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Sandra Gorman

Irish College of Humanities and Applied Sciences, mssandrag@gmail.com

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Child Welfare and Protection Professionals: How Do They Experience Their Work? An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Sandra Gorman, Irish College of Humanities and Applied Science, Limerick, Ireland.

mssandrag@gmail.com

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Abstract

Professionals and services which aim to help vulnerable children and adolescents are required to provide care, protection, welfare, and advocacy in a professional manner (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). This is a sensitive and emotionally charged job that can be very rewarding at the same time as being very stressful (Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey and Wright, 2007). Consequently, frontline Child Welfare and Protection Professionals (CWPP) are marked by high turnover rates. The declining economic context which led to budget cuts and understaffed offices has increased such risks (Ellett and Millar, 2001; Thoma, 1998; Markiewicz, 1996; Tham, 2007). Therefore, much research has focused on the stressors as well as the protective factors involved in this line of work. Given that each national and international region has its own policies which influence the outcomes and work experiences of CWPPs it is important to gather knowledge and research into each jurisdiction so that situations are properly assessed and addressed. For the Republic of Ireland this research has been less intense, with only a few published papers looking into this matter, albeit with original observations (Burns, 2011; Burns and Christie, 2013). The aim of this qualitative research was to expand the literature surrounding this subject by using semi-structured in-depth interviews with twelve CWPPs working within an Irish organisation. The research uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to organise and structure meaning into themes that reflect the experiences of the participants with regard to their work. Four super-ordinate themes emerged (Client Relationships, Organisation Support and Variance, Child Welfare System Inadequacies and Job Satisfaction) which unite positive and negative work factors consistent with the literature as well as factors that seem to relate to the local context. Improvements that can be made at the organisational and policy-making level are discussed, as well as possibilities and necessities to further expand on this research through the use of quantitative or mixed method measures.

Key words: Child Welfare and Protection Professionals, stressors, job satisfaction, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been a plethora of research on the conceptual continuum of a person's psychological relationship to their work spanning from the positive experience of engagement to the negative experience of burnout (Maslach and Leiter 2008). In particular, research has focused on job satisfaction and stress factors of frontline professionals in

healthcare and education in an attempt to understand staff retention and turnover. Findings indicate that engagement was considered a successful tool in helping to counteract burnout. Frontline professionals that work with vulnerable children are required to provide care, protection, welfare, and advocacy in a professional manner (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2011). Child Welfare and Protection Professionals (CWPP) are Social Workers that are legally mandated to protect children affected by either problematic families or social environments, working for a better social and educational integration of such children (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook and Dews, 2007).

According to the census data within the EU, the percentage of children in the total population is highest in Ireland with approximately 25% being under 18 years of age (CSO, 2012). Buckley and Burns (2015) note that while the number of child protection referrals and reports has increased twofold between 2009 and 2012, this has not been met with a proportional increase in the workforce of CWPPs due to inadequacies within the system. Furthermore, the economic crisis has led to a severe reduction of the services required by children at risk (counselling, alternative care, home visits by social work professionals etc.) (Burns, 2011).

It is within this short-staffed and highly pressured context that a CWPP workforce also has to manage the detrimental impact of high turnover rates characteristic in this line of work. Internationally, turnover rates for CWPPs are commonly reported to be above 30% and sometimes stretch far beyond 50% (Ellett and Millar, 2001; Thoma, 1998; Tham, 2007), with the majority of staff leaving within the first 3 years of employment (Ellett, 1995; Cyphers, 2001). Consequently, high turnover rates have been directly related to the mismanagement of child protection and high stress as perceived by Social Workers (Gomez, Travis, Ayers-Lopez and Schwab, 2010; Healy, Meagher and Cullin, 2009). The issue of high turnover rates has also been raised in Ireland (RTÉ, 2006, 2008 as cited in Burns and Christie, 2013).

