling eight to ten active cases, while on-call. These cases involve telephone calls with families or professionals and additional out-of-office visits for follow-up interviews with clients, families or involved professionals. In one case, the simple logistics of contacting a father to tell him that the agency was not going to further investigate a complaint of abuse against him, prevented the case from being formally closed; the front-line worker was unable to contact him, and without such contact, was not permitted to close the case.

Front-line workers feel that there are many administrative barriers to closing a case. Chief among these barriers is the amount of paperwork that needs to be
completed, much of which is perceived, by front-line workers, as unnecessary, excessive, and involving duplication. One front-line worker stated every time he brings a family of children into the care of the agency, five additional working days are devoted to pursuing all the administrative requirements for those children.88 Another front-line worker observed:

In March I apprehended a child unexpectedly on a Tuesday, so for four days that week I did nothing else [but deal with the courts and legal issues] and since then it's been a big game of catch up.

Field note, front-line worker comment, April 25, 1995.

One front-line worker, overcame her barrier of backlogged paperwork by taking advantage of the fact that she had to testify on behalf of a child at an immigration hearing. She stated that during the half day wait at the courthouse to testify, she was able to fill in the paperwork required to complete and close three cases.

Closing cases is rare enough to be treated as something of an event. In one branch, front-line workers were observed sending cards of congratulations to one another when they closed cases. In all branches observed, front-line workers announce their case closings to their colleagues, and receive verbal "kudos" in return.

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88 This would include such activities as writing up complete descriptions of the children and arranging medical examinations for them.
4.3 The In-Depth Interview Results

4.3.1 The interview Process Reviewed

After the observation phase was completed at each branch, front-line workers were interviewed in-depth. They were asked to describe a rich and challenging case in terms of a journey, with both a beginning and an end. The ending could be either the closing of the case, or the point at which the front-line worker's involvement in the case ended. Front-line workers were asked to identify the various gaps, barriers and helps which they encountered.

The ten interviews, varying from one and one-half hours to two and one-half hours in length, were taped and later transcribed. Half of the front-line workers described cases of sexual abuse, while the others described instances of physical abuse. 89 This section described the findings of the in-depth interviews with front-line workers, loosely organized according to several recurring themes and with frequent reference to the gaps, barriers and helps thus identified in both the interview and the observation phase of field research.

4.3.2 Job Perceptions versus Job Descriptions

In order to better understand the apparent disjunction between front-line workers' interpretation of their roles and their formal job descriptions, each interview began with the following open-ended question: "Can you please tell me a bit about your job here?" The intent, in addition to soliciting feedback concerning their own perceptions in this regard, was to provide an opportunity for the respondent to become comfortable with the interview process by responding to a

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89 Ten of the twenty-five front-line workers observed were interviewed in-depth: eight female, two male workers. Four of the workers had less than two years experience at intake, the other eight had more than two years. Only two of the ten [both female] had previous experience, prior to their intake job, with any form of information technology.
simple open-ended question about their job. The front-line workers interviewed enumerated their responsibilities fairly simply as:

(i) investigation of child protection complaints;
(ii) assessment of new cases; and
(iii) first agency contact with the general public.

Absent from the front-line workers' descriptions, were references to other specific responsibilities outlined in their job descriptions (see Appendix L and Appendix M), including but not limited to:

(i) information systems and processes such as recording and transferring;
(ii) legislated and or agency mandated information collection;\(^90\)
(iii) knowledge and enforcement of policy regulations;
(iv) consulting with supervisors on all alleged abuse cases;
(v) preparing for, and testifying in, court;
(vi) serving papers on families;
(vii) admitting children into care;
(viii) submitting comprehensive reports.

Front-line workers discussed in their interviews, or were observed involved with many of the above tasks. However, it appears as if they limit their own self-definitions of their role to tasks directly related to the determination of child abuse. In contrast, the agency's expectations of the front-line workers and their roles -- expressed by managers and supervisors, and identified in the official agency documents-- appear to be more legally and administratively related.

\(^{90}\) Except for one worker's passing reference to responsibilities pursuant to the Child and Family Services Act (1985).
4.33 Conflicting Agendas and Information Priorities

In their interviews, front-line workers tend to emphasize the gate-keeping role which they play in the agency, as well as the fire-fighting role their crisis-oriented job entails. Front-line workers frequently complain that they would like to have as much relevant information as possible in order to make an assessment, and to proceed through an investigation. However, they generally require less information than they are directed to collect, and as discussed below, often require this information in a very different format. As one front-line worker simply observed:

I guess there's sometimes when I'm collecting information from people, I question how much of it I really need. How does that directly relate to the complaint we have?

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

A variety of constituencies are served by the formal information system. These stakeholders include:

(i) the Ministry of Community and Social Services, as represented primarily in the governing piece of legislation, the *Family and Children's Services Act* (1985), and the *Revised Standards for the Investigation and Management of Child Abuse Cases by the Children's Aid Societies Under the Child and Family Services Act* (1992);91

(ii) the agency administrators who interpret the Family and Children's Services Act, and legislation related to child protection, as well as agency policy protocols and directives. This would include executive directors and directors;

91 Hereinafter the *Revised Standards*. 
(iii) the managers and supervisors who implement, and are responsible for, the policy directives handed down by administrators, including:

(a) the information technology managers at the agency who maintain the computerized information system and are, in theory, responsible for information management in the agency;

(b) the legal staff concerned with the legal and court-related aspects of cases;

(c) the records staff, who are the keepers of closed case files, both microfiched and paper files;

(iv) family service workers, who are responsible for long-term case management; and,

(vi) clients and their families.

The legislation and regulations outlining the information priorities of the Ministry are extensive and it appears that they conflict with the time limited needs of front-line workers.\(^{92}\) For example, the legislation requires that all reasonable complaints respecting a child-at-risk must be investigated within twelve hours and recorded within twenty-four hours. However, it appears that front-line workers regularly miss this deadline with respect to new cases of child abuse or neglect. That is, they do not log their new cases onto the computer, the record keeping device of the formal information system, within the required twenty-four hours. During observation it was noted that some cases were not logged into the computer three days after the case was assessed. In discussing this discrepancy with front-line workers they explained that their priority during that twenty-four hour period is to assure the protection and safety of the child at risk and to investigate all allegations within the twelve-hour limit.

Additionally, it was observed that in all branches, when on-call front-line workers investigate an allegation of child abuse or neglect, they remain responsible for responding to the numerous telephone messages that build up during their absence, some of which may be reporting other allegations of abuse or neglect. Many front-line workers explained that all of these responsibilities seem to occupy their work time, and that entering information into the formal information system within twenty four hours is not, generally, viewed by them as a priority.

As mentioned previously, front-line workers appear to understand that most of the information is for other stakeholders. In explaining why information is not always entered into the computer within the twenty four hour legislative limit one front-line worker observed that:

[Inputting information] is basically for the ministry's own statistics in terms of what we're servicing and not servicing, it doesn't do us much good.

Field note, front-line worker comment, August 14, 1995.

Front-line workers recognize that there is an administrative need to collect specific demographic information on a client, such as religion, income, nationality, and ethnicity. However, the prime responsibility for gathering this information falls to front-line workers, and they state that these questions are overly intrusive and personal. They further suggest that asking these questions of the client creates a potential conflict between developing an appropriate working relationship with the client, and collecting information for statistical purposes: 93

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93 Issues related to these categories are discussed in Agency Information Gathering versus Personal and Professional Values, below.
And I think that's just, I think that's just a tracking thing they do. You know, 75% of our clients are on social assistance....so what? I'm sure, you know, that in the broader picture that may be an issue for the Social Development Council of Ontario, and the Ministry [of Community and Social Services], but for us?

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

Front-line workers complain that frequently the needs of stakeholders concerned with the legal and court-related aspects of information conflict with their information needs. Front-line workers frequently observe that the formal information system shapes their style of reporting. It appears that report writing is motivated primarily with the knowledge of future court involvement in mind, such as the prosecution of an alleged abuser. One path to successful prosecution has been interpreted in the agency protocols as requiring that front-line workers record only the "facts" of a case. Moreover, front-line workers state that they are aware that all documentation on a case may be subjected to minute and legal scrutiny.94 One front-line worker commented that she writes her recordings with this awareness in mind:

There's a lot of covering your butt, unfortunately, in the investigation part of child welfare. And that's because of the concern of court action and lawsuits and so on.


94 Such circumstances would likely be legal ones involving:
   i) a child dying or being severely injured while the family is was under CAS care; or,
   ii) a client requesting access to their own records; or
   iii) workers having to submit their records, or testify in court; or
   iv) the CAS being sued for liability. (Recording Project, 1992)
The result of this "covering your butt" state of mind was discussed at a feedback session where front-line workers described a recent in-house course. The course emphasized that front-line workers should not record anything that cannot be defended in a court setting. For example, comments such as, "Approach the mother cautiously", or "Front-line worker needs to be confrontational with Mom initially", while valuable for the front-line worker (or the next front-line worker on the case), is not permitted in this litigious conscious environment.

As a consequence of the litigious nature of their work, several front-line workers interviewed state that they have found ways to imply critical client-related concerns in their notes without expressly saying them. They do this they say with the hope that the next front-line worker will, literally, "read between the lines". One front-line worker identified the change in their information recording based on the ever-present threat of litigation, and how he addresses his needs:

We used to be ...able to be a lot more liberal in terms of what we could put in our recording, now we pretty much have to stick to facts. I mean what I would do is say, 'Given the circumstances, the information from the community seems to be consistent though unsubstantiated. Given this, I would anticipate that there would be another complaint coming from the community of a similar nature thereby requiring this case to be reopened or receiving further service.' You know, stuff like that...


Rather than interpret information, front-line workers were told to consider the benefits of "pure case recordings", that is, verbatim transcriptions of meetings with clients. While these approaches to case work seem to be perceived as having
value in a court of law, they do not allow for the sort of summary commenting that time-constrained front-line workers claim they require. Front-line workers report that it is just these summary and impressionistic commentaries that are most helpful when assessing a case, and, as discussed below, they actively seek them out informally since they are not available in the formal information system.

Specifically, more than one front-line worker complained that the litigious-conscious recording process fails to capture the more subtle and less tangible case impressions such as the depth of emotional pain and injury which an abused child appears to be feeling. One front-line worker stated:

When you write...you can't capture somebody's tone of voice in a case note...[particularly] in terms of children in a disclosure it's harder to capture the attitude. Sometimes you can write about the child's body position as they're being interviewed...You know, the child whose really closed up and doesn't look down, you may comment on the fact that they never look up at you. But that kind of information is tricky to convey.

Interview with front-line worker, October 24, 1995.

Several front-line workers perceived that the litigious-driven recording style seemed to act as a barrier to effectively communicating case-relevant concerns in the formal recording documents. It was observed that front-line workers overcame this communication barrier in a number of ways, particularly by talking directly to peers who have had previous contact with the family, abuser, or the case. The front-line workers spoke with their peers and were observed requesting their "off the record" comments.95

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95 This is discussed below in section 4.36 Peers as Information Sources.
Relatedly, agency protocols regarding other legislation often is reported as creating a conflict between agency needs and the information needs of front-line workers. Specifically, and repeatedly mentioned throughout the observation period is the problem of restrictions on sharing of information with other professionals who are also acting in the best interests of the child-victim. The Freedom of Information and Protection of Individual Privacy Act (1987) 96, as well as agency policies concerning the confidentiality of records, were mentioned frequently as barriers to information gathering and exchange. One front-line worker commenting on his lack of access to school assessment records of alleged victims of abuse or neglect, noted:

I'm not sure whether it's even allowable now because of the change in the "Confidentiality Act"[sic], but a year ago or so we'd just call the school and say... 'Hey, we had this call,... we can't substantiate it but keep your ears open, and if you hear anything or see anything give us a call.'

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.

Another front-line worker was emphatic about how these restrictions may act against the interests of the victim of abuse:

Talk about blocks, and I think that usually they [the agency] require a Release of Information but, in a crisis like this, I think that most people should be able to share information with other professionals.

Interview with front-line worker, September 12, 1995.

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One front-line worker explained that she often overcame such barriers by wielding the term, "child-at-risk". The use of this term, she explained—with its implication that the front-line worker has an urgent need for this information, and that the person restricting access to this information will be held responsible for any harm that ensues to the child at risk—often allows information to be gathered despite any legislative or agency mandated restrictions.97

When rules of confidentiality are an issue, front-line workers also rely on their close professional contacts within police forces, for example, to informally gain access to restricted information. 98 One front-line worker put it this way:

If you've been here a while you get to know a lot of the police officers, and there's not that big of a problem in asking them to check a name [of an alleged abuser] for you.

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.

Conflicting priorities between the front-line workers' information needs and information technology staff are also cited by some front-line workers as a barrier. Information technology staff are responsible for maintaining agency computer hardware, as well as running computer hardware and software training programs for all staff. Comments by front-line workers suggest that the information technology services staff themselves are another stakeholder with different

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97 Interview with front-line worker. May 16, 1995. Similarly, this worker, and others stated that a great help for workers in this respect is citing of their legal mandate to interview families and victims of abuse when they show up to conduct an interview. 98 Another worker explained that this sharing of confidential information is a two-way street. When she felt that police should have access to confidential agency records, she gave him that access. She then suggested that the officer formally request the particular agency document that contained that information.
information needs served by the same information base: front-line workers perceive that these staff are expected to be watchdogs for the computer information system. Their focus, from the front-line perspective, seems to be to assure that every field is filled in, and filled in correctly, to generate statistics based on the computer-generated information.

Several front-line workers perceive that information technology staff communicate their information needs regularly to front-line workers, through memoranda and visits to the Intake area. Front-line workers, however, seem to feel that there are often inherent conflicts between meeting information technology staff needs, i.e. for completeness, and the reality of front-line work, i.e. the frequent inaccessibility to information. For example, one front-line worker described having to choose between meeting the legislative and agency-driven need to open a case on the computer within twenty-four hours, and "improperly" opening a case on the computer by listing the name of the primary care person as "Unknown, Unknown" in order to get by this mandatory field:

Here, if you do that [type in Unknown, Unknown] Information Services will be down your neck. So in that respect, if we don't know the name [of a client for opening a case] we might do two or three visits nobody home, then a week may go by before you get a name. And then you are backdating the referral date. So then we haven't opened a case within the twenty-four hour guideline.


99 The worker also stated that she was afraid that if she did not log this case on the computer it would fall through the cracks of their recording system, being neither a brief call, nor a full fledged allegation of abuse.
In addition to the conflicting priorities with information technology staff, front-line workers perceive that their information gathering and recording needs also clash with those of the records department. As discussed previously, the records staff no longer have the time to summarize a file over the telephone for a front-line worker. And yet, it is exactly such summary information that front-line workers must extract from the microfiched file. Further, front-line workers stated strongly and repeatedly that the microfiched documents were disorganized and that many identical statements and forms appeared in any one microfiched case file. One front-line worker described the additional barrier of trying to find one or two pieces of information in the microfiche files:

If the [paper] file is an absolute mess [when they receive it] they photograph it and [micro]fiche it...so that you can't get a [microfiched] file that has all the recording at the front, then it has all the court paper, then it has all the medical stuff...it makes it very difficult to try to track down the sections in the fiche...I don't really care to read medical reports...to find out the child had a cold or that they'd seen the doctor for an ear ache, when I'm trying to find out what happened to the family...

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

Overall, front-line workers seemed to feel that microfiched information is not very useful, stating repeatedly that it is designed for administrative and legal purposes, rather than to provide relevant information for the front-line workers' professional assessment-related information needs.\footnote{At both agencies, the chief source of delivery of microfiche is the inter-office mail. This mail delivery has been cut back from twice per day delivery, to one delivery every two to three days. The agencies' sense of the importance of this microfiche material to the front-line worker's assessment tasks may be inferred through the observation by front-line workers and}
Front-line workers indicate that most helps that were available to deal with administrative and legal barriers have long since disappeared due to budget cuts and other resource-allocation decisions. For example, the assistance of case-aids was previously used to review and summarize microfiched case files for the front-line worker. Additionally, there was a time when the staff in the vault were expected to, or at least willing to, provide front-line workers with an oral summary of microfiched documentation.

The nature and role of the receptionist position has also changed, no longer the formal help it was previously. For example, at both agencies, front-line workers report that there was a time when receptionists' responsibilities included transcribing and typing up thirty, sixty and ninety day reports, opening and closing summaries on cases, and other administrative functions for the front-line worker. When the computer was first introduced at the front-line, receptionists were permitted to input case file information into the computer for the front-line worker. However, an administrative decision was made to end this help.  

When workers are involved in a time-related crisis such as immediate assessment and intervention of a child-at-risk, and bringing children into the care of the agency, the most frequently observed help available in these instances, is the informal support of peers and supervisors who often offer to take responsibility for many of these telephone messages and calls which gather during the front-line workers' absence.

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their supervisors, that the decision to cut back on inter-office mail was an economically driven administrative decision. This suggests that perhaps even the agency itself does not view the fiche as containing critical information for the front-line worker.

101 Supervisors explained that the rationale for this was to "encourage" the front-line worker to learn to use the computer.
In summary, there are a number of contrasting and often conflicting needs that are purportedly met by the formal information system of the agency. Front-line workers perceive that the needs of these other stakeholders often act as barriers to their time-limited information collection, recording and transmission needs. Both the computerized information base, and the microfiched files of the formal information system were singled out by front-line workers as not being user friendly, i.e. accessible, and providing information in a summary form, and a useful format.

4.34 Expediency: Protocol and Process versus Front-Line Expertise and Intuition

Time is a critical factor affecting the gathering, storing and transmitting of information for front-line workers. The front-line worker must gather information for crucial assessment decisions involving urgent circumstances of child abuse almost immediately in order to protect the child-at-risk. Additionally, many front-line workers report being keenly aware of their very strictly legislated and mandated deadlines. Those front-line workers interviewed seem to shape and define their information needs in terms of the time they have available. In the context of an urgent situation, expediency, thus, becomes the governing consideration in information gathering. In the word of one front-line worker:
In intake...you have to keep going, whether you have the information there or not, if you decide you have to progress with even no information, you still have to go [to see the client].

Interview with front-line worker, Aug. 29, 1995.

Another front-line worker, under considerable time pressure to open a case that was being passed on to him by a community service resource, outlines his awareness of the time versus information gathering conflict, in one particular circumstance:

I think that I don't need to get too [many] details on the case at the time, just major topics...So I think that I would limit the amount of time I spend on the phone [dealing with this abuse case], I would...not spend too much time, excessive time on [this] call because I would be interrupting other incoming calls......if you have like five messages in a row waiting, you just cannot afford the time.

Interview with front-line worker, September 12, 1995.

Front-line workers interviewed repeatedly refer to "trusting their instincts "when moving forward on a case, and "using their gut" or "having a gut feeling" about a situation. All front-line workers interviewed suggested that this intuitive response to a situation is a particularly helpful resource in a crisis-oriented job with a limited amount of time to make an assessment decision.

When front-line workers have this type of visceral reaction to a call or investigation, they were observed trying to interpret and validate it. One front-line worker expressed his intuitive feeling, and the need to validate that feeling with peers:
Sometimes you don't know why you're thinking what you're thinking, but [need] to be validated that it is based on something more than just a gut feeling. You may not be able to verbalize from a social work perspective why it is that you thought what you thought, but [you know] what it is is based on something sound.


Another front-line worker detailed a case she kept open at intake because she "knew something was going on". She explained that what she knew was that none of the siblings she had just interviewed were quite prepared to talk openly about having been abused by their parent.102

Another front-line worker suggested that when she gets a gut feeling about a case she just keeps asking more and more probing questions until the feeling goes away:

I think that we collect a lot of information, but when you start feeling nervous that's when you start to consult more. And sometimes it's almost that you just are picking up from the tone of voice of the person calling in that they're more stressed than they were last time you talked. Or that there's just a subtle change...[y]ou just sense that something is different, so when you have that feeling you tend to go back, whether it's to review the notes, consult, call the person back, call the doctor, whatever, it's almost sort of a flag to do more investigation.


102 However, the front-line worker explained, if she could just keep the case open a bit longer, she believed that one of the siblings would come forward with an abuse allegation.
The sense that the case is often about more than the facts, that you are reacting to some other cues which can not be easily captured is not something that a front-line intake worker can ignore. However, neither is it something that they may record in the formalized information systems. Indeed, such intuitive feelings are explicitly discouraged and excluded as a source of assessment information. And yet the need to acknowledge these intuitive responses is important to front-line workers; one front-line worker commented:

I think that the computer gives you the factual information, it doesn't give you necessarily the feeling, and I think that that's something that you have to go out and do yourself. I think that probably feelings are hard to explain. What I'm feeling about a case and someone else seeing the same case, they might have a different feeling. I guess it comes down to your make up and what you are seeing at that time and hearing.

