

Daily Practice Narratives of Child Protection Social Workers:  
The Power of the Frontline.

by

Yvonne F. R. Gómez  
B.A., York University, 2000  
B.S.W., York University, 2002

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**Abstract**

The notion of ‘absolute’ power underpins my own interest in power relations in Child Welfare practice but I shift the focus to the perspective of frontline child protection social workers. Missing in social work literature are the stories from workers in child protection practice. How do workers conceptualize power? How is this grey space of practice – which is not easily discussed – understood by practitioners themselves, the academy, and the system in which they practice?

My completed master’s research draws on narrative methodology, adopted from Fraser’s (2002) model. It is a collection of six narratives. By using this open-ended approach, practice narratives were shared without limitation or parameters. From this rich data I analysed workers’ experiences, drawing out examples of power relations. My conclusions include; (a) the ways that frontline workers conceptualize power are strongly impacted by dominant notions of power, (b) relational practice with clients is occurring – and does so in isolation of the larger system of child welfare, and finally, (c) there is value in examining the perspectives of frontline child protection social workers as they are the one which have the greatest potential to initiate structural change from the bottom-up through transformative practice, which is happening every day.

## Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee	ii
Abstract	iii
Table of Contents	iv
Acknowledgments	vi
Dedications	vii
Chapter I: Introduction	p. 1
Frontline Child Protection Social Workers	p. 1
Who are the Frontline Child Protection Social Workers in Canada?	p. 3
Personal Interest in the Topic	p. 5
Philosophical Approach, Poststructuralism	p. 7
Theoretical Grounding	p. 8
Chapter II: Literature Review	p. 11
Part One: Power in Child Protection	p. 11
Social Work Research and the Concept of Power	p. 11
Foucault's Theory of Power	p. 18
Conceptualizations of Power	p. 18
Alternative Conceptualizations of Power	p. 19
Part Two: Perspectives from the Frontline	p. 23
Where are the Social Workers?	p. 23
Part Three: Anti-Oppressive Practice in Child Welfare	p. 27
A relational way of practice	p. 27
A Need for Further Research	p. 30
Summary	p. 32
Chapter III: Methodology	p. 33
Methodological Theory: Narrative Analysis	p. 33
Relevance of Research to the field of Social Work	p. 36
Methods	p. 37
Sampling Definition and Recruitment	p. 37
Participants	p. 38
Data Collection and Management	p. 39
Analysis	p. 44
Hearing the Stories	p. 45
Transcribing the Material	p. 47
Interpreting Individual Transcripts	p. 48
Scanning Across Different Domains of Experience	p. 49
Privacy, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent	p. 50
Issues of Harm	p. 50
Evaluation and Assessment, Limitations of my Research	p. 52
Credibility	p. 52
Consistency	p. 53
Reader Generalizability	p. 53

Chapter IV: Analysis	p. 55
Stories of Daily Practice	p. 57
I Fell for Her – Sherri’s Story	p. 58
Nobody wants me – Vickie’s Story	p. 60
The White man – Marc’s Story	p. 62
One of my children – Amber’s Story	p. 64
You’re upright and still laughing – Jean’s Story	p. 66
I don’t really know why – Gillian’s Story	p. 69
Domains of Experience	p. 72
Talking about Practice	p. 73
Intrapersonal Domains of Experience	p. 75
Self-talk, the script of the Child Protection Professional	p. 76
At a Loss for Words or an Unwillingness to Speak?	p. 79
Interpersonal Domains of Experience	p. 81
Relationships with Clients	p. 82
Relationships with Colleagues and Supervisors	p. 85
Cultural and Structural Domains of Experience	p. 88
The Impact on Daily Practice	p. 89
Valuing Practice the Culture of Insignificance	p. 90
Summary	p. 93
Chapter V: Discussion and Conclusions	p. 95
The Conceptualization of Power	p. 96
The Practice of Frontline Child Protection Social Workers’ is Relational	p. 97
Is Change from the Bottom is Possible?	p. 100
Where Do We Go From Here?	p. 101
The Master’s House	p. 103
Final Thoughts	p. 106
Appendices	p. 108
Recruitment Poster	p. 109
Participant Consent Form	p. 111

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Finally and most importantly, I want to acknowledge my mother and father, as well as my friends that have shared in the journey and given me unquestioned support, insightful discussion, and endless encouragement.

## Dedications

I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of Autumn Joy Jenkinson, whose passion and energy was both inspiring and infectious. Your love and commitment to both child protection practice and its betterment will live on in all the work you did and in the pages of this thesis. You are missed and will always be remembered.

## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

All interactions in child welfare are based in power. Power relations in child welfare have been documented in social work literature. Dumbrill and Maiter (1997) provide a clear example of the way that clients understand power in child welfare as “an encounter with child welfare authorities...often experienced as an encounter with ‘absolute’ power” (cited in Strega 2007, p.69). “For some clients, particularly Indigenous clients, the encounter is connected with historical, social and political oppression” (p.69). The purpose of my study is to better understand how frontline child protection social workers conceptualize power by conducting a narrative analysis of daily practice stories and by presenting the implications for daily practice. In my own practice experiences as a frontline child protection worker, I have found myself engaged in many complex relations of power. Therefore, my curiosity lies in how workers understand these relations and how analyzing power in daily practice could be transformative to the practices of child welfare. In the study of child welfare, little research has been done from the perspective of the frontline child protection social worker. The aim of this thesis with its collection and analysis of frontline workers’ daily practice narratives is to redress this shortcoming.

### **Frontline Child Protection Social Workers**

Before introducing the logistics of this study, it is important to define who I mean by the descriptor frontline child protection social workers. I have chosen to use the term ‘frontline’ because it is the term that is used most frequently in the social work literature. Although both Wharf and McKenzie (2004) and Callahan (2002) use first-line child protection worker, I feel that frontline best describes the position, and is a middle ground



between first-line and Stanley and Goddard's (2002) terminology of firing-line. The Oxford English Dictionary (2007, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com)) defines frontline broadly with only the inference of it being a militarist term.

front line = FRONT n. 5; also spec. the musicians in a jazz band other than the rhythm section; freq. attrib., of, pertaining to, or situated on the front line or at the front; also transf. and fig.; frontline state, (usu. in pl.) a state bordering on a country to which it is actively hostile; spec. a Black state lying on the border of the Republic of South Africa.

I, therefore, feel the best fit for this research is the term 'frontline' when speaking about frontline child protection social workers. I have included the title of 'social worker' as everyone in my study possesses a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree and is practicing as a social worker. Few jurisdictions in Canada require that a frontline child protection worker obtain a BSW or be registered as a social worker. In BC, the main child protection employer, the Ministry of Children and Family Development (hereafter referred to as MCFD), accepts a diversity of qualifications in addition to the BSW.

For a practical understanding of what the work of frontline child protection social workers involves, I wish to provide a current job description from MCFD. I chose an MCFD job description because my research is being conducted through the University of Victoria in British Columbia, and all of my participants have either worked or are currently working within MCFD. On MCFD's webpage, a child protection worker is a worker that:

In accordance with legislation and Ministry policy, provides services involving child protection to children and families; assesses client functioning and risk to children; formulates and implements casework plans; provides services to families with the goal of maintaining the family unit; removes children when necessary; gives testimony in court; makes referrals to community resources; accesses and monitors temporary and permanent

placements for children; participates in Family Group Conferences, Mediation or other Alternate Dispute Resolutions mechanisms; maintains case records; performs other duties as required  
[http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/cw\\_recruit/pdfs/cpworkerjd.pdf](http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca/cw_recruit/pdfs/cpworkerjd.pdf) (October 25th 2006).

The definition of child protection work outlined above gives context to what it is that frontline child protection social workers do in daily practice. The job description presents a challenging and difficult profession that operates within a range of power dynamics. MCFD's job description also clearly catalogues the specific job tasks of frontline child protection social workers and highlights the complexity of the work social workers undertake, showing the various systems that workers collaborate with and the different practice venues they work within.

To sum up my choice of terminology, throughout this thesis I have chosen to use the term 'frontline child protection social worker' because I am looking at social workers in a particular employment setting. These workers are on the frontline. They have direct client contact while also acting as the interface for MCFD and many community and professional systems. Most often, frontline child protection social workers are the first contact with families entering the system of child protection services. For simplicity in terminology, the word 'worker' in this paper will be used interchangeably with the phrase 'frontline child protection social worker'.

### **Who are the Frontline Child Protection Social Workers in Canada?**

Central to understanding frontline child protection social workers is the question of who they are. This question is challenging to answer in Canada as the literature is limited and there is scarce statistical data on social work as a profession, particularly in child welfare.

What is known is that many new graduates of social work begin their careers in child protection but “few are committing to long-term careers in this field” (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.41). The data provided in the report *A National Profile of Child Protection Workers* dates back to 1998 and is by no means comprehensive.

Unfortunately it is the only study conducted on child protection workers in Canada to date.

The 1998 report describes in detail the first and only demographic study of child welfare workers in Canada. Of the respondents who participated in the study, 80% were women whose primary language was English (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.44). 53% of participants had obtained a BSW from an accredited university (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.46). Social workers with less than two years’ experience comprised 35% of the sample, and social workers with two to six years made up 32% of the sample (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.47). The overwhelming majority of workers, 70%, were between the ages of 26-44 (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.47). Finally, in regards to ethnicity, 94% identified themselves as White. At only 2%, the second largest group identified as themselves as Aboriginal (Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003, p.47). Although the profile of social workers might have seen changes since then (which was my own experience, being hired in a large urban center where there were linguistic and culturally specific recruitments) overall the face of a social worker in child protection is that of a young, White female BSW graduate who had less than two years of direct practical experience in the field. Further research needs to occur to update this information; as it was limited in its participant numbers and the data is nearly a decade old. It would be interesting to

know if the face of child protection is changing to better reflect the communities social workers serve.

When reading the statistical breakdown of characteristics common to social workers in Canada (Fallon et. al 2002, cited in Kufeldt & McKenzie, 2003) I realised that I fit the standard picture, as outlined above, of a frontline child protection social worker.

Although finding myself squarely fitting within the dominant statistical norm was not a total surprise to me, seeing the information presented statistically provoked a reaction in me that further solidified my motivation and interest in researching a topic that was personally and academically interesting to me.

My own research data comprises only a small sample of workers who may or may not reflect these statistical findings. Due to the size of my sample, I will not make generalizations or comments about the demographic makeup of workers. Rather, I am searching for an in-depth understanding of power in daily practice.

### **Personal Interest in the Topic**

I have a strong personal connection to the research that I am undertaking. I was employed as a frontline child protection social worker after completing a Bachelor's degree in Social Work. My experiences as a frontline child protection social worker in Ontario led to my pursuit of an MSW after being employed in the field for a brief two years. Prior to my employment in child protection, I had no particular interest in child welfare. I accepted the position as an intake and assessment worker at the Catholic Children's Aid Society as a learning opportunity and as a chance to participate in that

agency's training program. My intention was not to stay much beyond the probationary period. Nonetheless, once I began to practice and carry a caseload, I felt compelled to stay. I developed a strong need to ensure the wellbeing of the clients and asked myself who else would guide them through the system if I left. I often felt the need to justify my decision to stay working within the field and as part of that justification, I defined myself and my practice as being an ally to clients. I considered myself the first point of contact, the agency's calling card to families, and I felt a great deal of power in this role. Often I was able to point out the benefits or potential pitfalls to clients of one or more aspects of the system, and I felt I was helping clients navigate a very intrusive system of support. This way of thinking about my role gave me the capacity to continue working in a system that I was beginning to question. Then after much reflection about my practice – which has occurred since leaving the field and returning to graduate studies – I believe that, fundamentally, I left frontline child protection social work practice because I could not practice in the ways that I wanted. I never completely felt at ease working as a frontline child protection social worker. I continually struggled to balance protection investigations, which I do believe are necessary, within the framework of providing support to families. I did not readily discuss with peers or supervisors my internal conflicts, and I could not make sense of power either within the system, or relation to the clients.

My experience as a child protection social worker leads me to the conclusion that the setting of child protection is not an easy environment in which to tackle or address issues of power. Social workers are busy with ever-growing caseloads of increasing complexity, and they struggle to provide services in the face of cutbacks while constantly being

accountable to managerial processes and also feeling the pressure of personal accountability for clients' wellbeing. There is little space and even less energy available to reflect on the issue of power in the workplace. However, without addressing the issue of power with those involved in daily practice, I believe child welfare will continue to experience a high turnover of social workers, particularly among those in frontline practice.

Finally, I feel a personal responsibility to take on some form of research within the area of child welfare as I plan to return to the work. I want to contribute to improving child protection services. I believe child protection services are essential to the wellbeing of children, families and healthy communities. Increasing our understanding of power in child welfare can only lead to a stronger, more informed workforce, and I believe that there is a distinct and untapped capacity for this group to effect systemic change.

## **Philosophical Approach**

### **Poststructuralism**

Poststructuralist theory, particularly the work of French theorist Michel Foucault, has a strong influence on how I make sense of the institutional world of child welfare. I understand poststructuralism to be concerned with the “relationship between human beings, the world, and the practice of making and reproducing meanings” (Besley, 2002, p. 5). Feminist poststructuralist Chris Weedon explains that poststructuralist theory allows for the exploration of the “relationship between language, subjectivity, and social organization and power” (Weedon, 1997, p.12). As I attempt to bring forward the narratives, perspectives, and experiences of frontline child protection social workers, this

philosophical approach allows for the inequalities of society to be presented and then explained in terms of relationships. Weedon (1997) makes clear that analysis “which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions can be used to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (p.40). Moreover, my own specific investigation, dealing with daily practice narratives, fits well with the poststructural injunction to look at the individual, particular and local in order “to explain where our experiences come from, why [they are] contradictory or incoherent and why and how it can effect change” (Weedon, 1997, p.40). I will further explore ideas of change in child welfare in the literature review.

### **Theoretical Grounding**

The concepts of power, discourse and resistance form the basis of my analysis. Each concept is treated in detail in the methodology chapter. I use Foucault’s theories of power to analyze the daily practice narratives and Foucauldian ideas guide and inform my research. According to Weedon, Foucault’s provide a mechanism for the “contextualization of experience and an analysis of its constitution and ideological power” (Weedon, 1997, p.121). Moreover, Foucault’s theory of power focuses on specificity, where analysis looks at particular details of discourse “to uncover power and knowledge at work in a society and their part in the overall production and maintenance of existing power relations” (Weedon, 1997, p.104). With poststructuralism as my philosophical perspective and with a Foucauldian theoretical grounding I have analysed how power is conceptualized in frontline child protection workers’ daily practice narratives. My research concludes with a discussion on the implications of power in child

welfare and provides recommendations for improving daily practice in frontline child protection.

It is important here to briefly define the terms 'discourse', 'power' and 'resistance'.

According to Weedon (1997) "[d]iscourses, in Foucault's work, are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relation between them" (p.105). What I take from this is that discourses are the ways in which we can understand things. Power, according to Foucault is "a relation" (Weedon, 1997, p.110). Weedon goes on to explain that Foucault takes power relations to be "an always-present, structural feature of human societies" (p.111,) as seen in the introductory example of client perspectives that encounters in child welfare are encounters with absolute power. What sets Foucault's theory apart from other understandings of power is the notion that everyone exists inside power. My literature review documents how strikingly different Foucault's understanding is from those of other theorists who have looked at power in social work. For example, French and Raven's (1959) understanding of power as something the worker can "use" benignly and beneficently as a professional is far from a Foucauldian recognition that both workers and clients operate inside power in many different ways. As Weedon (1997) notes, power is neither prescriptive (p.111) nor owned but is constantly negotiated. I agree, and in my narrative analysis, I do not look for deterministic factors for how frontline workers conceptualize power. I want my research to disrupt the dichotomy of powerless and all powerful that currently dominates the social work literature. I draw examples of negotiated power from participants' narratives and from these develop ideas about how power is conceptualized.



For the purposes of my research, I have adopted Chambon's (1999) delineation of Foucault's theory of power relations as having three inter-related components. First, power exists, secondly, where there is power there is resistance and finally, the presence of resistance leads to the possibility of transformation. "[W]here there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power" (Foucault, 1990, 1995, cited in Chambon 1999, p.278). Foucault's definition of relational power offers an alternative approach to understanding what occurs in daily frontline child protection practice. Non-Foucauldian social work literature does allow for the possibility of resistance. For example, in Fook's structural approach (2000) one worker states "We broke some rules; we were challenged; we became unprofessional and in doing so, we became skilled, professional, and, probably better social workers" (p.79), while another worker states, "I realised that I had become absorbed by the system. I have, in some ways, become so used to it that I now simply 'write things off'" (p.40). What is often absent in this and other structural analyses is the Foucauldian understanding that one is always 'inside' power: "Should it be said that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it, there is no absolute outside where it is concerned" (Foucault, (1990, 1995), cited in Chambon, 1999, 278). Existing analyses often also lack an acknowledgement of resistance, on the part of both worker and client as part of how power is played out in daily practice. Alternatively, Foucault notes that "it is doubtless that strategic codification of these points of resistance that makes a revolution possible, somewhat similar to the way in which the state relies on the institutional integration of power relationships" (1990, cited in Chambon, 1999, p.278).

## **CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This literature review looks at existing knowledge about frontline practitioners and power in the area of child protection social work; specifically, it tracks the perspectives of frontline practitioners in the literature and remarks on areas where the perspectives of frontline practitioners are either well-represented or missing from the literature. The review is divided into three parts. *Part One: Power in Child Protection*, examines the ways power has been understood in social work literature from various perspectives as well as Foucault's concept of power and how it has been applied to social work. *Part Two: Perspectives from the Frontline* explores the ways that child protection social workers have been represented in the literature and identifies gaps in the literature. *Part Three: Anti-Oppressive Practice in Child Welfare* presents an alternative means of practice for frontline child protection social workers.

### **Part One: Power in Child Protection**

#### **Social Work Research and the Concept of Power**

Because power in its many guises has frequently been discussed in the social work literature, this review primarily looks at how power has been taken up in relation to child welfare. In this section, I begin by presenting the perspectives of Wharf and McKenzie (2004), who speak to power in child welfare through connecting policy and practice and also discuss Margolin's (1997) *Under the cover of kindness*, which influenced my early thinking on child welfare. I then look at French and Raven's (1959) work, *The bases of social power*. Although it is dated, I have included French and Raven since scholars studying practitioners still utilize or reference their model. I also discuss de Montigny's (1995) book *Social working: An ethnography of front-line practice*, which applies a

Marxist understanding of power. Finally, I present Foucault's concept of power, which most speaks to the experience of power I had while working as a frontline child protection social worker. Foucault's scholarship forms the theoretical lens that enables me to see into my own research through the understanding that power is everywhere.

Wharf and McKenzie's (2004) *Connecting policy and practice in the human services* was the first literature I encountered that mentioned that practitioners could effect systemic change through policy reform. Their book provides a positive presentation of the role of frontline social workers and the potential for workers to change the distribution of power. They conceive of power as something that workers have which can be used to advocate for clients and to change the system. While they do not theorise power or discuss how social workers understand power, they do propose that "one way of closing the gap between policy and practice is to include service users and practitioners in the development of policy" (2004, p. 30). This sets the stage for frontline workers to be understood as agents of change through participation in policy making processes. There is an emphasis in their work on the "valuing of first-line [front-line] practitioners" (p.xiii) and they cite successful examples of practitioner inclusion in business organizations, including Peters and Waterman (1982) and Brodtrick (1991) as examples of frontline workers involved in policy development. They note that the practice of including frontline staff "is rarely found in the public sector", such as in child welfare (2004, p.xiii). Frontline workers are not their main focus, and the book does not therefore present a complete picture of how practitioners effect change in their daily practice. Nor does it address power and the frontline worker directly.