A 2001 meta-analysis performed by Mor Barak, Nissly and Levin on studies that include CWPPs, found burnout, stress, organisational commitment and job satisfaction as the best predictors for intention to leave and turnover. A more recent meta-analysis has produced similar findings (Kim and Kao, 2014) with results being strengthened by empirical accounts in the literature investigating turnover among CWPPs, experiencing some of the highest levels of stress compared to other helping professions (Regehr, Leslie, Howe and Chau, 2000). In particular, frontline professionals may experience higher levels of stress as a result of their client centred nature and the emotionally demanding environment in which they operate (Coyle, Edwards, Hannigan, Fothergill and Burnard, 2005; Naturale, 2007).

Over time, work-related stress can result in burnout, if it is not recognised and addressed. Mor Barak, Levin, Nissly, and Lane (2006) tested a theoretical model of turnover intentions using diversity characteristics, organisational climate and personal affective variables as predictors. A mixed method approach was employed on a sample of 418 participants. Organisational factors for intention to leave included job stress, low organisational commitment, high caseloads, a perception of unfairness in job promotion and being a younger staff member. The mixed method approach was valuable, as the qualitative data collected via interviews complimented and cross-validated the quantitative data. Van Hook, Rothenberg, Fisher and Elias (2008) studied 182 CWPPs and their findings showed that groups with a heightened risk of burnout included women, younger staff and staff with key responsibilities who previously experienced major trauma in their lives.

In terms of engagement, Strand and Dore (2009) studying a large representative sample of 927 CWPPs found that job satisfaction was slightly higher than the national norm although it was not statistically significant. Factors contributing to job satisfaction included being satisfied with supervision, good working conditions, availability of internal and external resources and being a manager. Chen and Scannapieco (2009) studied job related self-efficacy and perceptions of supervisor support in relation to job satisfaction and intention to leave in a sample of CWPPs. These findings showed that job satisfaction had a greater positive impact on participants with high self-efficacy and supervisor support in terms of their intention to stay. However, for participants that reported low self-efficacy and low supervisor support, job satisfaction failed to improve their intention to stay.

Several qualitative studies have also explored the experiences of CWPPs and their perceived sources of stress and job satisfaction. Using a mixed method approach, analysing in-depth interviews with CWPPs, Zell (2006) found job satisfaction emerged from the rewarding aspect of helping others and the commitment to protecting children. However, the negative themes emerging were insufficient resources to service their clients adequately and that their work environment lacked technical, administrative, and human resources. These negative themes highlighted concerns of burnout, low morale, and, most worryingly, loss of focus on the children's wellbeing which was their key objective. Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, and Dews (2007) conducted a national qualitative study of 369 CWPPs in 58 focus groups. Personal factors contributing to staff turnover included limited personal and professional interest, intrusion into their personal life, fear of legal liability and a lack of skills. Organisational factors included large caseloads, a culture of fear, uncompetitive salaries, feeling undervalued and a high volume of administration. In contrast, personal factors contributing to staff retention included adequate knowledge, skills and a realistic outlook about the work. Organisational factors included job benefits, flexible working hours, a challenging meaningful job and quality supervision.

In a review of previous studies, Stalker, Mandell, Frensch, Harvey and Wright (2007) suggested that CWPPs have a unique configuration by scoring high in terms of overall job satisfaction as well as in emotional exhaustion, a dimension of burnout, while usually a negative relationship is found between job satisfaction and burnout. Therefore, the role of CWPPs is very demanding, highly emotional, and, yet, can be very rewarding. At the same time, such unique aspects, mandate that research should be performed by focusing on the particularities of the work context of CWPPs. Furthermore, due to the changing cultural and organisational environment in which CWPPs exert their activity, their experiences and the factors that influence their work, have to be considered on a country by country basis.