Interview with front-line worker, September 12, 1995.

This sort of gut sense, likely a form of experiential knowledge,\textsuperscript{103} is presented by front-line workers as a significant help in the performance of their assessment. They rely on this to help them best determine how to proceed, how much information to acquire, where and when. As one front-line worker put it, with respect to family physical abuse:

\textsuperscript{103} Assumptive knowledge as described in Chapter One, includes practice wisdom, and experiential knowledge. The suggestion of a relationship between intuition and experiential knowledge is discussed in Chapter Five, Conclusions.
If you've been in Intake long enough you can pretty much smell those cases as they come up.\(^{104}\)

Interview with front-line worker, Aug. 29, 1995.

With regard to her intuition, one front-line worker adamantly asserted:

It's always...very very accurate. And it [the accuracy of the feeling]
always comes out in time.


One supervisor felt that it was his part of his role to translate his front-line workers' innate feelings into administratively acceptable, and formal terms.\(^{105}\) One front-line worker describing her uneasy feeling when she hung up the telephone with a client, discussed it immediately with her supervisor. During this discussion, the supervisor helped her to explicate what she heard on the telephone: the client's inappropriate laughter was compared to her more morose, serious tones at other times, the client's mention of not caring about the outcome of a baseball game was contrasted with her previous interest in the game, et cetera. These comparisons then gave the front-line worker a formal justification for wanting to act on this call.

In addition to their gut feelings, front-line workers describe how they use their years of experience at the front-line, their experiential knowledge, to balance out their time constraints with agency-related barriers, as in the examples below.

\(^{104}\) Similarly, another front-line worker referred to being able to "smell" custody cases, she stated,...custody you can smell on intake from 50 paces" (Interview with front-line worker, May 16, 1995)

\(^{105}\) Interview with supervisor, August 29, 1995.
If fiches are not available on site for at least three days, the front-line workers solution in the past was simply to call down to the vault and have another social worker read the intake summary, or the closing summary, to them over the telephone. In doing this, some sixty pages of microfiched materials, were searched visually in order to gain, as an example, a sense of the co-operativeness of the client or families involved. While formally this help is no longer available, and front-line workers with less than two years experience talk about it only in terms of what existed previously, the more experienced front-line workers stated that they still call down and request (or demand) that the records staff read summary information over the telephone to them.106

However, as this avenue of summary information is now formally cut off, some front-line workers have found a different means of dealing with fiches. Front-line workers appear aware of the legislative and administrative requirements of reading all case material before investigating a complaint of abuse or neglect. As a result of this requirement front-line workers report that they simply make a note of their request for the microfiched case history from the vault and that that information is pending. This helps, front-line workers report, circumnavigate the legislative requirements, and seems to be tacitly approved by supervisors.

Supervision is an example of a formalized agency process that experienced front-line workers, in conjunction with their supervisors, have adapted and reinterpreted to meet their needs at the front-line. The frequency and formality of supervision, appears to be directly related to the front-line workers' level of experiential knowledge, as well as their time pressures. Formally, one goal of the supervision is to act as a check and balance to front-line workers' assessment of a call, and to their later investigation. Under the Child and Family Services Act, (1985),

106 One front-line worker fondly recalled the time when case-aids -- social workers in training -- were assigned the responsibility of summarizing a microfiched file.
supervisors are legislatively required to approve of the assessment of the front-line worker and the subsequent decision to investigate.\textsuperscript{107} Not surprisingly, experienced front-line workers, however, appear to have developed a more consensual and supportive relationship with their Intake supervisor over years of service together. In the typical long-term relationship observed, supervisors are treated as peers, the front-line worker informs the supervisor of his or her decision to investigate with expectation of tacit approval. One front-line worker characterized such a relationship, commenting:

Yes, with me [and one other front-line worker] we're experienced. We just go to [our supervisor] and say here's what we're doing: X, Y & Z. And she'll say, "Fine", and I'll say "Here's something I need your official approval on because here's what I intend to do" ... I need to do that simply because procedures say I have to have her approval.

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.

Another example of the adaptation of supervision to meet the needs of the front-line worker occurs when supervisors hold informal supervision while they walk through the Intake area. One front-line worker characterized these meetings as "supervisory moments".\textsuperscript{108} The obvious advantage to both front-line worker and supervisor of such moments appears to be that their informality allows for expediency, they simply take less time, and do not require an appointment. One front-line worker commented:

\textsuperscript{107} According to the Revised Standards, all child abuse investigations, and allegations of abuse, the supervisor must be involved at the following points: initial referral or allegation; during the investigation; on completion of the investigation; when reporting to the Registry; when considering the removal of the child; when returning the child to his or her home; when the case is considered ready for termination; when the police are to be notified; prior to any court involvement; when the case is to be transferred; and during any major changes in the plan of service. (Revised Standards, 1992, p. 31).

\textsuperscript{108} Interview with front-line worker, September 3, 1995.
The biggest thing is that the more experienced you get, the more you are quickly able to prioritize things...when you first start here you always want to cover your ass, so you are always wanting to check things out with [my supervisor] or with somebody else, and that takes time. Simply because she has to share herself with eight or seven other people too. So that takes more energy, more time and everything else like that.

Interview with front-line intake worker, August 29, 1995.

Between the front-line worker and the supervisor these supervisory moments are considered to fulfill regulated standards of supervision. However, the downside of such supervisory moments are when the front-line worker has to record in the case file record the number of supervisory consultations he or she has had on a particular case. One front-line worker stated:

I know that when they do...reviews on our [case]files [this supervisory moment] won't come up. [The supervisor] knows every case that we're on. He knows, [that I told him] '...I went out there and they weren't home again.' And he'll say, 'Well keep trying or send them a letter.' But you, [the front-line worker], forget [to record it] because [the comment] is sort of in passing or he's at the next desk and you forget to write that down ... so...that's one of the things that's very hard to comply with.; to get all those little bits of supervision in. You know, you put the big pieces in where they're supposed to be but where the recording doesn't show is the others.

4.35 Agency Information Gathering versus Personal and Professional Values

The gaps, barriers and helps discussed here relate to the different information needs of stakeholders which are competing with the front-line workers' own personal, professional and ethical values.

Almost every front-line worker interviewed complained about the collection of information surrounding income, race, nationality, work status. While front-line workers acknowledge the need to gather much of this type of information for statistical purposes, they feel that the information collected is often too intrusive, not germane to their assessment and, in many cases, counter-productive to their assessment-related tasks. Front-line workers perceive that asking questions about such issues distracts the reporter from the issues surrounding description, for the purposes of assessment, of the child-at-risk. One front-line worker's explanation of a client's reaction to intrusive information, and the need to respond to it, stated:

The only thing I don't like recording, that I feel is very intrusive, and I get around it anyways, like this is off the record, is family income. I feel it is very intrusive, ... it can be really problematic in an interview when you're trying to talk, you know, 'What are you interested in my income for?' It's hard enough that you have to ask someone whether they are Catholic or not, you get reactions to that; but when you start asking them what their income range is they really get pissed off.

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.

With respect to the issue of income, one front-line worker felt so strongly that she maintained that she was willing to risk being fired rather than collect this information. All front-line workers observed and interviewed unequivocally objected to the issue of asking income-related questions:
Even if the person is on a limited income it is a personal question, it's like me asking you how much you're making a year, it's really none of my business. I know that ...we have to get involved in this family, [but] there is certain information really that we shouldn't ask.


In a review of its own document recording system, one agency's long-standing conflict concerning the collection of income-related information was acknowledged:

It should be noted that much discussion focused on the data element Income Range. Front-line workers feel this question is intrusive and unnecessary and may refuse to comply. Community front-line workers and the child welfare advocate see this as crucial information for the agency. A decision should be made at the executive team level with respect to this issue (Recording Project, Final Report, 1992, p. 50).

Many front-line workers' responses to conflicts between their personal, professional and ethical values and the agency's demand that they ask income-related questions is reportedly simple: they take a guess at the family income based on the type of jobs family members have and whether the family is collecting welfare; or, they ignore this field of information on agency forms, whenever possible. Front-line workers are clear that income, race, and nationality-related questions do not help them during their investigation:

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109 The Recording Project, later states that front-line workers are to gather income in ranges of $10,000. "Much discussion resulted in this recommended compromise between the rights to privacy of the client and the Agency's need for this information to inform advocacy." (p. 67)

110 One front-line worker stated that she "stumbled upon a supervisory override key." This key allows the front-line worker to by-pass mandatory fields such as income.
I don’t think that [income is] relevant. When [the computer] won’t let you [continue entering information] because it wants a mandatory country of origin; well if I’m talking to somebody on the phone and they don’t have an accent, I’m not going to ask, you know, where are you from?

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

In a similar vein, front-line workers feel that the agency and Registry requirement for explicitly detailed information about a sexual abuse does not further their investigation. One front-line worker, suggested maintaining a record to this level of detail is overly intrusive, and very likely does not serve the clients best interests and commented:

I feel that there’s a certain voyeurism with... the Child Abuse Registry. I don’t see any reason why they need to know whether it (the sexual abuse) happened six times or eight times or twelve times. And I don’t think they need to know whether it happened with one finger or two fingers...And maybe it’s my own sensitivity, but you know, I don’t know what they do with that information. ¹¹¹


¹¹¹ The Child Abuse Registry was supposed to act as a source of raw data on child abusers for further research. Despite the fact that they the Registry no longer has the resources to perform this task, the information is still legally required to be collected by the front-line worker (Bala, 1987).
4.36 Peers as Information Sources

Peers and colleagues within the agency appear to be the greatest source of impressionistic and concise information available to the front-line worker, conveying a sense of the case or the client to the front-line worker.112 Front-line workers were observed frequently sharing information that they did not formally record: "He's a bad social worker, I know that family, they are trouble, that "frigging" principal always makes promises for us that we can't keep".113 This type of information is valued by the front-worker. However, front-line workers repeatedly express their difficulty entering and extracting this type of information from the formal information system. As a result, it seems, peers are viewed as a help in overcoming information barriers of the formal system.

Previously, it was observed that front-line workers while on-call, often speak to the room, seemingly or specifically, looking for peer feedback. When asked about this process during the interview, one front-line worker labels it a "peer consultation", and refers to it as, "an informal process, just sort of running things by someone".114 Another front-line worker commented on the expediency of peers as a source of information:

If she [the front-line worker who had dealt with this family previously] had not been there I would not have had an idea of what exactly is going on in this, with this woman...I got [from this front-line worker] a sense of the history...around this case...how we'd been involved before...[and] it gave me some ideas to...just as to why we were involved in this situation.


112 The front-line workers interviewed implied that other front-line workers are thought of as peers, while family service workers, supervisors and receptionists are colleagues.
113 Front-line worker statements as recorded in field notes, June 21, 22 and August 14, 1995.
While front-line workers value this exchange of information with peers, they are well aware that the information is based on characteristics which are not only factual, but contain opinion, and often advice. It is these latter two characteristics of the information that front-line workers seem to believe are the most helpful to them: they value having a colleague give them an informed opinion based on their experience with a client or a past situation so as to validate their tentative conclusions. One front-line worker talked about the getting the "sense" of the case from their peer. Another states:

Sometimes you don't know why you're thinking what you're thinking, but [you seek out peers] to be validated that [what you are thinking] is based on something more than just a gut feeling.


Moreover, peers are a helpful source of information which is not captured effectively in the computer system, such as potential physical risks to themselves during the off-site investigation phase.115

The best source of information is your colleagues, especially if they've been here a long time and they know the family or the area. I guess certain things that should be on the computer aren't, like addresses that should come up as dangerous.

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

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115 Examples which arose during interviews included warnings about drunken fathers, vicious dogs, and the house being above a bar.
Front-line workers know that the gathering of personal and impressionistic information is perceived as contrary to their role of being fresh and unbiased observers of an alleged abuse situation. At the same time, they counter that gathering this type of information is consonant with the agency expectation that they collect as much information as possible when making an assessment.\textsuperscript{116} This issue of objectivity expresses itself most clearly when front-line workers were asked during their interviews, what they would like in a "perfect" intake system. They appeared to vacillate from wanting as much access to information as possible (that is, in the case of police records, access not only to the criminal record of alleged abusers, but also to any charges that did not result in a criminal record), to not wanting any. There is a field on the computerized face sheet that requires a case of child sexual abuse to be classified as either unfounded or substantiated. Of the information in this field one front-line worker commented:

Another worker, if they pick up that case not knowing what’s happened in the past, they would say, ‘There’s an unfounded sexual abuse allegation and they’ve got a new allegation coming in’. Now in a perfect world you’re totally objective, but [the allegation] is going to influence how you look at the situation.


Additionally, all front-line workers interviewed agree that the nature of their job entails a level of risk to themselves. Investigations into cases of the physical and sexual abuse of children necessarily place front-line workers in dangerous situations. Front-line workers regard their peers as their best source of information regarding at risk situations. The present computer program does not permit

\textsuperscript{116} As discussed below.
specific recording about safety factors that may affect front-line workers. These factors include: dangerous neighbourhoods and apartments, apartments located over bars, vicious dogs, and violent families. This is one aspect of information which front-line workers pursue when checking with previous social workers who had dealt with the case. In one case where there was a safety concern, the front-line worker was told by her supervisor to take the portable telephone and to stay in constant contact. However, the batteries for the telephone had not been recharged and so that technological safety option was not helpful. As an alternative, and as observed occasionally, a second front-line worker would accompany the on-call front-line worker on the visit.

Finally, it was observed that the most relaxed on-call front-line workers appeared to be the ones who were willing to accept or otherwise receive assistance from their peers during on-call periods. This help might be in the form of taking some telephone messages away from the on-call worker, screening an address, or checking a school location on a map. It seems as if team work at the front-line is an important help. The contrast between two front-line workers' perceptions of how supportive their peers were is expressed in two quotes below:

Keep in mind I'm on Intake. I'm still on-call so I'm getting all the other cases too. So you come back in at four o'clock, and you see what else ... that you got [to do] that day. You know, what else do you [have to] deal with. The unit is pretty good because when you get a big one like this, then somehow either [the supervisor] or the rest of the unit, or somehow, [the other calls get handled], 'Oops you've got to go out on another one'. Somehow that gets dealt with.


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117 See section 4.416 The Face Sheet.
One front-line worker spoke of the absence of this type of team support at his branch:

Say that I am dealing with a hot case on the phone and messages keep on coming in...teamwork is important... And of course when I say important when [the] team work doesn't work then it becomes a major block. It becomes a major stress inducing factor.... You know, please Mr. or Ms. [front-line worker] please can you help me, and they say, 'Oh I'm [too] busy'.


In summary, front-line workers state that they want to be able to make objective assessments of situations, regardless of whether the family has had prior contact with authorities. However, as they prefer to gather information in a form that has meaning to them regarding assessing a potential abuse, the source of much of this type of information is peers rather than the formal information system. Particularly, they value peers for their ability to provide tacit support to decisions and confirmation and validation for their gut instincts. Where the formal agency mandate orders front-line workers to collect as much information as possible, the reality of the intake process is that peers are a central and valued source of expedient information.

4.37 Informal Aids to Information-Gathering, Recording and Transmission

What emerged from both the observation and interview process was a range of informal recording and transmitting aids used by the front-line workers to gather
information helpful to their assessment tasks. As discussed above, peers are a critical source of information. Much of the information provided by peers is based on their experiential knowledge and insight drawn from the innumerable cases which they have assessed previously. This section outlines how front-line workers maintain and track those experiences.

It was observed that most new cases are not recorded on the computer within the twenty-four hours legislated by the Child and Family Services Act, and as directed in agency documentation. Yet some recording needs to occur and the informal response to this problem seems to be the use of manual recording devices such as calendars, and binders of loose-leaf paper, as described below. Recording a case opening in one of these formats, one supervisor asserted, at least meets the intent of the Ministry legislation.

In both agencies, it was observed that case openings are manually recorded by the front-line worker. One agency uses a simple four inch x five inch, "day-at-a-glance" calendar, recording the surnames of the clients when they open that case. The front-line on-call worker takes the calendar from the desk of the previous on-call front-line worker and, upon receipt of a telephone call, reviews the past two or three days and checks the list of cases recently opened. 119

Another branch has a wall size hard plastic board and each front-line worker writes the case file names up on the board with their own name beside it. Before a case is opened, front-line workers check this board. One front-line worker explained the rationale behind these informal recording systems:

118 As an example, The Data Codes Procedures Reference Manual (Agency Z, p. 4) states that "a computer information form must be submitted within 24 hours of any intake...case being opened."
119 Similarly, one branch uses a binder filled with loose-leaf paper, each page lists a day and date of the current week at the top of each page.
That board is helpful though if I am walking by it and I see what other people are doing and we both have the same name written down. Because some times you get two people just starting to work on the same case, but it's not open and you can't check that off of each other on the (computer) system. So it's helpful that way. It's also useful if you can't find something on the computer but the person on the phone is saying, 'but I called this in, I don't know who I spoke to', sometimes you can take a quick look at the Board and you see the name...People are pretty responsible (about writing on the Board, keeping it up to date).

Interview with front-line worker, October 24, 1995.

As discussed below, new cases are not placed on the computer immediately, but generally front-line workers report that it takes one to four days after opening. As the above quote suggests, these informal recording systems act as a help to this barriers, assuring that no two front-line worker's are spending time on the same case.

In addition to this recording system, more than half of the front-line workers observed kept a private journal of information, separate from the formal agency information flow (see Appendix N). Typically these journals devote only one line to each case that includes: the name of the client, the assigned file number, the reason for opening the case, the action taken, the date of the occurrence and the client's address.

It is not clear whether keeping a private set of records is permissible under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Individual Privacy Act (1987). One instructive agency document suggests that "all record-keeping must support the client's ongoing right of access to personally identifiable information. The record is to be considered an open document [with certain exceptions]" (Recording Project, 1992, p. 10).
Most lists begin from the first day of the front-line worker's job. One front-line worker commented that:

We have reams and reams of computer sheets, which are never accurate. Everything is here [in my list] that I should know. I keep my own list, a list of all the cases I have dealt with.


Front-line workers explaining their rationale for creating and maintaining these private records, highlight that these records:

(i) are the front-line workers' own records, separate from the agency information systems;
(ii) contain "all" of the information which the front-line worker actually needed;
(iii) are more accurate and current than computer records;
(iv) are more accessible than other records;
(v) serve as a memory "jog" when peers asked if the front-line worker had ever dealt with the case;
(vi) help front-line workers deal with stress by giving them a visual reference and reminding them of the number of cases they have dealt with during their time with Intake.

These reasons stand in sharp contrast to the formal reasons for collecting information as stated in regulations: prosecution, protection proceedings, reporting to the Child Abuse Register and determining whether services are required. 121

121 Revised Standards, 1992, p. 23.
The significance of front-line workers keeping their own separate records, then, is far from trivial. Explanations of why they keep them indicates that it provides front-line workers with a sense of security, accuracy, control, ownership and perspective that other information systems do not:

I can keep track of [my cases] myself, whenever I felt like looking at it. I know how many cases I've gotten on a given day or a given month. I looked back, I had felt like April was a really bad month and I looked back and I'd got twenty-two new cases in April.


While front-line workers can access the status of all of their open cases on the computer screen, they choose instead to keep a separate paper copy of their own. One front-line worker summed up the general reasoning with her simple assertion that "[t]he information in the computer is for management."\footnote{122} Another front-line worker commented that her list helps her to track her cases accurately through the formal system, while another acknowledged that, beyond a list, she also keeps a photocopy of all her contentious case files.\footnote{123}

Additionally, a number of front-line workers reported that the inspiration for a private journal came from their supervisor. This seems to indicate that, tacitly, some supervisors recognize that there is a gap in the formal information system in meeting the information needs of front-line workers.

\footnote{122} Interview with front-line worker, May 17, 1995.
\footnote{123} She stated that while she knew this was a clear violation of the regulations of the agency, she does this based on her past experience with another agency where notes and files sent to the vault, had gone missing.
A recognized procedure when interviewing alleged victims of child abuse is to hold the initial interview with both the front-line worker and the police present. This assists both the front-line worker and the police avoid unnecessary duplication of effort, misunderstanding, or misinterpretation. It also reduces the number of times the victim has to be put through the stress of an interview. As a result, both agencies have developed a detailed intervention protocol in cooperation with the police which explicitly enumerates the means and methods of investigating allegations of physical and sexual abuse against children through joint investigations.124

However, the breaching of these protocols by the police is a recurrent complaint among front-line workers interviewed. One front-line worker explains the barrier caused by police breaching the protocol:

...if the call [to investigate a report of child abuse] comes in around two o'clock, [the police detective] day shift isn’t really going to pick it up because of the issues around overtime...so it’s left to the afternoon shift to pick up which means you may not get an officer until 3:30, 4:00, dragging us [front-line workers] into overtime...especially...if you are going out late in the afternoon...and you are trying to determine who’s at risk within that home. 125

Interview with front-line worker, October 24, 1995.