French and Raven (1959) do present a tangible portrait of power. Their research aim was explicitly “to identify the major types of power and define them” (p.150, cited in Cartwright 1959). They catalogue and compare five ‘types’ of power available to professionals as a means to understanding the influence that each ‘type’ of power has when it is practiced. In their understanding, professionals are the ones with the power and, therefore, the ones who can affect the behaviour of the recipients (clients) they interact with. French and Raven’s discussion of power is limited to professionals. They do not explore the potential power of the recipient (client) or the relationships of power between professional and client. The reduction of power into categories leaves out any consideration of how the recipient understands or experiences power or whether power can be analysed in relational terms. Ultimately, French and Raven fail to acknowledge the possibility that power manifests in other forms that cannot be so easily categorized.

Many social work scholars have relied on French and Raven. Both Moreau (1989) and Swift (1995) for example employ French and Raven’s five categories of power in their studies of frontline child protection social work practice. Moreau’s (1989) *Empowerment through a structural social work approach to social work* uses French and Raven’s (1959) model as an evaluation tool for research with social workers that went through Carlton University’s structural social work program. Moreau conducted surveys to understand the graduates’ experiences of the university’s theoretical positioning. His research focuses on frontline social workers and draws out some interesting conclusions which are useful for my own understanding. First, for example, Moreau found that “the frontline worker is still the closest one to the client’s true situation. Much social work activity is in fact shielded from the intervention of the direct management” (p.256).

Secondly, Moreau states “there is a worker/client relationship that belongs to them alone, which provides the space for practice outside dominant state ideologies” (p.256), a comment that I believe warrants further investigation. Moreau goes on to say “In this way, the possibilities for the worker to manipulate information for the client’s benefit should not be underestimated” (p.256). Moreau does not substantiate his contentions by referencing his survey data; perhaps he could have done so if his survey had been less structured. Although Moreau uses French and Raven’s categories of power as an evaluation tool he does not capture the perspectives of workers in the field or inquire into how the categories of power are being used or understood.

In her book *Manufacturing ‘Bad mothers’ A critical perspective on child neglect* (1995), Karen Swift uses French and Raven’s categories of power in the final chapter, entitled *Transformations*. Her work uses critical theory and institutional ethnography to disrupt ‘neglect’ as a category of child protection focus. Swift’s proposal for how workers might engage differently with clients relies on French and Raven’s categories of power. She emphasizes the role of the frontline worker: “the worker in fact occupies a pivotal position in mediating many contradictions between social structure and the client” (p.183), and notes that certain power relations in society are “glossed over by the notion of the helping relationship” (p.184). However, Swift reduces the worker’s role to that of a vessel which the power of the state merely flows through, as evidenced by her contention that “[a]t all points in the relationship, both the client and worker are aware of the repressive power of the state that can be brought to bear on the client” (1995, p.184). Even though Swift states that workers occupy a pivotal position between social structures and clients, which I agree with, Swift’s does not go beyond French and Raven’s

categories of power in her exploration of relations of power between frontline child protection workers and their clients. In her conclusion Swift supports the use of three types of power (as identified by French and Raven) that she believes are underused, namely expert power, referent power, and the power of numbers. The importance of Swift's research for my work is her understanding that workers can change their practice. My intention is to enhance understanding of how workers practice through attending to and analysing their conceptualizations of power, which I believe may offer additional insights into how workers might change their practice in useful ways.

In contrast to Moreau and Swift, Gerald de Montigny (1995) works with a very different understanding of power in his book *Social working: An ethnography of front-line practice*, which presents a Marxist analysis of child protection practice. De Montigny argues that "socialism allowed [him] to recognize that social workers' practices were fully implicated in the social relations of accumulation, legitimization, control, and coercion" (p.11). The ethnographic approach de Montigny used allowed for an in-depth critique of daily work practices through the examination of the texts produced in child protection, such as files, reports, court presentations, as well as by the analysis of de Montigny's own experiences and location to the work he did as a child protection worker. He talks at length about how he identifies himself as working class but felt that he had to adopt a middle-class mentality while at work. Essentially he describes the process a family might go through if they were to become involved with child protection services. De Montigny challenges the social work canon, stating that "social work literature was thoroughly implicated in social relations of power and control" and that there is a "failure of scholars to recognize these relations" (1995, p.11). De Montigny's research aligns with

my own desire to understand the daily practice of frontline child protection workers and with my own experience as a frontline worker. De Montigny's preface ends, for instance, with his assertion that he "needed to understand how [his] practices could be distorted and shaped in ways beyond [his] control and beyond the boundaries of [his] desire" (1995, p.xvi). This captures a feeling that I often had while practicing. Where my thinking separates from de Montigny's is in our distinctly different understandings of power. According to the Marxist perspective, class is the main barrier to achieving equality. De Montigny substitutes the government and the structure of child welfare for the ruling classes of traditional Marxist analysis; nonetheless, in his conceptualization the elite still hold the power.

While these examples of research center on frontline child protection social workers and draw out an analysis of power, they all lack the perspective of how these workers conceptualize or understand power in their own practice. My own work, much like de Montigny's, wants to bring forward the "subtle and less visible moments of practice" (1995, p.209). Yet, none of these presentations of power, not even de Montigny's, makes the workers' conceptualization of power in daily practice available to the reader. In contrast, Foucault's theory of power positions the frontline child protection worker as inside of power. Much as Dumbrill and Matier (1997) explain that all interactions are based in power. This key difference suggests that understanding how these workers conceptualise power is vital to understanding daily practice differently.

Finally, Margolin's *Under the cover of kindness* (1997) also strongly influenced my thinking around child welfare, particularly as he uses Foucault's genealogical approach to

analysis, which “requires patience and a knowledge of details,” (p.7). Margolin attempts to put together a broad range of source materials, paying particular attention to the minutiae of social work stories: their central images and ironies, who takes the lead and who follows, how success and failure are defined (1997, p.7). Margolin suggests "that social workers live by two great contradictions: to help and to do good but simultaneously to investigate and to impose society's records and to impose society's values on poor clients" (1997, p. ix). His research used case records and professional writing as data sources, in contrast to my approach in which I have interviewed the people that create these documents. Margolin states that “social work is a type of power, a way of seeing things that traverses every kind of institution or profession" (1997, p.2). Margolin speaks of social work as a thing separate from those that carry out the practice of social work. Although his book challenges my thinking as to why social workers do the work they do, I feel it is too far removed from the social workers engaged in creating the minutiae that he is examining. What I take from Margolin is his understanding of power. He states that "social work is able to carry on its activities only by remaining oblivious to its use of power, a critical part of its survival involves creating new ways to keep itself oblivious" (1997, p.6). I question if this is true, as I believe that frontline child protection workers are aware of power and not at all oblivious to their practices. Quite the contrary, I feel that many workers struggle with the very contradiction he describes and do not know how to understand themselves inside of this conflict. Margolin also states that "clients are powerless or so the social worker thinks" (1997, p.179) without any qualification as to how he came to this conclusion. I also question this statement and feel that my research may present an alternative model of understanding.



## **Foucault's Theory of Power**

### **Conceptualizations of Power**

In this section I present the way that Foucault's theory of power has been used in social work literature. But before turning my attention to Foucault's impact on the literature of social work, it is necessary to spend more time considering the dominant conceptualization of power that can be found in much of the mainstream social work literature and in all of the research I presented to this point of the chapter. My own thinking about postmodernist power has been influenced by Foucault. His theories are appealing and applicable to my research as Foucault's thinking around power is not exclusive to certain individuals but to everyone and recognizes that power is best understood in terms of a model that he calls the juridico-discursive model. Foucault does not consider the juridico-discursive model as useful, but does believe that it exists. Therefore in this section, I give an explanation of both the juridico-discursive model of power as well as the postmodernist model of power.

Sawicki (1991) outlined the basic assumptions that are necessary to understand power from a juridico-discursive perspective. She uses the language of the juridico-discursive model to describe what I understand to be traditional forms of power, such as the forms I reviewed in the work of French and Raven (1959), Moreau (1989) and Wharf and McKenzie (2004). According to Sawicki (1991), traditional understandings of power rely on three basic assumptions (Sawicki, 1991, p.20):

1. Power is possessed (examples of this are by a class or by people)
2. Power flows from a centralized source from top to bottom (examples here are the state or the law)
3. Power is primarily repressive in its exercise (an example here is a prohibition backed by sanctions)

In all the narratives that I have analysed there are representations of this traditional understanding of power. Tension and the feeling of internal struggle and conflict are also present in the narratives. Power as it is traditionally understood can therefore be seen in the narratives, but this view is limited as traditional understandings of power cannot capture all that is going on in the daily practice of frontline child protection workers. In the narratives we will see that the workers struggle to explain and provide a context for their interactions and practice with clients. This leads workers to search for an alternative ways to conceptualize power.

### **Alternative Conceptualizations of Power**

Alternative ways of conceptualizing power may allow daily practice to take on a different form and meaning for workers, clients and the child welfare system. As we will see in the narratives, frontline child protection social workers do move beyond traditional understandings of power. How do we provide context for this? One way is by exploring the potential of postmodern conceptualizations of power. To understand postmodernist conceptualizations of power, I use Foucauldian theory. The appeal of Foucault is that he provides a critique of traditional ways of understanding power by providing an alternative way to understand power. Foucault does not deny that power exists and is understood in traditional ways. According to Sawicki (1991); “[Foucault] merely thinks that it does not capture those forms of power that make centralized, repressive forms of power possible, namely the myriad of power relations at the micro-level of society” (p.20). When conceptualizing power in Foucauldian terms three assumptions apply:

1. Power is exercised rather than possessed.
2. Power is not primarily repressive, but productive.
3. Power is analyzed as coming from the bottom up (Sawicki, 1991, p.21).

Although I do not believe that all of the workers interviewed would have stated that they have a postmodern ideology such as Foucault's, all have conceptualizations of power that reflect traditional understandings.

Foucault offered a different idea about power:

Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere...Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society (Foucault, 1990, p.93).

Applying Foucault's definition to social work leads to an understanding that no party stands outside of power. Neither client nor worker is powerless. Rather, all relationships are relations of power; whether they be with peers, clients, supervisors, or legislation.

Chambon (1999) notes that Foucault (1995) further defined power by stating that , ;

“where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p.278).

I understand Foucault's relations of power in three parts: first in the existence of power, second in the presence of resistance, and finally in the belief that resistance empowers transformation. When trying to understand how frontline child protection social workers conceptualize power this definition of power broadens the possibility of how to understand what occurs in daily practice. The second part of my understanding is that resistance exists inside of power. Social work literature often alludes to resistance, and I will discuss resistance later in my literature review. Finally, Foucault goes on to further explain (Foucault (1990) in Chambon 1999) that one is always 'inside' power, there is no 'escaping' it.

Foucault does not locate power in structures such as child protection legislation, government or the economy. Foucault, as explained by Chambon (1999) instead sees power as “diffused throughout the social system – dispersed, typically disguised through covert means – and manifested at a micro-level through local forms” (p.277). I feel that Foucault’s theory of power is suited to my research interest as his thinking meshes well with my feminist poststructural philosophy. As well, his approach allows for the examination of small moments of daily practice. To understand Foucault’s theoretical assertions I use both Weedon (1997) and Chambon (1999).

In her 1997 book *Feminist practice and poststructural theory*, Chris Weedon explains poststructural theory by answering questions related to language, subjectivity and power. Her work provides a clear understanding of Foucault and his concept of power. She explains Foucauldian concepts relevant to my own research, notably discourse, power, and resistance. For example, Weedon notes “[p]ower, according to Foucault, is a relation” (1997, p.110) and that Foucault takes power relations to be “an always-present, structural feature of human societies” (1997, p.111).

In Chambon et al's 1999 compilation, *Reading Foucault for social work*, Foucault’s ideas about power are taken up in the context of social work. This work provides concrete examples of how Foucault’s concepts can be utilized to re-understand the profession of social work by contributors who “argue in favor of critical reflexivity and the examination of unexamined truths” (Chambon et al., 1999, p.xix). Chambon et al. (1999) outline some of the work that has previously been done with Foucauldian theory, referencing a substantial body of literature that uses Foucault’s theories to analyze the

history of social work practice and as a means of questioning the various kinds of knowledge (for example, scientific and professional), organization and policy that social workers make use of. What no scholar to date has done is to utilize Foucault's theories to understand how frontline child protection social workers conceptualize power in their daily practice experiences. Chambon et al's work provides a comprehensible reading of Foucault and his concept of power, and I utilized their readings of Foucault throughout my research.

In Chambon, Moffatt's chapter Surveillance and Government of the Welfare Recipient provides an example of how social work scholars have applied Foucault's ideas to social work practice. Moffatt's piece produces a thoughtful micro-analysis of the interactions between workers and clients in a welfare office. Foucault's concepts of surveillance and the panopticon are central to Moffatt's analysis. A worker's story of practice is analyzed under the theme of "changing relationships". Here Moffatt captures the sentiment of the daily practice that occurs through an interview he includes:

"Well", I told him, "I'm going for a coffee right now – come with me and I'll talk to you." And that was the best thing for him, you know. He was walking back to the office with his arm around me saying: "I've never gone out for a coffee with my worker before." [Laughter.] You know that made me feel good about it (p230).

Moffatt analyzes this worker's story in a way that relates the disruption of the panopticon to change in the nature of the relationship the client and worker share. I see this story as having the potential to also be analyzed using Foucault's concept of power as it shows the resistance the worker demonstrates when going outside the confines of the office to conduct his practice. Moffatt concludes that power relations in the welfare office 'heighten dependency and increase marginalization' (p.242). His recommendations focus

on examining systemic decision making processes and their impact on service. Moffatt stresses that further research needs to focus on power relations. “At the same time,” he writes, “more analysis is needed of those specific rationalities constructed by social workers in direct practice” (p.243). I feel that my research does just that by focusing on how child protection social workers construct power and power relations in their daily practice.

## **Part Two: Perspectives from the Frontline**

### **Where are the Social Workers?**

If there is a general acceptance of the importance of frontline child protection social workers within social work, then why are their stories and voices predominantly absent from the scholarly literature? That question is central to my thesis. It is not true to say that the voices of workers are entirely absent. However, when the stories of frontline child protection social workers can be found, they are often small and fragmented, and that is the case with the next series of works I will review.

Kufeldt and McKenzie’s (2003) book entitled; *Child welfare: Connecting research, policy and practice* shares various points of view on child welfare. In the chapter Critical issues in child welfare, Kufeldt discusses underrepresented voices in the field of child welfare. Social workers, those that work directly with clients, are one of these underrepresented groups. Unfortunately, nowhere in Kufeldt’s short mention on the under representation of social workers is there a trace of their perspectives or their practice.

The same criticism can be levelled at a collaborative project funded by the BC Ministry of Social Services. The project chaired by Dr. Andrew Armitage and Dr. Brian Wharf, *Symposium on Research Issues and Approaches: Implementation and Evaluation of B.C.'s Child, Family and Community Act* in 1995 brought together key representatives from communities concerned with the delivery of child welfare services. The purpose of this symposium was to better understand how change can be measured. The overview claims that “Contributions for all perspectives were considered to be essential to understanding how change can be measured and evaluated” (1995, p.1). In spite of this assertion, nowhere does the report mention, for example, a union representative of frontline staff, or a parent support group. Such stories are entirely missing from the project. Naturally, there is a maximum scope that any project can take on, but when a work’s goal is to measure the success of legislation, I believe it necessary to talk to those most affected by and those most responsible for implementing that legislation.

A more balanced report presented by Callahan et al. (1998) *Best Practice in Child Welfare Perspectives from Parents, Social Workers and Community Partners* was funded by the Ministry for Children and Families in an attempt to “examine what constitutes best practice according to clients, social workers, supervisors and staff of community agencies” (p. i). This research interviewed 12 workers along with 35 women who had been investigated by child protection services. Although Callahan et al.’s (1998) research is ambitious in offering multiple perspectives; it does not capture stories of practice from the perspective of the practitioner. The report, however, complements my study and my interests as it concludes with six clear elements of “best practice”. One of these states that “[b]est practice is an authentic interchange between clients and workers that both

recognize” (p.iii). The report finds that there are many barriers to achieving best practice such as “poverty, racism, sexism, unemployment and inadequate housing, large policy issues that child welfare agencies can ameliorate but not solve” (p.vi). Two of the report’s final recommendations call for sharing management by bringing workers and clients to the decision making table (recommendation five) and for community involvement that includes further research where the best practices of workers are followed and understood (recommendation six). Callahan et al. incorporate frontline child protection social workers in a meaningful way, with direct quotations that allow the reader to connect with the worker in a way that other studies do not. Although the perspective of the workers is present, Callahan et al’s work does not extend to an analysis of power or power relations. This added dimension could lead to a richer understanding of daily practice, including how workers understand, accept, work with, challenge and resist power.

In a later work, Callahan (2000) recognizes that the perspective of frontline workers had been previously underrepresented, and brings attention to this in a collection edited with Hesse and Strega, *Valuing the Front-line: Perspectives from the Field*. In the introduction, she notes that the “realities of child welfare are largely unknown as it is difficult for practitioners and those that they serve to write about their experiences” (2000, p.xiv). The book brings together practitioners and academics to bridge this knowledge gap and it is a valuable resource. Nonetheless, what continues to be missing is the perspective of the workers on how practice is occurring. From my point of view, there is no clear focus on the frontline workers’ daily work or an analysis of power.



Gilroy's (2000) chapter in Callahan et al highlights a particular struggle that child protection social workers face in practice today. Her study found the second largest concern for workers is "their growing sense of powerlessness to define and do their own work" (Gilroy, 2000, p.35). Her discussion of power focuses on systemic issues of increasing caseloads and reduced resources as the main sources of workers' feeling of powerlessness. While Gilroy does not look outside of a dominant professional understanding of power in her discussion of powerlessness, she does, however, give an example of resistance, noting that some social workers she interviewed delayed court processes as a means to ensure families had the time to engage in long-term planning so that children could return home. She does not discuss power or how workers function in the power relations of daily practice, although from the example above it is clear that both issues are present.

My research looks at front-line practitioners' stories as stories of power within a Foucauldian analysis. Where it diverges most strongly from Gilroy's work is in her position that workers lack power. In her concluding remarks she states "[s]ocial workers recognise that heavy caseloads, *lack of resources and power*, fears for safety, liability and so on, act against providing real help and protecting children" (Gilroy, 2000, p. 36, emphasis added). Gilroy can only come to this conclusion through a failure to analyze power relations in the examples workers provided while being interviewed. For example, workers explained that they feel powerless and that, therefore, they must be, in fact, powerless. I cannot agree with this claim without fully understanding how these particular child protection social workers engage in practice. I would suggest that through her interviews Gilroy demonstrates the very opposite of her contention of

powerlessness. The interviews show that the workers are powerful, acting out forms of power through engaging in practices of resistance. This illustrates how important it is to have a better understanding of what lies behind some workers' use of the word 'powerless'.