From this perspective, the research on CWPPs experiences is limited for the Republic of Ireland. Yet, the few studies that have been published have produced insightful perspectives in considering the context of CWPP work. Notably, Burns (2011) interviewed 43 Social Workers from child protection and welfare on their perceived career preference and pathways, and found that the child protection and family support domain is perceived as a stepping stone for mostly new graduates, a place where they are supposed to prove themselves and acquire fundamental social work skills. Another study from Burns and Christie (2013) has followed up, highlighting the importance of distinguishing between turnover and mobility. By analysing secondary data gathered from the HSE on five CWPP teams, Burns and Christie (2013) showed that this aspect not previously considered in the literature, has implications for workforce planning strategies.

With the backdrop of the extensive research along this work engagement and burnout continuum, the noticeable paucity of studies on CWPPs in Ireland, along with the unique configuration of CWPPs work experiences indicating both high satisfaction and burnout (Stalker et al., 2007), there is need to extend the research within this area.

Therefore, the purpose of the current study is to investigate Child Welfare and Protection Professionals (CWPP) experiences working with adolescents at risk via in-depth interviews, to identify themes that can provide a framework for future studies that wish to empirically evaluate the factors that influence burnout and engagement in Ireland. This choice is justified as qualitative methods are recommended for initial studies, as well as the fact that there is congruence in the literature between qualitative and quantitative results, where mixed methods were employed (Mor Barak et al., 2006; Zell, 2006).

Methodology

This research employed the qualitative approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) informed by the constructivist paradigm of hermeneutics and idiography. The fundamental basis of the constructivist paradigm indicates that interpretivism was about contextualised meaning, and that reality was socially constructed (Guba and Lincoln, 1994). By applying the hermeneutics theory of interpretation, the researcher engaged in a process of self-reflection where biases and assumptions were not bracketed or set aside. On the contrary, these were embedded as essential to the process of making sense of the data collected (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Given the centrality of meaning in IPA and the aim of this research to extract the significance and personal experience of work for CWPPs, IPA was deemed an appropriate qualitative paradigm to use in this research context.

Sampling and Recruitment

The research utilised purposive sampling allowing for selection of participants based on their particular knowledge of a phenomenon (Streubert and Carpenter, 1995). The researcher identified an organisation that works directly with high-risk adolescents in the community providing services that are preventative in design, ranging from diversion through to intensive community based high-support programmes. The inclusion criteria required participants to be CWPPs working directly with high-risk adolescents because they have experiential expertise in this area and could provide rich, detailed data. Appropriate ethical approval was obtained and the risk to participants was deemed minimal. Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff who chose to participate. Qualitative research is guided by the principle of data saturation therefore there was no pre-determined number decided upon for the sample. Each participant was contacted by phone and a convenient location and time was arranged for the interview, which started with the participant providing informed consent. Confidentiality and anonymity via the use of pseudonyms was guaranteed and maintained for participants.

Data Collection

IPA proposes using in-depth semi-structured interviews as the best means of accessing participant's rich and detailed account of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009). A short

interview schedule was used as a guide to help phrasing difficult or sensitive questions. The majority of interviews lasted between 50 – 65 minutes. With participant consent, each interview was recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed with the aim of interpreting the meaning of the content. Although more participants were available, it was felt data saturation was reached at the 12th interview. The researcher knew that saturation had been reached when each additional interviewee provided no further data to what was already learned (Rodwell, 1998; Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

Data Analysis

The researcher engaged with the transcripts, moving from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Data was analysed during the listening and transcribing of the recorded interviews. The researcher began by looking in detail at the transcript of one interview before moving on to examine the others. This followed the idiographic approach to analysis, beginning with particular examples and slowly working towards more general categories (Smith et al., 2009). The transcript was read a number of times ensuring that the participant became the focus of analysis, using the left margin to make exploratory comments on what appeared interesting or significant. The right margin was then used to document emerging theme headings in order to obtain the essential quality and to manage the data. The trail back to what the participant actually said and the researcher's initial thoughts were clearly identifiable. The entire transcript was treated as data, and there were no omissions or particular sections highlighted above any others (Chapman and Smith, 2002). The researcher did not feel the need to check any clarification with the participants as the transcripts were lengthy and detailed.