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124 An agency-police protocol is required under the Child and Family Services Act, an agency-Board of Education protocol is not. The Act states that "such protocols shall include directives about mutual notification, consultation and sharing of information regarding the allegation and the course of the investigation. The protocols must, at a minimum, ensure that the police are involved in all investigations where there is a potential Criminal Code offense. (The Revised Standards, p. 11).

125 Workers identified a few specific schools and principals which often make a similar timing decision as police but for different reasons; in not wanting police or social workers visible on school grounds they often wait until late in the afternoon, frequently on a Friday, to call in reports of possible child abuse.
In one case, the front-line worker reported that the police initially refused to attend an initial interview in a clear case of physical child abuse.  

While front-line workers often mentioned these types of breaches of protocol in their interviews, they did not always view them as a barrier, but ironically occasionally viewed them as a help. That is, front-line workers were clear that it would be in the best interests of the victim, and the subsequent prosecution of the abuser, to only interview the child once. However, front-line workers know that some police officers are so poorly trained in sexual and physical abuse interviews, that their presence at the interview would be viewed as a barrier, rather than a help, to a successful assessment interview.

Access to police information is another gap that front-line workers identified. As discussed in Section 4.36, front-line workers complain about the inadequacies of computerized information regarding their safety. It appears that they turn to the police information system as a means to compensate for these inadequacies. Front-line workers report that they would like to have access to a police file listing charges as well as convictions against an alleged abuser. As significantly they would like information on issues centering around front-line workers’ safety such as a list of domestic abuse complaints against an address they may be visiting. One front-line worker contrasted police access to valuable information against her own access:

Let’s say this boy shows up again with a head injury and you want to know who abused him...you’d ask [the other branch] for the file to be sent down to you, and then two weeks later you could read it. But

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126 The explanation given to the front-line worker privately by the police officer was that his force had just received a stern lecture from their superior about the negative impact of overtime work on the police budget, and this investigation would have clearly required overtime work.
...[t]he police would have more information than we do at their fingertips. So the police would know very quickly who abused the kid, and what the charges were and what the disposition was.


Access to such police information, front-line workers report, is totally dependent on the relationship a front-line worker has with a police officer, and that officer's willingness to share the information.

Also mentioned as a barrier to information gathering was the role of the schools. Front-line workers interviewed reported that some schools, and/or some particular principals were less than welcoming of police and social workers on their property. These schools and principals would rather that interviews of their students take place elsewhere. As a result, front-line workers report that calls from school professionals often are initiated at the end of the school day, and particularly at the end of the week, Friday afternoon. The perspective that, 'child abuse doesn't happen among my students' generally makes information gathering from these school officials more difficult. One front-line worker was quite blunt in her assessment of the barrier which some schools purposefully create:

They [the school administrators] don't want any dirty stuff on their property. And that's the bottom line...they will [call us and say] 'Oh, he's just got on the bus, I see it pulling out now'. ...we get that all the time.


What appears to help the front-line workers in situations of breaches of protocol, and resistance to co-operation by external resources, is the clear mandate of the agency. Front-line worker find help in knowing that regardless of gaps or barriers, they have authority through the agency's mandate to proceed
with an investigation. Related to this, front-line workers recounted stories in which the support and encouragement of their peers and supervisor acted as significant helps in dealing with breaches in protocol by police and school officials:

I think that it's helpful in doing our job that we do have something clear and definite. I think you can go out and tell them, you know that people don't like Children's Aid knocking on their door but you can tell them you are obligated by law, you have no choice, and with that authority, the backing, is really very good in getting you into situations that someone who doesn't have that authority wouldn't be able to follow through with. So I think it's good to have it.

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

4.39 The Computer Information System

Overall, front-line workers appear happy to have access to computers, particularly for the screening functions. Barriers relating to the computer discussed herein include the introduction and use of the computer with insufficient training, the failure of the system to be user-friendly, and to provide information in a narrative, summary format.

4.391 Front-line Worker Attitudes

Although I am not an expert with our computer system but now that I have one in my office I can't envision having a duty day without one by my side because it's helpful.

Interview with front-line worker, October 24, 1995.
Apparently, front-line workers feel strongly about their computers. Despite all their criticism of the process of information collection, and the time pressures which their jobs entail, front-line workers expressed an almost complete devotion to having access to computers. 127

When viewed as a screening device the computer appears to be particularly valued by the front-line workers, despite any other concerns expressed. Front-line workers appear to enjoy having the opportunity to screen names and addresses right at their desks while taking calls. The screening aspect of the computer most closely fulfills the criteria of information characteristics that front-line workers say they want and need. Beyond the initial screening of calls, however, as observed above, front-line workers in both agencies appear to view the computer primarily as a post-assessment recording device, used most effectively when a case is two to four days old.

The issue of the computer not being user-friendly occurred frequently in both observation and interviews:

This computer system isn't user friendly but what can you do...the information you want is kept in there--you work with what you have.

Interview with front-line worker, August 14, 1995.

Some front-line workers perceive the very complexity of the computerized information systems to be problematic. One front-line worker stated that the computer was not yet a barrier for him, because he was not expected to understand its complexities:

127 Front-line workers clearly perceive that the new technology is better than what they had.
I didn't mention too much about the computer in this interview because it doesn't create a block for me so far. I mean they haven't asked to [me] to use it in a big way.

Interview with front-line worker, September 24, 1995.

Many complex tasks, while possible on the computer, appear to be still performed manually. At a feedback session, for example, one front-line worker commented that he had tried to type his case notes directly into the computer, printing them off, dating and signing them. 128 This front-line worker commented, however, that this process worked sufficiently during the initial investigation, because there is a certain information "flow". Beyond that, he found it was easier just to hand-write the case notes, adding a bit here, and a bit there. He explained that he had reverted to hand writing case notes because of the difficulty involved in finding the original document file on the computer, let alone keeping it accessible while he works on other cases. He concluded that it is too difficult to quickly access any files on line, and simpler to find and open up a paper file on his desk.

4.392 Formatting and Information Preferences

One barrier in information gathering for front-line workers is the formatting of the information provided by the computerized information system. At Agency Z, for example, the computer automatically prints out a one page summary of a case as it is opened in the computer system for the front-line worker. This page contains the basic variables that front-line workers have stated are valuable to them when beginning a case -- date of birth of the child-victim, address and the telephone numbers of the victim's family. However, it appears that the information on this

128 The agency has recently set a policy recognizing this as a legitimate means of keeping case notes, however, its admissibility in court, as legal, time-specific documentary evidence, remains unclear.
printout is generally ignored by the front-line worker, in favour of other information sources, and locations. For example, front-line workers were observed to write telephone numbers on case note lined paper, on file folder covers, or in week-at-a-glance calendars. When asked about this, front-line workers state that writing the numbers down is a convenient means of storing the number with the rest of the case information. Significantly, however, front-line workers strongly stated their objection to the format of the computer printout of telephone numbers -- a string of ten digits together--area code and seven local numbers. The front-line workers were emphatic that without the customary dashes in between, this telephone number is difficult to read and does not meet their needs (see Table 4). They were also clear that this problem had been raised as a concern previously with the information management department. Some front-line workers also felt that the format of the date of birth field, discussed below, both in printout and on the screen does not appear in a helpful format, and they were observed writing it out in long-hand.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Format That Front-line Workers Receive In Computer Printout</th>
<th>What Front-line Workers Would Like to Receive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4164632541</td>
<td>(416) 463-2541</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>091195</td>
<td>November 9, 1995</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked about front-line workers' dissatisfaction with the computer format, one information technology manager responded that, "The workers will
adjust to the printout format". 129 According to him it is the responsibility of the front-line worker to become computer-friendly, and not the responsibility of the computer to become user-friendly. This attitude was also accepted by some front-line workers. Turning the concept of a computer as user-friendly on its head, one front-line worker commented, "I'm not very computer friendly." 130

A number of front-line workers do make use of the computerized generated case file summary. They place each summary away in their desk drawer and when they have time, they use these summaries as reminders of cases they have opened and need to close.

As discussed previously, front-line workers' information needs also include the age of the child. However, the computerized information systems of these agencies only provide a field for the child's date of birth. This information when generated from the computer appears in the format DDMMYYYY. As well as this information not yielding immediately the age of the child, front-line workers complain that this format is also difficult to read.

Additionally, rather than the date of birth, front-line workers stated that what would help them is to know the age of the child, at particular points in time, for example, over the history of the agency involvement with the case, as well as at the time of this case opening (see Table 5).

129 Interview with information manager, July 19, 1995.
130 Interview with front-line worker, September 12, 1995.
Table 5
Information Needs and Wants: Date of Birth

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
<th>FORMAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Computer-generated date of birth information.</td>
<td>09111991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Information that is not available but that front-line workers describe as wanting from the computer</td>
<td>Current Age: 5 1/2 years Age at Case Opening: 3 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another oft-cited formatting barrier is simply the fact that a child's exact date of birth must be entered into the computer in order to move forward to other fields on the screen; however, that information is often not known until well into, or after, the assessment. One front-line worker commented:

We are trying to fit the computer programming...it's got very clear parameters it works under and anything that doesn't fit into it doesn't want and it spits it back at you. Like sometimes you won't have a birthdate for a child, only the year, but you can't just put 1988. It wants a day and a month.... So...what I do...I'll put in brackets '1988'. To somehow indicate to the next person that this child was born in
1988....[T]he computer says... that it has to have all this information, [but] it won't take like what you have, and we don't always have all that nice information that the computer wants.

Interview with front-line worker, July 20, 1995.

This example demonstrates not only the barriers that the computerized information system creates for front-line workers, but how they struggle to help themselves, by placing information they need into the computer whenever possible.

In addition to the issues relating information to formatting and computerization, front-line workers express a need for less information but information of a better quality. That is, they appear to want quality information over quantities of information. As discussed above, the nature of a front-line worker's crisis-oriented role demands that quality information be made available to the front-line worker expediently, and in a summary and brief form. However, during the research for this project, front-line workers were observed sifting through three screens of computerized and statistically-based information seemingly in search of a few, brief cues that would help them understand the family situation and develop an appropriate assessment response.

In summary, the computer appears designed to collect large quantities of information with the purpose of meeting the needs of numerous stakeholders. This massive storage capacity may, in part, be influenced by the Ministry's regulations which state that the front-line worker must collect as much information as possible. The vast quantity of information on the computer, and its storage and transmittal format are perceived by front-line workers as barriers to their

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131 Revised Standards, 1992, p. 10.
information needs. Additionally, the complexity of the computer also appears to present a barrier to front-line workers which may be exacerbated by what front-line workers perceive to be insufficient training.

4.393 Computer Training

At both agencies, there is a wide gulf between the perceptions of many intake staff and the information technology staff as to the adequacy and the reality of training and upgrading of computer-related skills.

One example of the need for basic training on the computer, while not generalizable, is illustrative: A seven year veteran of the Agency was observed dimming the lights and closing the blinds of her office when beginning a shift. For the rest of the shift the room remains lit only by the computer screen and a light on her desk. With the first telephone call, she leaned into the computer, squinting. She begins to prescreen the names supplied by the reporter typing in names to see if there is a case file for the family. This process was repeated numerous times during the day. It was observed that the words on the screen are very light and difficult to read. When asked about her office environment she stated that she believed that the light from the fluorescent lights above, and the glare from the window made the screen difficult to read. When asked if the problem could be her computer, she stated that it wasn't. When asked her if she knew what functions the two buttons on the front of the computer had, she replied: "Oh no, I never touch anything on the computer". As it turned out, the two buttons adjusted sharpness and contrast, and the screen's dimness was due to these buttons having been turned to their lowest setting previously.

Many front-line workers felt that their training on the new computerized information systems was inadequate:
They are bringing the technology in without always making sure training is there, [or] making sure we have adequate support in [intake]. Like we lost [our one computer-literate front-line worker], and haven't replaced him.

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.

One manager described the process of computer training for all new front-line workers as: at least 45 minutes on the first day, reviewing all the data elements, forms, policy procedures relevant to information technology; an hour in front of the computer walking the front-line worker through the system, and; on another day, information technology staff walk the new front-line worker through an actual intake on screen, step-by-step.

The formal manner of dealing with on-going computer training at one agency, is to assure that there is one "computer expert" in each branch. Front-line workers stated this approach was not helpful for them. They were clear that if this computer expert did not have formal training on the computerized Intake form, then the designated "expert" could not help them to overcome their computer-related issues. One front-line worker stated that she wanted a technical advisor on site, and "not just one who knows computers, but someone who has actually opened a case on the computer."

In contrast to the formal training procedures outline above, one new front-line worker dismissed her CAS computer training as "five minutes" of training. 132 Many front-line workers stated that they tried to overcome the barrier of a lack of training, or inappropriate, or inadequate training, through a "trial and error" principle. They usually just asked other front-line workers to help them out when

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132 Another front-line worker despite her stated lack of computer experience, stated that she had been given no training on the computer at all.
the computer wouldn't do what they expected it to. Front-line workers were observed relying on their intake peers to help them "muddle through", or "learn the ropes". They were observed asking questions about inputting procedures as well as an explanation of codes on the computer face sheet. They also asked peers about how to use the word-processing package, how to cut and paste, how to open, save, and most frequently, how to find documents that they had saved. In most branches, one front-line worker, or the supervisor was identified as the expert to go to if you didn't know something about the computer.

There were numerous situations, observed, and raised during interviews, where the front-line worker was clearly not familiar with the most basic operations of the computer. One front-line worker expressed her discomfort with even turning the machine on in the morning or off in the evening. This contrasts with another front-line worker whose first reaction when she experienced a problem with the computer is to "just turn it off and on, and start again!". Comments such as this were frequent during the feedback sessions, and elicited much laughter and nods of agreement. One front-line worker said that while the computer was a good tool, it caused "a lot of stress, especially if you hit the wrong key." Many front-line workers also felt that they did not have enough time to learn or upgrade their word-processing skills. Other priorities, such as completing paperwork, and investigations imposed on the front-line workers' scheduled training time.

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134 Interview with front-line worker, date.
135 Three appointments for word processing training were canceled by front-line workers during the observation period.
4.4 Review of Documentation and the Recording Process

Don't ask me why I fill this out.

Interview with front-line worker, July 20, 1995.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the research began with requests for all of the documents that front-line workers used. This resulted in the provision of some fifteen to twenty additional forms from each agency. During the observation period, another ten to fifteen forms and memoranda per agency were collected. Agency staff also provided documentation that discussed the information system, and the process of computerization. This next section discusses these documents in relation to front-line workers information needs.

4.41 Classification of Documents Reviewed: Instructive and Operative

The documents examined may be classified as either instructive or operative. Instructive documents are understood to be those that provide direction or instruction to the agency or staff regarding how tasks are to be accomplished. Examples of instructive documents that were collected during this research include: the Child and Family Services Act (1987); front-line worker job descriptions; Information System Data Codes Summary; Child and Family Recording System: Users Manual and memoranda from supervisors to front-line workers. Operative documents refer to the papers, forms, and computer screens which front-line workers routinely use in the performance of their tasks. Examples of operative documents include: the face sheet, telephone logs and child-in-care forms. 136

136 While each agency has different computerized operating systems, both have similar computerized information forms available to the front-line worker. For this reason, unless
4.42 Agency Standards and Recording Objectives

Agency documents state that records are kept for the following purposes: to create a record of the agency's activity with the client; to assist in information gathering and continuity of care when a case is passed onto another client; to facilitate inter-professional communication; and to comply with the Child and Family Services Act, 1982. This Act, in turn, describes the reasons for agency information collection: enabling the agency to protect and determine the necessary care for a child-at-risk; protecting other children; preparing for court action; documenting the clinical assessment of the client; providing a historical record of the client, and gathering information for use in planning and research.

The above list suggests that record-keeping is designed to satisfy numerous stakeholders, including: the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the solicitors and other court-related managers, planners and researchers at both the Ministry and the agency, supervisors, family service workers, front-line workers, the child victim, and the victim's family. Meeting the needs of such a large number of stakeholders appears to have been approached through the creation of one large, undifferentiated data-base. One report suggests that the amount of material captured by the information system is massive, and describes the goals of record-keeping through the imposition of order on this mass:

The task of record-keeping is not simply to store information, it is to transmit useful and relevant information, to make available as easily otherwise stated, references to a computerized operating system, or to regulations pertaining to documentation generally applies to both agencies.

as possible a mass of material which has structure and coherence imposed on it (Recording Project, Agency Y, p. 7).

4.43 Legislated Recording Responsibilities

This legislated demand to collect as much information as possible has, as a counterpart, a demand to record detailed information on cases at particular times. That is, the legislation of the Child and Family Services Act (1985), and agencies' administrative policies oblige social workers to complete documentation on every client every twenty-one days, sixty days, ninety days, and six months, as long as the case is open. ¹³⁹ Front-line workers strongly and repeatedly expressed their belief that these reports are driven by administrative, supervisory and statistical requirements of the agency, and that they do not appear to reflect the information needs of the front-line worker, nor family service worker. ¹⁴⁰

4.44 Litigation-Driven Information Standards

The Revised Standards emphasize that documents are to be maintained in anticipation of later court action:

It is important that as much detail as possible be obtained regarding the alleged abuse. This is not only necessary to assess the urgency of the child's immediate situation, but may be essential at the later stage of the process should court action be required. (Revised Standards, 1992, p. 10).

The potential for court action is an important theme within agency documentation and has obvious and significant impact on front-line workers' ¹³⁹ That is, one report per child, not one per family. ¹⁴⁰ Falconer & Swift state this unequivocally (1983, p. 148).
recording style. While formal agency policy requires input and feedback from the front-line worker, the manner and format of this input seems to be driven by the legal focus of the agency. Thus, front-line workers are expected to gather "facts" about a case, and are discouraged from recording their interpretations of these "facts" in the formal information systems of the agency.

At one feedback session, front-line workers spoke about a recent in-house course for the front-line staff, which emphasized they should not write down anything that cannot be defended in a court setting. Rather than interpret information, front-line workers were told to consider the benefits of "pure case recordings"; verbatim transcriptions of all meetings with clients, alleged abusers and families. The Revised Standards also emphasize such verbatim recording methods. While these approaches to case recording likely have great value in a court of law, they specifically exclude interpretive comments. Such interpretive comments, however, are precisely what front-line workers were observed seeking out in making an assessment as most helpful.

4.45 The Recording Process Reviews

The immediate needs of the client often take precedence in competition for the workers' time, and record-keeping often comes last (Recording Project, Agency Y, p. 7).

Both subject agencies had recently reviewed their information and recording processes with a view toward extensive modifications to their information systems. In both cases, the modification entailed a plan to computerize agency records.

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141 "The worker shall...quote verbatim statements made by the child and others" pp. 41-42.
Each agency has an ongoing strategic planning process of which these reviews are a part. One agency began this review process in 1991 142 and the other, in 1995 143. Representatives of both agencies stated that while the reports focused on the computerization of information systems, these reviews were done within the broader perspective of refining all information forms and information flows within the agency. The top-down process of technology introduction, discussed in Chapter Two, was revealed in one agency strategic plan whose goal was "to extend information processing to include 'office automation' applications such as word-processing, spreadsheet, DOS data bases, electronic mail and external communications for remote support ".144

A variety of factors that motivated this review at Agency Y were listed as follows: changes to legislation that would assure that clients would have more access to their own case records; stricter regulations regarding confidentiality and access by helping professionals to these same records; strong concerns within the agency about the lack of co-ordination, integration and standardization of recording formats; the opportunities to access new technologies and to support good clinical recording practices (which, it stated, the current system does not do). Similarly, agency Z stated that their goals were:

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142 The project began in 1991 and the final report, cited herein, is dated 1993.
143 This project began in 1985, with the objective of building a single, integrated Information System.
144 Computer Task Group; Strategic Plan, 1995, p.2
To provide key decision support for direct service and management and to ensure an appropriate level of accountability both internally within the organization and externally to funders, the community and to the client we serve (*Computer Task Group*, 1995, p. 3.).

The stated goals of both agencies were to be met through addressing the issues of:

(i) duplication;

(ii) timely access to extensive case file records, and;

(iii) information accuracy.

Regarding the latter two issues, documentation written expressly for the front-line worker clearly places the onus of responsibility for the delivery of timely and accurate information onto him or her, reminding the front-line worker, that:

...timely data submission or data collection is as important as accurate data...A computer information form must be submitted within 24 hours of any Intake or Family case...all changes of information must be submitted within 48 hours (*Data Codes Procedures, Reference Guide*, 1994, p. 4).

