The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 32
Issue 2 *June*

Article 9

2005

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FOR THE CHILDREN: ACCOUNTING FOR CAREERS IN CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

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This paper analyzes autobiographical essays from women who work as social service workers in child-protection agencies. Working long hours in relatively low-paying jobs, these women have limited prestige and autonomy and increasingly, come under close scrutiny and public criticism. They are clearly exploited in terms of the emotional and "mothering" labor they are expected to perform and are held personally accountable for daily decisions that could have dire consequences for the children they serve to protect. This paper is an investigation of how their narratives explain and justify their willingness to continue working in these situations and how their professional identities are defined and defended.

Keywords: *social service, women, labor, children, narrative*

DCF in the News

"A year ago this month, Erica Jones was a 27-year-old woman with a bachelor's degree in political science. She had just enrolled in a two-month training program on how to become a state child welfare counselor. By the time she was fired by the state Department of Children and Families last week, Jones was handling 50 child abuse investigations, even though she had been on the job less than a year and lacked full certification as an investigator."

<div align="right">St. Petersburg Times, July 17, 2002</div>

"Two workers with the Department of Children & Families resigned Wednesday, the same day that 13-month-old Christopher Cunningham died. It was the third child homicide this year in

Brevard County, each preceded by apparent mistakes by child-welfare workers. "It seems evident that high-quality casework has not been occurring in Brevard County," DCF spokeswoman Yvonne Vassel said."

Orlando Sentinel, March 15, 2003

"Embattled Department of Children & Families Secretary Kathleen Kearney resigned Tuesday; four months after the case of a missing 5-year-old girl put the department under scrutiny."

South Florida Sun Sentinel, August 13, 2002

"The family says DCF is trying to cover it tracks because someone dropped the ball."We are not satisfied with DCF's conclusion that it properly handled the Behazadpour matter. I question their policies and practices handling sexual abuse cases of children, particularly that of Nikki's case," says a family spokesperson."

WFTV.com, January 26, 2004

DCF Workers Beleaguered and Belittled

These are the stories that appear almost weekly in local newspapers. Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF) workers are regularly vilified, not only in newspapers but on radio and television stations as well. The resignation of DCF head, Kathleen Kearney, even made the national news (NBC Nightly News, August 13, 2002). Given the demanding working conditions and bad press, it is no wonder that there is a high turnover rate among DCF's child protection workers. More surprising, however, is that some stay—and in fact, the distribution is bi-modal. There are many who come and leave quickly but there is also a surprising number who have worked for DCF for many years.

Introduction

It is this latter group that concerns us here, the people who continue to work in an environment where overwork (50–60 hours a week) and under-pay ($31K average) is typical, the responsibility is overwhelming (caseloads of 50 or more), and there is little appreciation—either among the clients they attend or the public they serve. Why do they do it? How do they explain their

willingness to continue participating in a system that all agree is dysfunctional? What accounts do they offer for the apparent contradiction between their own best interest and their willingness to serve? In this paper, I present child protective worker's stories, in their own words, their accounts of how they got where they are and why they stay. In addition, I place these accounts within a larger theoretical context that helps to explain their tolerance of the contradictions inherent to their situations by way of a set of counterstories constructed to prevent or repair damage to their individual identities. Because child protection workers are mostly women (Gold, 1998) and, as we might expect, there are particular reasons for that, my focus in this paper will be only women's accounts of these issues.

Life History Narratives and Feminist Inquiry

Although the use of "narrative" means different things to different people, narrative research has become common across disciplines in feminist research. The "life history narrative" has been established as an important means of gaining insight into the life-experiences of individuals—both the actual events and the dynamic of interpreting those events. Among the many benefits of studying life history narratives, are that: " . . . they illustrate the relationship between the individual and society; they demonstrate how women negotiate their 'exceptional' gender status in their daily lives; and they make possible the examination of the links between the evolution of subjectivity and the development of female identity" (Bloom and Munro, 1995, p. 100).