Another piece of research that draws on the experiences of the frontline can be found in a limited way in Rutman et al.'s (2002) *'Undeserving' mothers? Practitioners' experiences working with young mothers in/from care*. Rutman et al (2002) summarized workers' experiences and therefore necessarily lost a great deal of the workers' perspective. For example, Rutman et al note that "workers were highly critical of policies that made child protection the only possible means to access supportive services" (2002, p.154). But the reader is unable to understand how practice is carried out in the face of this contradiction or how power is conceptualized in daily practice. My criticism of Rutman et al. leads me to the next section of this chapter. Rutman et al's work is useful, particularly their comments on conflicts in practice. There is, however, a need for further research. In order for the literature to be reflective of and able to comment on the complexity of power relations in social work, the voices of frontline child protection workers must be added to the discussion.

### **Part Three: Anti-Oppressive Practice in Child Welfare**

#### **A Relational Way to Practice**

I feel that it is important to dedicate a section of my literature review to Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) in social work with particular focus on child welfare. Earlier work on AOP was done by Jocelyn Jones (1994). Her article, "Child protection and anti-

oppressive practice: The dynamics of partnership of parents explored” is based on the legislative changes in England and Wales in 1991 and focuses on the notions of partnership with parents and how this is central to the Act. Jones concludes that the sharing of power is not easy as they “may, themselves, be oppressed and unsupported in their organizations” (p.189). It is unfortunate that it has been almost 20 years since this research has been published and frontline child protection social workers find themselves in this same place.

This leads me to explore the book *Emerging Perspectives on Anti-Oppressive Practice* edited by Wes Shera (2003). Dumbrill’s work in this book entitled Child Welfare: AOP’s Nemesis? challenges notions of practice and what frontline practitioners are capable of effecting from the frontline in child welfare . Dumbrill’s belief is that the answers to these questions are in the clients. What is valuable to take away from Dumbrill’s work is his presentation of AOP as “not bring[ing] a radically new perspective to social work” but what it does is that AOP “brings a synthesis and refinement of earlier social work perspectives” (p.104). A clear aim of Dumbrill’s work is to privilege marginalized voices as a means of effecting systemic change in child welfare. I believe that this is a valid approach, and although in my own investigation speaking with clients was outside the scope of the research, I believe for transformation to be possible both clients and workers need to have their voices privileged, separately, and then in a collective manner that allows for both groups to collaborate as allies.

Donna Baines (2007) edited book entitled *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice; Building Transformative Politicized Social Work* provides a current look at how to translate the theory of AOP into the everyday practice of social work. In her opening chapter Baines

explains in the broadest sense that “AOP represents current ‘state-of-the-art’ thinking and practice by social justice oriented social workers concerning how to best ‘push the envelope’ within the context of neoliberalism, globalization and restructuring” (p.19).

What is most useful in this definition is that Baines stresses “AOP does not claim to be nor does it wish to become, an exclusive and authoritative model containing every answer to every social problem” (p.19). The main aim of AOP is to “not only help people who need it but also to help clients, communities and themselves to understand why they are oppressed and how to fight for change” (p.19). What I would like to highlight here as most relevant to my own research is that one of the aims of AOP is to focus inwardly on themselves, in my case the frontline child protection social workers as a necessary point towards fighting for change. What is lacking for me in this definition is the sense of bonding together, although community is clearly mentioned, the way in which the information is presented still leaves social workers as outsiders in all the aforementioned grouping of people. What this book does well is bring together theory and practice in social work from the perspectives of academics as well as practitioners.

Susan Strega’s (2007) work in this book focuses on AOP practice in Child Welfare. Strega makes the point early on that “social work is still struggling with how best to practice in child welfare” (p.68). Strega also takes us through some of the thinking that social work went through historically from moral guidance to the model of casework. She comments that that current practice of child protection is individualistic and “holds individual parents, usually the mothers, responsible for individual “failures” in parenting” (p.68). What stands out for me here is the direct parallel to frontline workers that are often singled out for practicing in relational or AOP ways as bad, subversive, or rogue,

when they resist the dominant culture in child welfare that Scourfield (2003, cited in Strega 2007) coins as the “occupational culture and discourse”. What sets Strega’s chapter apart from other AOP writing is that she provides practical practices for frontline child protection social workers that place the onus on the practitioner, not the client. Strega leaves us with the optimistic challenge that AOP transformation is possible in child welfare. Although she does not get into how to challenge oppression at all levels what Strega does is name the macro and the micro intersections where these challenges need to occur. Again what is important to my own research is that Strega names relationships, worker/worker and worker/employer where I note that AOP and relational practice is most deficient. Frontline child protection social workers are often taking steps to better serve their clients but not themselves, or the larger system.

### **A Need for Further Research**

It is difficult to find social workers’ stories from the frontline of child protection work. A real-life account of a caseworker’s practice is presented by Marc Parent in his narrative, non-fiction *Turning Stones: My Days and Nights with Children at Risk*. Although Parent’s (1996) piece is not rooted in theory, his practice stories are vivid and allow an understanding of his struggle and angst as he tries to process how he functioned as a caseworker in New York over a four year period.

This is how I succeeded and how I failed these children, but more than that – this is how I kept on trying, using the tools of my upbringing to work through situations they were never meant to handle. This is what I was allowed to do and what I was held back from doing. (p. 3)

Parent’s book is extremely hopeful and he has continued to work for legislative reforms in American child protection. Parent does not glorify or justify child protection work but

presents his account of what he did and how he experienced it in a way that is accessible and brings an understanding of the work to the public.

In contrast to Parent's book, another memoir style account that presents itself as an academic text is a book written by Cynthia Crosson-Tower (2002), *From the Eye of the Storm: The Experiences of a Child Welfare Worker*. The book tells Crosson-Tower's story from the point of her job interview to the point when she left direct practice. Unfortunately there is not scholarly support for the contentions that Crosson-Tower makes in her book. It is filled with quotations that stereotype and blame individual parents involved with child protection and throughout the book there are similar judgmental statements that individualize blame. Crosson-Tower presents the experiences of a social worker as she remembers them and she makes no attempt to critique the larger system or provide a context for deeper understanding. The book is a judgmental work that I found to be racist, sexist, and classist. I feel particularly concerned that the book is intended as a teaching tool for new workers in the field, with questions for thought at the end of each chapter.

An example of a book that combines narrative and academic analysis in an accessible way is McMahon's (1996) work *Damned if you do, Damned if you don't: Working in child welfare*. McMahon's approach is very similar to mine. He collected experiences from the frontline of child protection practice through the perspective of the social workers that carry out the work. McMahon's research set out to answer the questions: How do child welfare workers go about their work? How do they describe what they do? And how do they understand their experience of doing child welfare work? His study

that followed eight practitioners on the job and includes interviews where he joined in the discussion. He also interviewed supervisors and parents. Like me, McMahon wanted to investigate how workers understand and experience child welfare practice because he had the experience of performing the work. McMahon's conclusion is a critique by the workers of their work and their profession. Many implications for practice can be drawn from McMahon's work, from education and training to a revisioning of the relationships between clients and social workers. What is missing for me is an analysis of the workers' own understanding of power in their practice. What these stories provide the reader with is a detailed account of the struggles that workers face and the choices they make in daily practice. I feel that there needs to be change in the system and that this work is very informative but I believe it fails to push our understanding of ourselves or our understanding of what power means to us in daily practice.

### **Summary**

There are many ways to conceptualize and utilize power. I believe that using Foucault's concept of power is the most useful way to analyze the daily practice narratives of frontline child protection workers and to draw out the implications for the profession. The literature conveys that there is a gap in practice knowledge, and I hope that my research will begin to address the topic of frontline protection workers.

### **CHAPTER III: Methodology**

This qualitative study aims to address some of the gaps in the social work literature regarding frontline child protection social work practice, particularly how power is understood from the perspective of frontline child protection social workers. I have collected personal interviews, and analyzed the narratives of the participants voicing their experiences of daily frontline practice in the setting of child protection services. This study documents and analyses the narratives of frontline child protection social workers as a means to better understand how power operates in child protection.

In this chapter, I provide the reader an overview of the theory that guided my analysis, examples of my analysis, and the methods by which this research was evaluated. I also provide a description of an evaluation of my research. Following this chapter I present the results of my research.

#### **Methodological Theory: Narrative Analysis**

Narrative analysis as a methodology is broad in its beginnings and, as Riessman (2002) suggests, “does not fit neatly within the boundaries of any single scholarly field” (p.217). I used narrative analysis as a way to expand what is currently understood of frontline child protection social workers’ practices. In addition, this methodology provides a means of documenting knowledge from the perspective of those in the field. Narratives provide the data where operations of power can be analysed and new ways of understanding social work practice can be formed. The key influences in shaping my understanding of narrative analysis have been the works of Riessman (2002, 2005) as well as Urek (2005) and Fraser (2004). Riessman (2002) provides a broad understanding



of narrative analysis and has functioned for me as a starting point for applying this methodology. Fraser (2004) adds to Riessman's (2002) work by taking the analysis further and by entering into the discussion of social context and how we are active subjects in our worlds.

My use of narrative analysis has been influenced by my interest in bringing frontline child protection social workers' stories to the forefront of social work literature as well as by my own experiences as a frontline child protection social worker. I have also been influenced by narrative research and two books that I read, which are autobiographical in nature: *Under the Cover of Kindness* by Leslie Margolin and *Turning Stones* by Marc Parent, as I discussed in my literature review, Chapter Two.

With this project my aim was to build knowledge about daily practice experiences as related by frontline child protection social workers. I approach this from a postmodernist and critical narrative framework. Narrative analysis as a research methodology is located mostly within postmodern theories and is a way to perceive, analyse and describe stories that people tell. These stories construct and give meaning to a subject's lived experiences. Riessman (2002) states that "narrative analysis allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning: how events have been constructed by active subjects" (p.263). Narrative analysis is becoming more accepted as a method of enquiry in the social sciences (Fraser, 2004). Narrative analysis as a methodology can also be found in fields such as psychology, anthropology, nursing, and, increasingly, in social work (Fraser, 2004, Riessman, 2002).

Narrative research that is done from a critical social work perspective looks at “author[ing] the stories that ‘ordinary’ people tell” (Fraser, 2004, p.181). This makes narrative methodology well-suited to the task of examining the stories of ‘ordinary’ frontline child protection social workers. The critical narrative approach also acknowledges that the construction of stories is influenced by interactions with other stories. Stories are created within political, cultural, and social contexts (White & Epston, 1990). As a researcher using narrative analysis, I am challenged to have “an awareness of social conditions as they consider how culture, and social structures, surface in the stories participants and researchers tell” (Fraser, 2004, p.182). This means that research has the potential to make invisible experiences of disadvantaged groups visible (Devault, 1999). I am careful here to note that I do not believe frontline child protection social workers are a disadvantaged group, but, collectively, their voices and stories have been underrepresented in social work literature, particularly in the theory of child welfare, and practice teachings.

The attributes of narrative analysis are important to this study for many reasons. First, I believe that frontline child protection social workers stories are made invisible by a culture that denies their importance. It is no coincidence that this is an area where there is little information published in academia that is written from the perspective of or in collaboration with frontline child protection social workers. Therefore narrative analysis not only has the potential to identify these stories, but also to acknowledge the participation of societal discourses in the stories of frontline child protection social workers. Riessman (1993) reinforces this when she states, “political conditions constrain particular events from being narrated” (p.220). In making these stories of daily practice

experiences more public, the dominant discourse of frontline child protection social workers can be expanded, examined, and dismantled thus creating space for other stories.

### **Relevance of Research to the Field of Social Work**

To ensure that my research is relevant to the field of social work, I required that the participants have a Bachelor's degree in Social Work. This helped to ensure that participants have comparable education and training and also have a working knowledge of the social work code of ethics. Ideally, I wanted the participants to be employed in the role of frontline child protection social work at the time of the interview. As it turned out, four of the six participants were currently practicing at the time of the interview, and the other two were practicing in child welfare related positions. This is an important point as I wanted to capture the daily practices that workers are engaged in and if these stories and practices are of maximum value, naturally, the participants need to be or have recently been involved in the practice of social work.

My research presents a collection of frontline child protection workers' daily practice narratives as well as an analysis of how power is conceptualized, understood and enacted in their stories. To transform child welfare, those studying social work must understand practice from the perspective of those involved most intimately with its workings. This means taking an in-depth look at the perspective of frontline child protection workers as an entry point. The value of my work is that little attention to date has been paid to the stories of how practice is carried out from the perspective of workers and the knowledge my research uncovers has implications for the transformation, improvement and comprehension of daily practice.

## **Methods**

### **Sample Definition and Recruitment**

There are many differences in the various methods for the analysis of personal stories. One element that brings these methods together is the use of personal narratives collected through an interview process. I conducted individual interviews of frontline child protection social workers, either current workers or those who had recently left the field. I recruited participants through three avenues: the British Columbia Association of Social Workers (hereafter BCASW), personal contacts in the community, and posters at the University of Victoria (see Appendix A). Having various recruitment methods increased participants' anonymity and safety since it broadened the pool of people who were able to participate.

Six social workers participated in the study. All participants responded to one of the forms of recruitment. When potential participants contacted me, I introduced myself, sent them an information poster that described my study, explained confidentiality and its limitations, outlined the interview procedure, and explained the data management and recording plan. I then set up appointments to arrange for interviews at times and in places that were convenient and would ensure confidentiality. At the onset of the interview, I reviewed the consent form (Appendix B) with the participants and asked that they sign a copy.

My selection of participants did not address issues of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, or geography (rural/urban). I believe this is a shortcoming of my research, but

unfortunately, I have not been able to capture all aspects that influence child protection workers in a single research project which due to the narrative analysis method needed to be limited to a smaller number of participants. This is one of the limitations of the narrative analysis method. To address this concern I allowed for space in the interview for participants to speak to anything else that, in their opinion, influenced their daily practice, by including an open-ended question near the end of each interview.

### **Participants**

I have changed the name of the participants to enhance their confidentiality. The modified names appear in the stories. Five of the participants are female; the other is male. Three participants work with Aboriginal families, or have had extensive experience doing so. One participant self-identified as Aboriginal, and the male participant identified himself as White and made reference to his gender as being a marker that directly affected his practice with clients. There were also references made by several of the participants to being a parent and to being a single parent. I would classify all of the participants as economically stable and middle class due both to their current employment situation and to information the participants revealed during the interview. Four of the participants were practicing as frontline child protection workers at the time of the interviews. The other two remain involved in the area of child welfare. Two of the six participants knew each other as work colleagues and may or may not have been connected to the other participants due to professional matters. Therefore, I am purposely vague with recording identifying characteristics such as employment. I did inform participants that I would do this to protect their anonymity, and that it was impossible to guarantee their confidentiality and privacy fully. All participants stated they were satisfied with the measures I was

taking. Participants knew that I would want to use direct quotes and that materials may be published in the future and their consent informed the process.

### **Data Collection and Management**

The data collection method selected for this study is an in-depth narrative interview, which means that my role in the interview was minimal. There were only two questions, one at the start of the interview and one at the end. The opening question was this: *Tell me a story of your daily practice. This story should be told from your perspective, where you are in an active role as a frontline child protection social worker. The story has no other parameters or limitations. What I am interested in hearing is your stories – told by you – a frontline child protection social worker.* Since I approach my work from a Foucauldian point of view and since a basic premise of this approach is that all interactions in child welfare are inherently based in power, I believe the question did not need to be more specific. As well, it was my intention that the question be both open and broad enough to establish how power is conceptualized by the participants without leading them to structure their answers in any particular way. Prompts were the only other participation from the researcher, and they were only used as needed to encourage the participant to continue or expand on their stories. The result was uninterrupted stories from the participants that do not follow a script of tailored or preset questions. This flexible format lent itself to the collection of stories by focusing on the participant rather than the researcher (Gilbert, 2002). I would like to mention that the participants knew what the question for my interview was going to be before the interview began. Although none of the participants stated that they prepared for the interview, they told me that it had been helpful to their thinking to have the question prior to our meeting.

During the interview process my skills evolved with each participant. Kvale (1996) provides metaphors for the role of the researcher. One of these metaphors is that of a miner where the research is searching for "...knowledge" and "is waiting in the subjects' interior to be uncovered, uncontaminated..."(p.3). During my own process of conducting the interviews I was weary of impacting the dialogue and findings with my own experiences and ideas of frontline practice. But, as each of the interviews proceeded and I began to probe and guide the interview I felt that my interview practice reflected Kvale's second metaphor, that of a traveler. The traveler metaphor "understands the interviewer as a traveler on a journey" (Kvale, 1996, p.4). By the time all my interviews concluded I feel that the data collection through interview was a process of "wandering together with" the participants rather than excavating for truth as in the miner metaphor (Kvale, 1996, p.4). It was challenging at first to get into the metaphor of the traveler, even though my own theoretical grounding mirrors that of the traveler with its "...postmodern constructive understanding that involves a conversational approach to social research" (Kvale, 1996, p.4). What I have come to appreciate through this process is that conversations do process rich data. It is possible for "the structure of the research interview [to] come close to an everyday conversation" as well as "involve a specific approach and technique of questioning" need when there is a specific goal in mind (Kvale, 1996, p.27). Using this conceptualization of data collection allowed me to benefit from "open interviews [where] people tell stories, narratives, about their lives" (p.43), where many thoughtful stories of daily practice were shared.

To close the interview, I posed a second question, which simply asked if the participant had anything else to share or add. The closing question allowed participants to fill in any information and close the interview when they were ready to do so. The closing question ensured that the participants got what they needed out of the interview, and if they wanted to, could talk about anything that was still unresolved for them. In this section I dialogued more freely with the participants when I turned off the audio recorder. I know that the conversation shifted as the participants' body language became more relaxed, and storytelling shifted to back-and-forth exchanges. In addition to the opening and closing questions, I also employed some probes and used these to facilitate the storytelling. I feel that my own experience as a frontline child protection social worker provided me with the skills to sit and listen without influencing the interview process.

When it came to the actual individual interviews, they ranged in length from 50 minutes to 1½ hours. I was flexible to allow each of the participants whatever time they needed to be able to tell their stories of frontline practice. All participants needed a 'warm up' which I was surprised by. This warming up period at that beginning of each interview consisted of each participant talking about their beliefs and their practice philosophy and often their role as an employee of the Ministry before proceeding to the stories. Although each participant was unique in their warm up they all took upwards of ten minutes before beginning their storytelling. I believe that this occurred for a variety of reasons, which I did not ask participants to speak to in their interviews. I believe, based on my own practice experience, that this warming up time could be due to the information that they were sharing as it is often sensitive, and has not been processed by the workers in other settings due to the constraints of confidentiality. Also, the participants' relationship to me



was new and unfamiliar and even though I was a former worker I was now in the position of academic researcher that is somewhat foreign from their practice experience. This will be expanded on in the analysis chapter.

With the participants' permission I audio-taped the interviews; I chose not to take notes during the interviews as from my own experience as a frontline child protection worker, I know the influence that this can have on participants, and I did not want to sway their sharing. Therefore, before each interview I wrote in a journal to ensure I had a clear head for the process, and also directly after each interview, I made time to write down my impressions and thoughts. These notes included the context of the interview, the place, and initial observations that would not have been captured by audio recording, for example, silences, body language, behaviours, rubbing of eyes, blinking, tears etc.