4.46 Front-Line Worker Input in Information System Design

At both agencies, front-line workers had been involved in the design process of the computerization of the information system. In one agency they were represented through a front-line support services sub-committee, and in the other they were interviewed by information technology staff, and re-interviewed a year after the computerized information system was introduced. Despite these efforts, however, information technology managers interviewed for this research
acknowledged that the front-line workers were, evidently, dissatisfied with the computerized information system. One explanation offered by an information manager was his perception that front-line workers did not understand what they were asking for, or being promised during the design period. For example, this manager explained that the front-line workers were originally asked whether they wanted a lot of information on one page (screen), or a little. Front-line workers all stated that they wanted as much information as possible on one screen. As a result, the intake screen is filled with coded fields of information. "Fifth Street High School", for example, does not appear as the child's school, rather, it appears as a school code (for example, "School: 44"). This code then needs to be looked up to find out the name of the school. In this sense, the implication from this manager was that front-line workers got exactly what they had asked for.

In one agency, following a number of complaints from front-line workers about the absence of room to record any narrative in the computerized information system, a "narrative field" was incorporated into the system a year after the initial design. Unfortunately, this field was situated behind three screens of data, and difficult for front-line workers to access in a timely fashion, i.e. when the reporter is narrating their story. From a users' perspective, this "narrative field", may be seen to clearly reflect the priority designers have for static information, over the front-line worker's need for fluid and narrative information.

145 A four page list of codes is given out to every front-line worker and is also available on line.
146 In the vernacular of computerization, this "narrative field" is merely a large alpha-numeric "data field".
147 Further, this field is not designed to accept word-processing minimal standard features, such as: wrap-around text -- a hard-carriage return must be added at the end of each line; underlining, bolding and formatting of text; a simple means to amend and correct text; and it only permits a limited number of text lines or other formatting features.
The face sheet, formally termed the "Family Profile and Change Form" is the primary and controlling operative form for intake services.\textsuperscript{148} As the front-line worker is the gatekeeper for the client to the agency, so, too, the intake form is the paper equivalent for client information to the agency information system. In both agencies, the intake form has been transferred to the computer which is now the preferred medium of information.

The face sheet, reviewed below is described as "forming the basis for the initiation of record keeping for all service areas".\textsuperscript{149} At the time of this research, and as discussed above, brief calls and their accompanying telephone logs were separate from the face sheet recording process at one agency, and computerized at the other. The purpose of the review below is to discuss, through description and front-line workers' comments, the user-friendliness of the computerized information system.

The responsibility for the face sheet resides exclusively with the front-line worker. Beyond the initial gathering of information, the expectation is that the front-line worker will update the face sheet as necessary, and as new information becomes available. One instructive document reflects the primacy of the face sheet while emphasizing the need for completeness and accuracy in filling in the face sheet:

\textsuperscript{148} While both agencies use slightly different forms, both face sheets share enough in common, serve an identical function, and are subject to such similar critiques by front-line workers, that for the purposes of this thesis they are treated as essentially similar and discussed together herein.

\textsuperscript{149} Recording Project, Agency Y, 1992, p. 62
This FACE SHEET will be used within every service area. Compliance with informational requests and necessary changes and updates is crucial. 150

The paper face sheet forms, described below, were designed in conjunction with the computerized face sheet screen. The information filled out on these paper forms was observed to be typed into the computer, usually one or two days after case opening.

In both agencies, photocopies of intake forms were made available to each front-line worker. Front-line workers were observed using these forms, rather than the computer, to record initial client contact information. The paper version of the face sheet is broken down into four, colour coded sections, totaling twenty pages of information. These forms represent all of the main elements of recording which occur at Intake. 151 The Intake Case Opening, (Parts One and Two) must be completed for all cases opened while the other forms are dependent on the type and dispositions of the case. 152

The Intake Case Opening Form, Parts One and Two combined are four pages in length. Each page contains a series of boxes, either white or pink. Part One is designed to be filled in in triplicate, with three copies of the form layered below each other. The titles of the white boxes refer to explicit case information, such as the name of the family, their address, the name of children and referral

150 The Recording Project, Agency Y, p. 49.
151 The intake case opening (six pages), Child-in-Care Admission & Case Opening (four pages), Child-in-Care Information Changes (two pages), Family Recording & Family Information Changes (four pages), Resource Opening and Changes (two pages), Caseload Transfer Form (two pages).
152 For example, the Intake Transfer Summary, (Parts One and Two), is filled out if the case is transferred to a family service worker for on-going counseling, while a Caseload Transfer Family Information Changes is filled out should an different Intake worker be assigned to the case. Children taken into care are further documented through the Child-in-Care forms (Parts One and Two, and Information Changes). 152 Any additional resources, either internal or external to the agency which the client is referred to entails a Resource Opening & Changes form.
sources. The information in the pink boxes requires coded or numeric information, such as: dates of birth, and codes for national origin, racial origin, housing type, et cetera. These coded fields are the ones that front-line workers have identified as creating barriers to proceeding forward through the assessment process.

The first page contains the following headings: Primary Caretaker, Children, Referral Information, Worker and Child Abuse Information. An untitled section on this page lists a series of fourteen codes relating to the family, including: income sources, racial origin, religion, primary language, aboriginal ancestry. At the bottom of this page is a directive that reads, "Forward to Information Services".

The opposite page entitled "Presenting Issues" is primarily a large white box, with no codes, or other listings. The directives on this page read: "Use this space to briefly describe presenting issues and any additional information that may have a bearing on risk or need for protection. Please print or write legibly and firmly (so that all copies are readable). When complete, please detach this part of the form...for inclusion in the file." This is the page that front-line workers stated they began their recording, and that it allowed them to write down the narrative as it was being told to them. This narrative recording page is not microfiched, and as discussed, most front-line workers felt that the lack of room for narrative on the computer screen was problematic.

The Intake Case Opening, Part Two: Worker Safety Alert, follows a similar pattern; the front-line worker Safety Alert Narrative section is approximately one-eighth of the second page, and directs that this narrative section "be forwarded to the Unit Secretary for typing (on Form WSA-001) before this form is sent to Information Services." Many workers complained about the minimal amount of room to record information regarding safety issues on the computerized information system.

As front-line workers have identified, the narrative field is found some three screens behind the initial primary caretaker screen, and is not designed for word
processing. One front-line worker, however, expressed her gratitude for having even a semblance of a narrative field, stating, "It doesn't wrap around but we're really happy to have a place to type in something."

The minimal space provided for narrative on the computer form and the separate, ancillary routing for it on the paper forms, may be perceived to bolster the front-line workers charge that the information in the computer is primarily for "management", rather than the front-line worker. This concept appears to be supported in one agency document that speaks to the imperative of front-line workers completing every field of information:

> The analysis of this information...is essential to service planning, administrative reporting to the Ministry, O.A.C.A.S., and the Board of Directors, as well as for the communication of accurate information to the public. 154

The complexity of the computerized face sheet, which many front-line workers commented on, may be inferred through an examination of the user manual which accompanies it. This manual outlines how and when to fill in each section of each screen, and provides definitions of, and details on every field. Additionally, the details of the codes themselves occupy eight pages, with three columns of codes per page.

The initial computerized intake case screen follows a similar pattern, requesting the name and address and date of birth of the primary care provider and address at the beginning of the first screen, and following with the request for codes regarding race, religion, nationality, and income. Appendix O lists the more

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than one hundred information fields on the Intake form at one agency.\textsuperscript{155} Branching out from this intake screen are the numerous screens which request more detail about the other household members, the child, the referral source and the nature of the abuse. Front-line workers must generate this information at the time of case opening, or as soon as possible thereafter. \textsuperscript{156} The regulations accompanying this face sheet indicate that the computer form (not the paper) must be completed within twenty-four hours of a newly opened investigation.

In observing front-line workers filling out the computerized face sheet, it was noted that specific fields were consistently not filled in, while in other fields inaccurate information was entered. For example, it was observed that front-line workers often do not ask, but simply enter, "Canadian" under the nationality field and often fill in fictitious information in problematic categories such as birth dates. Further, front-line workers were frequently observed simply omitting information from fields which they reported as discordant with their personal, professional and ethical values -- such as ethnic status, and income (see Section 4.35).

When a case is opened on the computer, a one page summary sheet is printed out for the front-line worker. This sheet lists such information as the name and address and telephone number of the primary care giver. In numerous cases observed, front-line workers felt that this sheet did not meet their information needs, and being difficult to read. As a result, the telephone number was copied onto the file folder of the case, and this print out seemed to be ignored.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{155} That is, there are more than one hundred fields for a case of one child being abused or neglected; this number increases substantially should this child have siblings, or should other children be at risk.
\textsuperscript{156} A few fields, such as the date of the last opening of this file (see Appendix Q), are filled in automatically by the computer.
\textsuperscript{157} As discussed in Section 4.392, Formatting and Information Preferences.
4.48 Brief Calls and the Telephone Log

In comparing the telephone log design to the actual recording practices of front-line workers, it was generally observed that formal and manual information process of recording brief calls does not appear to match the front-line workers' expressed needs. The telephone log, a legal size sheet of paper, allows for one line of information per call, as described above. However, it was observed that front-line workers write a great deal more information onto the left hand side of the page than the form permits, often using up half of a page to record one call. When questioned, however, front-line workers reported that they preferred to spend less time on, and reduce the quantity of information kept in these logs. As this is the only formal record maintained on a brief call, however, front-line workers stated they record as much information on the sheet as possible. Thus, they record extensively in anticipation that the case, presently assessed as brief, may return in the future and be opened as active. Additionally, many front-line workers have found themselves referring back to the log records when they get another call about the same family, or issue.

The brief, or telephone log is supposed to record every call into the agency requiring less than one hour of the front-line workers' time. However, it was observed that not every call of this nature was recorded. At least two calls per each shift came into the agency requesting basic child care information such as: "How old must a child be to be left alone in the house", or, "Where is there a day care near me?" Frequently it was observed these calls went unrecorded.

At the agency where the brief is placed on line, the concern for front-line workers is not so much recording the brief, but having access to that information again once it is recorded. As discussed above, that brief information disappears when the screen is called up for a second time.
4.5 Problems Identified in the Recording Process

4.5.1 Duplication

Both agencies state that reduction in duplication is a central ambition of introducing computerized information systems. Front-line workers, information technology managers and administrators all recognize the cost in terms of time and energy of repeatedly recording the same or similar information on a case.

Front-line workers report that short-term and brief cases result in minimal duplication, while the greatest amount of duplication takes place at the points of information transfer, particularly when:

(i) a file is to be opened;
(ii) a case is to be transferred out of intake; or
(iii) children are to be taken into care.

At these points of transfer, information is either reformatted, re-written, or re-typed in order to meet the requirements of the Ministry of Community and Social Services, or the agency guidelines, standards and forms.

From the perspective of the front-line worker, the computerized information system may be seen as a system that merely automates the existing information system: what is written down freehand is later transferred to computer. Duplication through multiple re-entry of identical information often occurs. Hand-written case notes are rewritten and reformatted to meet the design of the computer information screen. One front-line worker stated:

When doing up the Child-in-Care files, there are different forms that are done and you are repeating the same information over and over, the medical form and the face sheet require writing, while the recordings are on the computer.

Interview with front-line worker, June 27, 1995.
The new computerized information system has apparently helped the workload in some areas of work, while creating another level of duplication in others. Specifically, until the front-line worker can directly input information from a telephone, it appears that on-call front-line workers will continue to use paper and pen to begin the assessment and record information on the paper form of the face sheet. Nevertheless, front-line workers appear to view the computer as reducing duplication.

One means of minimizing duplication is through the computerization process referred to as "single data entry". This is the process of entering each piece of information once and only once into a computer as it becomes available. The computer then cascades that information automatically throughout all relevant files. In single data entry, for example, the name and date of birth of the client would only be entered on the face sheet form, and would appear automatically on other related forms as they were called up on the screen. However, this process is only partially operational at the agencies reviewed. For example, information from the face-sheet does not cascade into the twenty-one, sixty or ninety day recordings.

"Direct data entry" is the term used to describe users entering information directly onto the computer without benefit of paper or pen. 158 This is an explicit goal of both agencies. This goal is revealed in a list of one agency's computerization goals:

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158 Direct data entry is a separate goal from single data entry, and yet at the agencies visited the terms seemed to be used interchangeably by some managers as cited in the examples below.
Enhanced aggregate statistical analysis... improve "on-line" client specific query for both day and after hours staff, [and] "formless" worker-to computer-interface (direct worker data entry and query).159

Direct front-line worker data entry was not observed being employed at these agencies, and front-line workers did not refer to their data entry in these terms. It was, however, the subject of a pilot test at one agency, wherein front-line workers were given headsets to wear so that they could type directly into the computer as they listened on the telephone to a reporter. However, this project was not pursued beyond the pilot testing stage.

Significantly, it is interesting to note that the language and image of direct-data entry was raised by supervisors and information technology managers. One intake supervisor commented:

Well, I think that now that we've moved to direct-data inputting ...we're getting better quality information about our clients, and we can track the re-openings a lot better... Most [workers] aren't [filling in paper forms] anymore, they're just typing [assessment information] right into the system...Some of them...could open a case without ever needing a piece of paper.

Interview with front-line supervisor, September 29, 1995.

It appears that, at least in this instance, there is a gap between what the computerized systems actually provide to the front-line worker and some supervisors' perceptions of what these systems are providing.

159 Recording Project, p.4.
4.52 Conflicting Priorities

It was observed that front-line workers often need to choose between conflicting priorities they encounter. While the agency expects front-line workers to open cases on the computer within twenty four hours it also places barriers to this task. For example, each case opened on the computer requires a unique numerical identifier known as a case file number. At Agency Y, front-line workers must call down to the records department in order to have a new case file number issued. Without this file number, the front-line worker cannot fill in further fields on the computer. When queried, neither front-line workers nor their supervisors were clear as to why this requirement exists. 160

By way of contrast, Agency Z, while similarly not having all prior client records fully accessible through the computer, allows front-line workers to open a new case immediately, and of their own accord, i.e. without an intake supervisor's or the record department's approval. The supervisors at this agency mentioned that instances of front-line workers opening a new file on an existing case, were rare.

Once the barrier of obtaining a case file number is overcome, the front-line worker must deal with mandatory fields. These fields must be filled in, ad seriatim, as they are reached in the recording process, otherwise the computer will not allow the front-line worker to move forward, or complete other data fields on the screen. As in the case of the exact age of the child, discussed above, it was observed that much of the information necessary for mandatory fields appears not

160 Their speculation included:
i) that a case file on this client may be opened under a separate filing system, such as an adoption filing system which is not available to front-line worker;
ii) that a case file on this client may not have been entered into the computerized information system. Cases held by the agency prior to 1987 are not entered on the computer;
iii) that a case file on this client exists in a previous computer information system. A list of such files is maintained only by the records department;
iv) the need to assure that the front-line workers cannot open a new file on a case that has already been opened by other front-line workers, or family service workers.
to be available when a reporter calls in, nor when a case is opened. In many instances observed it was never available.

Front-line workers, when faced with the need to get past these mandatory fields, were observed to place inaccurate information in them. For example, many front-line workers, knowing the age of the child but not the date of birth, frequently enter "01" for the day, and "01" for the month and then the appropriate year. 161 Another front-line worker explains his difficulty with meeting the agency's mandatory information requirements regarding taking a child into the custody of the agency:

I have to do admission data, by hand, for all the kids. And that includes sections like [giving] a physical description of the kid, even though I'm apprehending from the hospital and haven't even set eyes on the kid, [or] the kid may have come in on [at] night and I haven't set eyes on the kids because they're in a foster home, or maybe I've seen the kid for thirty seconds of whatever, and I don't know maybe I'm describing the kid that's on the end of my block instead of the kid I just admitted!

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.

Additionally, the vast amount of paperwork required to be completed and read by front-line workers imposes on the time they have available for assessment and investigation of child abuse complaints. The twenty-one, sixty, ninety and six month mandatory recordings are an example of this problem. Most front-line workers complain that these interval-based recordings contain very little useful information for them, yet, it was observed, they seem to occupy a great deal of the front-line workers' time. Front-line workers complain that these recordings, being

161 When asked how many children in the file were listed as being born on January First, one supervisor replied, "Probably thousands".
interval based, must be filled out even if there is nothing new to add to the case.
Front-line workers suggest that it would be more helpful for their information needs to have a reporting process that was based on relevant changes to the case. They suggest that these changes would include: noting that the abuser has changed address, or the father has breached his court order, or that the child has withdrawn her complaint.

In addition to consuming much worker time in writing, these interval-based recordings also demand considerable time when workers are required to review them during the assessment process. One front-line worker noted that for most cases handled by the agency, minimal change may have occurred, yet the forms must still be filled in. She stated:

The [recordings] are...redundant. I don't know if I do it right or not, but I know that there are certain things that if I put it on the twenty-one day recording I'm not going to repeat it every time, so I just say, see twenty-one day...I'm not going to retype that stuff, it's a waste of time.


Front-line workers appear to deal with this time barrier by simply cutting and pasting the twenty-one day report, for example, onto the sixty day reporting form. This process, front-line workers report, has been greatly accelerated through the use of word-processing computer software. However, the end result of such a process remains the duplication of the same information in the microfiched case file.

Given the problematic nature of the various interval-based reporting requirements at one agency, front-line workers and supervisors were pleased with a "general amnesty" which had been approved by senior managers. This amnesty provided front-line workers and family service workers with the opportunity to catch
up on their overdue paperwork by filling in a one-time "catch up recording" form for all the overdue reports on a case. If they filled in this one-time recording, then any past omissions in their twenty-one, sixty, ninety and six month reports were to be ignored. Ironically, this amnesty was issued as a result of incorporating a new recording module into the computer, the design of which will make the meeting of administrative recording deadlines a priority:

All subsequent due dates cannot be changed as they will be set by the system's programming, which is regulated by the required initial 21, 60 and 90 day periods and then every 90 day thereafter from the date of the last recording... 162

In anticipation of some resistance to the imposed rigidity of these soon-to-be computerized due dates, the memorandum adds as a final warning that to those who may already be thinking of how to work around this rigidity "the Recording due dates are fixed by the system and will not be changed by the completion dates being entered". 163 In other words, the original dates can not in anyway be overridden, or altered.

Expediency, in terms of the obligation to formally record and open case files in order to move on through the investigative process appears to take priority over the agency information expectations and their demands for accuracy, and completeness. As discussed previously, and contrary to agency and Ministry directives to collect as much information as possible164, most front-line workers

162 From a memo entitled, Documentation of Recording Authorization and Completion Dates, Effective May 1/95 , p.1.
163 From a memo entitled, Documentation of Recording Authorization and Completion Dates, Effective May 1/95 : p. 2.
164 Revised Standards, 1992, p. 10
dealing with cold cases require a minimal amount of information to begin their more in-depth assessment.

4.6 Case Study Reviews

Three cases that were observed being dealt with during the observation phase, and were discussed by front-line workers during their interview, were reviewed. The purpose of the review was to examine the case-files in light of the front-line workers' comments and observed actions, and to identify any discrepancies between their interview statements and the formally recorded statements. The cases examined had not yet been placed on microfiche, but had been closed.

Front-line workers, for example, complained about the extensive documentation that they were required to complete; in two of the cases reviewed, the hand-written case note files were about 55 pages in length while the third was 24 pages long. Additionally, between 20 and 40 additional pages of information were contained in the files.

Each of the cases is organized first by family, then by child. The family case files are separated into ten separate file folders. Each accompanying child's file additionally is separated into folder titles such as: Preliminary Assessment and Social History; Annual Report; Crown Ward; Resource Reports; Other reports on Child; School Reports; Agency Forms (Information changes, releases, disclosures, consents; volunteer requests, service contract, financial form); Incidence/Occurrence Reports.

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165 Notes on these files were taken; however no photocopies were permitted.
166 Service Intake Record; C.A.S. Report; Medical Reports on Parents/Family; Child Abuse Reports; Legal Documents; Correspondence; Agency Forms; Case Notes; Youth Court Record; Other Non-Disclosable Information; Audio or Video Tape.
167 Swift (1990, p. 117) comments: "[T]he file format in child welfare is organized to capture identifying information about nuclear families, the broad outlines of their relations to one another, and their relations to relevant social institutions. These are the "facts" needed by
What was apparent with even a cursory examination of the documents was the omissions and duplication of information and forms. As an example, one document had left out the following case information: the primary language of the family, the national origin, religion, racial origin, housing type, aboriginal ancestry, income source, date of birth of the primary care giver, the place of employment, the postal code and the address of the child's school. Pointedly, many of these categories were ones which front-line workers had earlier expressed the greatest objection to collecting.