An important focus of this recent interest in life history narratives is the issue of "nonunitary subjectivity" (Bloom and Munro, 1995). The idea of "nonunitary" subjectivity challenges the humanist notion that individuals have a "core" or "essence" that defines who they are. According to Moi, the concept of the "seamlessly unified self" as defined by the humanist tradition is based on a phallic logic that sees the self as "gloriously autonomous" and unambiguous (1985, p. 8). This approach denies the possibility of changes in subjectivity over time, implies that an individual's "core" is a constant that becomes fixed in one's formative years and operates as a filter for subsequent experience. Postmodern feminism takes the position that subjectivity is always active,

always being produced and identifies the humanist perspective as flawed by its failure to recognize the dynamic nature of the self. Some describe the self as more verb than noun, more process than entity (Smith, 1993). Such a view suggests that the self is precarious and " . . . always open to new ways to understand the world and the self, to act in and upon the world, and to think about experiences (Bloom and Munro, 1995, p. 101).

Nonunitary subjectivity is pertinent to an analysis of the narratives of child protective service workers because these positions place individuals in paradoxical roles. Their primary responsibility is the safety of children. But this often means making decisions that, in the immediate situation, cause emotional distress and may cause long term harm to a child's mental health. When a child must be pulled from a parent's arms and placed with strangers, it causes mental anguish among all concerned, not the least of which is the child protection officer who is responsible for the action. Individuals enter these jobs because they want to "help" but are then faced with day-to-day decisions that require re-definition of their role and purpose. They see things they've never imagined and must deal with one impossible situation after another. This affects their outlook on both their jobs and their personal identity—and this would be true even without the negative press and stereotyping associated with their positions. Adding these aspects to the mix requires a complex consideration of who they are and how to explain what they do and why they do it.

One could argue that nonunitary subjectivity is a requirement of the job. Child protection workers are required to act as nurturing agents of the state, to apply a set of bureaucratic principles to assure that children are parented in appropriate ways. In a sense, they are acting as surrogate mothers who tend the public young by the authority of legal statute. These women are asked to intervene in the most intimate realm of society, to insert the public arm into the private sphere of family life. Their personal calling to "help" becomes an unwanted interference into personal and embarrassing matters.

Female socialization in this culture is focused on nurturing. It creates an orientation for "pleasing" and "serving" others, not for abrupt and confrontational entrances into another family's life. On one hand, child protection workers can justify their actions as

necessary for "saving" children—sometimes quite literally. The rewards of intervening successfully to improve a child's life are obvious. On the other hand, however, the determination that her actions have been "successful" is only made in retrospect, if recognized at all, while the negative components of her intervention are unavoidable and immediate.

No one is happy to see a child protective worker appear at the door. It means that there is a serious problem—or suspicion of one. It means someone is accused of something unpleasant, perhaps unspeakable. Adults' responses can be expected to range from anger and indignation to shame and humiliation. By definition of the situation, there is no way for her to be pleasantly welcomed into a home to investigate child abuse. She must, instead, enter as an unwelcome outsider who is there to question the judgment and actions of family members, all the while making it clear that her authority as an agent of the state surpasses the existing familial hierarchy. Her very presence undermines extant and "normal" family processes. The implication is that this particular family's children are in need of protection—from the very individuals who are charged with their wellbeing.

Someone To Do The "Dirty Work"

This role—examining a family's most private habits—is not unlike others classified as "dirty work" in the society. The sociologist, Everett Hughes defined "dirty work" as something that is necessary for the survival of society but unpleasant, even degrading (1958). "Dirty work" may involve contact with *things* that are considered "dirty" or unclean (Mary Douglas, in her 1984 classic *Purity and Danger*, explains how cultures construct "clean" versus "dirty" things) or it may involve contact with *behavior* that is considered "impure" or objectionable. In a study of garage workers, Dant and Bowles (2003) describe "dirty work" that deals with objects considered "dirty" (in a literal sense) as well as work that no one else wants to do. It is this latter variety that concerns us here. Hughes describes what he refers to as a "moral division of labor" which "always separates those willing to undertake society's dirty work from the 'good people' who would rather not get their hands dirty—it is this capacity of the interaction [sic.] between in-groups and out-groups that enabled members

of the S.S. to undertake the 'dirty work' of the Nazi regime (Dant and Bowles, 2003).