These notes served as a second source of data in my research, along with my research journals, a collection of field notes as the process of the thesis unfolded. I used these field notes as a way to deal with conceptual baggage as discussed by Kirby and McKenna (1989), for example recording my reactions to the research process as well as my reflections on what the research was bringing out in me personally as a former frontline child protection social worker. Kirby and McKenna (1989) advise: "Since all research is done by someone, it is essential that that 'someone' is identified and accounted for in the research" (p.49). With a journal of field notes, I was able to capture my reflections on the research and the process of researching. Again, because I have been so close to the research that I conducted, it was necessary to document my own stories in order to account for my biases. For example, my journaling process allowed me to process my

own stories of frontline child protection practice, and to see similarities to the other participants. This journaling occurred most frequently after interviews, as many of the narratives shared reminded me of my own practice experiences. This gave me a space to reflect on power, and my conceptualizations as well as allowed me to keep these stories and experiences separate allowing the focus to stay on the participants narratives.

Although narrative analysis supports the interviewer in being active and connected to the participant during the interview, I did not want to influence the direction of the stories as I also had experience as a frontline child protection social worker. I do understand myself as being in relationship with my participants and that “as a researcher or a practitioner we cannot participate without influencing or being influenced” (Laird, 1995, p.152). I was warm and engaging, sharing of myself when I felt it was relevant, as a means of modeling the storytelling, since, as I mentioned before, a few participants had difficulty speaking to their own practice and placing themselves inside the story. I also felt that speaking a little about myself helped us relate and reassured the participants that I was not being judgmental. Self-disclosure is an important part of interviewing and has been observed to help develop trust (Neuman & Kreuger, 2003). For me, self-disclosure meant sharing some of my own practice experiences and relating to what the participants were sharing when probes were not enough to keep the story going. For the most part I felt that it facilitated trust as well as an insider’s understanding because of my previous work experience. I refrained however from participating in a dialogue or discussion with the participants as it was a narrative interview. I only stepped in with probes or with my own story if there was a lull or if the participant questioned me directly. Also, I tried to remain warm and engaged without saying too much. I wanted and felt that the participants were

'in charge' of their storytelling and only redirected them if they lost themselves and moved away from storytelling or went on tangents about unrelated matters.

All confidential material was stored on my personal computer, which is password controlled and a backup copy was stored on a CD, both of which only I have access to. All hardcopy material is locked in a file cabinet along with the audio tapes, transcripts, consents, and my journaling notes that may contain the participant's personal information. I am the only one with access to the key for this cabinet. It is also a possibility that this data may be used for further research, such as an article in an academic journal. I informed the participants that I will keep their data for 5 years from the completion of this thesis. At the end of this time all the data will be destroyed, via shredding of paper and breaking of disks.

### **Analysis**

There are many different ways to undertake narrative analysis. Riessman (2002) provides several avenues to take up the task. Riessman explains that the analysis of narratives is meant to open up the telling of experiences and therefore is flexible in its various methods (p.218). She states that, "there is no binding theory of narrative but instead great conceptual diversity" (Riessman, 2002, p.218). Flexibility in analysis is fitting for my feminist poststructural approach as it lends itself to multiple truths. Riessman's (2002) article goes on to showcase some key researchers' methods in her article. I am including Labov's (1972) structural approach as he is well established in the field of narrative research, although I am not using his method in its entirety as Riessman (2002) suggests that he is a "simple first step when interpreting narratives" (p. 251). Labov argues that

narratives have formal properties and that each of these properties has a function. His method of analysis is to code stories with a common set of elements which serve: “(A) to provide an abstract for what follows, (O) to orient the listener, (CA) to carry the complicating action, (E) to evaluate its means and (R) to resolve the action” (Riessman, 2002, p.251). Although Labov’s method uncovers the form that narratives take, it did not capture everything I wanted to analyse, such as the social context and thematic connections between stories. It did, however, help me to visualize the different parts of narratives I was faced with during my transcription phase. Fraser (2004) provides another method of line by line analysis that captures the social context and challenges the researcher to perform a critical analysis of the narratives. This idea of critical analysis is also captured by Plummer (1995) who explains that “narrative analysis offers us a way to understand the role personal stories play in the making of socio-political worlds” (cited in Fraser 2004). Plummer’s model allowed me to analyse how power was being conceptualized and enacted by frontline child protection social workers. Fraser (2004) presents her work as a guide with seven phases of analysis. I used Fraser’s approach as a clear and extensive framework for my own research.

### **Hearing the Stories**

Fraser (2004) acknowledges that interviewing is part of data analysis in narrative research, and she calls the first phase, *Hearing the Stories, Experiencing others’ Emotions*. Fraser advises that the researcher listen to the words and emotions of both the participants and researcher. I tried to stay aware of my emotional responses to what participants were sharing when I agreed or shared a similar experience. I was also mindful that I did not want their stories to reinforce my feelings on the topic, and I really

listened to their keywords (words that they repeated and/or emphasised) in order to be able to use them as probes.

As I was interviewing, I acknowledged the similarities between the participants and myself and listened through the filter of a social worker who had the experience of working in a frontline child protection setting. I was also aware of the differences between the participants and myself, and I was careful to refrain from making assumptions or outward gestures or reactions about the stories they shared. This challenged me to listen carefully and to ask for clarification when I was uncertain what was being inferred or implied.

Within a couple of hours of the completion of each interview, I made notes of what the interview process was like and wrote down any thoughts that came to me, for example, where I felt I was similar or different in beliefs or practices, as well as anything else that stood out for me. This was important to keep myself close to the interviews as well as to separate my own understanding of power and daily practice. Also this journaling acted as a means of documenting my reactions so that later during my analysis my own reactions could be analyzed and would not affect my “subsequent interpretations” (Fraser, 2004, p.186). I sat quietly and listened intently. I tried very hard not to nod or smile and to allow an open space for the stories to flow.

During this phase, Fraser (2004) encourages the researcher to develop further insights about herself including insights that are derived from raking over past experiences (p.187). This last consideration was important as I have my own opinions of the

contradictions that frontline child protection social workers find themselves in and I had to be careful not to let my opinions interfere with or take over the stories. I believe this process of developing insight began with my journaling before and after the interviews and continued throughout the analysis.

### **Transcribing the Material**

Transcribing the material was a long and slow process of really connecting with my participants. As Riessman (2002) states, “taping and transcribing are absolutely essential to narrative analysis” (p.249). I fully transcribed all the interviews as a means of working from the “most accurate record of the interview” possible (Fraser, 2004, p.187). I believe that transcription is part of the analysis and this is why I chose to transcribe the tapes myself. This way I could ensure that the tapes were transcribed verbatim and that the transcriptions included silences, laughing, crying, and vocal inflections such as when the participants spoke loudly and sped up. Although this was a time-consuming process, it provided me with “a closeness” to the stories (Fraser, 2004, p.187). This closeness developed and deepened through re-listening to the tapes many times, first without trying to transcribe them and then again after the transcriptions were completed. It surprised me that I felt an even stronger sense of the workers’ feelings during the transcription process than I had during the interview itself. Their passion for their work and the strong emotional connections to clients came through in the re-listening and transcription phase.

Before beginning the work of transcription, I listen to the tapes one at a time after all the interviews were completed. Listening to the tapes once through without interruption allowed for further journaling and I found I made additional observations and

connections. This also increased my familiarity with the participants' stories. It brought back recollections of ideas and thoughts and helped draw parallels between the narratives. The stories were individual but were also coming together for me with every additional listening. After the transcribing, I listened again to the audio tapes to ensure the accuracy of the transcription as well as to continue to increase my closeness to the participant's narrative, which is seen as important by both Riessman (2002) and Fraser (2004). Transcripts were offered to participants for their review as a means of honouring their participation and stories, as well as a way to ensure accuracy. Participants were also given the option of receiving a copy of the completed thesis by email or hard copy.

### **Interpreting Individual Transcripts**

Interpreting individual transcripts involved noting some of the specifics of each transcript as suggested by Fraser (2004). Throughout this phase I made notes on the actual transcripts that commented on how the story felt to me, whether for example the stories felt rehearsed, or whether the stories had never been shared, where there were contradictions in what was being told, and how the stories were being communicated, both verbally and physically. This phase allowed me to break down long sections of talk in the transcripts into specific stories; this is what Fraser (2004) calls segments of text. This was difficult at times as some of the stories the participants told were not told all at once; they were not "discrete or self-contained" and participants jumped from topic to topic (Fraser, 2004, p.187). Also, the stories were not always in sequential order but Fraser comments that this is common (p.189). After numbering the lines of text to then divide the transcripts into smaller sections, I was able to look "for sets of ideas where some sort of plot unfolds" (p.189). I then named those smaller sections according to the

themes that emerged from the transcript. In this way I was able to clearly see smaller groupings of text, and from there I isolated particular stories for further analysis. As I had anticipated, since the interviews were all upwards of an hour, participants shared more than one story of their daily practice, and I collected more narratives than I was able to analyze. The stories that I included in this analysis were selected because they have a clear structure; a beginning, a middle, and an end. As well the participants were emotionally connected to their tale, and there seemed to be something going on when they told the story, a kind of complete immersion in the telling of the story that included a diminished consciousness of the interview process and a re-living/re-visiting of the event.

As Fraser (2004) names her stories, so do I. The names that I gave the stories were found in the participants' narratives and seem to capture the essence, tone, or feeling of a story by using the exact or a similar phrase to one that the participant her or himself used.

### **Scanning Across Different Domains of Experience**

While selecting the stories to analyze, I noticed that I was drawn to some more than others. I believe that my previous experience as a frontline child protection social worker was influential in my selection process. To ensure that my own bias did not take over, I used Fraser's (2004) *Scanning Across Different Domains of Experience*. This phase allowed me to analyze the narratives while preventing myself from "fixat[ing] on the one dimension of life and [avoiding] the problems of social determinism and (hyper-) individualism" as expressed by Bliss (2003, cited in Fraser, 2004) and Segal (1999, cited in Fraser, 2004). This layer of analysis was particularly relevant to my study since my research attempts to "unearth insights about how people interact with different



dimensions of their environment [their daily practice]” (Fraser, 2004, p.191). I carried out this phase by examining the narratives and making notes on the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural aspects. I did a separate reading of all the transcripts for all these aforementioned categories after separately analysing each of the narratives as distinct stories.

### **Privacy, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent**

Frontline child protection social workers may feel uncomfortable about participating in research as it is not in the forefront of social work literature. When frontline child protection social workers are included in studies their voices are often lost in the greater context of the study. I use narratives to get these voices included in the literature and so that frontline child protection workers will be present and visible in the discourse of child welfare. The reality is that if a participant’s identity were to be revealed, it might compromise the participant professionally. In child protection there is a confidentiality oath that employees they must adhere too, as well as a ban on speaking to the media. I asked for and received informed consent so that I could use direct quotes and feel that the sample size and my vagueness in describing the participants are satisfactory.

### **Issues of Harm**

Also, when conducting interviews, there is the concern that there may be backlash for the participants, for example from a professional organization or from the workplace. I feel that my ethics application ensured that this was not an issue, and confidentiality was of the utmost importance throughout the thesis process. In fact, far from doing harm, I believe that participating in the interview process was useful for my participants and

myself. Typical of the comments I got after an interview was an expression of gratitude and the statement, '*I felt like I was in a confessional.*' This is where I see the potential for change from inside the system. This analysis of the experience and storytelling may lead to change in practice and in the way that workers communicate with colleagues. This notion will be expanded on in the analysis chapter.

There are further ethical implications because of the interview style and methodology that I used. Because narrative analysis deals with personal experience, I did not know what kind of stories were going to be shared. In several instances, participants became emotional when telling their practice stories and this is why I was flexible with the interview time. I also allowed stories to go off track to ensure that the participant felt resolution before moving on, and I allowed for space through silence. I also offered at the beginning and the end of the interview process the option for further meetings. As well, I had support referrals ready. The referrals were not utilized but were a necessary preparation/precaution.

Furthermore, using personal stories could be interpreted as a criticism of the Ministry of Child and Family Development, or of state child protection authorities in general, although this is not the intention of the research. This research could be harmful if used against frontline child protection social workers and the information that was shared with me during the interview could, if it became public knowledge, marginalize a participant in their workplace. Obviously, I did not want this to happen. Likewise, I did not want these interviews to be used to reaffirm stereotypes about social workers in child welfare.

My intention, rather, was to disrupt the dichotomy of the power hungry worker and the powerless worker.

### **Evaluation and Assessment, Limitations of my Research**

My research consists of stories of practice experience as told by frontline child protection social workers, thus drawing conclusions based on my interpretation of narratives. My goal was to conduct a trustworthy study, but in the literature there are many opinions of what constitutes good quality research. Riessman (2002) states, “validation in narrative studies cannot be reduced to a set of formal rules or standardized technical procedures” (p261). In this section I expand on the concepts of credibility and consistency and reader generalizability as associated with trustworthy qualitative research and the limitations of this research.

### **Credibility**

Credibility in qualitative research refers to the believability of the findings. To ensure that my study was indeed believable I used several strategies. I used a member check, where the participants were asked to review the results of my analysis to ensure that the findings made sense to them. Riessman (2002) encourages this as part of narrative analysis. My findings proved to be recognizable to the participants and therefore this increases the level of credibility of my findings. I would have wanted more workers to participate in this process but it was voluntary, and I had limited time for the process. A second check for credibility was comparing my findings with what is already in the social work literature, and noting some of the similarities and differences and reflecting why this

might be so. I was continually critically reflecting on my position while performing my data collection and data analysis in order to fulfill this criterion.

### **Consistency**

Consistency is understood in qualitative research as the results being consistent with the findings collected. I have provided this by documenting a clear path, or audit trail, of how I came to collect my data, how it was analysed, how I interpreted the findings and, finally, how all of this led to my conclusions as set out in the discussion chapter.

Riessman (2002) draws attention to the need for trustworthiness and transparency of process in research. As she suggests, with the consent of participants I have made my transcripts available to other researchers for this purpose.

### **Reader Generalizability**

In this research, the focus was to gain an in-depth understanding about relatively few experiences, rather than a shallow description of many experiences. Reader generalizability is a concept that is found in qualitative research as a marker to help understand whether the findings are applicable to the reader, instead of thinking of how well the research might apply to many people. I believe that readers, especially readers who are frontline child protection workers, will be able to see themselves in the stories that are told. For this reason I have provided considerable detail within the stories and analysis so that the reader can decide if the analysis and interpretation fits for them. To accomplish this, I have used direct quotations and have as much as possible left the stories as they were told. I have also shared enough of my own story throughout the

opening chapters to, as Fraser (2004) suggests, make my own location transparent and present.

What is not covered in Riessman (1993, 2002) are issues of social justice within the evaluation and assessment of analysis. As a researcher, I have thought at length both “about whom” and “for whom” this research will serve (personal communication, Strega, 2007). I treat the “data collected with respect and see participant narratives as a gift” (personal communication, Strega, 2007). I hope that my research will be understood as not only a challenge to the status quo in how frontline child protection practice is understood but also as a “challenge [to] my own complacency in the systems of domination and subordination” (Strega, 2007, p. 3) in which I have worked and in which I aspire to continue my career.

The final product of the analysis is my story. I was not looking to produce the “right” knowledge or the “truth”. I have produced a piece of research that I believe is coherent and credible (Fraser, 2004, p.196). This took place through many drafts, with attention being paid to the relevancy of my research question, the analysis, and fair interpretation. Throughout, I have worked closely with my supervisor and committee.

## CHAPTER IV: ANALYSIS

The purpose of this study is to better understand how power is understood and enacted by frontline child protection social workers. I have done this by collecting daily practice narratives from a range of participants who are or were recently practicing frontline child protection social workers. These interviews produced stories of daily practice. This process has provided me with a rich data set from which I have drawn my analysis of how frontline child protection social workers understand and enact power. My analysis is guided by Fraser (2004) and her seven phase process, as explained in the previous chapter.

It is clear now after analyzing the narratives of these participants that there is no singular understanding of power for my participants. I continue to believe that all interactions in child welfare are based in power (Dumbrill & Maiter, 1997, cited in Strega 2007) but how this is understood, enacted and communicated by each worker varies greatly. What is most interesting to me after scanning the narratives is that in each of the interviews the participant's understandings and presentation of power shifted and was not consistent.

My analysis demonstrates that power in child protection continues to be a complicated matter; depending on what each participant was trying to convey with their narrative of daily practice, their understanding and presentation of power shifted. I feel that each of the participants' stories portray their understandings of power, but that these understandings are often contradictory and in conflict. This chapter tells six of the frontline child protection social workers' stories of daily practice in the child welfare system. The experiences of the frontline child protection social workers I interviewed are

likely common to other social workers practicing in child welfare as all six tell stories of a myriad of experiences in day-to-day work. What all of the stories have in common with each other are contradictions in how they speak about daily practice and how they describe their behaviours in daily practice. Within each of their interviews, sometimes even within a single segment of their stories, the participants' understandings of power shifted.

In this chapter you will read the six narratives that I have selected from the participants' extensive transcripts. It was a difficult task to only select one story from each of the narratives collected, but there is limited space in a research project, and I felt that it was important to showcase a variety of different workers' stories. I selected the stories based on numerous readings and listenings of the transcripts and audio materials. Through this intimate connection to the data, I was able to select narratives that I feel have certain elements such as a defined beginning, middle and end. As well, the topics and families that the participants chose to speak about in the selections appeared to me to be somehow more meaningful or more alive to the participants than some of the other stories they told. This showed through for instance in the way in which a participant's tone of voice would change while telling a particular segment. From a listener's perspective in these particular stories the storytelling also felt freer and presented as unforced. In terms of the structure of this chapter, I intentionally group these six narratives at the opening of the chapter to allow the reader to connect with the stories through a process that I hope will be similar to my process as the researcher. The editing in these stories has been kept to a minimum, only to insert omitted words, add punctuation and alter names to protect the

identity of the places and people in the stories. Following the presentation of narratives is my analysis.

### **Stories of Daily Practice**

I will briefly introduce each of the stories, and explain how I came to their naming. I have selected six stories from different participants of the many that were shared. I chose the stories because they were moving, told with passion, and are illustrative of the workers' conceptualization of power. This was done through an extensive process of line-by-line reading as suggested by Fraser (2004) and as discussed in my methodology chapter. In addition to pseudonyms for the workers and for the clients within the stories, I have taken steps to conceal the geographical locations where these stories took place. My introductions are kept short to respect and honour the story teller and to keep the telling separate from the further analysis. After all six narratives have been presented, the chapter moves to an more analytical look at the narratives, and then closes with what Fraser (2004) refers to as domains of experience, where I take an in depth look at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, cultural and structural aspects of stories.

#### ***I Fell for her – Sherri's Story***

Sherri's story is both her sharing of a daily practice experience as well as her attempt to make sense of her daily practice. This is a common characteristic that can be seen in other narratives. Sherri's story is titled *I fell for her* as it brings attention to the fact that Sherri feels that she is doing something wrong or illicit by having a 'human' relationship within the structure of child protection. It is also a phrase that Sherri uses several times



during her telling. In regards to story selection, I chose this particular piece of the narrative as it clearly shows Sherri's turmoil with relationship building within the context of frontline child protection social work. Sherri shares her own internal conflict of needing to satisfy the child welfare system and honouring her practice values. In this narrative Sherri explains that 'she fell for her [the mother]' on her caseload even when she was trying to maintain a professional distance in her practice. Sherri's narrative reads like advice that a person would give to a co-worker. Yet there are contradictions as to who knows best in practice: the client, the worker, or the child protection authority.