In this same file, there were four copies of a court document entitled "Ontario Court, Provincial Divisions Order". Each of these copies will be microfiched adding extra pages for the next front-line worker to sift through should the case be reopened later.

A related issue, identified above in section 4.42, regards the need of the front-line worker to read through lengthy twenty-one, sixty, ninety and six month reports; in one record examined, these reports, began in 1994, and were twenty three pages in length.

In one file the primary language listed was English, however the front-line worker’s narrative during the interview indicated that this case required an interpreter.

In one of the three files, there were three identical and unsigned Consent to Disclosure forms. These forms formally permit the sharing of information on a case among professionals. The necessity of having clients, and other community resource service workers sign these forms in order to share client information was a barrier identified by front-line workers. In the other two files, which also would have involved a similar sharing of information, no such forms were found. Also

workers to manage cases in accordance with their legal and social work mandates and to negotiate their relations with other institutions in the apparatus.

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missing from one case was a complete file section, entitled Child Abuse Reports. Evidently, it had been placed in a related case file. What is notable, however, is that this case file had been boxed up and was ready to be sent out for micro-fiching, having been reviewed and signed off by the appropriate administrators. 169

Most disturbing were the omissions in the documents mentioning safety concerns to front-line workers or to children. In one case a grandmother is considered as an alternative caretaker for a child because of repeated incidents of alcoholism and abuse between her mother and father; however the file fails to record that the grandmother, too, has a history of alcoholism. In another case, the common-law father’s abuse of his preschool child -- causing retinal damage, and days of hospitalization -- appears to be understated in the file; the child is listed as having been "punched". Additionally, the record makes no mention of an informal and impromptu visit which the front-line worker made to the abuser’s home to "see what this man was all about", and to tell him to "get some counseling". 170

A physically abusive father, who choked his daughter was known by the front-line worker to be living in the same house with her. However, the written documentation lists the abuser as living apart from his daughter. Further the file contains a copy of a court order which limits him to supervised access with his daughter. However, the front-line worker reports that he has been seeing her unsupervised, and that he has threatened her in order to frighten her into recanting her story of abuse.

A review of three case files is not at all generalizable. However, it is valuable to note that discrepancies do exist between the oral narrative of the front-line workers as related during the interviews and the formal written case files. There appears to be some information which is not reflected accurately in the formal

169 It had been in a sealed box until it had been requested for review for the purposes of this study.
case files, or alternatively, which is not recalled accurately in the retelling of the story. Impressionistically, the narratives were summary and to the point, whereas the written case files were more repetitive and massive.

The next chapter examines the gaps, barriers and helps discussed above in relation to the question of how front-line workers perceive their information needs and how they actually meet their information needs. It then reviews the sense-making methodology used in this research and suggests areas for further research. Finally, it relates the information needs of the front-line worker to the design of computerized information systems for the front-line of social work.
CHAPTER FIVE
CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the uses of information by front-line workers in the initial client assessment process, with a view to better understanding their perceived information needs. This was attempted through on-site observation, in-depth interviews and a review of documentation. A central assumption behind the research is that the experienced front-line worker is the essential arbiter of what information is necessary to perform his or her critical gate-keeping role; accordingly, his or her own perceptions of information need are of great relevance and interest. To this end, the thesis adopted as its analytical framework the sense-making model of information use. This framework emphasizes as critical the perspective of the information user, and provides a convenient structure, in its gaps, barriers and helps terminology, for better understanding the information gathering process.

Thus, in its broadest sweep, the thesis posed the following three questions:

i) How do front-line workers perceive their information needs in the context of their assessment-related tasks?

ii) What are the gaps, barriers and helps that front-line workers encounter in pursuit of those needs?

iii) What is the information-seeking behaviour of front-line workers with respect to information sources and systems?
Having observed and explored the gaps, barriers and helps encountered along the information gathering process in the previous chapter, this chapter seeks to build on that foundation with a concentration on the question of how front-line workers actually, as opposed to theoretically, meet their information needs. What emerges is that front-line workers appear to address their information needs through recourse to an informal and alternative information system. The characteristics of this informal system are detailed below.

In approaching some tentative conclusions regarding the perceived information needs of front-line workers, the next section describes some of the drivers shaping the perceptions of those needs and inspiring this informal information system. Such drivers include: the power of the narrative ethic, the role of experience as expressed through an interpretative-intuitive ethic, the need for a sense of ownership of information, and the influence of expediency and the reality of time constraints.

The following section suggests areas of further research that emerge from the findings, including a discussion of the application of the sense-making model in child protection, the role of narrative and intuition and the design of bottom-up, computerized information systems.

The final section examines the role and effect of computer technology on the apparent disjunction between front-line workers' perceived information needs and the information formally provided by the agency.

5.1 Information Use: The Informal System Described

Earlier, an information system was loosely defined as any combination of people and physical resources that combine to gather, store, manipulate, transmit
or otherwise communicate, information. Certain salient features of the informal system emerge from observation as summarized and contrasted with the formal system in tabular form below (Table 6).

Taken together, the various responses, to gaps and barriers, and the helps that were observed and described in Chapter Four appear to meet such criteria for an information system, albeit loosely structured and informal in the sense of a system unsanctioned by the agency. Whereas the formal information system may be characterized as top-down, initiated by administrators and information managers, the informal system has evolved bottom-up, by and purely for front-line workers. The formal information system is designed to meet the diverse needs of numerous stakeholders in child protection: the Ministry of Community and Social Services, funders, agency board members, police, school administrators, other professional child protection organizations, agency management, supervisors, family service workers, front-line workers, clients, and parents. By way of contrast, the informal information system meets the exclusive information needs of the front-line worker related to assessment. The information front-line workers prefer is largely qualitative and interpretative in character, whereas the formal information system, designed to meet the needs of so many stakeholders would best be described as quantitative, focusing primarily if not exclusively on the generation of statistics. The formal information system appears to be driven by controlling legislation regarding child protection, and agency protocols and regulations. For example, the computer software is programmed to remind the front-line worker of mandated and interval-driven recording obligations. The informal information system, however, appears to be results orientated; what works, works: only those directions furthering the assessment process are pursued. Similarly, peers appear to provide, among other things, a "quick fix" of information relative to a client, or a
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<td>sequential</td>
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<td>(Regulations &amp; Legislation)</td>
<td>(What Works)</td>
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<td>Theme</td>
<td>The Process</td>
<td>The Result</td>
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<td>Ambition</td>
<td>Completeness</td>
<td>Expediency</td>
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<td>Point Of Perspective</td>
<td>The System</td>
<td>The User</td>
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<td>Description</td>
<td>Highly Structured, Static</td>
<td>Loosely-Structured,</td>
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<td>Dynamic, Interpretative</td>
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<td>Primary Method Of</td>
<td>Written</td>
<td>Oral</td>
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<td>Transmission</td>
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<td>Vehicle Of Transmission</td>
<td>Case Recordings, other</td>
<td>The Narrative (Stories) and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Written Documentation</td>
<td>private journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information Characteristics</td>
<td>Cumulative, Repetitive,</td>
<td>Accessible, Summary,</td>
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<td>Massive, Statistical</td>
<td>Narrative</td>
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<td>Empirically-Based</td>
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case; whereas the ambition of the formal system appears to be completeness, capturing as much information as possible to serve as many stakeholders as possible. The informal system appears to be broadly based on expediency; gathering only the necessary information front-line workers perceive will get the task accomplished. The overall emphasis of the formal system may be seen to be on process, whereas the informal system is results-oriented.

The formal information system may be described as highly structured, creating barriers, for example, when information for a mandatory field on the computer is not available. When this occurs, the front-line worker cannot complete the assessment. By way of contrast, the front-line worker's informal system may best be described as more versatile and loosely-structured; when a gap or barrier occurs, the front-line worker moves forward by maneuvering around it. The information from the formal system is considered by workers as static; whereas the informal system provides information in a more dynamic form.

The informal information system seems to rely much less on information printed out by the computer, or recorded on microfiche, than it does on information which is orally transmitted and maintained in journals. The information cues necessary to meet front-line workers' assessment needs seem to be sought through a narrative process, with front-line workers and supervisors alternating between taking the role of listeners and narrators of stories. Formally, however, front-line workers are required to meet their information needs through written or word-processed agency recordings and documents.
Finally, it appears that information collected through the formalized information system reflects an empirically based tradition, recording facts, and explicitly omitting speculation, opinion and advice. In contrast, front-line workers seem to specifically seek out experienced-based speculation, opinion and advice, particularly when they have an intuitive reaction to a reporter’s story.

This information system is termed informal when contrasted against the formal, agency-designed and sanctioned information system. It may be alternative in the same sense that Dervin & Clark (1987) label their information paradigm, alternative; that is, it is not meant to replace existing systems, but to enlarge the options available for assessing information needs. In this manner, the informal information system of the front-line worker may be seen to be comprised of certain elements shared with the agency system, either borrowed whole or modified to serve an expanded role. It also is comprised of certain ad hoc additions, extraneous to, and sometime explicitly excluded from, the formal information system.

Much of the people and physical hardware may be seen to be shared between the formal and informal systems. What may be seen to be new for the informal system is the role of the narrative as the heart of the informal information base, with peers as the primary transmitters and communicators of valuable narrative information. The computerized information base has been marginalized by front-line workers, as have been the microfiched files. Record keeping through calendars and private journals are informal recording devices not recognized in the formal information system, or in the policy and regulations of the agencies.
5.11 Formal Information Base Marginalized

While the front-line worker must legally and ethically consult the formal information system, it appears that its information base is marginalized when it comes to meeting front-line workers' information needs.

The formal agency information base contains a massive collection of data, and attempts to serve numerous stakeholders who have competing and often conflicting information needs. However, what this research seems to indicate is that the formal information base is not perceived by front-line workers as meeting their information needs.

In Chapter One, an information base was described as the physical resources which combine to gather, store, manipulate, transmit or otherwise communicate information. From this perspective, front-line workers believe that the formal agency information base does not fully, nor in many cases, partially gather, store, transmit or manipulate information for the purposes of communication of their information needs. Put another way, the formal information base is not an information base as perceived by front-line workers.\textsuperscript{170}

The microfiche information base, as an example, is cumulative through its interval-based recording of information. However, this characteristic creates a barrier for front-line workers who want to gather summary information. Further, the microfiches were seen to take two to three days to arrive at a branch, diminishing their ability to transmit information expediently to front-line workers. In this manner, the microfiche information base fails to meet the information needs of front-line workers.

\textsuperscript{170} From a more practical, less definitional perspective it may be argued that the formal information base is not a relevant information base as perceived by front-line workers.
Similarly, the computerized information system is described by front-line workers as complex and not user-friendly, these are two characteristics which workers value. Mandatory fields, for example, act as a barrier to meeting the front-line worker's need to expediently record case relevant information. Brief cases that disappear when opened on the computer is an example of difficulty with accessing stored information, while the print out format of telephone number and date of birth fields are examples of the difficulty with communicating information stored in the formal information base.

Finally, the term the "vault" seems to indicate that a priority of the agency is to protect and store cumulative quantities of information on case histories. It appears likely that these priorities, in many instances, conflict with the front-line worker's need to expediently manipulate, transmit and communicate quality information.

Overall, the formal information system, as described by supervisors, managers, and in agency documentation, is to be used at the front-end of their assessment process. However, it was observed that there are a number of barriers in the formal information system to the gathering, storing, transmitting, manipulating and communicating of information which front-line workers need. As a result, it seems the formal information system is marginalized; being used more toward the tail end of an assessment and investigation, rather than at the front-end as it was designed to be used.

### 5.12 Peers As Information Sources

The barrier of a marginalized information base appears to be, in part, compensated for through the use of peers as an alternative source of gathering, transmitting, storing, manipulating and communicating information.
It was observed that front-line workers consistently seek out the experiential knowledge of other social workers who have worked with a particular family whose case has been re-activated at Intake. Front-line workers report that their goal in seeking out these workers is to gather information germane to their assessment responsibilities in a summary and narrative fashion.

The communication of this information is through narrative story-telling. This process of story-telling appears to involve transmitting information stored in the mind of the story-teller.

The manipulation of information by peers appears to be more complex, and demanding of further research. However, it was observed that front-line workers often enlist the support and attention of their peers immediately, at the initial point of a call, using a loud speaking voice that can be heard throughout the intake area. Frequently, front-line workers may place the caller on hold in order to direct a specific question to a peer, or just to speak to the room. Many front-line workers appear to welcome opportunities such as this to clarify what they has been reported to them, what they believe about a case, or what they observed throughout a particular investigation. In telling and re-telling their story, they appear to elaborate on some details, and clarify others, in reaction to the feedback they receive from the listener. In this sense, peers may be considered a source of validation and support for the front-line worker's analysis of the assessment situation.

Peers then, seem to recognize the importance of gathering, transmitting, storing and manipulating information among each other for the purposes of meeting a front-line workers information needs.

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171 In this respect, the front-line worker on call is somewhat of "a first among equals"; everyone seems to defer to his or her needs in dealing with a call that seems to involve a child-at-risk. Such observed behaviour includes: peers looking up addresses for the on call worker, screening names which workers have written down on scraps of paper, and bringing the on-call worker tea or coffee.
Much of the information which front-line workers gather and exchange among each other appears to be substantially impressionistic, expressing verbally what they are not permitted to write down in the formal case record.

The role of interpreting information and offering an impressionistic perspective, while problematic for the formal information system, seems to be a necessary aspect of information gathered to meet the needs of front-line workers. In a time-limited, crisis-oriented job such as assessment, many front-line workers appear to rely on impressionistic information such as their gut reaction to a case.

5.13 Experience and Intuition as Information Sources

Most of us at intake rely on our instincts heavily.

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.

During their interviews, front-line workers spoke in terms of having a "gut reaction", an "adrenalin rush", and an "instinctual feeling" towards a call. One front-line worker explained that when these feelings occurred she would just keep asking questions in order to make the feeling go away.

These types of reactions to calls have a visible effect apparent through casual observation. Telephone calls, described later as "serious" by front-line workers, elicit a physical reaction from them: case files are closed, papers cleared away, a writing surface created, and the keyboard pushed in.¹⁷² Viscerally, the tone of voice of the front-line worker often lowers, the body stiffens, hand movements stop, such as the clicking of a pen being opened and closed; concentration and listening seem to intensify.

¹⁷² This might be an area of concern for information managers seeking to computerize. It would seem that the keyboard being pushed in when the call becomes serious is the opposite of the desired response if the computer is to be an effective assessment tool, with the keyboard as its' transmission tool.
This intuitive feeling appears to act as a transmission source, letting the other front-line workers know that some important information is being communicated and heard. While front-line workers report that they often need peer and supervisory help interpreting their gut reactions to a reporter's story, they all consistently report that they have learned to trust these feelings.

This type of intuitive or gut reaction appears to act as a cue, helping front-line workers to determine the direction of their assessment and investigation. Such cues, triggered by visceral reactions, are not recognized as a valid source of knowledge within a formal information system designed to meet information standards to prosecute child abusers.¹⁷³

However, it appears that most front-line workers draw on their professional years of experience at the front-line to interpret these intuitive reactions. As in the example above, one front-line worker simply becomes more persistent, asking questions until the feeling goes away. In other cases, it was observed that the years of collective experience of peers and supervisors are called upon to interpret the gut reaction. A front-line worker seeks out peers and the supervisor to retell the narrative they have just listened to, and to elicit opinion and feedback. Often, it was noted during observation that front-line workers would follow their narration and invite commentary by asking such questions as: "Am I crazy? Is it just my imagination or what? I can't figure out what's bothering me about this, does this make sense to you?" In this way, professional experience -- an assessment element recognized in the formal information system -- is used to interpret the intuitive feelings of front-line workers -- an assessment element not recognized formally but used substantially in the informal information system -- into meaningful communication.

¹⁷³ That is to say, a front-line worker can not present as evidence the fact that she 'just had a bad feeling about this alleged abuser'.

Additionally, the supervisor was observed helping the front-line worker to interpret these gut feelings and to translate them into more tangible, and evidentiary terms, suitable for the formal information system.\textsuperscript{174} One front-line worker commented on this need to re-interpret and redefine what they had heard for the formal information system:

\begin{quote}
[It] used to be a lot more liberal in terms of what we could put in our recording, now we pretty much have to stick to facts.

Interview with front-line worker, August 29, 1995.
\end{quote}

Workers may, however, have an option to record detailed information informally, as discussed below. Interestingly, it appears that they either do not have a need to, or choose not to, record such intuitive gut reactions to cases.\textsuperscript{175}

5.14 The Manual Recording Aids

This is the best system we have, we write in the names of the cases we've opened.


Manual recording aids of the informal information system include: day-at-a-glance calendars, and binders filled with loose-leaf lined paper for recording new cases opening, a wall-size board, centrally located, and private journals. Additionally, telephone logs, may be seen to be a manual information aid that is

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{174} Such terms may include, for example, 'her laughter seemed inappropriate, he seemed nervous or hesitant, he never really answered the question I asked him'.
  \item \textsuperscript{175} It may be that the reason for these types of notes not being recorded, is that the name itself, a simple asterisk beside the name, or the demographic information appearing on a computer screen may be enough to recall a case which created such visceral reactions. Certainly this may be a subject for further research.
\end{itemize}
modified from the formal information system in order to meet the front-line workers' information needs, as discussed above.

The calendars, binders and wall-size board are all used as information storage, retrieval and transmission devices. They all serve to record cases that were recently opened, according to the date and time when the case arrived. In this manner, front-line workers report, these aids fill a gap created when time pressures do not permit the front-line worker to formally record a case opening on the computer. These recording aids were observed to be effective transmitters of information, being portable and summary. Front-line workers were observed reviewing the calendar\(^{176}\) at the beginning of their on-call shift, and physically handing it over to the next front-line worker on-call at the end.\(^{177}\) Additionally, retrieval of information simply requires a visit to the on call worker's desk to pick up or read the calendar.

Telephone logs seem to store information on brief calls very effectively. However, it seems that front-line workers, in writing more that the allotted one line per case, perceive a need to store more information than anticipated in the design of these logs. While information may be retrieved from these telephone logs, it was observed that this process may be very time consuming. As mentioned previously, two front-line workers used more than an hour of their time searching through these telephone logs. The logs are stored on-site in filing cabinets, filed by day and month.

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\(^{176}\) Hereinafter the calendar refers to both the calendars, and the binders used at all but one branch.

\(^{177}\) During shifts, front-line workers would visit the on-call front-line worker's desk and review the calendar, often commenting on the number of cases opened that day. This ritual of reviewing the calendar and initiating discussion around the number of case openings was observed to occur in every branch.
Private journals, on the other hand, appear to effectively store the information workers need. The information stored in this recording aid is very cursory, often consisting only of a series of clients' last names, and case file numbers. Even the most extensive recordings were limited to the client's name, the date of opening, a one or two word description of the case (i.e. sexual abuse or physical abuse) and the disposition of the case.\footnote{Of course, the case file number and the disposition of the case are entered later on in the assessment process.} This informal information recording system is described by some front-line workers as their own, that is, belonging to him or her.

These journals may be interpreted as also aiding in the transmission of information, as front-line workers were observed referring to them when asked to narrate information about a previous case.\footnote{As identified by front-line workers in Chapter Four, private journals appear to do more than just store information, acting as a stress reducer, a memory jog, et cetera.}

5.15 Oral vs. Written Communication

The primary mode of communication for the informal information system is oral: the manual recording aids, described above, appear to supplement the oral vehicle. The human voice acts as a primary transmission tool for the front-line worker, communicating through the telephone, and into the room.

It was observed that the oral communication with peers often begins immediately upon telephone contact with reporters. The content of this contact, in many instances, was communicated immediately to peers and supervisor by speaking to the room. Alternatively, many front-line workers were observed, putting the reporter on hold in order to narrate their interpretation of that reporter's story to their peers and supervisor.
Front-line workers appear to be very comfortable with this oral method of transmission. It was observed to be employed extensively throughout the assessment and investigative process, being used between the front-line worker and reporters; peers; supervisors; child-victims and police.

Much of the communication between supervisor and front-line workers regarding cases also takes place orally. Front-line workers, however, speak in terms of "supervisory moments"; that is, instances where supervisors participate in the narrative story-telling while passing through the Intake area. One reason they do this, one front-line worker suggested, is for the purpose of approving or commenting on a front-line workers initial assessment plans or interpretation. Front-line workers and supervisor all seem to agree that most of these oral supervisory moments are not formally recorded. The oral supervisory role is an informal element that has been borrowed and modified from the formal information system.