The emergent themes were listed and the researcher searched for connections between them using the following forms of identifying patterns: abstraction, subsumption, polarisation, contextualisation, numeration and function, where appropriate (Smith et al., 2009). Themes were then grouped into broader super-ordinate themes. During that process, prioritising and reduction was applied and certain themes were dropped if they did not offer new information (Chapman and Smith, 2002). This analysis was conducted for every transcript in turn and a final table of super-ordinate themes was assembled. Finally, the themes were written into a narrative account of the meanings inherent in the participants' experience (Chapman and Smith., 2002). In addition to the manual analysis of data, Qvalyzer (2011), version 1.2.1, 64bit, for Windows, was utilised to perform the qualitative analysis of the sample. It enabled hierarchical coding of the emerging and super ordinate themes and provided the related quotes as evidence from the transcripts.

Results

The aim of this study was to explore how CWPPs experience working with high risk children in the Irish child protection and welfare context. Table 1 displays demographic and descriptive characteristics of the 12 CWPP participants. Consistent with the literature in general, participants had both positive and negative experiences and identified a range of factors impacting their work.

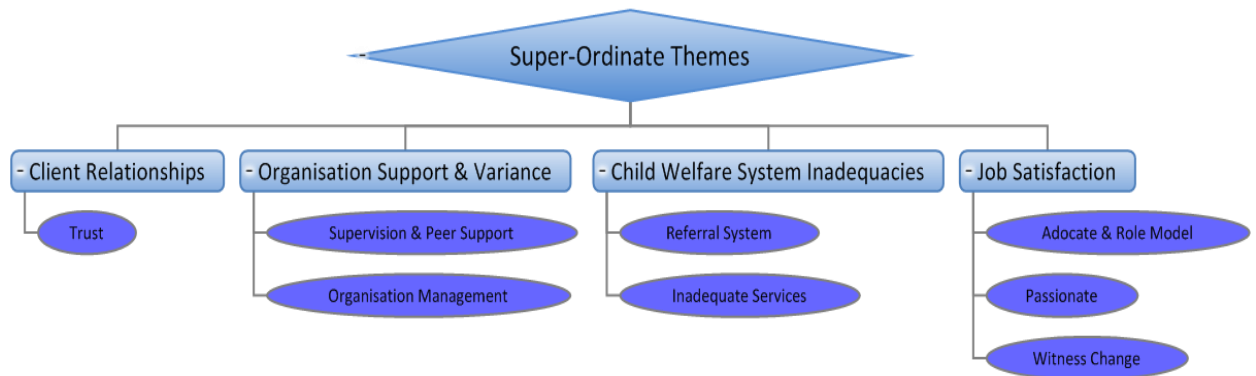
Table 1: Percentages of Main Demographic Variables
(n=12)

Variable	Category	%
Age	20-29 years old	41.67
	30-39 years old	33.33
	40-49 years old	25
Gender (female)		58.33
Role	1-to-1 work	66.67
	Group work	33.33
Education	Degree	66.67
	Other qualification	33.33
Years post qualification	< 2	25
	2-5	0
	6-10	33.33
	11-20	41.67
Years in organisation	< 2	25
	2-5	41.67
	6-7	0
	8-10	33.33

Overview of Themes

Based on the qualitative analysis of the data, many emerging themes developed which led to four overarching super-ordinate themes. The four super-ordinate themes and the sub-themes that were generated to support them (Figure 1) will be detailed below, followed by illustrative quotes for each theme.

Figure 1: Summary of Themes and Sub-themes



Theme One – Trust in the Client Relationships

Throughout the interviews, expressing the necessity for trust was palpable. Trust was central to the relationships with their clients, built through consistent developing and maintenance of a strong relationship.

P10: Absolutely, it's all about relationships...if you've built a relationship with them you can say anything to them.