Dressel refers to "service work" as dirty work, one reason being that individuals who provide social service are "located at the intersection of potentially conflicting subsystems of the welfare enterprise" (1984, p. 6). She goes on to explain the difficult task of juggling the various demands of policy makers, agency administrators, service recipients, and the general public. It is the street-level worker who must do the "dirty work" of making policy into action. It is also the service workers who receive most of the criticism associated with the policies they are tasked with applying.

In addition to delivering policies from above, service workers also buffer the rest of society from the clients they serve. Child protective workers, along with other social service workers, are thus "caught in the middle" (Dressel, 1984, p. 40) between those at the top of the system who make and deliver policy and those at the bottom of the system who are regulated by in it some of the most intimate areas of their lives.

Child protection workers are, of course, not alone in this regard. Other examples of "dirty work" include bail bondsmen (Davis, 1984), nursing home attendants (Stannard, 1973, Allen, 2004), and law enforcement officers (Heinler, Kleiman, and Stenross, 1990).

Not surprisingly, an outcome of fulfilling a position identified as "dirty work" has negative consequences for the individuals performing those roles. Even if individuals experience a form of nonunitary subjectivity that allows them to define their actions as "right," there may be negative consequences for their personal identities. Changes in personal identity might produce self-imposed social isolation. The bail bondsmen described by Davis (1984) are one example. In that case, the individuals saw themselves as unjustly portrayed as corrupt by the more "respectable" members of society. Their response was to socially isolate themselves as a kind of insulation against the negative attitudes they perceived from the larger society.

Personal identity is a " . . . complicated interaction of one's own sense of self and others' understanding of who one is" that acts as a " . . . lever that expands or contracts one's ability to

exercise moral agency" (Nelson, 2001, p. xi). How others define us establishes what we are permitted to do—if we are identified as defective in some way we are not fully free to act. Operating within environments that restrict our actions leads to changes in our own identification of ourselves. We may begin to mistrust our abilities, suspect our own motives or exempt ourselves from full responsibility for our behaviors (Nelson, 2001). Such self-doubt eventually restricts our moral agency and inhibits our willingness to act.

Nelson discusses the problems that occur when members of particular social groups are "compelled by the forces circulating in an abusive power system to bear the morally degrading identities required by that system." This causes trouble in two realms: the limitations placed on individuals by the larger society and the harm done as a result of individuals' reduced self-worth. From the perspective of society, certain expectations develop regarding the behavior of individuals who share these identities—prescriptions for "what they can know, to whom they are answerable, and what others may demand of them." This, Nelson refers to as "deprivation of opportunity." From the perspective of the individuals, they assume *damaged* identities as a result of an imbalance of power. The more powerful group defines members of the less powerful group as "unworthy of full moral respect, and in consequence unjustly prevents her (them) from occupying valuable social roles or entering into desirable relationships that are themselves constitutive of identity." The damage is done when "she endorses, as part of her self-concept, a dominant group's dismissive or exploitative understanding of her group, and loses or fails to acquire a sense of herself as worthy of full moral respect. We call this *infiltrated consciousness*." Either of these types of trouble (coming directly from society or self-inflicted) "constricts the person's ability to exercise her moral agency" (Nelson, 2001, p. xii).

The personal identities of long-time DCF workers have been damaged in several ways. The constant negative attention of the media, a lack of respect from law enforcement officers and court officials, and the day-to-day resistance of clients take a toll on the psyches of these women. In the words of a 23-year DCF veteran:

" . . . family safety work is emotionally intense, leaving little left
over to invest in our own support systems and families."

Sally

This same woman, in talking about the adjustments necessary to
remain in the job, says:

"That first year is where the idealism is lost and the real work
begins."