The primary means of information transmission among peers, then, is oral. Their narrative stories are unwritten, undocumented, summary and non-statistical in nature. These transmissions appear to stand in sharp contrast against the empirical nature of the formal information system, providing as they do, sources of information that are interpretative, experientially-based, opinionated and advice-laden.

In summary, it appears that an informal information system has evolved alongside the formal information system. This informal information system borrows elements, whole or modified from the formal information system, and expediently meets the information needs of the front-line workers. The informal system also appears to meet the criteria for being an information system; consisting of people and resources that gather, transmit, store, manipulate or otherwise communicate information. Unlike the formal information system, front-line workers appear to
accept the premise that, for information or fact to become meaningful it requires an interpretative element.\textsuperscript{180}

Unlike the information placed on the formal information system, information in the manual system appears to be the exclusive domain of the Intake department and is generally not accessible to other stakeholders.\textsuperscript{181} Front-line workers comment that this system is user-friendly, accurate, reliable, and accessible.

The informal information system may be characterized as bottom up, operated for and by front-line workers, with the tacit support of their supervisors. Salient characteristics that differentiate it from the formal information system include a results oriented focus on the quality of information, using an oral method of transmission, and an emphasis on expediency.

With these factors in mind, it may be useful to revisit Dervin's (1986) definitions of gaps and barriers: "gaps" are defined as anything which prevents movement forward, whereas, "barriers" are anything which stands in the way. While Dervin notes that, for respondents in an interview, these two words may be used interchangeably it is clear that in an environment that places a primacy on expediency, this rule does not apply. Rather, in a crisis-oriented, child-protection role such as front-line work, it appears that there are very few gaps which will prevent workers from moving forward in their assessment and intervention roles. The lack of information available on a case (i.e., a gap) does not prevent a front-line worker from initiating an investigation. However, the refusal of police to allow social workers to interview victims and witnesses (i.e., a barrier) prevents the front-line worker's assessment from proceeding.

\textsuperscript{180} In contrast, it seems obvious that for a gut reaction to become meaningful it requires an interpretative element.

\textsuperscript{181} This is particularly true of the private journals, which are kept under the desk-top blotter of some front-line workers, and locked in their desks at night.
There seem to be a number of barriers, many of them administratively-driven, which stand in the way of the front-line worker. These barriers include discrepancies between the obligation to review all information on a case and the inaccessibility of that information on a timely basis, and the massive amount of information that must be sifted through to glean one or two relevant cues on a case. The imagery of a vault of information suggests both the quantity and value which administrators place on information collected and stored, and the relative inaccessibility of that information.

The surfeit of, and access to information, legislatively and administratively required to be collected and stored, acts more as a barrier to front-line workers, than the absence of information, or resources, acts as a gap. Put in another way, in child protection, the requirement to collect massive amounts of information appears to be more of a barrier to front-line workers than the absence of information or resources acts as a gap.

5.2 Information Needs Revisited

This research suggests that the informal information system bridges a fundamental disjunction between the formal information system and the information needs of the front-line worker. This section suggests that there is likely an underlying structure that drives the evolution and development of such an informal information system. This structure consists of such elementary drivers, discussed below, as: the primacy of the narrative ethic, the interpretative-intuitive ethic of knowing, the sense of ownership of information, and the expediency of time and resource constraints.
5.21 Story-Telling: The Primacy of the Narrative Ethic

Story-telling appears to be a natural and elemental means of communicating human events and experience. Story-telling is pervasive in its reach: fables, myths, legends and family histories are all passed along through generations of story-telling. Each story has certain essential elements: a plot, protagonists, antagonist, etcetera. All are systematically and thoughtfully organized according to a beginning, a middle and an end. The telling of a story is a powerful and elemental vehicle of information transfer by a reporter to a listener.

In his examination of story-telling, Polkinghoine (1988) describes the narrative form as, "[an] organizational scheme expressed in story form...the process of making a story" (p. 13). He states that narrative story-telling is the fundamental scheme by which people understand events. They do this by creating causal connections between human actions and events over time. He formally defines narrative as:

...a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole...Narrative provides a symbolized account of actions that includes a temporal dimension (Polkinghoine, 1988, p. 18).

Narrative story-telling appears to be an elemental and pervasive feature of child protection at the micro level of practice, where the primary focus of a social worker's activity is direct interaction with individuals and their families. Salabeey (1994) identifies the primacy of the narrative ethic at this front-line level:
Practice is an intersection where the meanings of the worker (theories), the client (stories and narrative), and culture (myths, rituals, and themes) meet. Social workers must open themselves up to client's construction of their individual and collective worlds, the major vehicles for this are stories, narratives, and myths (1994, p. 351).

This intersection of meaning and culture, likewise happens at the micro or direct practice level of children's aid societies as the front-line workers interact with clients, reporters, peers and community resources in order to assess reports of children at risk.

Much of the assessment process employs a narrative story-telling ethic: reporters call in, and with little or no prompting from the front-line worker, the information of alleged abuse is organized as a narrative. It appears that reporters choose this narrative story-telling naturally and instinctually.

The front-line worker appears to listen to the story, interrupting only to clarify various plot events, in eliciting details of the situation being described. Alternately they may seek some clarification of temporal, causal factors; sorting out what happened and in what order, asking specific time and sequence related questions. In other words, front-line workers seek to help the client narrate their story in a meaningful and purposeful manner.

In the informal information system, story-telling continues well after the telephone call is terminated. The front-line worker narrates his or her interpretation of the story to peers for consultation and validation. This process of consecutive story-telling, with the information organized as a narrative, moves further along the system when the front-line worker narrates his or her story to the supervisor during the formal consultation meeting.
Front-line workers appear to tell and retell stories to their peers for the purpose of further clarifying their own interpretation of the reporter's story. In the retelling, cues are identified both by the teller and the listener. Front-line workers appear to use these cues to make assessment decisions.

In summary, what was reported and observed during this research was that reports of possible abuse or neglect almost invariably arrived from the reporter in story form. They are then understood by the front-line worker in story form, and passed on to peers and supervisors in story form. And, it is suggested, the iterative process of story-telling likely threads its way throughout the agency and the informal system, appearing for one last time when a front-line worker is called to testify in a court setting. In the courtroom the front-line worker's own assessment "story" is narrated.

However, it appears that the formal information system has little or no place for narrative information; whereas the informal system is formed around the narrative, and is integral to it.

Further, it appears that the formal information base imposes a different structure (and likely meaning) to cases of child abuse and neglect. It atomizes the story of abuse. Front-line workers, in order to complete their assessment process, must deconstruct the narrative for the purpose of entering "facts" into the computer. In turn, front-line workers complain that these atomistic stories act as barriers when they are trying to (re)construct a picture of the family case history. To compensate for this barrier, front-line workers seek out narrative information from their peers, a form which both client and front-line worker are familiar with and seem to turn to naturally.
5.22 Experience: The Interpretative-Intuitive Ethic

In the broadest sense of the term, experience is developed by the act of living through an event or a series of events. Experiential knowledge, therefore, is the learning that develops over time through experiencing of a repetition of similar events. In the case of the front-line worker, for example, they appear to have developed an expertise in judging the veracity of allegations of child abuse or neglect grounded upon previous experience.

This expertise seems to be based on what might be termed an "interpretative-intuitive" ethic. That is, front-line workers, as the gate-keepers to the agency routinely listen to, react, and assign meaning to the narrative story of reporters on behalf of the agency. One aspect of this assignment of meaning to the story appears to be an iterative and external one; through the telling and retelling, ordering, comprehending and re-organizing the story among peers (that is, external to oneself). In sharing these stories and asking for feedback front-line workers appear to draw on the collective experiential knowledge of each other. Through this iterative process, meaning or interpretation is assigned to the story, and an assessment decision may be made.

In addition to this external process, there may also be an internal one -- the use of a front-line worker's sense of intuition. Intuition is understood here to be the direct and immediate knowledge about an event that occurs without conscious reasoning. In other words, many front-line workers have learned to rely on their feelings as an integral part of the informal assessment process, or as they might alternatively explain, to "go with their gut", to be uncomfortable with answers, to intuit what's coming, and to "smell" cases. The relationship between the intuitive reaction to a case and experiential knowledge underlying that intuition occurs frequently in discussions with front-line workers, in such assertions that: if you have been at the front-line long enough you can smell custody, and family abuse cases coming, and; that a front-line workers gut reaction is based on stories just not
making sense when compared against other cases that they have previously experienced.

In this manner, it appears that the informal system allows front-line workers to harness their experience and instincts to ascertain and interpret an assessment situation. By way of contrast, the formal information system assumes that the only valid source of assessment decisions is empirically provable information: if the information cannot be recorded within the formal information recording system, it is dismissed, administratively, legally, and practically.

In terms of Dervin's (1983) analogy, the formal information system treats all users as equal and interchangeable buckets. As discussed earlier, transferring the brick of information from one bucket to the next does not change the form or shape of that information. However, if clay rather than brick is being transferred into a pair of cupped hands, and some hands have more experience molding clay, then the shape and form of that clay may change dramatically when transferred.

The informal information system centres around the experience of front-line workers, whereas the formal information system essentially circumscribes such experience. Given the gaps in the availability of information that have been identified by front-line workers during the initial stage of the assessment process, it appears that an interpretive-intuitive ethic would be a reasonable means of informing oneself at this stage; that is, intuiting the situation and/or seeking feedback from your peers are the most readily available and perhaps the most reliable sources of information around.
5.23 Sense of Ownership

Ownership generally can be seen to refer to a possessive relationship between people and object or ideas: people own houses and cars, and through copyright own ideas, symbols and logos. Often the ownership of an object is associated with the possessive "my": my car or my idea, for example. Usually this ownership can be quantified in tangible terms; the existence of a formal receipt to establish a purchase of a house or a car, the registration of a symbol with an agency, et cetera.

However, a sense of ownership suggests a less tangible relationship. People may feel a sense of ownership of a project that they worked on, for example, although the project belongs to another person or agency. They might show this sense of ownership through their respect for an object or idea, or through their commitment to it.

There appears to be little literature on the concept of a sense of ownership and information technology. However a few authors speak about the problems which can be encountered should users of information systems fail to "buy into", or demonstrate a sense of ownership of these systems.  

Within this study, the concept of ownership was briefly raised with an information technology manager. Ironically, she discussed it in the context of the other managers not having a sense of ownership of the computerized information system. She then related this concept in terms of the managers not being able to extract the information they wanted out of the computer in the form they desired; in other words, their information needs were not being met. 

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183 It is interesting to note that she did not raise a similar concern regarding front-line workers.
Front-line workers do not appear to have a sense of ownership of the information of the formal information system. The information in the fiche system appears to be owned by the records department; the keepers of the "vault". However, it was not clear in this study exactly who owned the computerized information system, let alone its information base. What was observed, however, was that front-line workers did not perceive that the computerized information system provided information to meet their needs in a format they wanted.

By way of contrast, however, this research suggests that these front line workers may have a sense of ownership toward the informal information system. They were observed showing a sense of commitment to the information in this system through filling in calendars appropriately, accurately and in a timely manner. They also appear to "own" their private journals, keeping them locked up or hidden away. In addition, they appear to collectively take responsibility for the accuracy and maintenance of calendars and wall boards.

5.24 Expediency and the Reality of Time and Resource Constraints

We're expected to do a very big job in a very short period of time. We have to assess risk to children, try to determine what's happened, consider who else may be at risk...and what's the best plan. And we do that all in a matter of hours initially.

Time constraints often shape and direct the nature of work. Limited time and too many obligations force people to prioritize their needs and to make choices among their obligations; to act in an expedient manner. Expediency implies taking advantage of what is useful and available to achieve a goal, oftentimes acting in self-interest.

Front-line workers are the fire-fighters of child protection, operating as they do in crisis-oriented environment. Their self-described, primary responsibility is immediate intervention for the protection of children-at-risk. In this manner, the pressure of time appears to lead to expedient actions and behaviours: in terms of their recording responsibilities they appear to fill in only what is absolutely necessary, and state that time constraints often cause them to "whip off" their recordings as quickly as possible with little concern for accuracy; they actively ignore fields which they do not feel are relevant, or which they perceive as overly intrusive. Such fields include: income, nationality, and ethnic origin. Front-line workers frequently omit the legal obligation of calling the Registry.  

5.3 Suggestions For Further Research

5.31 The Power of the Sense-Making Methodology for Social Work

Savolainen observed that, "indisputably, the sense-making theory has opened new vistas to studies of information seeking" (1995, p. 259). Bridging the gap between two professions, library and information science and social work, through the sense-making methodology proved to be a challenging and successful task for this research. The sense-making method, with its bucket and bricks

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184 Bala (1987) found that asking front-line workers to rank 13 factors which help them in the investigation of an abuse case, front-line workers ranked contacting the Register as least important.
analogy provides an effective vehicle for the examination of the information needs of the front-line users. It makes clear that these users are not simply interchangeable buckets, but that they do define and transform information.

Sense-making and front line social work practice share similar core values. The process of 'starting where the client is at' is operationalized in the sense-making methodology; that is, the methodology assumes that the researcher wants to understand the culture of the respondent, and develop findings based on an understanding of the respondents' values and perspectives.

The origin of the sense-making methodology also belies its application to social work. Dervin devised the sense-making methodology to provide a structure which respondents can easily assimilate into their own culture. It attempts to avoid reified language and researcher driven value-laden concepts. Rather it purports to provide a language and terms which are more familiar and more respondent value-laden than most other methodologies. However, Dervin's suggestion that the respondent be asked if he or she had to "unlearn" anything when dealing with gaps, barriers and helps created confusion unnecessarily. (see questionnaire page 2, Appendix F ) The term "unlearn" was not intuitively grasped by respondents as Dervin suggests that it would be.

One disadvantage to the sense-making methodology as used in this research was the process of asking respondents to identify and discuss each event, gap, barrier, and help which they encountered along the way. This process proved to be time consuming and, it seems, overly repetitive.

Interestingly, at a time when social work theory and practice may be seen as moving in the direction of scientific empirical models, alternative models of information theory such as sense-making indicate that information researchers are
challenging core assumptions behind their own empirical models and encouraging consideration of more qualitative approaches.185

One aspect of the sense-making model to emerge from this research was the perception that there are barriers to meeting information needs that were seen to be more problematic than gaps for front-line workers. Whereas Dervin suggests that the terms gaps and barriers may be used interchangeably this research suggests that the terms may be perceived distinctively by respondents.

The sense-making model provides a flexible, analytical edifice which emphasizes the crucial perspective of the information users. Its ease and versatility suggest that it could be readily applied to understanding the needs of other stakeholders in child protection. One area which might benefit from some exploratory and sense-making research is that of client information needs: little is known about how clients perceive the agency, the services they expect, or what information clients need to know.

5.3.2 The Bottom-Up Design

It appears as if many computerized information system designs omit consideration of one or many constituency groups. In some instances the decision to design a system specifically for one group is consciously made: management information systems for example are purported to be specifically geared for managers, decision-support systems may be for executive directors, et cetera. However, it appears that many systems purportedly designed to serve numerous stakeholders fail in their task. The systems examined in this research appear to not significantly meet the information needs of front-line workers. Put in other words, when judged by the end results, front-line workers' involvement in aspects of the

185 That is, while the pendulum may be swinging primarily in one direction for social work (i.e. toward empiricism) it may be swinging in the opposite direction for information science (i.e. away from strict empiricism). As discussed in Chapter One, social work theory also includes experiential and post-constructionist models.
information design may be understood as little more than tokenism; with the information systems providing considerable more useful information to administrative and managerial stakeholders than to the front-line worker.

It is for this reason that a designed, bottom-up computerized information system should be investigated further. However, that is not to suggest a bottom-up system should replace a top-down one; a bottom-up system would likely suffer from many of the insufficiencies identified in top-down models--ignoring or minimizing the critical information needs of managers and administrators. Rather what is needed is a study of the implications of a bottom-up system in order to explore and examine in more detail the information needs of front-line workers. The questions generated from such a study should then be applied to the design of a more balanced system, meeting the information needs of all stakeholders. These questions would include: what would the information base look like; could such concepts of workload, for example, be re-defined based on the complexity of the case? Is it possible to generate information based on such a bottom-up design that would meet some of the information needs of other stakeholders, such as managers and administrators? What would be lost and what would emerge as new and innovative?

Such a bottom-up design might begin with the Dervin's (1997) alternative definition of information, based on the needs of each particular front-line user, in each particular situation, at a particular time. In a sense, the information system becomes the repository for collective interpretations of information. The analogy might be one of a group of users sitting in a circle: the first user whispers information into the ear of the second, the second to the third, and so on. By the time the information returns to the first user, it has likely changed considerably, in form, content and meaning. Issues that would need to be resolved through research would include: what information should have been retained while going
around the circle according to each stakeholder; what information was retained; why, and in what form, and; what gives that information value?

Designing an information system from this perspective could yield some practical and likely radical results, such as reforming the face (and face sheet) of child protection.

5.33 The Role Of Narrative

What emerges from this study is the central and critical role which narrative story-telling plays in meeting the information needs of the front-line worker. The narrative ethic appears to be so pervasive that it seems to be the driving force behind the informal system at these agencies.

The findings of this thesis suggest that the narrative vehicle may be so elemental to front-line social work practice that, perhaps, it's omission in a formal system would necessarily lead to its evolution in an informal one. This suggestion would be a valuable subject of further research.

Further research must also be done on the question of ownership. What this research suggests strongly is that front-line workers do not feel a sense of ownership of the computerized information system. Casual observation and discussion with other stakeholders at the agencies suggest that they also do not feel a sense of ownership, begging the question who, if anyone, owns the system, and what are the implications of this ownership or lack thereof? Further, how can ownership be assessed? Many qualities of ownership were suggested above, such as possession and a commitment of time and energy. What other attributes might apply to this concept?

5.34 Knowledge and Intuition

Another research question based on the concept of the drivers identified above is, how do we know what we know? What are the relationships and inter-
relationships wherein data becomes fact, fact becomes information, information becomes knowledge, knowledge become wisdom? Clearly this is not a linear process and it remains to be determined exactly how this process works. Where does the interpretive-intuitive ethic come into this process? Is intuition a matter of bringing to the surface empirical facts which the subconscious or preconscious have identified?

While Dervin's assertion that all information may be defined solely by each individual user was not the focus of this thesis, conceptually, the question of how we collectively know when child abuse or neglect has occurred is an important topic for further research.

5.4 Information Technology and Social Work: At The Crossroads

It never occurred to me to double-check actually. I figured if the computer did it, it had to be right.

Interview with front-line worker, May 19, 1995

The agencies within this study are at the forefront of computerized information technology at the direct-practice level of social work. The advent of the computer in the form of ever more powerful and sophisticated information technology, its widespread acceptance as an information panacea and the inevitability of ever more extensive computerization of information systems, puts the practice of social work and the process of child protection at a crossroads. With its vast potential and seemingly limitless resources, the computer has the power to radically transform the information system for the better or to perpetuate or even exacerbate the faults of an imperfect system, creating further information gaps and barriers for the front-line worker.
The computer is perceived as the standard-bearer of empiricism -- a physical manifestation of the rational scientific model. In child protection it reduces victims of abuse to "byte size" data elements, producing statistically-generated reports, and atomized accounts of family histories.

By contrast, the front-line worker is the practitioner of an assumptive tradition of knowledge and a narrative, interpretative-intuition ethic, warmly welcoming the practical benefits of information technology in the context of a time and resource constrained environment, but skeptical of its overall utility and suspicious of its ultimate effects and ambitions.

If formal systems are the harbingers and representatives of an empirical future, then the informal system is the holdout, digging in its heels -- guerrilla resistance -- not just as a profoundly pragmatic response to an imperfect system; but in order to preserve the narrative, and interpretive-intuitive vehicles in certain respects; maintaining the value and sanctity of the holistic view of the child-victim, and the realities of abuse through narrative.

The dilemma facing front-line workers is the inevitability of more profound intrusion of information technology into the practice of social work. This threatens to radically transform the process of child protection, replacing the interpretative-intuitive ethic with a process of atomistic information retrieval.

The working assumption that the computer is a creature of, or wedded to, an empirical tradition of knowledge, that it is inherently unfriendly to the front-line of social work, must be challenged. It is the responsibility, perhaps, of social workers, to pry loose, or divorce the technology from its empirical roots. It is a truism, possibly, that information technology finds its limits not in its hardware but in the parameters of the software. Put another way, it is the software that defines and delineates what information technology can do. Social workers need to embrace the essentially value-neutral information technology for its prospective utility, the
computer itself is not the villain. In child protection agencies, the computerized information system must be adapted to fit the needs of the front-line worker. This entails recognizing and designing for a narrative ethic, and creating a system that is user friendly with respect to providing expedient, timely and summary information to the front-line worker.