It was important for CWPPs to demonstrate to their clients their genuine want to build a solid trusting relationship with them. This required considerable effort and patience which the CWPPs felt was a necessary investment. Being open and honest were two key ways to achieve this trust. It was important not to have barriers to particular conversations or to withhold information unless in circumstances where the clients would not benefit from having this information. Additionally, an ability to attune to their clients and engage with their interests and concerns was important in building this trust.

P12: I think you give them enough space to be open enough. What we've called it here is the 10-minute rant, where they get into the car and you know for the first 10 minutes they will shout, they will scream, and they will tell you everything that has gone on ... and then you talk them through it.

Participants appreciated that their clients were taking a significant step in trusting an adult. Regularly, clients' past experiences with adults had been negative, and as such, they were wary about trusting new adults that came into their lives. Only when the trust had been established, could the CWPP sense that their clients would turn to them if they needed help. From there, they could concentrate on the focus of work agreed upon to address their needs without too much resistance.

P4: When a child actually rings you when they are in crisis, then you know that you're the person that they can trust. You're the person that they know can actually help them and that they actually recognise that. I got a text from a kid at 8 o'clock in the morning going "I want to be taken into care. Can you contact my Social Worker?"

However, developing this trust was difficult as their clients had a mistrust of the social services generally inherited from their families, their environment and from their own life experiences.

P6: Obviously the young people we work with wouldn't easily trust adults or services because of past experiences and maybe they have been let down in the past on a regular basis.

Families involved with social services tended to have a negative relationship with these professionals because there was a sense of intrusion into their lives. Therefore, the CWPP tried to be seen as separate from these "mistrusted professionals".

P1: I find the families trust us a little bit more because we are not Social Workers.

Immense effort goes into creating a relationship of trust. Once the trust is established, every effort is made to maintain that trust. However, the CWPP were keenly aware that it could be lost very quickly, and, once lost, was very difficult to regain. The trust was constantly susceptible to breaking down at the smallest indication that clients felt let down. This was a constant source of stress for the CWPP because sadly, they knew sometimes the trust could not be regained and the clients would disengage from the service completely.

P7: It can be difficult at those times to regain the trust even though you might have felt you have done everything in your power to keep it.

In summary, creating and maintaining a relationship of trust with clients was a fundamental and central part of doing the job effectively. However, this was a difficult task to achieve and was further hindered by barriers arising from their clients' environments and past experiences.

Theme Two – Organisation Support and Variance

CWPP views on organisation support highlight the value and importance they place on supervision and their relationships with peers, while views on organisation management appear at variance with CWPPs in terms of their work demands.

Overall, supervision was recognised as a valuable support by the majority of participants. CWPPs were aware that, as frontline professionals, they were dealing with trauma daily, and needed to have access to professional support that could help them process their experiences.

P8: And, I brought it all home with me and I cried my eyes out at home, and went back in the next day, sat down with my supervisor and talked about it, and it was fine.

However, formal supervision could also be a hindrance and unproductive due to the rarity of the sessions (once a month) or due to the inadequacy of the supervisor. Interestingly, participants stated that more frequent informal supervision was very productive for them and they found significant value in that as a support. When CWPPs were able to access their supervisor in an informal setting in the office it seemed to reduce the exposure for criticism and they were more forthcoming with their difficulties. It was a timely and readily accessible support.

P10: The informal is very good, our manager is very open and very chatty, and we'd speak to her every day.

In addition, the importance participants placed on peer relationships was significant. These were seen as very supportive and trusting relationships. It was valuable because they were all doing similar work, so were reciprocally attuned to their needs and empathised with each other.

P10: If you're in the office, we'd be talking about our cases and we'd all know everything, and that's really important because otherwise you can just go into cuckoo land, you become very insular in your little box. We've got a buddy system put in place, too, so you're put together with one of your colleagues.

In terms of organisation management, CWPPs felt unsupported by management when dealing with their work demands as some of the organisational priorities were at variance with theirs. Specifically, they highlighted the volume of paperwork, achieving targets and a concern that the needs of their clients were not being adequately met. There was an overall consensus that the paperwork and documentation was an important element when working in the child welfare system. However, frustration stems from the sheer volume required.