Much like the other stories that will follow, in varying degrees, the opening of the story is where Sherri sets the context for her narrative and provides the reader with a sense of what the daily experience of child protection social work practice is like for her, before moving into the specific interactions between her and the client. Again, and much like the other stories that will ensue, the closing of Sherri's story is a practice reflection in a broader context, well outside the situational client examples. This is important because the participant's desire or need to share the context and experience of practice outside of the narratives is something that I can relate to as a former frontline child protection, where there was no space to engage in critical reflections of the work, and the impact it has on social workers personally or the broader impact of practice on the larger structure of child welfare.

*If [families] know that you are being honest with them then they give you a certain amount of respect I have found, but at the same time I think that you just have to accept that the relationship is often not a positive one and it is hard. It is hard having all these people not like you. I mean you are trying to help them and people don't like you, and I*

*think as soon as you accept that... It took me quite a while. I took it personal. 'I do all this for you and you swear at me' and you just have to let that go. It isn't about you. It is not a relationship that most people have ever been in, in their life. So you have nothing to compare it to. You just don't. So it takes a while, it just takes a while, a couple of years to be okay with that and to understand that – to just accept that it is difficult. It takes a long time and I think it burns most people out, but after a while after a number of years you can see patterns. You can see how it is going with people and I actually stopped to a certain degree taking that on. It just wasn't about me, but this is hard and people are not cut out that way. We are affected by the relationships that we have. We are human. So um, you know the less that you can get personally, I think, involved the better off you [are] at this job. This is definitely a difficulty with social workers as people as we are trained: we are empathic, we are caring and that is the work. But this isn't the work in child protection in any case. Really the more that you get personally involved, the faster you burn out. You can't sustain those relationships.*

*There are always certain cases that will stay with you forever for whatever reason. I had a case that was multi-generational, multi-issues and problems, and it will stay with me. It was three generations of child welfare involvement. Children removed over years, it had become a way of life for this family, you know, and I think it was, they did not know anything different, and it was always personal. They had had so many workers, and I had the eighteen year old daughter – who was a child in care most of her life, and she was having children. I had removed her daughter three times in two years, and she and I had the most interesting relationship. She was so vulnerable, and her capacity was limited in some ways, and we had this relationship, I mean, I had removed her daughter twice at this point. She had the most darling baby, and as much as you try and stay kind of removed, I just adored her. I just did not want the situation to keep going on and on... So in trying to figure out what to do, [the mother] just didn't have anything together, and I had her daughter in care. She would sort of get back on track and then we would reunite [the mother and child]. So her and I – she would hate me, and then she would like me, and when she needed something she was at my office, so we had this very – very... She was very blunt and up front in her way of talking. She respected me because I was the same way with her. We had a level of respect there, and she knew what she could expect from me, and she knew I was there and I would help her – it might not always be the way she wanted – but I would be there.*

*I remember that case because when I left that office her child was in care, but she knew that I had her baby's best interest at heart, and even though I would see her in the community, and she would talk to me, even when she was with friends, even though I couldn't return her baby to her. In some ways I think she appreciated me, even though she would never have said it. I really fell for her. I really liked her you know. And I think she liked me, for whatever reason. It is so hard to explain these things. This job is huge. I don't think that I will ever have another job like this. It is such a huge job. I think it can be so overwhelming looking at the job, it is so enormous and when you are in it you don't even have the time to think. You don't get to think about the scope of your practice, and I don't know if you can when you are in the thick of it. You almost have to step back and say, wow, yes I struggle with the decisions that I was making at the time and they were huge and [I was] were making them all the time.*

*You learn to be an advocate and an optimist. If you are going to be a strong advocate – which is our role – then you have to look at ways to get that done. The structures and the policies don't always let you do what you need to do. This was the biggest part of my job. I knew exactly the policies and legislation so that I could get the job – done regardless. If my families needed x, y, and z, and they didn't qualify for it or whatever I could usually find another way to get it done. I would find ways to get people, like the mom in the story I told you, what she needed. Maybe she didn't need a 200 dollar clothing allowance maybe she needed 200 dollars worth of groceries but when our budget got cut and we couldn't hand out emergency cheques, I would say fine, I will use the money I know I can get for clothing, and I am just not going to tell [her supervisors and client]. I would often get people what they needed through other avenues. I guess I am a policy breaker – (laughing) but in the larger scheme, it is what people need. You work with what you have, and you just do it.*

### ***Nobody wants me – Vickie's Story***

This story is included for several reasons. First, it is unresolved. This is important because in the practice of frontline child protection social workers often do not know what happens to their clients and families after they do the piece of the work that the legislation assigns to them. In Vickie's case, she is unable to finish her story and it is as if it is too difficult for her to relive her experience. Vickie switches topics and never returns to the story of this particular youth, although the setting and the particular group of boys at the youth drop-in come up repeatedly. Another reason for the inclusion of this story is that although not as extensive as the previous story, where Sherri spends a great deal of time setting the context and reflecting on practice, Vickie opens her story with the context and closes with a reflection. Vickie's story is one of practicing alone, even when she has peers. She separates herself from her colleagues, supervisors, and even from the structure of child protection, her family, and herself. By the end of her narrative the reader is left with a sense that Vickie cannot see value in her way of practicing. This narrative bears the name *Nobody wants me*, and I select this title again directly from

Vickie's text. The line stood out for me, as it was the participant sharing the sentiment of the youth client that she was working with at the time and summarizes in one phrase the isolation that workers often find themselves experiencing.

*So many wicked things happened. One time I don't know if this can be shared, but it is just too weird not to share to illustrate my practice. When I was doing my Bachelors program, I did my practicum (while I worked at MCFD during the day) at the youth drop-in, and I loved working with the youth. When I started on the reserve, I had 11 boys, and there were some serious issues – serious stuff going on... They were in a gang. We had to try and figure out, you know, what we were going to do. They were causing havoc on the reserve. So I went to the youth drop-in and lots of the boys were coming. I had one [on my caseload] that was in a treatment center, and he loved to come into the youth drop-in and hang out there.*

*Well, one night when I was working and these kids came in and said Vickie your car just got shot, he had shot my car. Granted it was a BB gun or some kind of gun, but it left bullet holes in my driver's side, and I was horrified. And he was quite horrified with what he had done. I went out back, and I was kind of teary-eyed and thought what am I going to do? Plus, I had been trying to get him a foster home really hard and the therapist assessed him as being quite dangerous, and I was saying he isn't dangerous. Well now, of course, everything that I had been advocating for and planned for and hoped for – for him, I realized now, it was not going to happen.*

*It was not looking good, and maybe I was wrong. Maybe he really was dangerous – so I was shedding a few tears, and he came out back. He started to cry, and said, 'What can I do? I am so sorry, some kids dared me to.' I said 'Why did you do that? We have such a good relationship. I don't understand why you would damage my car' and he said, 'I am frustrated you couldn't find me a foster home, and I'm frustrated that nobody wants me', and then... it was just... oh boy...*

*We went to the police station together. He was crying. I was crying. So was the police officer. The officer said 'I'm sure that I can advocate for the band to pay for the damage'. So I went back and of course all my co-workers thought it was funny, but I didn't and the managers said 'We aren't going to pay. Why would we pay?' My husband was really upset and, um, I later ended up getting divorced, and he said it was just too much for him. I was working full time [as a frontline child protection social worker] and trying to do my practicum and trying to do my school work. I think that is an issue that isn't brought up, the impact on your personal life...*

*The White man- Marc's story*

In Marc's narrative he speaks to power directly both in his story and in his context building. His story shows a deep theoretical analysis of how power influenced his daily practice. Marc's narrative shares his experience of power and how it can be perceived by others. I chose this story because Marc is very aware of his particular place in the child welfare system, and yet he maintains a sense of humour on his role as a helping professional. Even though the tone of Marc's story is much more positive than Vickie's, the same inability to recognize value in their practice approach is a point that should be made. If workers are stepping outside of traditional social work practice in child welfare, striving to be anti-oppressive and client-focused, and they themselves cannot recognize this when the 'outcomes' are not deemed by them as positive, what impact does this have on practice? I will address that question later in the analysis.

The story is named *The White Man* as race is central to Marc's understanding of himself throughout the interview and how he was perceived in the Aboriginal community he was practicing in at the time that this story occurred. Unlike the other story titles this one was not directly taken from the text, but Marc does reference himself as White in his telling. I phrased the story title this way as it was direct and telling of Marc's own understanding of race and the impact it has to be White and practicing in an Aboriginal community.

*I went into [a remote Aboriginal community in Northern British Columbia] for work. And it was the first time [the community] had a posted social worker in the community. It used to be a worker that would fly in from another community and deal with the [community] maybe two days out of the week. Sometimes they only got [a social worker] one day out of the month. So I lived in [the remote Aboriginal community]...so 24/7*

*basically was what the job was there. At first, before anyone got to know me, I was... Welfare. That was what everyone called me: Welfare. That was my name.*

*Actually I was thinking of changing my name for a while, all the stigma that went around with me...with....we are the government. It was interesting. A lot of the families up there have dealt with probably one of the most horrific of the residential schools. So there's a lot of scars and stuff, I represented a lot of stuff [to the community].*

*So the first time I flew into [the community]. Whenever you fly into [this particular community], the police officer—the traveling police officer, meets [you] at the dock and escorts you around the town for the first little while because the people in the community have a history of shooting people they don't know as a means of protecting themselves. And I jokingly said "I love your Kevlar vest... Can I have one of those?" and he said, 'you don't need one of those – from in front.' And he was joking....sort of. So there's a history in [this community].*

*To try to diffuse the power issues I would walk around and talk to people – not do any work for the first little while, the first month or two. I didn't do much of anything. Just had to get to know the social dynamic – who was related to who – very difficult of course – and who was related to the other villages I was flying in to. Me being in the role I was in got in the way a lot for the first couple of months. The way to diffuse it for me was to be a person instead of a representation of the government or anglo-political agenda or social work in general. That seemed to work really well.*

*And then having it backfiring once in a while too a little later on into my tenure as a social worker there. About a year and half [into my stay in the community] I had a really good relationship with this one family, who has four generations still in the village. And they would react to me like you know, Marc you can't do that. I responded to a report of a grandfather molesting his granddaughter. And you know I went into the house, and I have some dinner, sit down and talk with them and stuff. And it was much more personal than traditional child protection social work where you leave your shoes on and your jacket, and you write everything down. So eventually they said well you know you can't really talk to the girl about this. You got to respect us, our family Marc. You know how we operate. If there's something, we'd tell you.*

*And at that point I had to say, you know ok, I had to step back from how you are perceiving me at the table here, I'm not Marc your friend, somebody that knows your family and stuff like that. I have to approach this from my place as a child protection social worker. And that is, I have a report that a young girl has been sexually assaulted, and I need to investigate that, and I need to talk to the girl first, in private and separate from you guys. And then I'm going to interview other people in the family and I'm going to call collaterals and I'm going to do it very officially.*

*Because, one, if it's not really happening, you want this clear. You want this out of the way. Two, if it is happening then we need to help this little girl and....this is why. Grandpa may have his issues and [if] he's done this, we can work on helping him get through those issues, but, really, he's 85 years old, and he's got, maybe, five years left. I*

*mean nationally speaking if you go by the death rates in the community he should already be passed away. The little girl, however, is five and she's going to be around for another 80 years. And she's going to probably have her own children and her own grandchildren. And she is going to carry this with her all that time. And if we don't deal with it now, then she's going to be a grandmother who is talking to a social worker about somebody that's molesting her grandchildren, or her children. And we have to start with today to do that.*

*And they said, 'Well, you know, do you really have to do that? We don't really want to open a can of worms. Understand that we are doing this for the children and we respect that, can you just, you know, talk to her and just get her therapy and stuff. Do you have to go tell everybody in the village?' It was at a point where I started to withdraw my personal feelings from the situation.*

*And I actually did, physically get up from the table and step back and you know, pick up my book and my pen, just as symbols. You know the black leather binder...every social worker has a black leather binder, right? And [say] 'sorry I can't do that. This isn't about you and me. This is about the little girl.'*

*So that was hard for all of us. That was difficult and caused a couple of rifts in the community for a little while. But eventually when the little girl started to play a little more and laugh and stuff, and talk to her grandmother about it, and her grandmother talked to her about her childhood, it actually started a whole cycle of stuff for the family. That was really kind of cool. A problem I have with power as a child protection social worker is the difference between child protection and social work.*

### ***One of my children – Amber's Story***

Amber's narrative is an example of the positive potential that daily practice holds in child protection. The story, as told by Amber, shows in considerable detail what she values, and how she was able to embody her client-centered, anti-oppressive beliefs about her social work practice as a frontline practitioner. I selected this narrative out of Amber's extensive interview because of the passion and joy she shared while telling the tale. What makes this story worthwhile for analysis is Amber's understanding of relationship, relationship building and the impact that worker-client relationships have on the client, in this case, the youth and all the peripheral people that are involved in the youth's life. What stands out in Amber's story is the detail in which she describes her daily practice

and her interactions with those involved in the case: the youth, her colleagues, the supervisor, foster parents and her own child, and how she is actively reflective of the impact of these interactions on her practice and the youth. This story also provides a contrast to Vickie's story of isolation, and I believe that Amber is able to process her relationships and practice in a different way than Vickie, as I will discuss later in the analysis. In this narrative, Amber understands herself as the parent. She uses the phrase, *one of my children* several times throughout the text and, therefore, the phrase stood out to me as the most appropriate title for her narrative. *One of my children* both in the title and in its message challenges the traditional notion of what it is for the social worker to be the legal guardian of children and youth on their caseloads.

*Yeah...I don't know if they're any....There is this...There is this youth that I'm working with now. This is a fresh one because I just – this experience is still happening. There is this...There is this youth that I'm working with now...He's been uh, he's been – really high risk lately, and he was very...He's so neat because we're close. We've got a really good relationship, and he said to me very honestly when he burnt through his last placement, and I had to put him into a group home that he had no intention of staying at a group home. He hates them, and that he'll couch surf until I find him a new home, and so I left the group home there for him, as a safe place – in case.*

*But I kept looking, and I had a number of people coming to me and saying, 'Why are you doing that? Like he doesn't. He's not even working with care. He's not even at the group home. Why would we find a foster' – you know like that kind of thinking, and um, I said to the soc – my team leader is totally on board with me. He totally agreed with the, the value base that fed that plan. He's totally awesome, which is lucky. But there were other people that were like, 'what are you doing?' Almost like I was...like...giving in to him, or not being strict enough, or stern enough, or punitive enough in my response to his behaviour. Anyways, I ignored them, and on I went. (Laughs) I found him this fabulous home.*

*I sat down with him right before I had turned him into the group home and said, 'What would you want in a home that would help you feel comfortable and safe and give you enough reason that you would try to connect?' Because my god, at this point for him to try to connect with family at sixteen and knowing that he's going in two years anyways, like why would he invest? So I asked him, 'What would be there that would give you enough reason to try?' And he gave me a list! Like he knew what he needed. It was awesome. I found a family that met what he wanted. Like I went through his list systematically, and I interviewed foster parents to have my child. So interviewed foster*



*parents to decide whether or not they were good enough for my kid, and I thought that's the way that this should go. Right? You're taking care of my child. I need to know that you're going to do this in a good way.*

*I went to him, and said, I saw him – I was driving home from dinner with my daughter – we had gone out for dinner – and I saw him driving his bike down the road. It's like 7:30 at night. I pulled over, rolled down my window, called him, he came over, and he's like, 'What are you doing pulling over? It's the middle of the night, and you're not working.' And I'm like, 'Huh, that's funny. I'm always working.' And I said, 'So I found a place.' Because I haven't been able to find him – he has kind of been couch surfing, right? So I told him I found him a place, introduced him to my daughter, which was very meaningful for him and me, and, uh, and he said, 'That sounds sweet!' He was, like, so excited. I said, 'It is buddy. It is. I spent time, really looking at everything I could possibly offer, and this was the best I can do.'*

*So now it's your turn. Now you need to come to the table. Now you need to try, because I've brought you what you asked for, and now you need to do your work. And he did. He showed up the next day at my office with all his things. He was ready to give it a go. He's been at the house. He's trying. For me, I don't think that would have happened if I just placed him somewhere else. He would have given it the royal finger like he had every other placement. But this one, he had a role in, he defined what he needed. Right down to, "I want dogs" and there are dogs in the house.*

*It was just really neat when I left. I was leaving the house, and he came up, you know a big sixteen year old guy, comes up and gave me a hug and he's like, 'I just, I can't believe this Amber. You're so great.' It was just, it was so neat. It was really – it wasn't I'm great, it was "I chose this, thank you". That's what that was. So those kinds of moments, I really feel like you know I'm doing the right thing. There are times when you can't take the time to do that, and that sucks. When you have to move a kid quick and you have to just kind of throw them wherever, and how that feels, it feels those ones suck. But when you're able to do it like that...that feels amazing. Like it felt amazing. I was crying as I drove away...*

### ***You're upright and still laughing – Jean's Story***

The story that Jean shares is unique compared to the others as the daily practice experiences that she chooses to speak about are not crisis oriented or risk based, which in child protection practice is the standard due to the structure of the referral system and service delivery model currently in place. I chose this story as Jean is able to articulate in detail how she practiced with a particular client, a mother and recent widow, as well as

her reflection on how her practice needed to revolve around the client, not the client around the system. Again, like the others, Jean does not name her methodology or theory of practice, but places a strong emphasis on what she believes is important – the true love of children and the valuing of parenting. Much like all the stories, relationships and relationship building are at the forefront of the narrative. The naming of the story came easily in this story as it came from the participant’s own text. Jean used the wording of “upright” and “laughing” more than once. Also, her story was told with such respect and humility that I wanted the reader to begin reading with a sense of what Jean’s daily practice looks like.

Jean recounts a heart-warming story of how her relationship with a particular mother was a gift to her own learning and to her journey of becoming a better frontline child protection worker, where family can be a celebration and the frontline child protection social worker can practice alongside of the client in a judgment-free environment.