Further, the single, undifferentiated computerized information base of these agencies in its attempt to serve so many masters, fails to serve the needs of the front-line worker.

There is a need to face squarely, and resolve the underlying tension between the empirical tradition and the interpretative-intuitive ethic of social work practice.

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the Life we have lost in living?
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

Eliot, T. S. (1963)
Collected Poems
1909-1962.
Chorus from The Rock.

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186 For example, the NUD*IST analysis program used in this study allows for inductive and deductive analysis, and theory development based on the data.
APPENDICES
THE QUESTIONNAIRE (AFTER INTRODUCTION):
1. First, I want you to tell me what happened during your most recent situation in which [INSERT SITUATION SPECIFICATION HERE]. I want you to tell me what happened from the first moment when the situation started happening until the point later when the situation was completely out of mind or to the present time if the situation is still going on. Tell me what happened first, what happened second, and so on. Tell me everything that you did or said, everything that others did or said, and everything that just happened.

FOR EACH EVENT NAMED:
Now I am going to go back and read each event as you presented it and ask a series of questions.

2. When [RE-READ EVENT] happened, did you see anything in particular as standing in your way or blocking you?
   IF YES: What was it? How did it block you?

3. When [RE-READ EVENT] happened, did you have any questions in your head, any things that you needed to learn or unconfuse?
   IF YES: What were these questions?

FOR EACH QUESTION NAMED:

4. How important was this question to you - very important, somewhat important, somewhat unimportant, or not important at all?

5. Did you ever get an answer to this question [RE-READ QUESTION]? Was it a complete or partial answer?

6. IF GOT AN ANSWER OF SOME KIND:
   6a. How did you get the answer?
   6b. How did the answer help you?

7. IF DID NOT GET COMPLETE ANSWER:
   7a. What do you see as having prevented you from getting an answer?
   7b. How did you hope the answer would help you?

AT END OF INTERVIEW:
8. I have a few remaining questions which describe you and your household. Remember that all your answers are confidential. These questions allow us to classify this questionnaire.

h. For classification purposes, which of the following categories describes your total family income from all sources last year?

- Under $10,000 (0)
- $10,000 to 15,000 (1)
- $15,000 to 20,000 (2)
- $20,000 to 25,000 (3)
- $25,000 to 30,000 (4)
- $30,000 to 35,000 (5)
- $35,000 or more (6)

i. About how long ago was the last time you visited a library? Would you say....

- More than two years ago (7)
- 1-2 years ago (6)
- 6 months to 1 year ago (5)
- 3-5 months ago (4)
- 1-3 months ago (3)
- 2-3 weeks ago (2)
- Within the last week (1)

j. Do not ask, code gender:

- Female (0)
- Male (1)

Suggestions for recording responses during the interview:

In studies done to date, it has been easiest to use loose-leaf paper. On the first page, the interviewer records the time-line of events, numbering the events 1, 2, 3, and so on. The interviewer then keeps this "time-line" in view. Then a separate loose-leaf page is used to record responses to the remaining items. An alternative method is to use a cassette tape recorder to record the interview. The hand-written notes or transcriptions from a cassette of the interview are then typed up in the following format:

1. What happened in situation:

1) A friend of mine from Belgium was visiting and his wallet was stolen with his passport and air tickets and everything. He called me frantically.

2) We went to the police.

3) There was nothing they could do unless the wallet was turned in.

4) We really didn't know what to do next. So we tried to call his embassy in D.C. The line was busy for two hours.

5) We reached them and they agreed to send a passport substitute on Monday. This meant he had to stay for the weekend.
6) They couldn't do anything about his airline ticket so we tried to reach the airlines. They wouldn't do anything.

7) I ended up loaning him the money to get a new ticket.

ANALYSIS OF TIME LINE EVENT #1
2. ANYTHING BLOCKING: Yes.
   WHAT: My own ignorance.
   HOW: I didn't know where to start on helping him. After it all happened, I learned that Traveler's Aid has some helpful information on this and so does American Express. But we didn't know that then.

3. QUESTIONS:
   Q1: What should we do first?
   Q2: Will he have to miss his plane?

ANALYSIS OF Q1 ON TIME LINE EVENT #1:
4. IMPORTANCE OF Q: Very important.
5. COMPLETENESS OF ANSWER: Not then; partial later
6. GOT ANSWER OF SOME KIND:
   6a. HOW GOT ANSWER: Eventually friends told me what they had done in similar circumstances.
   6b. HOW DID ANSWER HELP: Told me what to do next time.

ANALYSIS OF Q2 ON TIME LINE EVENT #1:
4. IMPORTANCE OF Q: Very important.
5. COMPLETENESS OF ANSWER: Complete.
6. GOT ANSWER:
   6a. HOW GOT ANSWER: It happened, he didn't have a ticket so he missed his plane.
   6b. HOW DID ANSWER HELP: Well, we know what we had to do. But it really didn't help. It was a different situation.

ANALYSIS OF TIME LINE EVENT #2:
2. ANYTHING BLOCKING: Yes.
   WHAT: My own fear of the crassness of policemen.
   HOW: I probably wasn't as effective in dealing with them on my friend's behalf as I might have been.

3. QUESTIONS:
   Q1: Why do the police act like this?
   Q2: Will the wallet ever be found?

ANALYSIS OF Q1 ON TIME LINE EVENT #2:
4. IMPORTANCE OF Q: Somewhat important.
5. COMPLETENESS OF ANSWER: Partial.
6. GOT ANSWER OF SOME KIND:
   6a. HOW GOT ANSWER: Own thinking, reading.
   6b. HOW DID ANSWER HELP: Well, it helps to know the cause at least partially in the sense that it helps to understand things.

7. WHAT PREVENTED ANSWER:
   7a. WHAT PREVENTED: Knowing the causes in a societal sense isn't the same as understanding why the person standing in front of you is behaving abysmally. Only he knows.
7b. HOW HOPED ANSWER WOULD HELP: Maybe I would then know what to say to get people like him to stop.

ANALYSIS OF O2 ON TIME LINE EVENT #2:
4. IMPORTANCE OF Q: Somewhat important.
5. GOT ANSWER: No.
7. WHAT PREVENTED ANSWER:
   7a. WHAT PREVENTED: Too early.
   7b. HOW HOPED ANSWER WOULD HELP: Hope the wallet is found so my friend doesn't lose all that money.

8a. WHEN SITUATION STARTED: within the last week (1)
8b. STILL IN PROCESS: yes
8c. # PEOPLE IN HOUSEHOLD UNDER 18: 0
8d. # PEOPLE IN HOUSEHOLD TOTAL: 1
8e. # YEARS SCHOOL: post graduate schooling (4)
8f. AGE: 35-49 years old (3)
8g. RACE: White, Anglo (4)
8h. INCOME: $35,000 or more (6)
9i. RECENCY OF LIBRARY USE: 2-3 weeks ago (2)
9j. GENDER: female (0)
APPENDIX B
MEASUREMENT FORMS ASSESSED AND REJECTED

NOTES:
(TIME: )
EVENT: BEGINNING/MIDDLE/END:
- who is present, when?
- information exchange
- what do participants do?
- closure?
- reactions? to end of event?
- other descriptive data?

Blocks?

Barriers?
- what did not happen that you might have expected? Was anything not available?

Thoughts? Issues Questions Asked?

Structured Time/Unstructure: Evidence:

TIME:
## PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION SUPPLEMENT

**Date:**

**Respondent Identification #:**

### Area:
- desk, general office, other
  - time start:
  - time finish:

### INFORMATION TOOLS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Telephone:</th>
<th>NOTES:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Telephone:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>take a call:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-internal (recp'n, s/w...)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-external (client, reporter...)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiate a call</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>return a call</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>check voice mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual (sep. activity):</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>report</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>note/message</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspaper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Computer:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>w/processing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modem</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intake form (specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Handwritten</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>note</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intake form</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;case notes&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Person-to-person</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(direct communication)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drop by this area</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others (specify)</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### RELATED TO WHICH TASK(S)

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Open File</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- internal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- external</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Request for Service:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- internal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- external</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ongoing File</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- information gathering</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- information organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- court related</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- inputting handwritten notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX C

PHYSICAL DETAILS OF ENVIRONMENT FORM

PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION PHYSICAL SETTING
Date:
Respondent Identification #:

Physical Descriptions of Setting:

Chairs/Computer/Phone/Desk/Lighting/Noise-Sounds//People-Movement Patterns/

NOTES:
[changes over time?]
PARTICIPANT-OBSERVATION REFERENCE GUIDE

Date: 
Respondent Identification #: 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event:</th>
<th>time start:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location: desk/within office/hall...</td>
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<tr>
<td>End of event:</td>
<td>time finish:</td>
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**INFORMATION TOOLS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Telephone:</th>
<th>Computer: w/processing</th>
<th>Person-to-person</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>take a call</td>
<td>e-mail</td>
<td>(direct communication)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiate a call</td>
<td>modem</td>
<td>Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>return a call</td>
<td>intake form (specify)</td>
<td>Hand Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
<td>note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Visual</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>intake form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>report</td>
<td></td>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>note/message</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Case Notes”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspaper</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others (specify)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**RELATED TO WHICH TASK(S)**

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<th>Close File</th>
<th>Ongoing File</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>- information gathering</td>
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<td>- inputting handwritten notes</td>
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<td>Request for Service:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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**INFORMATION SOURCE(S)**

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<th>External:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td>Prior CAS report</td>
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<td>Staff Meeting</td>
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<td>School</td>
<td>- counseling</td>
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<td>Neighbour/non-family report</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
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<td>Newspaper/Media</td>
<td>“Case Notes”</td>
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<td>Child Abuse registry</td>
<td>Computer reports (specify)</td>
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<td>Social Service Professional</td>
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<td><strong>Other CAS</strong></td>
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<td>CFSAct</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ministry</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Other Reg’ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Others (specify)</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guidelines</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

APPENDIX E
EXAMPLE OF FORM TRIED DURING OBSERVATION*

P-O SUPPLEMENT

| Date: April 26 |
| Identification #: 8426 |
| Area: desk, general office, other |

**OBSERVATIONS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TELEPHONE:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>t-take, n-initiate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aide-colleague</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VISUAL (read):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>report</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>note/msg(not ph)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>newspaper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COMPUTER:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>input</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>processing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>data entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTAKE specify:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BY HAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>note</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OTHER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>datebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>scrap paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pull file out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>put file away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-TO-P (direct)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drop by this area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other: (specify)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTRODUCTION

I want to begin this tape recorded session by assuring you that your comments will remain confidential, and that no identifying information will be used in any publications which result from this research.

Can you please tell me a bit about your job here?

(Formal title: How long have you held that position? Length of time in this position?)

There are numerous tasks which child protection workers are responsible for. As you know this research focuses on the INTAKE responsibilities.

[NOTES IN PARENTHESIS NOT TO BE READ]

[i.e. all the activities and functions you do to establish whether child abuse or neglect exists and to open a case in your agency, to refer it or to close it...
...talking to the reporter, evaluating whether a situation belongs with protective services or providing information and referral to other resources; investigating and assessing the situation to verify and determine the severity and areas for service; contacting community reporters to tell them whether you will follow up the complaint. Bringing identified problems to the client's attention.]

SITUATION

What happened, what led up to this situation?

I'd like to discuss with you an INTAKE situation which you have recently been responsible for.

This could be one which I was able to observe you involved with [during structured-observation phase of research], or a current intake situation which was a rich or challenging one. I want you to begin by giving me a very brief overview of this situation, after that we will walk through it in more detail.

RECORD...

I want you to tell me about this assessment in more detail now. I want you to think of the intake process as a walking journey beginning with your first contact in the situation to the end when you refer the case. The journey is made up of a series of footsteps, one placed in front of the other.

I want you to break down this journey into small steps and I'll record each event. An event, then, is a very specific and brief point (step) at which you were not able to move forward on your journey, a point at which you stopped or were stopped.[i.e. couldn't move forward w/o a home visit, contacting the police, your supervisor...]

Does this make sense to you? Do you have any questions?

OK begin. (When did situation occur? How did it come to your attention?)
1. EVENTS

NOW Thinking of this situation as a journey, as a walking journey. I am going to go back and read each event as you presented it and ask a series of questions.

Again, an event is a very specific and brief point or step at which you were unable to move forward on your journey. Movement forward was stopped by a barrier or a gap; something which prevented you from moving forward.

[gaps: anything preventing movement forward or barriers; s/t standing in the way]

FOR EACH EVENT:

GAP
Did anything block you?

What happened, did you see anything in particular as standing in your way or blocking you from moving forward in your journey? (blocking you from gathering what you wanted)

How did it block you?

How much did it block you? (Did it feel insurmountable or were you able to get past it?)

WHAT WERE YOU LOOKING FOR?

When happened what thoughts were running through your mind? Did you have any questions? (anything you needed to learn or unlearn?)

IF YES: What (was it/were they)?

[any thoughts or issues that arose because of this blockage/gap?]

For Each Question/thought/issue Named:

HOW IMP. WAS THIS QUESTION?

Did you ever pursue this question/ get an answer to (re-read question)?

IF GOT AN ANSWER OF SOME KIND:

How did you get the answer/resolution?

How did the answer help you? How much did it help you?

GAP BRIDGED

IF DID NOT GET A COMPETE ANSWER:

What do you see as having prevented you from getting an answer?

How did you hope the answer would help you?

How much did it block you?

HELP

FOR EACH EVENT:

What help did you want?

What help did you get?

Was anything in the situation helpful? [reread event if necessary]

What?

How much did it help?

How did it help?

CLOSING:

What made you choose this particular case to talk about?

If s/o were to read this case file to a new s/w over the phone what would they ask to have read to them?

What would you like them to read?
(I would like to discuss briefly some of my observations from my previous visit)

[Ask questions related to discrepancies between observed behaviour and stated behaviour in 'journey' above...interruptions? time related issues? consulting with police re: protocol]

Is there anything you would like more access to in an intake situation inorder to 'complete your journey' (goal(s))? (...other social service agency info, police records...)

Are there bits of information that you would like to record but don't; or conversely that you don't want to record but do? [ie Child Abuse Registry?. disclosures of adults...]

Can you tell me about the intuitive part of an assessment? [do you ever have a gut feeling about something? what do you do w. them?]

CAS's seem to be agencies with clearly legislated mandates? How does this affect your job? [psycho social assessments o/s of mandate, image of CAS, duality of roles; intake vs. court]
If you woke up tomorrow in a "perfect" world and found the "perfect" intake system designed specifically for you in your role as a front-line intake child protection worker, what would it look like; what would it do; what would it do differently?

What strategies do you use to keep a perspective on your work? [...some workers keep separate logs of client contacts just for themselves; what works for you?]

We have talked a great deal about your needs in during an assessment, is there anything which has occurred to you through this process which you would like to comment on? Do you have any questions for me regarding my research to date that you have observed?
DEMOGRAPHICS

DO NOT ASK, indicate:

Male ☐
Female ☑

Can you tell me a bit about your job history? How long have you been in this position? (If not covered in beginning of interview)

In which of the following age categories do you belong? (check one):

☐ 20-25
☐ 26-30
☐ 31-35
☐ 36-40
☐ 41-50
☐ 51-60
☐ 60 +

What is your highest level of formal education: (check one)

☐ Community College Diploma
☐ Bachelor of Art
☐ Bachelor of Social Work
☐ Masters, Administration (please specify)
☐ Masters, Social Work
☐ Other (please specify)

Have you worked with computers and automated information systems, (prior to this job)?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR CO-OPERATION AND HELP
CONSENT FORM
FRONT-LINE CHILD PROTECTION WORKER

I am a doctoral candidate with the Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto. My thesis research topic is the exploration of the information needs and uses of front-line child protection intake workers. My thesis advisor is Dr. Robert MacFadden an associate professor with the Faculty (416-978-5818).

My research is unique in that it seeks out your perspective on your information needs and use. It is hoped that the results of this research will inform the development of information systems which are particularly relevant to front-line social workers. In order to understand information systems and technology from the front-line perspective I need to understand what you do on a daily basis.

If you agree to participate, the study involves the following:

i) My active observation of your office routine, and that of your colleagues on the intake team for a maximum of four days. During that time I will make notes regarding your professional role and activities. From time to time during this period I will need to confer with you in order to make sure that I am accurately recording my observations.

ii) Tape recorded interviews, a maximum of two hours in length, will be conducted with two workers from the intake team. This interview will occur after the observation period and at the worker's convenience. The interview is designed to enable you to discuss an intake experience, and your perspective on gaps and barriers you experienced during that experience. You may choose to not answer any specific questions.

YOU MAY CHOOSE TO WITHDRAW YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY AT ANY TIME WITH NO REPERCUSSIONS OR CONSEQUENCES. NO PERSONALLY IDENTIFIABLE INFORMATION ABOUT WORKERS OR CLIENTS WILL BE TRANSMITTED TO YOUR AGENCY OR APPEAR IN ANY PUBLICATION RELATING TO THIS RESEARCH.
All recorded interviews will be coded by number to ensure confidentiality of participants. Tapes will be transcribed for analytical purposes only; any identifying information will be removed from the transcription.

All research information will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to the myself. Upon completion of my doctoral dissertation, all tapes will be erased, and notes will be destroyed.

I hope you will choose to participate in the study, as the results should provide greater insight into the information needs of front-line intake child protection workers. Should you to agree to participate a summary of the research findings will be made available through your agency.

If you agree to participate, please sign the attached consent forms. A copy will be provided to you.

Should you have any questions or comments please do not hesitate to contact me. Sincerely,

Steven Davis-Mendelow,
Doctoral Candidate.

Steven Davis-Mendelow
96 Monarch Park Avenue
Toronto, Ontario.
M4J 4R2
Phone: 416-463-2541
CONSENT FORM

I, ________________________________, agree to participate in this research study conducted by Steven Davis-Mendelow, Doctoral Candidate, which will involve a maximum of:

- four days of participant observation by the researcher regarding my professional role and;
- a two-hour individual interview.

I understand that all interview material will be confidential and that I may withdraw my consent at any time with no consequences.

Signature: 

___________________________________________________________

Date

Witness signature:

___________________________________________________________

Name (please print):

___________________________________________________________

Date

Please direct all queries to:
Steven Davis-Mendelow,
416-463-2541.
APPENDIX H

EXAMPLE OF TIME LINE LISTING ALL GAPS/BARRIERS/HELPS
AGENCY Z

**************
Case Name: *****
**************

DESCRIPTION: 14 year old girl from India
school calls in allegation of abuse
father strangled her with coat hanger
dad charged.

**************

Time Line As Presented

Friday-VP of school calls CAS
Computer Screening check, nothing
1:00 PM, contact police
speak to detective sergeant (police won't investigate)
speak to Youth Bureau officer “
speak to her supervisor
detective sergeant calls back, will investigate
pick up rental car
meet police at school
joint interview-disclosure
meet privately with police, develop plan
get names of teachers who spoke with VP
develop a plan
explain process to victim
check in with supervisor
(victim to police station for photos w. police)
go for coffee (not police station)
joint interview, videotaped
call 2nd supervisor
back to school (?) 
back to police station
interview with mom and victim's sister with interpreter
speak with sister's alone
(police charge Dad)
set appointment to visit victim at school next week
VP calls s/w on Monday, victim not at school

bail conditions set (Dad not to communicate with the victim with out another family member present)

(Dad not to reside in the home)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EVENT</th>
<th>GAP</th>
<th>HELP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer Screening Check</td>
<td>nothing on file</td>
<td>Is this file open to someone else? (I don't need to deal with this kind of case right now)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Police: 1:00</td>
<td>-by time I interview the girl and get back to police it'll be 2:00 and police will say I have to wait for the next shift at 5:00</td>
<td>I want to insure the victims safety at a time when she's to be home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact police re: joint interview</td>
<td>-police will not investigate</td>
<td>How can I investigate w/o the police, I want them there I want to reduce the stress on the victim, through joint interview, non-repetition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-police breach protocol</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talk to supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td>What to do about police breach of protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Detective S.calls back(OK to do a joint interview)</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Can do a joint interview -can police check the address and name in their records</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop a Plan including how to get victim to police station from school</td>
<td>-feeling that Mom is not very supportive and would forewarn Dad. -can't call for her permission to escort victim in CAS vehicle</td>
<td>How can I physically get the child to the police station for interview and photographs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disclosure</td>
<td>-reported abuse to teacher on Tuesday, called CAS on Friday. -school has a history of not dealing with abuse allegations appropriately.</td>
<td>-how to get the message across to schools about believing abuse? -will teacher be charged? -could the investigation have started earlier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>police speak to mom in parking lot at school</td>
<td>-Mom doesn't speak much English -Mom may forewarn Dad -Can't arrest and charge dad in English</td>
<td>How will we interview mom, need interpreter Is language an issue?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Mom and Sister w. interpreter</td>
<td>Sister won't tell 'truth' in front of Mom</td>
<td>If victim goes home after disclosure what is the risk to her, re: ostricization, or community rejection? Does Mom use or condone physical discipline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Sister and victim together</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sister admits Mom spanks her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition of bail set</td>
<td>Dad not to communicate with victim w/o family member present -Dad not to reside in the home</td>
<td>Who will protect the victim? (Not mom, dad, or sister) -Who will provide child care while Mom works -How will residency be enforced, he could be there all day and just not sleep there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX I
EXAMPLE OF TIME LINE LISTING ALL GAPS/BARRIERS/HELPS
AGENCY Y

Agency Y

Interview Date: June 27th

*************************

DESCRIPTION:

Principle calls, 5 year old reports another child is putting his finger up 5 year old’s bum.