P11: The paperwork is a huge challenge. I think everybody is going to say that. I appreciate the fact that it has to be done, but it's not all necessary. It's just the litigious nature of society that we have become.

In addition, the perception that paperwork was used as a performance measure of their work rather than the direct time spent with their clients was de-motivating. CWPPs felt that the paperwork was not capturing a true reflection of the work. Participants spoke about how the organisation was being run as a business model where the focus was on achieving targets, rather than prioritising its' clients.

P5: Having to hit our targets, or we're hitting our targets, but fit the work we are doing into a box, and it's not accurately capturing what we are doing.

They felt that management should serve as their buffer, advocating with upper management and the system as a whole. Instead, they felt their concerns were not being listened to or addressed.

P4: When are we going to turn around to the HSE and say we can't do this; this is not actually physically possible. You feel in a way that the organisation has sold out on you as a staff because they're not advocating for you, they're just advocating to keep the business.

In summary, formal supervision was deemed to be less valuable than informal supervision and peer support. Additionally, the administrative and budgetary demands were a source of stress and CWPPs felt that the needs of the clients were not being adequately met.

Theme Three – Child Welfare System Inadequacies

CWPPs expressed an overall lack of trust in the child welfare system to support them, their organisation or to adequately address the needs of their clients. Ultimately, they felt the system was letting their clients down. The two sub-themes here focused on concerns with the referral system and the lack of services available for clients. All participants mentioned the inadequacies within the child welfare system as significant stressors. Inappropriate Health Service Executive (HSE) referrals concerned the CWPPs. Some referrals received impacted negatively on the CWPP ability to do their work effectively. These inappropriate referrals limited the relationship and trust that CWPPs were able to develop with their clients and consequently limited the work they could do. The frustration experienced from receiving inappropriate referrals was echoed by several participants.

P5: Take the referral forms with a pinch of salt, just go out and meet the child.

Of notable concern were referrals of adolescents with particular behavioural and mental health disorders that CWPPs did not have the relevant expertise to deal with. There seemed to be a growing number of these referrals over the last year, adding to their frustration and concern.

P10: There is a big gap in the service for young people that aren't special needs and not learning disability like autistic or ADHD. The young person that doesn't fit into a box! They're stuck in the middle. We get a lot of those referrals. I had a schizophrenic young person, that again we probably weren't really the right service for them.

This left the CWPP feeling vulnerable as they knew they were not adequately equipped to deal with some of these behavioural and mental health disorders. They felt professionally exposed and unable to address the needs of their clients, which was very disappointing for them. The participants stated that no-one benefited from inappropriate referrals, which also resulted in cost inefficiencies for the system as a whole.

Lack of services available for clients was the second sub-theme. CWPPs stated it hindered their work and added to their disillusionment with the system. Part of their role was to link their clients with appropriate community services that provide supports to successfully reintegrate them into their community. When these services were not available, transition into the community was delayed and their clients returned to their community without adequate supports in place to manage successfully. The lack of services reinforced their views that the system had a lack of commitment in providing adequate support for its clients. Participants

identified an almost chronic lack of services for adolescents in need, with long waiting lists or simply non-existent services.

PI: I think the hardest thing is you work and work, and there are just no services. You just get so sad. I feel the system just fails the child.

In summary, the lack of trust in the child welfare system, inappropriate referrals and inadequate services available for clients were sources of frustration and stress for CWPPs, making their work more difficult and less productive.

Theme Four – Job Satisfaction

The fourth super-ordinate theme that emerged was CWPP enthusiasm and passion for the work, indicating high job satisfaction. Given the volume of negative comments about the system they operated within, the researcher wondered what motivated the participants to continue with this work. It was found that most of the participants had been with the organisation over three years and no one indicated an intention to leave. Three positive sub-themes emerged in relation to job satisfaction. First, participants expressed how they perceived their role and that they were clearly committed to it. Second, without exception, all participants spoke passionately about their love of working with adolescents, a key element of the work, and derived enormous satisfaction from it. Third, the privilege of witnessing change in their clients and their clients' lives was acknowledged.