*Stories...I think the most humble places have been, witnessing people still moving forward, still having hope, still having excitement and witnessing their love and connection with their children even though they're in some of the most challenging experiences that – that I could ever think of, and getting up every day and [they] keep moving forward and doing what needs to be done...*

*I think of one woman who her first husband was killed in a car accident, and the second [husband] had committed suicide. She had seven children and addiction issues with 3 children. She herself had gotten sober – she had one child who had severe special needs and a teenage daughter that was pregnant. We were sitting together in my office and we were just laughing. Ok, where do we start? I asked the mother. You know. What do you want to [do] and where do we go from here? I knew that I – that there's nothing that I could – you know I have no idea what you need. You've been through all this and you're still upright and laughing! So, you know it is amazing to see people who are able to hang onto their spiritual self and be the anchor and move forward – do what they need to do for their children. It's been an amazing process.*

*Well she [the mother] was really neat. She would show up whenever she needed something, and it wouldn't be that she was downtrodden or you know, at the end of her*

*rope. It's just that she thought maybe I could help her find something. She'd turn up and we'd have coffee and, and she'd tell me what's going on. And that's how I'd start: 'So what's happening?' And she'd tell me what was happening, and we'd deal with that, whatever it was that she needed help with at that time. She didn't have a phone. She didn't have a car... She'd have a couple of kids in a stroller and you know, it was really important to be able to be available, because you can't plan for –that's one thing about appointment scheduling. All these appointment times when I was with the Ministry. You're booked back to back and then with the Aboriginal agency, because a lot of people didn't have phone or transportation, you're pretty open and you'd go out and try to connect with them and know where they were depending on, you know, the season or knowing what's happening generally for the community and having a finger on that without making that be an understanding rather than a problem.*

*People like to problematize things, and it's just it's the way it is, and this is what we're going to work with, and we'll do whatever we need to do to support that rather than the other way around. So if it was the day that the food bank had vegetables, I would make those good days to visit because then I had a car and I could help [families] bring groceries home. So it's not oh I can't – they are busy. You know, we can meet and I can do it together. So you know some of those things just really impacted me. I think about my life and who I am. the small things and how important they are and the difference they can make. It's the things that are so miniscule to us that we wouldn't think about. Just amazing....so trying to work around whatever way's going to support the outcome of our meeting, that I can be there rather than this clinical person who's going to tell you, 'Well you can go here for drug and alcohol counseling,' or 'You can go there to the food bank,' but not think about the barriers, you know to get to the food bank, to get your food home. 'Oh you don't have a care card, so you can't get food,' because you have to have a care card number, that's how they register you. If you lost your care card, you're out of luck. And it can take weeks to do that. But what really bothers me, too, was when I would phone to help her with child tax, we'd phone from my office, it would happen very quickly. But if she phoned without some back up, it would take weeks!*

*So it's really frustrating to see what people [go through], the little struggles that people say well, why don't they get help themselves? Well, the systems just don't allow it. They're [clients] constructed in a way that are really non-supportive or don't recognize some of the barriers that people are trying to work under. So I still see [the mother] now. She's got a couple of grandchildren, and I'll see her; she waves. And we bump into each other at the mall and chat, and she's still glowing. She loves being a parent, loves being a mother, loves being a grandmother. It's a very connected family and that's the thing that I've seen as a cultural issue. Like the connection to the child as more than an individual, as a part of a family, as a part of the community and a large network of families, not just mom or auntie. It's multiple aunties. Lots of happy people connecting and spending time together and that's the, you know, where the main importance is, rather than having appointments. Understanding where people come from. Trying to see and understand where she's at and what her needs are.*

*I don't really know why – Gillian's Story*

Gillian's is the last story that I have included in my analysis chapter. There are six narratives that I analyzed, and it was difficult to keep it to this number. It is intentional that the stories are from different participants. For me the closing story parallels the first story in that Gillian, like Sherri, is unable to explain her practice in words. Gillian was the last participant, and as such, I had become more skilled at probing throughout the narratives if there was a pause or silence and I felt confident to challenge Gillian to put words to her thoughts. With Sherri, who was also more rigid and uncomfortable with the interview process in general, it was more challenging to ask her to elaborate on her sentiments. I feel this is an important point in the introduction of Gillian's story. What is the impact of frontline child protection social workers' not being able to speak about and reflect on daily practice? What does this inability to articulate mean? What are the structural and practice impacts? Both of these women have extensive experience, Gillian over 20 years and a Master's degree, and yet the lack of language or an inability to explain practice still remains. Why is this? I will investigate that question during the analysis to follow.

All of these unanswered questions lead me to include this particular segment from any other I could have chosen in Gillian's interview. As was the case with Amber, Marc, and Jean's narratives, Gillian is quite descriptive and specific about what her daily practice entailed. As in all the stories, relationship building and keeping the practice client centered are at the forefront, as we see in the closing of Gillian's story when the father invites her to hold his newborn child.

While Gillian is able to discuss the details of her daily practice, she cannot articulate her sentiments on power or on the meaning of her work exactly. Throughout Gillian's narrative, she attempts to work out what was going on for her at the time that she was practicing on this particular case. It is as if she has never reflected on this particular practice experience before. This inability to get at the meaning of their practice and an apparent inability to easily reflect on their practice was seen in all the interviews and stories told by the participants.

Gillian never quite puts into words or names what her practice looks like but her descriptions are clear. Gillian starts her story as many of the others have, with a context and justification of the sequence of events that will follow.

*Family of 4 kids--little kids: 7, 6, 3, and 2. Those were the ages at the time. And this family was struggling, lots of drinking, lots of addiction issues. So this family was really struggling, and I was all the time trying to keep the kids from having to come into care, because I knew that all [the children] knew was the shores of this community. There were no roads, no vehicles nothing. So these little kids, their whole world encompassed what they could see. I thought to myself, if I drag these little kids out of this community, and down to [a larger community] which was just a little small town, what would that do to them? It would blow their minds. They did not have flush toilets in their homes. They did not have running water in their homes. They did not have electric heat, none of those things.*

*And so I was always working, trying with the drug and alcohol worker in the community, with the nursing station, with Chief and Council, trying to...provide service to this family that didn't involve these kids having to come into care. And about, I don't know, about a year? More than a year, after I'd started up there, there was a situation. Dad was in jail and mom was home with the kids, locked them in the house, and went out drinking. So now it was....Chief and Council called me out of my regular schedule to come up there. And so it was agreed that these kids were coming into care. There was no other option left. And they didn't have any placement people to suggest to me in the community. So I flew these kids from [their village] to another [Aboriginal] community. Mom wasn't even going to come down to the plane with us, and I said to her, 'Please come down to this plane and see your kids off. Because they need to know that you're ok. And that you, even though you're not ok with this, that you're....care enough to come and say good bye to*

*them.' And nobody else from the community came down to that plane that day. We flew them up to [the other Aboriginal community] where everybody was standing on the ice. The entire community was standing on the ice as our plane taxied in. So this community was....like night and day.*

*So then everybody who could cram themselves into the Band office were in the Band office and then they opened the windows so everybody else could hear what was going on. Like this was a community undertaking. And again... I try to imagine some of the people I've worked with over the years having....allowed that. And I'm going to use the word "allowed" because that's how I see people misusing their power. They get into a situation where they think that they can allow something. A different social worker even within the office I had been working in would have not allowed that community to participate. And I don't know how else to say that, and I don't know why I knew, just to not fight that issue. Yes, I'm sure there were privacy issues and I'm sure there were confidentiality issues. But my focus was: I need the best possible place for these kids, and so I need to focus on where're they going to be, right? My only issue was just the whole discussion around the fact that they were going to be separated, and how we were going to make sure that they visited each other and see each other every day and all those kinds of things.*

*So we went house to house and the community came, house to house with us. The home studies were done, with the community in the home. And the families that were going to be the foster homes had no issue with that! This was just how things were done. Anyway, that family went for treatment. They went to a treatment centre and [the parents] sobered up. The [home] community came up with two homes for me to study for the kids and I did the home studies and brought the kids back to their own community. It was – it was like, what do they call the....happy ever after. Honest to God, it just all clicked into place, and then the kids were returned. And so about 6 months later, I had taken a new employee – new worker that was replacing me – up to introduce her to the families, and that family was still sober, and they had had a new baby. Mom got pregnant maybe in treatment centre probably. She was not drinking that entire pregnancy. It was a boy, the first boy to survive past a month old. All of their boys had died, and only the girls had survived for this couple and they'd lost four boys already. This was their little boy. I don't know how old he was when we were up there visiting, probably going on two months. Anyway, dad brought him over and put him in my arms. I started to cry. Here he was trusting me with his new born boy, right? Anyway, I would love to know how that family is doing....*

*It was weird. I didn't have – I didn't have any way to analyze it back then. It's only, you know, 25 years later that I really have a much better grasp of colonization, assimilation, reserves....all that combining in that one community...I wish I had known then what I know now. Because for me it was more of a stumbling around kind of a situation, not knowing why I was doing things, just knowing, I don't know, I'm going to say, instinctively, that this was the way to do it. And I'm sure that the executive director of that Children's Aid Society would have freaked out had he known some of the stuff I was doing up there, but it just made sense to me. I don't know how else to describe it...*

This concludes the story section of the analysis chapter. The six stories above all reflect a shared passion for frontline child protection social work practice. The storytellers vary in their methods of practice, their presentation of practice and their understandings of power throughout their stories. What brings their stories together are their presentation of relationship, their inability to speak easily about their own daily practice experiences and finally, conflict within child welfare. In the next section of the analysis chapter I take up these themes by using Fraser's (2004) domains of experience.

### **Domains of Experience**

There are many ways to undertake narrative analysis, as discussed in my methodology chapter. Despite this reality, Fraser's (2004) work stands out for me, as her presentation of how to undertake narrative research allows for in-depth analysis that honours individual stories as well as allows for the contextualization of experiences. In the case of my research this contextualization aims to expand the how frontline child protection social workers understand, enact and conceptualize power in the tellings of their daily practice experiences.

This final section of the analysis follows Fraser's (2004) domains of experience: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and cultural/structural. Fraser (2004) recommends this method of conducting narrative analysis because it is a way to "unearth insights about how people interact with different dimensions of their environments" (p.191). Domains of experiences are a particularly relevant way to understand and present how power is understood, enacted and conceptualized by frontline child protection social workers because power is a part of all interactions in social work practice. With a Foucauldian

understanding that power is all around us, and that all of us in child welfare participate in power relations through our interactions, it is relevant to analyze the practice narratives of frontline child protection social worker as a means to see how power operates in social worker – client interactions on an everyday basis. Using Foucault’s understanding of power allows for small scale, often invisible practice that is taken for granted to come forward to center stage. When we begin to see that even the smallest interactions between clients and social workers are relevant and meaningful, power can be analysed in Foucauldian terms as being exercised, productive and transformative.

It is suggested in Fraser’s work that personal stories can be examined for their interpersonal, interpersonal, cultural (Gagnon & Simon, 1974, Simon, 1996, cited in Fraser 2004) and structural aspects (Mullaly, 2002 cited in Fraser 2004). Although I am using these categories, they are not intended to be exclusive or seen as a way to keep the categories separate. What the categories provide is a means of, as Fraser (2004) suggests, “examining the social role of stories” (p.191). I chose to combine the cultural and the structural domains as the selected narratives overlap in these categories quite extensively. As the frontline child protection social workers’ narratives have already been presented in an uncensored manner at the start of this chapter, this next section makes references to the stories only by name or via excerpts.

### **Talking about Practice**

What daily practice looks like from the perspective of the frontline social worker is not easily found in social work literature and it was not freely spoken about by the research



participants. One participant spoke nervously even before being recorded, and referred to the research process as visiting a confessional. Another stated that talking about practice was not something she had done in the past. There was a real element of participating in a secretive or illicit act while talking about daily practice. This being said, one participant was glad to have someone to listen to their story. Another worker thanked me profusely at the end of the process, commented that she was very glad to have shared her stories, and noted that she has never done so before, even with colleagues. There was a pervasive sense among all participants that there is a lack of space or realization that collaborating in practice means bringing yourself, as a frontline child protection social worker, into discussions about practice. Vickie, one of the participants, expressed this sentiment of doubt in her narrative: *“I’ve had so many wicked things happens. One time, I don’t know if this can be shared, but it is just too weird not to share to illustrate my practice.”* The sharing of one’s stories is not a simple task as there is an element of risk and vulnerability particularly when referring to one’s own practice. Participants raised concerns about confidentiality, not wanting to compromise the families or other people involved in the files. There was also a real hesitancy around sharing actual stories of practice versus their thoughts on daily practice. An important point here to highlight is that these participants self-selected to participate in the research and yet speaking about themselves and telling stories from their perspectives was a challenge. I expected that it would take a bit of time for participants to warm up to telling stories, as this was common in the interview skills and narrative methodology literature that I read. In all cases it took the participants a significant time (up to half the interview) to become comfortable enough to speak about their own daily practice experiences. In two cases, I was not able to use the interviews I recorded as the participants were not able to enter into a comfortable enough space to

speak in a narrative way about daily practice. They remained in the safe space of talking about other workers' practice, and the theory and values that they hold. In the current child welfare system, where workers are expected to sign confidentially waivers that ban them from talking to media and participation in professional associations, it is understandable that workers have difficulty voicing their stories. Again, as we are all inside power, it is important to note the relevance of analysing our own stories. Without looking at frontline child protection social workers' own involvement and roles in their practice narratives, we cannot hope to understand how power is understood, enacted and conceptualized. The fact that it was such a challenge for participants to speak in the first person shows how removed from their own practice these frontline child protection workers are. Yet their expression of satisfaction and relief with me about participating in the research shows that frontline child protection workers benefit, at least personally, by having their experiences heard and validated. This reinforces the need to examine daily practice experiences from the perspective of frontline social workers.

### **Intrapersonal Domains of Experience**

Intrapersonal aspects of stories may be seen to be those that encapsulate internal body-mind experiences (Fraser, 2004). These aspects become evident through "narrative self-talk and may involve rehearsing possible courses of action or confessing to thoughts and feelings that are concealed" (Fraser, 2004, p.194). Intrapersonal domains of experiences were present in all of the narratives.

Foucault's understanding of power is again useful when looking at intrapersonal domains of experience. As Foucault suggests we are all inside of power at all times, the

conversations that social workers have with themselves is not only relevant but necessary as a means of understanding how power is understood and conceptualized. Further, Chambon et al. (1999) argue in favour of examining unexamined truths by engaging in critical reflexivity, which is found in the self-talk of the participants in this research. Therefore examining the intrapersonal aspects found in the narratives provides us with an particular window into how frontline child protection workers understand and conceptualize power in their daily practice.

### **Self-talk, the script of the Child Protection Professional**

Throughout the narratives, participants shared intrapersonal aspects of their daily practices, many of those experiences which are not shared with others through what Fraser (2004) refers to as self-talk. This self-talk generally took the form of describing what is expected in child welfare in the narratives I collected, in short, what it means to be a professional. Although not written down in any handbook format, it would seem as if there is a definite script for frontline child protection workers. In the narratives, this script was expressed by workers in the form of advice or warnings spoken to both me as the researcher and to the greater audience who would read their stories, but I believe they were words primarily spoken to themselves. Examples of this script include that frontline child protection social workers are both professionals and experts, thus have the authority to tell people how to raise their children, and are in fact mandated to do so. This self-talk can be seen in all the narratives. In Sherri's story, for example, she uses self-talk to illustrate that as the social worker, she is in charge when she relates "*I do all this for you and you swear at me*". This statement is a way of summarizing her interaction with the client and it is Sherri's way of both legitimizing her role as the expert professional as well

as discounting the mother's reaction as unreasonable. Sherri expects to be acknowledged as the professional expert in the situation by the client; perhaps she even expects gratitude, or some similar recognition.

Another example of self-talk in a different context that speaks to being a professional is found in Vickie's narrative. Vickie speaks to herself about doubting her relationship, and her assessment of the youth on her caseload when she states; "*Maybe he really was dangerous...*". Vickie's self-talk here indicates that she is deferring to the opinions presented by her colleague and supervisor, as professionals are expected to do. Finally, there is Amber, who like Vickie uses self-talk to convince herself that her practice is legitimate, but unlike Vickie she challenges the opinions of her colleagues by questioning to herself why a youth would want to engage with a new foster family. Amber states; "*Because my god, at this point for him to try to connect with family at sixteen and knowing that he's going in two years anyways, like why would he invest?*" This example is as much to herself as it is to the researcher, as it reinforces her decision to practice in the manner she does.

These examples might suggest that these workers are talking from within a dominant or traditional understanding of power and powerlessness, where power is vested in the state and enacted in child welfare legislation, policies and practices. In this reading, as employees of a state power structure, workers are powerful and possess power, a way of thinking reinforced when they present themselves as experts. Since the frontline child protection workers that I interviewed are not totally convinced of these dominant

understandings, their dialogues on the subject of worker expertise often take the form of a questioning self-talk.

One of the common ways that professionals distinguish themselves as professionals is through positioning themselves as not just neutral and objective, but categorically different from clients. In the dominant child welfare occupational discourse (Scourfield, 2003), it is understood that relationships with clients in child protection will not be positive, that clients and workers belong to different groups and therefore workers must maintain what is usually known as ‘professional distance’. Yet, as the narratives show, even workers who subscribe to this dominant discourse and position themselves in this way sometimes feel challenged by experiences of connection with clients. For example, in Sherri’s story, her first few words describe what she has found helpful in her practice – ‘being honest’ and ‘giving respect’, which would seem to challenge these ideas. Very soon thereafter her tone shifts as she tells us that “*you have to accept that the relationship is not positive*”. This may indicate that Sherri is speaking within and from the dominant discourse, that positive relationships are not possible in child welfare, and therefore her practice style and experiences are normative. Sherri goes on to share some advice reflecting this occupational discourse when she states, “*You know the less that you can get personally, I think, involved the better off you [are] at this job.*” In the next section of her narrative Sherri reinforces this particular way of conducting worker-client relationships when she ‘confesses’ to “falling for” a mother and child on her caseload, describing a situation in which she had a close relationship with the young mother and “adored” the child. It is important to note the confessional tone Sherri adopts because it speaks to her embeddedness within the dominant occupational discourse in child welfare.

Sherri's narrative is rich with self-talk and detail of her daily practice that bridges the intra and interpersonal domains of experience. I understand Sherri's narrative as more of a dialogue with herself than one of daily practice. Similar to the other narratives, Sherri spends a great deal of interview time opening and closing the story.

### **At a Loss for Words or an Unwillingness to Speak?**

Gillian's narrative also provides examples of the intrapersonal aspects of narratives. She is the participant with the most experience as a frontline child protection social worker, having worked in several provinces as well as having experience at a managerial level. Despite her knowledge and practice experience, Gillian is unable or unwilling to articulate her daily practice experiences. In her narrative, Gillian struggles to describe her practice and to explain how she is practicing and what that means to her. Like Sherri, Gillian seems to be within a particular professional child welfare script, one in which workers are not particularly critically self-reflective about their own practice but do sometimes comment on the practice of others. Gillian struggles to articulate her own practice but does comment on her peers, for example when she says "*I try to imagine some of the people I've worked with over the years having....allowed that. And I'm going to use the word "allowed" because that's how I see people misusing their power.*" In this example Gillian is talking about a colleague that does not have a good understanding of colonization and the impact that this has had, and continues to have on First Nations people. And yet for Gillian it is easier to talk about practice and power outside of her own practice experiences. For me this speaks to the difficulty of applying theory to practice in tangible ways and how this is further complicated by my request to her about personal practice. Gillian shares her critique of others but not herself. This is not

uncommon to what frontline child protection workers do in daily practice, and it is challenging to turn the focus inward on one's own experience. Gillian is doing the work to untangle daily practice and power through her understandings of other people's practice as seen here; "*They [social workers] get into a situation where they think that they can allow something.*" This dialogue with herself allows for a distancing of her own practice as she does not step outside of the narrating to critique her role, but what Gillian's comments provide is the valuable space of looking at daily practice critically that is informed by theory and can impact the role of frontline workers in a transformative way. Although she is not telling us what her own practice is, Gillian is telling us what her practice is not. This sense of unknowing, and not having words to describe her own practice does not come off as insecurity on Gillian's part, but rather, as a lack of time spent with herself or colleagues critically reflecting on practice. What I conclude from Gillian is that there is no key, no right answer. There are so many ways to understand frontline practice, but little energy is put into asking these questions. To add to this point, Gillian discusses the past by stating: "*It was weird. I didn't have – I didn't have any way to analyze it back then. It's only, you know, 25 years later that I really have a much better grasp of colonization, assimilation, reserves....all that combining in that one community...I wish I had known then what I know now.*" What impact would it have had? Does she think that she would have practiced differently? I do not think so. Social workers need to understand that theoretical knowledge Gillian presents above, such as colonization, and assimilation of this kind is not going to undo history or transform the way practice impacts people. What needs to become the focus is *how* this knowledge can mediate the interactions between frontline child protection workers and how it can impact

frontline child protection social workers, the clients and the structure from the bottom up in child welfare.