*************************

TIME LINE

Call from *** branch, transferred to us. (they’re too busy)

Wednesday

At team meeting, assigned to me, and new worker Y.
Given Fax from *** branch.
Did computer check
Called Catholics to do record check, couldn’t get into it, called a friend at Catholic CAS downtown
Contact the Police, youth bureau
Contact the school, principal,
Tried to Contact Mom at work, left voice mail,
Tried to Contact Mom at home that night, first time no answer, no tape, second time contact
Meet with Mom, police at school next day
5 year old discloses to S/W trainee while others meet.
Meet with 5 year old, mom, 2 police, S/W and s/w trainee (5)
S/W, Y, one police officer leave room disclosure
Couldn’t leave message for Principal

Friday a.m., contact Principle to set up meeting with other Mom and alleged offender.
S/w & Y speak with Mom at school
Police join meeting
Mom waits outside, child. comes in (four adults)
no disclosure
discover child is Catholic
child leaves room
develop a plan
Mom into room, plan to re interview child. discussed.
Set for next Thursday

*************************
**EVENT**
Team meeting re: cases from *** branch,
Assigned to WW and SW
Given Fax from Etobicoke.

**GAP**
Etobicoke overloaded
WW needs training; protocol, process, how to do interviews not clear, or legible, confusing; missing information

**HELP**
WW does the bulk of the work
Which name belongs to which address, phone number; siblings at home; no father listed
did anybody know this family, was this open to CCAS. previous contact, how long ago is there a pattern of contact.
still need to view fiche (if any) to get complete history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>5 year old discloses to S/W trainee while others meet.</th>
<th>discloses before interview</th>
<th>Not sure what to do because of inexperience. Should she interrupt pre-meeting?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meet with 5 year old, mom, 2 police, S/W and s/w trainee (5)</td>
<td>too many adults Mom very anxious, 'inappropriate' redirection to child. being nervous...</td>
<td>child won't disclose, anxiety level too high If some of us leave the room would he disclose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couldn't leave message for Principal</td>
<td>didn't want to contact Mom directly</td>
<td>don't want CAS to contact offending child. parents, risk shutting child. down, raise anxiety level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mom waits outside, child. comes in</td>
<td>four adults, too many... child. wants to end interview</td>
<td>How to make child comfortable Can we get a disclosure Where is this coming from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>develop a plan</td>
<td>no disclosure</td>
<td>when can we all meet again to re interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alleged off. is Catholic</td>
<td>can't pass it over to CCAS unless abuse is verified and ongoing service is needed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Call Catholics to do record check,**
**Set up appointment with police for interview**
Dear [supervisor name]:

Thank you for agreeing to allow me to work with your Intake team of the [Agency] branch of the [Agency Name] Children's Aid Society. I look forward to my work beginning, Monday August 14, through to Thursday August 17th.

My thesis research focuses on the work of front-line intake workers. I believe that their role is critical to the development of effective information systems because they are, generally, the first agency members to come in contact with potential clients, and community members. It is from these contacts that the data trail upon which all further case decisions is built. My research is unique in that it stresses the importance of the front-line workers perspective in understanding information needs and uses.

I anticipate that my analysis will also touch upon the Intake workers role in transferring information to other levels within the agency. With that in mind I look forward to attending the Child Abuse Committee meeting on Monday morning.

I feel that my research will benefit the Society through the exploration of the role and responsibilities of front-line workers; information flow; and a discussion of strategies for integrating the needs of front-line workers with the broader goals of the Society.

In response to our previous telephone discussion I have attached a brief outline of my research and information regarding time allocations.

Should you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Steven Davis-Mendelow, Ph.D. Candidate.
cc. R. MacFadden, Ph.D. Chair. (letter only)
TITLE OF PROPOSAL:

SILENT VOICES: EXPLORING THE INFORMATION NEEDS AND USES OF FRONT-LINE CHILD PROTECTION INTAKE WORKERS.

IDENTIFICATION

Principal Investigator: Steven Davis-Mendelow, Ph.D. Candidate.

Supervisor: Dr. Rob MacFadden, Associate Professor, University of Toronto, Faculty of Social Work.

DESCRIPTION

Front-line workers, while responsible for the majority of the direct service provision to social welfare clients, have also been inordinately burdened with the time-consuming task of providing data to feed agency information systems. In the child protection field, new information technologies often exacerbate rather than alleviate the time pressures and professional obligations of the front-line worker (Cahill & Feldman, 1993). In order to create a better "fit" between agency information systems and the front-line child protection worker a fundamental understanding of the information needs of the worker is necessary (Johansen, 1984). Without this understanding, information systems -- both manual and computerized -- are likely to meet with resistance and failure (de Groot, Gripton, Licker, 1986).

The central question of this research is: What information do front-line child protection workers need and what information do they use? From the perspective of the front-line worker, this research will identify:

a) the use of information by front-line intake workers for professional tasks;
b) the front-line intake workers perception of their information needs as related to their professional tasks;
c) strategies for meeting the information needs of front-line workers.

PROCEDURE AND METHODOLOGY

An exploratory, qualitative approach to understanding the information use and needs of child protection workers is proposed. The methods of data collection to be used are:

i) pre-test;
ii) structured-observation;
iii) analysis of agency documentation;
iv) in-depth interviews.
ii) On-Site Structured-Observation

My intent is to be close enough to the worker to monitor conversation (face-to-face or telephone), mail, computer input/output and other documents with in the workers purview, unobtrusively.

Ongoing questions regarding clarification of observed behaviour will flow from the context of the immediate situation, and will vary from respondent to respondent.

iii) Analysis Of Agency Documentation

The primary purpose of examining Agency documents is to place the needs and information use of front-line intake workers within various contexts (i.e. their job descriptions, MCSS requirements, intake data collection instruments, agency information system policy, memos, etc.).

A select number of client records will be examined as a result of interviews with intake workers. The goal of this examination is to view the relationships between observed information collection (during the structured-observation period) and written information collection.

Confidential agency and client information such as client records will be examined on site only. With permission, photocopies of relevant non-confidential documentation (job descriptions, information system planning and proposals, etc.) will be made for the purpose of off-site analysis.

iv) Interviews

After the structured-observation period, interviews with two intake workers (per branch) will be arranged. These interviews will be a maximum of two hours in length.

The goal of the interview is to have the worker identify barriers and aids to effective information collection and use and to speculate on how their information needs could be addressed differently.

All interviews will be tape recorded, and notes will be taken.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF THE DATA

All recorded interviews will be coded by number to ensure confidentiality of participants. Tapes will be transcribed for analytical purposes only; any identifying information will be removed from the transcription.

All confidential records will be examined on-site only.

All references to specific cases and clients will be disguised to assure that they can not be identified. No personally identifying information about clients or workers will be transmitted to the agency, or in any publication relating to this research.

All research information will be stored in a locked cabinet accessible only to myself. Upon completion of my doctoral dissertation, all tapes will be destroyed.
## TIMING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TIMING</th>
<th>STRUCTURED - OBSERVATION</th>
<th>INTERVIEW</th>
<th>DOCUMENTATION REVIEW</th>
<th>INTERVIEW</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i) 4 days observing the group of intake workers. Primary observation will be with workers on call. When a worker leaves the office to investigate a call observation will switch to next worker on call.</td>
<td>with two intake workers observed over the participant-observation period (maximum 2 hours).</td>
<td>includes ongoing clarification during structured-observation.</td>
<td>with supervisor, following documentation review. (maximum 1 hour)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at Team Meetings and other Committee meetings at the discretion of the Intake Supervisor</td>
<td></td>
<td>one to two days of case file review (on site) following interviews, of cases discussed during interview.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ii) follow-up brief interviews with workers re: clarification, of observations, and information gathered during investigation. (ongoing during day as time permits, maximum 15 minutes each at end of day.)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The structured-observation period will take place in the CAS office environment, and does not require me to accompany the worker during a home visit. My goal is to be close enough to the worker to monitor conversations (face-to-face or telephone), mail, computer input/output and other documents with in the workers purview, unobtrusively.

This time allocation proposal may be modified.
APPENDIX K

AN EXAMPLE OF TELEPHONE LOGS

AGENCY Z

(REDUCED FROM 8.5" X 14")
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTICULARS</th>
<th>ACTION TAKEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Screen time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Health check</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Educational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child</td>
<td>Mental Health</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**
- Child attends school.
- Child has good attendance.
- Child has good behavior.
- Child has good health.
- Child has good academics.

**Recommendations:**
- Continue monitoring.
- Encourage further improvement.
- Provide additional support.
- Monitor progress regularly.

**Parental Involvement:**
- Regular communication.
- Attend parent-teacher meetings.
- Support child's learning at home.

**Follow-up:**
- Schedule a follow-up meeting in 6 months.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NAME</th>
<th>CALLER</th>
<th>PARTICULARS</th>
<th>ACTION TAKEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F/1-</td>
<td>Na B</td>
<td>Has expanded to school. Need to school her 3 children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(No job) Not sure about the amount of work she needs to do</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>School attendance to school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Principals said the last term she was in school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Her son father was a year ago</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Has threatened to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Return to school today</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Phone call back</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M/2</td>
<td>M/10</td>
<td>Caller is separated from wife</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>There are no children</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>He and his in the same house</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Call from her that she is</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>婚 marry and she is not</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Going out for marriage</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Also does not want to</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Have a child</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>She is unable to</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Return to his children</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Home sickly</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>And she has to seek advice from</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wife has 3 children. He has</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Access</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Caller wanted to talk to his</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Wife about taking advantage of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Home visitation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX L

JOB DESCRIPTION

AGENCY Z

(WITH AGENCY IDENTIFICATION OMITTED)
JOB DESCRIPTION

TITLE: Intake Worker

REPORTS TO: Supervisor, Intake

BRANCH: 

POSITIONS SUPERVISED: None

UNIT: Intake

EFFECTIVE DATE: August 1988

Basic Function:

Acts as first point of professional contact between Society and potential clients; investigating whether child is in need of protection; devising tentative treatment plan in such cases; taking emergency action where indicated to protect child; referring child to other Unit or closing case within specified time period; carrying out appropriate child care activities until case transferred or closed and maintaining all necessary documentation and records, as agency standards of service.

Principal Responsibilities:

1. Receives, during regular business hours, reports by telephone, mail or office visits of children in need of protection and records all necessary information.

2. (a) Where reports indicate possible need of protection, immediately conducts further investigations both personally and through other agencies, contacting parents, child, schools, police, neighbours, etc., assessing reliability of information and depth of investigation needed, risk to child and to attending worker.

   (b) Follows up and completes Night Duty reports, as above, where children not already in care of another Society Department.

3. (a) On basis of investigation, the Child and Family Services Act, agency policies, standards of service, determines type and extent of services for family and child.

   (b) Where C.A.S. services are not needed, or not appropriate, informs initial caller and refers to other source of help in the community.

4. (a) Where a child is to be admitted to care, carries out a social assessment of the family and the child, taking into account total family background and devises a tentative plan for the welfare of the child, including immediate and longer term goals and the most appropriate resources within or outside of the Society to deal with the situation.
JOB DESCRIPTION - INTAKE WORKER

(b) Carries out the required child care responses with the child, his natural parents, and foster parents until such time as the child care file is transferred or closed at Intake.

(c) Submits a report within 21 days setting out above information and recommendations.

5. Where case to be transferred to the Family Services Unit, meets with the Worker assigned to the case, and the family, to explain details of transfer.

6. When, after assessment and investigation, the need to protect the child is evident, and parents are reluctant to participate in the Agency services, takes necessary emergency action as defined by the Child and Family Services Act including:

(a) physical removal of the child, often without prior knowledge of family;
(b) obtaining necessary court order;
(c) coordinating placement of child in appropriate facility;
(d) serving papers on family and appearing in court;
(e) insuring child has medical attention;
(f) gathering and representing in court all necessary evidence;
(g) submitting comprehensive reports and, in abuse cases, appearing before Child Abuse Committee and following through on the Committee's recommendation.

7. Provides short term limited supervision (not more than 60 days) where after investigation, it is decided not to transfer case, ensuring adequate care and supervision provided to child and writing case summary on closing.

8. Ensures that all necessary records, files, documentation and recording are initiated and carried out properly during all phases of a case and that all closing reports and summaries are completed and submitted on schedule.

9. Where voluntary, planned admissions to care, negotiates with family the terms of care, degree of supervision, costs to be borne by the family and related factors.

10. (a) Assesses families in Region on behalf of other Children's Aid Societies, carrying out investigations and submitting necessary reports.
(b) Provide, on request from other agencies, verbal or written summaries on closed cases in the Society in accordance with policy on confidentiality.
11. Interprets Child and Family Services Act, Board policies, and reflects the philosophy, mandate and operation of C.A.S. to all clients, particularly in relation to the role of the Intake Worker, and provides advice, guidance and counselling to families on a wide range of matters affecting the care of their children.

12. As requested, testifies in family courts of other jurisdictions or in divorce/custody proceedings.

13. Maintains liaison with other agencies, institutions and individuals concerned with welfare of children in care and deals continuously with staff of other departments regarding a wide variety of professional and administrative matters.

14. Consults with the Intake Supervisor on all alleged abuse cases, as well as prior to the admission of children to care of the Society, discharge of children from care, court action, transfer and closing of cases, expenditures of Society funds.

15. Participates in and speaks to community groups in order to share information, and to develop and maintain good public relations for the Society.

16. Provides input to Staff and Committee meetings on particular cases and operations of the Unit generally.

17. Carries out other duties as assigned.

Specific (Branch Name) Duties:

1. Where children known to a Social/Welfare agency and, as requested, children without a guardian, are arriving at, or are in transit through, Toronto airport:
   
   (a) deplanes and supervises child while in airport or places in a foster home while authorities determine disposition of case;

   (b) if necessary, apprehends child on behalf of the C.A.S.;

   (c) works closely with R.C.M.P., immigration and other authorities.

Qualifications:

(a) General

1. A Bachelor's of Social Work Degree from a recognized university,
APPENDIX M

JOB DESCRIPTION

AGENCY Y

(WITH AGENCY IDENTIFICATION OMITTED)
CHILDREN'S AID SOCIETY OF

JOB POSTING # 92

The following position is available and applications are invited:

TITLE

Short Term Intensive Intake Social Worker

LOCATION

Branch

SALARY RANGE: $35,998 - $48,415

SUMMARY OF DUTIES

To be a member of a centralized Family Service Intake Unit in Branch. Responsible for completing investigations and assessing the need for protection of children in accordance with provisions of the Child and Family Services Act, and to facilitate appropriate referrals. The incumbent will be responsible for screening, investigating and assessing the full range of cases referred to this Agency, including the investigation of allegations of physical and sexual abuse, and will also provide short term service where appropriate. The incumbent will work with a wide variety of community resources, interpreting the Agency role and responsibility in conjunction with other members of the Intake Team.

QUALIFICATIONS

M.S.W. or B.S.W. Must have demonstrated high level assessment and diagnostic skills; high level casework skills including proven knowledge of crisis theory and ongoing treatment, as well as a clear conceptual framework for the practice of social work. Must have demonstrated ability to be decisive and effective under crisis pressure; comfortable in the use of authority, a co-operative and positive attitude working within a team and an ability to work effectively both in consultation with and jointly with other professionals during the investigative process.

Must have demonstrated ability to write clear, concise reports, be able to meet deadlines, and to assume responsibility for one's own workload. Valid Ontario Driver's Licence is a necessity.

>> >> >> OVER
ASSETS

Proficiency in French and/or a second language could be considered an asset.

Knowledge of Child Abuse Standards.

Experience in the Investigation of Sexual and Physical Abuse of young children

Sexual Abuse Protocol (experience with).

Familiarity with City of (City Name)

Competency in computer generated Family and Child Profile Form.

THIS POSITION IS WITHIN THE BARGAINING UNIT.

Written applications must be received by Janet Haddock, Human Resources Department, NO LATER THAN MONDAY, JULY 24, 1995.

/ebl-h
2240
July 17, 1995
APPENDIX P

An Example Of Workers Own Separate List Of Cases, Blank Form

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REFERRAL</th>
<th>DATE OPENED</th>
<th>CASE NAME</th>
<th>FILE NUMBER</th>
<th>DATE CLOSED</th>
<th>DATE TRANSFER</th>
<th>WORKER ASSENT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
APPENDIX O
FACE SHEET FIELDS OF INFORMATION

File Number;
Worker Number;
File Name, Primary Caring Person (P.C.P.) ;
Worker Safety Alert;
Risk Level;
Abuse Verified

Service Entry:
                                Brief Service
                                Opening (New)
                                Re-Opening
                                Change

Service Status:
                                Protection;
                                Support;

Alert File;
Number Of Previous Brief Services (Computer Generated);
Number Of Previous Openings (Computer Generated);
Sealed File;
Open Date;

Reason For Service:
                                Intake Primary CANS Code;
                                Intake Secondary CANS Code;
                                Current Primary CANS;
                                Current Secondary CANS;

CANS At Last Opening (Computer Generated);
CANS At Last Termination (Computer Generated);
Last Open (Computer Generated);
Last Close (Computer Generated);
Due Date Of Birth;
Other Children's Aid Societies Checked; Abuse Register Checked;
Records Department Checked;
Supervisory Override;

---

a The information is listed rough in order of appearance on the computer screens, similar information is requested of Agency Y;

b Child Abuse and Neglect System, these are codes which identify more specific information about the abuse, i.e. "physical abuse, physical abuse/CAS foster home, physical abuse/CAS group home, sexual abuse intra sibling, sexual abuse (intra), sexual assault, lack of parental care, inadequate supervision, assault of female partner, parent alcohol abuse."
Referral Information:
Call Date;
Call Time;
Referral Worker: Employee Number Of Worker Completing Form;
Source Of Referral;
Referral Surname;
Referral Given Name;
Referral Telephone;
Night Duty Intake
Caller Requests Confidentiality?
Census Tract;
Telephone;
Ownership/Least Type (Of Housing)
Income Range;
Housing Type;
Source Of Income;
Adults: Primary Caring Person(S) And Other(S);
Relationship;
Legal Surname;
Given Name;
Maiden Name;
Alias;
Address Information;
Street/Number;
Apartment Number;
City/Town;
Province;
Postal Code;
Home Telephone;
Business Telephone;
Date Of Birth (Adult)
Sex;
Deceased/Unknown (Date Of Birth);
Marital Status;
Country Of Birth;
Years In Canada;
Interpreter (Being Used?)
Preferred Language Of Service;
Racial Grouping;
Citizenship;
Religion;
Child(ren)
Child No. 1:
Child's Name;
Legal Surname;
Given Name(s);
Alias Surname;
Sex;
Birth Date;
Deceased/Unknown;
Country Of Birth;
Religion;
Years In Canada;
CANS Code;
Whereabouts Of Child;
Home Telephone;
Whereabouts/Surname;
Whereabouts/Given Names(s):
School/Day Care;
Grade;
School/Day Care Contact Surname;
School/Day Care Contact Given Name;
School/Day Care Contact Telephone Number;
Educational Placement
Relationship Of P.C.P. (Primary Care Person) With Child;
Relationship Of Other Adult #1 To Child;
Relationship Of Other Adult #2 To Child;
Relationship Of Other Adult #3 To Child;
Legal Status;
Society Wardship Expiry;
Non-Ward Expiry;
Other Children (nb: Fields Repeat As For Child No. 1).
Details Of Referral
Cross-References: Names:
Cross-References: Number
CAS (Agency) Services:
Code;
Name;
Collateral Contacts:
Name;
Relationship To Child;
Telephone.
APPENDIX P

DATA ANALYSIS: TWO LEVELS OF NUD-IST NODES

(A composite of views on a computer screen)
BIBLIOGRAPHY
BIBLIOGRAPHY *


* INCLUDES BACKGROUND MATERIAL NOT CITED IN TEXT.