CWPPs strongly perceived themselves as advocates for the adolescents in navigating the system and finding new ways of being. Their clients were vulnerable people and without this advocacy support they would not have the knowledge and resources to fight for their rights on their own and there was no-one else who would step up.

PII: We are trying to help the child. We are doing this type of work to make sure they're given the rights they were born with.

CWPPs also saw themselves as positive adult role models in their client's lives as this was often lacking in the client's own environment. CWPPs wanted their clients to experience a genuinely positive relationship with an adult. The impact of consistently showing their clients a different way of being and opening up positive life options for them was so valuable for building resilience.

PI: Mainly if I was to put it into one sentence, it's the positive adult in their life 'cause often it's nonexistent, it really is, and it's awful.

When discussing their work, participants were alive with passionate emotion. The sense that this was far more than a job, more like a vocation, was voiced by many of the participants. They genuinely loved the work they did, and, more importantly, they loved working with the adolescents.

PI: I always wanted to work with children. I love working with the young people. I love taking them out.

P8: For a job like this first of all, I don't think it's a job it's more of a vocation. There is something that actually makes you want to do this.

Participants unanimously declared the great sense of achievement they felt when they witnessed positive change in their clients. Without exception, they spoke about the ways in which they were moved and overjoyed by witnessing a change occur in their clients and overcoming adverse environments and events. This was rewarding for the participants and gave them hope that their clients would have a better life. Noticeable throughout the transcripts were references to participants being humbled, privileged and in awe in response to such change. Many participants referred to stories of clients overcoming barriers.

P11: Sometimes we've had young people on the programme a long time and it is outstanding to see the difference in where they were and they will bring that up themselves. "Do you remember the first day I met you and I did such and such" and, it's like now "Look at me!" That's probably the most rewarding.

The CWPPs were resigned to the fact that the process of change for these vulnerable clients was slow and difficult. The change could also be very small, even minute. To people outside the system, it may have appeared that there had been no change and that the service had failed to deliver. However, the CWPPs knew what a struggle it was for these young people and that something that appeared to be a small change to others was a significant change for them.

P1: Yeah, it doesn't have to be anything huge. You're not getting them ready to be president or anything. You just want them to be just a little bit more settled.

In summary, these three sub-themes highlighted CWPPs' reasons contributing to their high job satisfaction and their intention to continue.

Discussion

This study explored the experiences of CWPPs working with high risk adolescents in the Republic of Ireland. Both positive (sources of job satisfaction) and negative (sources of stress) factors resulted from the identified themes, most of which were expected based on the existing literature (Mor Barak et al., 2006; Strand and Dore, 2009), along with some new themes.

Trust was not a significant consideration in the literature review. However, it was prominent in the findings. For CWPPs, building and maintaining a relationship of trust with their clients was paramount enabling them to be effective in their work. Schmied and Walsh (2010, p.168) concur stating the relationship was central to the work, "*a process of relationship building and collaboration or walking it together.*" Similarly, Freake, Barley, and Kent (2007) found that one of the most important themes for adolescents in relation to helping professionals was that they could trust them. The relationships were very susceptible to breaking down when a sense of trust was broken. When it did break down, the participants expressed that it was unlikely the relationship would sufficiently recover. However, they did not elaborate on how they would try to restore the trust in these situations. There was an unspoken sense that you only got one chance at establishing the trusting relationship, thus adding more stress.

The aspect of trust links to other themes whereby poor organisational practices and system inadequacies may negatively impact the relationship between CWPPs and clients, diminishing the hard-earned trust and ultimately affecting CWPPs ability to do their job and reducing job satisfaction.