### **Interpersonal Domains of Experience**

According to Fraser (2004), interpersonal aspects of stories are those that involve other people. Given that one of the parameters of the interview question was that the story be about daily practice and that the participants must have an active role in their telling, these were the most common aspects of the narratives collected. What I want to show in the excerpts selected is the focus on relationship from the perspective of frontline child protection social workers. As we will see in excerpts that I selected, interpersonal aspects overlap with both intrapersonal aspects and cultural/structural aspects. The relationships to note are those with clients and those with colleagues and supervisors. In the first, frontline child protection workers stress the vital role of relationships with clients but contact with colleagues and supervisors is discussed only minimally and rarely in terms of relationship.

Interpersonal domains of experiences, as found in the participants' narratives, help draw out examples of power relations in child welfare that can fruitfully be analysed using Foucauldian ideas. The narratives of participants reinforce my earlier contention that all relationships in child welfare are relationships of power. Foucault states that "where there is power there is resistance," (Foucault, 1977, cited in Chambon 1999, p.278.) The interview excerpts in this interpersonal section provide examples of how power is conceptualized through the ways in which the social workers practice. Specifically, this is illustrated in how they form relationships with clients, and not with supervisors or



colleagues. I interpret many of these ways of being in relationship as acts of resistance to the traditional role of social worker as expert, as will be seen in the following section.

All the narratives I present feature the language of relationship throughout. I did not suspect that frontline child protection social workers would use this language as the practice of child protection is often anti-relational in nature, given the brief length of time workers have to work with clients and the frequent turnover of these workers. Although the way in which services are provided may be anti-relational, relationship is of paramount importance to the frontline child protection social workers that participated in my research. As I began to understand the term 'relationship' as it was being used by workers, I understood that it illustrated resistance, even if the participant was not opposed to a dominant understanding of what interaction between workers and clients is supposed to look like in a professional setting. Using the language of relationship was a way the participants shared their beliefs in regards to frontline child protection social work and provides an example of power being exercised rather than possessed.

### **Relationships with Clients**

In Sherri's story, she repeatedly positioned relationships between workers and clients in child welfare as unique, as in her statement that "*It is not a relationship that most people have ever been in, in their lives so you have nothing to compare it to, you just don't.*"

Sherri's own level of being unsettled with the frontline child protection social practice comes out in how Sherri speaks about her relationships with clients; her story gives the sense that she sees forming relationships between workers and clients in the child welfare setting is an illicit act, something that should not be done. Sherri's statement "*the more*

*you get personally involved, the faster you burn out. You can't sustain these types of relationships*" supports this reading. Although Sherri warns about such relationships, she also confesses to engaging in them in her own practice.

The language of relationship presented itself as a natural non-political way to speak about the interactions that frontline child protection social workers had with clients. This is shown by the frequency and the ease that this language was used by all the participants without them ever needing to define or qualify it during the interview process the same way other practices and terms were contextualized and justified. This is interesting as the action that comes with having relationship with clients is a form of resistance to the dominant script found in child protection, but as the workers present this as an easy manner minimalizes the powerfulness of this way of practicing.

In Amber's narrative, *One of my children*, she steps outside of the role of a detached professional, speaks about the youth as one of her own children and provides an example of treating him as such when she describes engaging with him outside of working hours. *"I saw him – I was driving home from dinner with my daughter – we had gone out for dinner – and I saw him driving his bike down the road, it's like 7:30 at night"*. Amber continues *"I pulled over, rolled down my window, called him, he came over and he's like what are you doing pulling over? Its the middle of the night, and you're not working. And I'm like, huh, that's funny, I'm always working"*. It is interesting to note in this example that even the youth questions her action of speaking to him outside of the office. Although Amber laughs this off, the interaction seems to be meaningful to the youth as he then engaged in a different process for finding a placement. This sense of being in

relationship continues in the narrative through Amber's description of her actions: "*So I told him I found him a place, introduced him to my daughter, which was very meaningful for him and me*". In resisting the dominant understanding of how clients and workers are supposed to interact, Amber has shifted the way the daily practice that can occur.

Vickie's narrative also provides us with examples of interpersonal domains of experience with somewhat similar examples regarding the client-worker relationship. Vickie does not clearly articulate what her practice values are, but they are revealed in how she talks about her practice and the ways in which she interacts with her youth client. When she describes directly talking to the youth that is both on her caseload and who attends her youth drop-in practicum, Vickie talks about relationship. She challenges the youth to discuss their shared relationship and to move beyond the damage that he has caused to her vehicle. Vickie opens her discussion with him by saying, "*We have such a good relationship*". This sentiment of having a good relationship is what stays at the forefront even though the story that Vickie presents is difficult for her and the youth. Before she turns to the youth to discuss being accountable for his actions, she allows the youth to be heard in an open-ended way. Vickie states; "*I don't understand why you would damage my car*", thus opening a space for the youth to respond. She also describes going with the youth to the police station. Vickie does not abandon the youth, but rather, she takes him through the process anti-oppressively by asking him what they should do next together. Throughout the narrative Vickie puts the relationship as the central focus of her means of practicing with the youth. What is also critical to note is that Vickie does not acknowledge that value or worth of this anti-oppressive practice and how it positively impacts the child.

Relational understandings of power are not new to social work. One notable example of anti-oppressive practice can be seen in Moffatt's chapter in Chambon et al. (1999) where he describes challenging the dominant understandings of practice through simple resistance actions like meeting a client for coffee outside of the welfare office with the glass partition to allow for a different way of power to flow between the worker and client. What is clear from all the participants' narratives, and particularly the three examples that I highlighted in this section on relationships with clients is that many more examples of this challenging and resisting the dominant scripts of child protection are going on everyday – and they are not being shared. These stories of relational practice are not shared among workers, the greater system of child welfare, or with the public, and most of all they are not recognized by the workers themselves as being meaningful and transformative. This last point of self recognition will be discussed further in the analysis chapter.

### **Relationships with Colleagues and Supervisors**

Continuing with interpersonal domains of experience and how they draw out frontline child protection workers' conceptualizations of power, I look at how participants present relationships between colleagues and supervisors. Several of the narratives speak to the negative reactions that colleagues have towards the participants' practice styles, most notably Vickie and Amber's.

Vickie was visibly upset while narrating her story. Her voice shook and her eyes watered with, what I understand to be, professional frustration. From what she told me about her

colleagues' reactions and the lack of support from her supervisor, I understood this to be frustration with the child welfare system in general. Simply put, Vickie is not able to practice as she wants. Vickie speaks about going to her supervisor and having support denied; she speaks to the way that her colleagues laugh at her situation. Vickie's physical presentation during her narratives shows how challenging it was for her to encounter structural and cultural barriers in child protection practice. In Vickie's narrative, she has connected with a youth on her caseload that she also sees at an after school program. Yet Vickie's story also reveals a sense of working without support and working against the system. Vickie states that "*...of course all my co-workers thought it was funny...*," yet she is crushed that her peers are not supportive of her experience. Again, Vickie's struggle to tell this story shows how personally affected she was by this experience. Vickie clearly expresses that she did not see the humour and was notably disappointed when "*...the managers said 'we aren't' going to pay, why would we pay?'*". Vickie is practicing in isolation, and as she shows us in her narrative, she does not have the support of her amused peers or her unsupportive supervisor. Her own practice values extend outside of agency expectations and office hours, and her peers and managers cannot understand why Vickie would be looking for support. Vickie cannot get past this frustration and we see the impact that this 'inside-the-box' thinking has on how Vickie understands herself as an effective frontline child protection social worker. This incident seems to impact Vickie's practice and her understanding of it deeply. She had difficulty when wanting to share the story, as mentioned in the opening, and then there is no ending to the story. It is as if Vickie is not able to process the experience any further. This is also the case as Vickie speaks about the same youth and the youth drop-in, but she does not revisit that particular narrative again during the interview. She has a strong conviction

about how practice should occur, evidence of which can be found as we look at her relationship with the youth. However, she presents herself as insignificant within the larger context of child welfare practice.

Although peer interactions play a role in the narratives, the participants did not describe them as relationships. Amber's narrative provides an example of relationship or lack of it between colleagues when she shares the reactions of her colleagues about her practice choices. *"I had a number of people coming to me and saying, 'Why are you doing that?'"* This clearly shows that frontline child protection social workers can face barriers inside the workplace beyond the pressures of legislation and policy. Part of this may be related to dominant ideas about professionalism, while other interpretations may have to do with the self-regulation and monitoring of colleagues that serves to maintain a child welfare system that is comfortable and familiar, even if it is not the best for clients – or workers. Amber recounts her peers' reactions by relaying a comment made to her that *"he's not even at the group home"* when she was trying to find a youth a foster home. Amber's efforts to find the youth a foster home were mocked because, according to her colleagues, the youth was not participating in the structure of child protection, as he should have been doing, by staying in the group home. For some of Amber's colleagues, this was the way the youth could demonstrate that he was 'deserving' of other services. These comments and reactions are examples of how workers are disciplined into re-producing dominant practices. Amber feels that she was being perceived as weak by *"giving into him"* and *"not being punitive enough in response to his behaviour"*. Having strong practice values enables Amber to continue her daily practice; *"I ignored them and I went on (laugh)."*

She tells the story with joyful enthusiasm, including her description of resisting her colleagues' efforts to have her produce a more 'acceptable' type of practice.

### **Cultural and Structural Domains of Experience**

My last section of analysis deals with both cultural and structural domains of experiences that I have found in the participants' narratives. I have collapsed the cultural and structural domains of experience as they are so closely linked in the participants' narratives. As Fraser (2004) notes, the "[c]ultural aspects of stories often refer to larger groups of people and sets of cultural conventions" (p.192). She goes on to say that the benefit of undertaking the analysis of cultural domains is that "dominant discourse may surface through appeals made to common sense" (p.192). Although structural aspects of stories overlap with other aspects, I feel that they fit best when combined with the cultural domains. According to Fraser (2004) structural aspects are "distinct by the claims made about the influence of public policy and social systems, class, gender, ethnicity and other modes of social organizing come to light" (p.192). These cultural and structural domains of experience will be discussed in terms of the impact on daily practice, as felt by the workers, as well as the importance of valuing practice on the frontlines.

Foucault's ideas about power are particularly relevant when looking at both the cultural and structural domains of experience found in the daily practice narratives presented by the participants. According to Foucault, power can be analyzed as coming from the bottom up, and these narratives present the workers' understanding of how power flows through the structure of child welfare as well as through the actions of the workers themselves.

### **The Impact on Daily Practice**

Throughout the narratives, there was a great deal of negative commentary directed at child welfare as an institution. Their critique was revealed in the discouragement they expressed with regard to the effectiveness of the profession. Comments such as Jean's illustrate this: *"It felt like I was a resource broker...So, it was at that point it was this is really useless. I'm not helping you at all"*. Some, like Amber, were critical of the larger system: *"The structures and the policies don't always let you do what you need to do."* Others, like Vickie, had a fundamental inner conflict about how the system operated for the social workers as well as the clients: *"I guess that my hope was that [the system of child welfare] would support us emotionally so that we could then go out into the trenches and deal with this really traumatic work."* Vickie goes on to say, *"I don't understand why a profession can say that we hold all these wonderful values and yet not extending them to the people that are actually doing the social work."* The perspectives of frontline child protection social workers provided here permit insights into the competing ways of conceptualizing power, and how these play out for workers. Analyzing the narratives of frontline child protection workers provides the opportunity to think differently about daily practice and the impacts that it has on clients, the structure of child welfare and the workers themselves.

Sherri's narrative closes on a much different tone. She becomes both energetic and optimistic about her role in the larger system of child welfare. She states that *"you learn to be an advocate"* and she describes herself as *"a policy breaker"* as a means of getting clients *"what they needed"*. Sherri understands herself as a part of the structure and the



institution of child welfare. Sherri cannot stop the back-and-forth internal conflict where she cannot sort out her power and role as frontline child protection social worker. Sherri understands herself in role as a frontline child protection social worker, meaning that she is the expert and she is expected to “*figure out what to do*”. Sherri is not working with her clients, she is practicing for them and this is reinforced when she explains using a clothing allowance for groceries when emergency cheques were cut from the budget. Sherri makes the choice, “*I am not going to tell [her supervisor or client].*” This has ramifications on her, the client, the supervisor, the team she works on and the larger system of child welfare as it keeps Sherri isolated. Sherri stays alone in her practice, and admits to not being able to see the “*scope of your practice*” while practicing.

### **Valuing Practice the Culture of Insignificance**

Feeling devalued as a practitioner is not uncommon in the culture of social work practice. In my own experience, I remember needing to back up each of my assessments and reports with professional collaterals that did not include the opinions of frontline social workers. I could not put to use my critical skills and consider myself a professional, only a social worker that made observations as I felt I was required to report observations of families without any critical context outside of the work expectations. Too often social workers are overly self-critical and do not see themselves as valuable or skilled. This comes out when Vickie voices her opinion that the day’s incident, the vandalism to her vehicle, is going to completely impact the rest of the case planning she has undertaken with the youth: “*well now of course everything that I had been advocating for and planned for and hoped for – for him I realized now it was not going to happen.*” Instead of questioning the structural limitations of a child welfare system that had not been able

to provide a safe and caring foster placement for this youth, Vickie's first reaction was to blame herself, as if she had let him down by advocating for something outside of the expected group home for this youth. In the professional world of child protection, there is no room to understand the youth's destruction of her car as anything other than a dangerous and violent act of defiance by a teenager undeserving of a foster home setting. However, from Vickie's story, it is clear that she feels she was not meeting the youth's needs. Vickie doubts herself: "*It was not looking good and maybe I was wrong...*" She seems to readily defer to another professional as having more influence in her system than she does herself when talking about the role of the officer in the story. "*The Officer said 'I am sure that I can advocate for the band to pay for the damage.'*" As seen here, Vickie does not give us reason to believe that she will be able to advocate for herself or the youth. This does not make her a bad worker but one that is isolated and unsupported.

We see this again in a quote from Jean, despite the fact that she has been working for over ten years and has an MSW degree as well as very high expectations of the system. "*But what really bothers me, too, was when I would phone to help her with child tax; we'd phone from my office, it would happen very quickly. But if she phoned without some back up, it would take weeks!*" Although Jean is hopeful that clients will be able to advocate for themselves and is disappointed in the system that does not support this, she does not recognize or value her position as a social worker. As Jean is sharing at this point in the story, she recounts this incident with an air of disbelief. Jean nowhere in her narrative recognizes the value of her position as a social worker. I therefore conclude that Jean does not truly see the impact that she is making when she is able to get action from the child tax department quicker than the client does. Jean knows that in her role she is able

to make things happen for clients, but does not acknowledge in her interview that this could be seen as a positive. By not sharing in the idea that the positions of frontline child protection social workers are influential, it becomes easy to devalue them for ourselves.

Marc, like some of the other participants, has a very good critique of the profession and traditional roles within the child welfare system, and, even though he sees himself as doing something different, he feels that he is not living up to the expectation of what a worker should be. Marc's marker for what makes a child protection worker is similar to Vickie's. Marc's expectations of being a good worker revolve around being relational and connecting with the families that he practices with and for. In the story that Marc shares, he says, "*I went into the house, and I have some dinner, sit down and talk with them*". The language that Marc uses is particular and very inclusive even though it is a very sensitive situation of child sexual abuse. Marc continues: "*It was much more personal than traditional social work...where you leave your shoes and your jacket on and write everything down.*" But when those lines of familiarity blur too far for Marc and he feels that he is unable to do his work, he goes back to the traditional symbols of frontline child protection worker by "*having to withdraw my personal feelings from the situation.*" He showed the family this by "*physically get[ting] up from the table*" and "*physically pick[ing] up [his] book and [his] pen just as symbols.*" In this instance, Marc is able to use his understanding of the dominant discourse around what it is to be a social worker as a means of communicating the intention of his practice. What is concerning in this section of the story is that first Marc sees this incident with the family as an example of his bad practice, or when something has "*backfired*". He does not recognize or acknowledge, much like Vickie, that his practice affects the family in a positive way and

also influences the way that the family understands the profession of child protection social work. Throughout the story, Marc does practice successfully as a relational social worker as he describes how he explained the investigation, the process and the reasoning behind what needed to occur if the investigation was in the best interest of the child. This is not the traditional practice of workers interviewing children without parental knowledge and consent and other intrusive practice methods. Following this Marc sees himself as the traditional social worker here, thus it is hard to be transformative when his own self perception as a worker is affected by his practice. Marc is used to being physically isolated in terms of living and practicing in small, remote communities. Marc now practices in a larger urban setting yet continues to practice in similar ways as when he lived in this fly in community. What is important to note is that Marc still holds the same understanding of child welfare and practice as he did then, that hold him to a practice standard that does not allow for an understanding of the worker's limitations and victories inside the system of child welfare. There is no room to critically evaluate practice or get support if needed in different ways because he holds himself responsible for the successes and challenges of families, much like in the story he presented in his narrative. Although Marc had to step outside of his relational way of practice to a degree he does not give himself any credit or value for how he was transparent in his communications with the family and how he, with the family, was able to ensure the little girl got the supports she needed.

### **Summary**

How do we practice as frontline child protection social workers? Some of the workers give a detailed account of what it might have been like to have them as social workers.

What I have taken away from this thesis is that there is no correct way to practice. Each of the stories presents a particular set of circumstances and realities and, in those instances each social worker may or may not have made similar decisions. Much in the same way that I started the thesis by saying that all interactions in child welfare are based in power, these narratives show that the daily practice of frontline child protection social workers is a grey area of making the best choices you can in the circumstances in which you find yourself. Even in the face of a profession that presents itself as black and white with legislation, and policies to guide it, the lives of families are messy, and clients in child protection do not fit into neat and tidy boxes of services. These social workers are no different in that they are messy too in their doubts, self-criticisms and desires to support clients and families.

## CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter I take up some of the points mentioned in the analysis chapter in more detail and offer a conclusion to my research.

What I set out to investigate in my research was how frontline child protection social workers conceptualize power. To understand how power is conceptualized I conducted a narrative analysis of frontline child protection social workers' daily practice stories.

These daily practice narratives, from the perspective of the workers, provided rich insights into how daily practice is enacted and presented. As stated in my introduction and throughout my thesis, I firmly believe in what Dumbrill and Maiter (1997, cited in Strega 2006) present in their work – the theory claims that indeed all interactions in child welfare are based in power. To present my findings I go back to the work of Sawicki (1990) who breaks down Foucault's concept of power into three points as a means of presenting my finds. These three Foucauldian principles provide an alternative to the dominant script of power, and are highly applicable to child protection practice. They are:

1. power is exercised rather than possessed;
2. power is not primarily repressive, but productive and;
3. power is analyzed as coming from the bottom up (Sawicki, 1991, p.21).