Cheon et al. (2009) found the working alliance between supervisors and supervisees was a strong predictor of satisfaction with the organisation. Andersson (1996) found trust and meaning were essential components, similar to the relationships that CWPPs hope to build with their clients, of effective supervision. In contrast, this relationship was at times a source of stress for CWPPs. Participants' dissatisfaction with formal supervision was mainly due to the relationships with their supervisors, who were also their line managers, thus creating role conflict. To avoid this conflict, Webb (1997) stated organisations were moving to contract external clinical supervision services for their staff. However, many child welfare organisations in Ireland do not provide this external service perhaps due to budgetary constraints. One solution recommended by the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (2005), was for organisations to partner up to share the resources of clinical supervision. Given the lack of enthusiasm expressed for formal supervision and to deal with the intensity and demands of the job, CWPPs utilised informal supervision support on a regular basis. Additionally, strong peer relationship provided another source of support. The fact that they had been working together for some time may have been a contributing factor.

Every participant stated volume of paperwork as a source of stress. In line with Freeny and Tiernan (2009), the imbalance of time spent on paperwork was taking time from direct client work, which CWPPs felt was their priority. Consequently, without adequate time, building the relationship was more difficult. Greater communication with staff could be beneficial here. Conducting annual managerial reviews of the paperwork and providing explanations why documentation is important for child welfare, organisational and legislative reasons to CWPPs, could be useful. Additionally, these reviews could identify documentation no longer applicable which could be eliminated.

There was concern that services being delivered were based on quantity not quality, contrasting with what CWPPs were aiming to achieve. Maslach and Leiter's (1997) Burnout Model suggests that incongruent values between the organisation and staff were a key source of burnout. The human aspect of the work appeared to get lost within the organisation management, which clearly conflicted with CWPPs role in working with high risk adolescents.

Clients were being referred to the organisation from Social Workers, but the behavioural and mental health issues of those clients impacted on the ability of the CWPPS to perform adequately. In a review, Edwards et al. (2000) found that having to deal with inappropriate referrals was one of the top three work stressors. Lack of services and inappropriate referrals may be explained by increased budget cuts and austerity measures. Granted, the poor economic climate is unlikely to turn around in the near future, however, putting organisational strategies in place to help deal with these issues could be beneficial. Additionally, considering high turnover and employee training costs, safeguarding retention by investing in services and additional practices may have more economic sense than reducing expenses.

People may wonder why someone would enter this profession given the trauma and frustrations encountered daily. In response, the passion for the work vocalised by participants

was overwhelming, matched by their expressive body language and smiles. Huxley et al. (2005) found high job engagement where staff enjoyed the relationships with their clients. Participants stressed that this was no ordinary kind of work that they found themselves simply falling into. It was practically a vocation where you needed to be deeply committed to your work. Although not specifically stated by the participants, their main focus was their clients. CWPPs went over and above their remit to help them. Mor Barak et al (2006) found that in such emotionally demanding roles, staff had at times a greater sense of responsibility and commitment to their clients, rather than the organisation.

The current research has identified thematic factors relating to the experience of CWPPs which are in line with previous research on the subject of satisfaction and stress in the workplace of CWPPs, which includes the importance of supervision, peer support, and management, as well as the importance of witnessing change and having direct impact in the life of clients.

Among the newly identified aspects of CWPP work which are likely to be specific for the Irish context, there are the inadequacies of the referral and services system, as well as the importance of trust in the client relationships. Both common and new factors can be used to inform policy and decision making at the local level, as well as further extend theoretical models at the international level. More importantly, the results of the current research should be extended through quantitative and mixed methods designs which employ a more varied sample of Irish CWPPs and such studies could use the thematic framework provided herein.

None of the interviewees expressed intention to leave and this might have skewed the results due to increased homogeneity between participants' opinions. The staff in the participating organisation declared that they are treated well and benefit from some levels of autonomy, as well as mentioning it would be difficult for them to find different jobs. As such, future studies might want to focus more on CWPPs with a higher intention to leave in order to identify further experiences which may highlight what impacts job engagement and burnout to such an extent that they determine turnover in the Irish social work context.

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