The discussion chapter is divided into sections which address these three key Foucauldian principles and allow me to share my final thoughts on the thesis.

Again, the reason that Foucault's theory is most fitting is that he provides a critique of traditional ways of understanding power as discussed earlier in the literature review. As a more fluid and pervasive concept, Foucault's approach allows us to see power relations at work in the everyday practices of professionals such as the social workers that I

interviewed. This is not to say that a Foucauldian analysis denies interpretations of power as it is more typically understood. Rather, as Sawicki (1991) points out “[Foucault] merely thinks that it does not capture those forms of power that make centralized, repressive forms of power possible, namely the myriad of power relations at the micro-level of society” (p.20). I sought to expose and explore power relations, through articulations of child welfare practices, in a way that revealed the productive capacity of power.

### **The Conceptualization of Power**

The narratives collected provide examples of daily practice as told by frontline child protection social workers. What I set out to better understand was how power was conceptualized by these workers through their narratives. What I have learned is that there are no simple answers when trying to understand power. Power, for the participants, took on many forms during their stories. Traditional scripts of power took shape in the workers’ stories; such as the roles of hero or martyr in Sherri and Gillian’s stories as well as the role of the powerless worker that appeared in Marc, Vickie, and Jean’s narratives. What came out consistently was that each of the participants flowed in and out of different understandings of power, often in the same story during their interview.

What does it mean to have an inconsistent presentation of power throughout the participants’ stories and to each other’s narratives? Foucault’s thinking allows for the traditional notions of power to exist while acknowledging that they are limited to

understand power. Traditional notions of power, which have been discussed in the literature review, lead to the notion of responding to power by workers as being understood as refusal or rebellion. Social workers in child protection all have some notion of distance and the expectation of being a neutral worker, but what we persistently see is that there is resistance by engaging in different types of relationships within the system of child welfare. This resistance occurs for a myriad of reasons that are outside of the scope of my research but are generally moral and ethical in nature.

### **The Practice of Frontline Child Protection Workers' is Relational**

Frontline child protection social workers' conceptualizations of power have been observed through how they describe power is exercised in their daily practice. Foucault's understanding of power as an interaction between people as opposed to a commodity that is possessed was demonstrated time and again through the narratives I collected. Throughout the narratives I found that no matter what philosophy of practice, or theory of social work each participant came into the interview process with, every participant spoke about their practice in terms of relationship. Does this mean that all of the workers have the same understanding of relationship? No. But what is shared among all the participants is a collective language of relationship when speaking about clients. Using this relational language presents the frontline child protection social workers' enactments of practice as postmodern even within a dominant script that holds the understanding that power flows from a central place, in this case the legislation and mandate of child protection.



The narratives also showed that frontline child protection social workers did not use this same conceptualization of power in regards to peers, colleagues or supervisors as I showed in my analysis chapter. What is key to my understanding of this focus on relationship is how workers understand *themselves* when practicing with clients.

According to Foucault's understanding of power, this means that even when workers do not make the connection between their practice beliefs and how they carry out their practice they enact their power as subjects as relational. Therefore in child welfare, where frontline child protection social workers are constructed as subjects that have the capacity and will to enact power over their clients, the workers' conceptualization of power involves daily practice experiences with and for clients through their relationships with these very clients. The frontline child protection social workers that participated, even those with the most traditional understandings of their role, understood and presented their practice as relational. Examples of this relational practice can be seen throughout the narratives, particularly in Amber's connection with the youth where foster placement was an issue, as well as in Marc's stories where he dealt with the sensitive issue of inter-family sexual abuse and also in Vickie's story of being an ally to the client with police. Even when the practice is challenging and the worker does not have positive feelings about the outcome (as per Marc and Vickie) we can see the relational practice of the workers. For example, Amber expresses the youth's sentiment so well although the youth's feelings were not directed at Amber but were speaking to the bigger picture: "...it wasn't I'm [Amber's] great, it was 'I chose this, thank you'. This tiny excerpt shares so much feeling and implies that relational practice is meaningful and is being practiced successfully everyday. Amber's narrative is a perfect example for doing so and always maintains that she is indeed practicing inside of a system of child welfare where she has

not always been supported. Daily practice has the capacity to move beyond traditional understandings of power and rigid expectations of the child welfare system although worker – client are not the only relationships that need further examination.

There were several examples of negative and unsupportive interactions with colleagues, supervisors and upper management in the narratives that I collected. Only Amber provided an example of a positive interaction between a frontline child protection social worker and her team leader. This is not to say that many more of the interactions could have been positive, but this information was not shared. Since the interview question was open to any experience of daily practice it was outside of my scope to seek out particular narratives. This said, all participants spoke about their relationships with clients. What needs further attention in the literature is a way of looking at frontline child protection workers' interactions and relationships with each other. This could enlighten and support the idea of changing the system from the bottom up in a way that is not so isolating for individual workers. As per the narratives I gathered, frontline child protection workers' daily practice is done alone and independent from their peers – the exact opposite of what was striven for with their clients. What makes all of the stories extraordinary is that they are simply everyday narratives of frontline child protection workers. The conceptualization of power in the narratives of frontline child protection workers' changed and shifted throughout the interviews, and this is hopeful as we shift to understand if change from the bottom up is possible.

### **Is Change From the Bottom is Possible?**

Sawicki (1990) provides us with the postmodern understanding of Foucault's work that power is productive and not repressive and that power can be analysed from the bottom up. I feel that the narratives collected are a beginning step to challenge frontline child protection social workers to take the notion of relational practice and test its potential to effect change. This would require further initiatives and research but I am not the first to take social workers to task; Wharf and McKenzie (2004) state that for change to be successful it must come from the bottom up for policy and practice to connect in a meaningful way. Moreau's (1989) work encourages frontline child protection workers to exploit their time alone with clients, outside of the watchful eyes of the system and bureaucracy that is child welfare. There is much research that has been done looking at alternative means of practice and best practices see for example Callahan (1989, 2000), Swift (1995) and Strega (2005, 2007). What my research provides are the narratives of frontline child protection workers' enactment of this productivity, of relational practice on a daily scale which moves beyond techniques and theories such as anti-oppressive practice in place of looking at those people, those workers, that carry out the practice. My research is only a small step in wanting to understand daily practice from the perspective of frontline child protection social workers and, as mentioned, relationships with clients is the factor that stands out. This is similar to what is found in the literature of anti-oppressive practice and I would like to suggest that further research on this subject include the exploration of other relationships that exist in child welfare. Further analysis of daily practice can only enrich the movement of wanting to see change from the bottom up where frontline child protection workers and clients can work towards shared goals.

### **Where Do We Go From Here?**

Foucault's later work elaborates on this theory and provides us with another means of detangling power as we move into the future and what it means to be frontline child protection workers inside of child welfare;

I would like to say, first of all, what has been the goal of my work during the past twenty years. It has not been to analyse the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis. My objective instead has been to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects (Foucault, (1995), p.326).

What I take away from the wisdom of Foucault is that power is enacted by the subject.

The subjects in this work are the frontline child protection social workers within the realm of child welfare, much like the clients are the subjects of this realm as well. In this realm clients are often treated like they are less important than workers and need to be saved or corrected or disciplined by these very workers. By using a poststructuralist understanding of power we can see that frontline child protection workers are subjects that are enacting power regardless of whether clients are in a professional relationship or in a more postmodern relationship that makes space for relational practice. Foucault acknowledged that there is a traditional power structure, and, as postmodernist workers that view practice in relational ways, we must always remember that these relationships occur within a system that does not accept or support that power is productive, that it is exercised rather than possessed.

Frontline child protection workers have the potential to be transformative in their daily practice. This idea of transformation is not original and can be found in the social work literature that looks at systems and occupational culture from Parton (1996) and

Scourfield (2003). If the potential of frontline child protection social workers is to be utilized, there is a need to study what social workers are doing at work, as suggested by Parton (1996). Emphasis on “paying close attention to the effects of what social workers do, the beliefs they profess, and the organization of social services departments, their routines and bureaucracies” must enter into our academic and practical thinking (Scourfield, 2003, p.31). What my research brings light to is the idea that each frontline child protection social worker thinks that they are the only one. By this I mean their feelings of practice are not shared or normalized with each other. On the contrary, my research findings show that they practice alone and are isolated from peers and supervisors both systemically and by their own beliefs that they doing what no other worker is doing with and for their clients. All of this occurs in spite of the existence of professional associations such as the BCASW that aim to provide space for professional development and discussions around practice issues to occur. The BCASW has committees, such as the committee of Child Welfare and Family, which has organized listening tours to engage child protection social work professionals, family and communities in discussions together. Despite the availability of this resource, frontline child protection social workers cannot engage with the outside. Maybe we need to focus our attention inwards on ourselves before looking to change the system. It is difficult to build relationships, but this needs to occur outside the constraints of the child welfare system before there is any kind of transformation from the bottom up. What would happen if all frontline child protection social workers placed relationship as a practice priority? What would the impact be on the structure of child welfare?

Further to this thinking around transformation, the relationships that are formed with clients and workers are limited as well. As Scourfield (2003) reminds us “...social workers’ constructions of clients are to a large extent limited by the discourse of their workplace” (p.34). Frontline child protection workers can only think so far inside the system before they need to step outside to envision something new. Again, here I would encourage further research to follow up with Callahan (1998, 2000) and Dumbrill (2006) in an effort to make connections between workers and clients. It is important to do the research separately, to allow for space to understand and hear the perspectives of all involved. Although Dumbrill’s (2006) work shows that clients are aware of workers’ possibilities more so than the workers themselves, frontline child protection social workers need to do the work that challenges their practice. Even external knowledge can be valuable and beneficial – workers need to connect in a relationship with one another.

### **The Master’s House**

Much like Lorde (1984) and then Strega’s (1995) work on the view from the poststructuralist margins of research, I too feel that the master’s tool will not dismantle the master’s house. What I want to turn my attention to are the frontline child protection social workers, who both hold up this house and keep it alive and thriving. I believe that, although the convictions and passion of these workers in their daily practice is truly to practice with and for families as well as protecting children (which is key and necessary), their practice is often muddled with conflicting ideas about their roles. The role of frontline child protection social worker has many facets, a few of which are to act as professionals, enforcers of policy, and to protect children, while simultaneously acting as advocate and ally with clients. This leaves workers with an overwhelming sense of

responsibility that they carry as individuals, not as frontline child protection social workers that are part of a team and bigger picture of child protection and child welfare. I use these words ‘with’ and ‘for’ even when it is not easy to see because at the heart of anti-oppressive practice, or whatever the newest best practice methodology is being labelled, this is the biggest shift in practice that has to continue to occur (and is occurring).

Is change from the inside possible? This is an ongoing debate, most eloquently articulated by Audre Lorde (1984), a black feminist writer and Strega (2005, 2007).

Audre Lorde (1984) stated “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (p. 112). A strong emphasis is placed on community and its ability to meet its own needs on its own terms. Lorde (1984) goes on to say that “they [the master’s tools] merely allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (p. 112). It is Lorde’s position that change is not possible from inside the already-established institutions. Lorde’s position oversimplifies the debate of child welfare. It is not as simple as breaking down the challenge of meeting children’s needs to an inside/outside debate. Child welfare is missing community from within – the workers are splintered and judgmental of each other (as seen in Vickie and Amber’s stories) and they are policing and controlling of themselves (as seen in Gillian and Marc’s stories).

An alternative way of seeing change as possible is presented by Mohanty (in Turner et al., 2004): “genuine change results from fighting power and domination, using and modifying the master’s tools, creating our own tools. Genuine change must be demanded and worked for; it is never a gift” (p. 37). Foucault’s conception is positive and future-

thinking as presented by Chambon (1999), “the purpose of Foucault’s investigations was critical and transformative. He questioned the nature and the effects of our activities and the ordinary assumptions and taken-for-granted realities that sustain them” (Chambon, p.53), “power is something that is circulated and dispersed throughout society rather than being held exclusively by certain groups.” (Strega, 2005, p.225) Yet as social workers we form a group that we rarely acknowledge. The BCASW is doing work to bind workers together to have discussions by way of projects like the listening tour.

Strega (2005) speaks to space that has been opened in the academy by feminist critical race theorists and Indigenous scholars. Their work “...makes us aware that these institutions [such as child welfare] are also deeply implicated in maintaining and rationalizing inequalities” (p. 228). So where does that leave us? Working together to build relationships and further expanding this concept outside of the realm of client-worker by bringing in peer relationships is a avenue that needs further exploration. With these ambitious goals there needs to be a pairing with that concerns raised by Foucault in Strega’s work that practice must not be so radical that we fall outside of the mainstream. We need to challenge our own complacency and take responsibility for the lack of change. As Mahatma Ghandi said, “you must be the change you want to see in the world,” (2007, internet resource) and I see this happening in the smallest of spaces, beginning with daily practice. Strega (2005) states that “a critical measure by which our work needs to be assessed is the extent to which we are complicit with or challenging of dominant discourses” (p. 231). Although Strega is speaking in terms of academic work, this goes far beyond the academy as it is a challenge to ourselves in daily practice. This



is an opportunity to take the theory of the academy and conceptualize it differently in practical ways where the power has been all along.

### **Final Thoughts**

My own research addresses those that enact legislation: frontline child protection social workers. I recognize that my research is limited in its scope and does not include supervisors or families, but I acknowledge here that this research has been done, at least in part. The research that was conducted was small in scale and there is great variance in the participants' narratives. Further research should involve the input of frontline child protection social workers, individually as well as in the form of discussions. My research has reinforced my own personal experiences of being a frontline child protection social worker, specifically the idea that one thinks that one's practice is individual and that one is practicing alone. My research shows that this sentiment of practicing in isolation is shared and that normalizing these feelings of practicing alone could both open the discussion on how practice is occurring and broaden our understanding of how practice is being done from the perspective of the frontline. Furthermore, such a dialogue could tackle the possibility of how conceptualizing power in these terms may provide us with a different way to discuss change from the bottom up.

Finally, without understanding the perceptives of frontline child protection social workers in their daily practice, we are in the same place we have always been with an incomplete narrative of child welfare. The study's six frontline child protection social workers have given us an understanding of how to continue the pursuit of practice knowledge. I hope

that, in part, my work presents alternative views of child protection practice and how dedicated the workers in this field are to the families in which they try to serve.

**Appendix A Recruitment Poster**

# Interested in research?

**My name is Yvonne Gomez MSW student at the University of Victoria.**

**I am looking to find participants to interview in February 2007**

**Topic: Front-line child protection social workers' daily practices**

The purpose of this thesis is to collect the stories of front-line child protection social workers as a means of better understanding how power is conceptualized in daily practice.

**I am looking to conduct one in-depth narrative interview with participants, approximately one hour in length, with the possibility of a follow up meeting to review transcripts.**

**If you are interested in participating or want further information please contact me directly at:**

**250.857.2603 or via email  
yvonne.gomez@sympatico.ca**

# of course you are...

**Appendix B Consent Form**

***Participant Consent Form***

**Frontline Child Protection Social Workers' Daily Practices: a revolution of one?**

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled Frontline Child Protection Social Workers' Daily Practices: A revolution of one? that is being conducted by Yvonne Gomez.

I, Yvonne Gomez, am a graduate student in the department of Social Work at the University of Victoria. I am also a former child protection worker from Ontario. You may contact me if you have any questions by email at [yvonne.gomez@sympatico.ca](mailto:yvonne.gomez@sympatico.ca) or by telephone at 250.857.2603.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for the degree Master of Social Work. This research is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Susan Strega. You may contact my supervisor at [sstrega@uvic.ca](mailto:ssstrega@uvic.ca) or by telephone at 250.721.8036.

The purpose of this research project is to analyze the stories of front-line child protection social workers. In particular, I will be analyzing how power is conceptualised by front-line protection social workers in their daily practice stories.

Finally the goal of the research is to further social work knowledge on power in daily practice. This research will be carried out by using in-depth narrative interviews within a qualitative research inquiry approach.

Research of this type is relevant as frontline child protection social workers are an integral part of social service delivery. Social work literature is limited within the topic of child protection where the perspectives of front-line practitioners are the main focus. These perspectives are necessary to analyze power so that the dichotomy of the all powerful/completely powerless worker can be disrupted. If a richer understanding of power in daily practice we can begin to look approaching the challenge of systemic change in new ways and realizing social justice with the practice of working with individual clients.

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your direct practice experience as a child protection social worker. You have a minimum education of a Bachelor of Social Work. If you have a prior relationship with me, outside of this research due to a shared historical employer please be assured that there is not pressure to participant in this research and you may withdraw at any time.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include a one time private audio taped narrative interview that will last approximately 1 hour in length. There is the possibility of a follow up meeting to verify interview transcripts. Meetings will occur in a mutually agreed location. I will be available to participants for follow up questions after the interviews, as well open to participants input and access to their transcripts that I will use as data for my analysis. As a former frontline child protection social worker I am empathetic to what the interview process may be like for you, the participants. I believe my own experience will put

participants at ease in sharing their stories; this will allow participants to feel comfortable and supported during interview. Participants are also ensured that the information and narratives that will be provided during the interviews will be used in a just and ethical manner to further studies and knowledge in the field of social work and will not be used against them, their clients, the British Columbia Association of Social Worker (hereafter the BCASW) or the MCFD.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you. This includes scheduling of meeting(s) during your personal time.

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include emotional, social, economic and psychological. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken to ensure anonymity and confidentiality; in terms of protecting your anonymity your name and the location of your past and present work place will not be disclosed within the research. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping all audio tapes, transcripts and a CD in a locked filing cabinet to which only I have the key. Data will only be shared with committee members. Participants are reminded that they should only disclose information that they feel comfortable in sharing, and may withdraw at anytime if they feel that they are placing themselves at risk of losing employment by participating in the interview.

As the researcher I will try and be supportive and connect you with resources in the community if harm occurs.

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include: the opportunity to critically reflect on your daily practice in ways that both positive and empowering. This research is of potential benefit to child protection social workers, and society in that interviews and check-in will provide participants the opportunity to frame their work in a different way – if you do not already perceive yourself as being powerful this may change. This in turn will affect the ways practitioners view their work, and ultimately the way in which they practice critically.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will not be used and will be removed from analysis.

To make sure that you continue to consent to participate in this research, I will obtain your ongoing consent by asking you to sign in the ongoing consent section of this form, should a second meeting be necessary. This research may lead to a further research project or a publication in the form of a journal article. By signing this consent form you are also consenting to my use of the data.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways: directly to you the participant, the possibility of a published article, thesis, presentations at a scholarly meetings, or to the BCASW and the MCFD.

Data from this study will be disposed of 5 years after the start data of my investigation, data will be destroyed by erasing electronic data, shredding paper copies, destroying audio tapes and erasing electronic data on the CD.

Individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include the investigator, Yvonne Gomez and my supervisor Dr. Susan Strega.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545). Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

Name of Participant	Signature	Date
Name of Participant (for ongoing consent)	Signature	Date

*A copy of this consent will be given to the participant and a copy will be kept on file by the researcher.*

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