Sally

Her description of this turning point—where "idealism is lost"—
provides insight. The high turnover at DCF is in no small part
related to the disillusionment of individuals who seek "helping"
roles only to confront the realization that their jobs are "dirty
work" that will require adaptations of their subjectivity and ad-
justments in their personal identities.

Stories and Counterstories

This is not to say that such adjustments are impossible. They
are made daily by workers in "dirty" jobs. Nelson argues, " . . . be-
cause identities are narratively constituted and narratively dam-
aged, they can be narratively repaired. The morally pernicious
stories that construct identity according to the requirements of
an abusive power system can be at least partially dislodged and
replaced by identity-constituting *counterstories* that portray group
members as fully developed moral agents" (Nelson, 2001, p. xii).

Counterstories are "purposive acts of moral definition" that
work in two ways. First, they uproot the negative stories that
constitute the subgroup members' identity from the perspective
of the dominant group. Ideally, this alters the level of disapproval
toward the subgroup and allows greater freedom to exercise
moral agency. Second, by redefining the situation in more pos-
itive terms, the counterstory reshapes self-reflection and allows
individuals to see themselves in a more favorable light. In this
case, she begins to reject others' degrading representations of her
and redefines her identity as more worthy (Nelson, 2001, p. xiii).

Counterstories are positioned against various master narra-
tives that exist in society. Master narratives are summaries of
socially shared understandings, often archetypal, with familiar
plots and characters. We use them both to make sense of our

social experiences (Nisbett and Ross, 1980) and to justify what we do (MacIntyre, 1984). Master narratives are not necessarily oppressive but those that reinforce power hierarchies in the larger society obviously are.

Women's (Usually Unpaid) Emotional Labor

The traditional role of women as caregivers is such a narrative. Although caregiving in itself is not an oppressive master narrative, it becomes oppressive with the expectation that *women*, regardless of their job title, will be caregivers. This has been described as the "female ethic of caring," a structurally determined attribute that women express in personal terms (Gold, 1998). The problem is not so much that women are defined as caregivers but that their labor is "degraded and devalued" (Kemp, 1994). Caregiving is defined as "domestic" labor and is usually unpaid. It is relegated to women, and is seen as "unproductive" within the larger patriarchal-capitalist society. Child caregiving is likewise seen as inferior in this superior/inferior power relationship. During the twentieth century the socialization and success of children became the exclusive domain of women (Anderson, 1988). Since child care within the family is unpaid and undervalued, its status transfers to childcare in environments outside of the home. This is evidenced in the average earnings for every occupation in which childcare is its primary responsibility.

The master narrative is that women are "natural" caregivers and caring for children is the most natural kind of care. Given the gender socialization of girls, it is no wonder that many women are drawn to child protective services. The recognition, once inside, that she has become one of society's "dirty" workers, helps to explain why they leave. In fact, Dressel (1984) defined this as the "service trap" in which one enters for altruistic reasons and becomes trapped in dirty work.

Research Setting and Methods

All study participants were (at the time of data collection) employed by the Florida Department of Children and Families (DCF). The autobiographical essays were collected over a six-month period between February and July of 2003. A total of 32 essays were collected; 20 of these were used in this paper.

The remaining essays were not considered because (1) they were written by men (2 essays, deemed an insufficient number for comparison) or (2) they did not answer a sufficient number of questions to allow comparison with the other essays.

All participants had had direct field experience (as child protection workers) but several of them were in supervisory positions and were no longer directly involved in the day-to-day "frontline" defense of children. Those women who had moved up the career ladder (into supervisory roles), while no longer responsible for meeting the demands of individual caseloads, were responsible for supervising a number of case workers with 50 or more cases each. Thus the cumulative experience of the sample represents thousands of child protection cases over a span of more than 20 years.

Study participants were asked to write "career autobiographies" based on a list of questions. Questions were given to provide focus in the narratives with particular interest in the effects of personal life history on career trajectory. Respondents were also asked to consider the effects of their race, class, or gender on their careers. The study was undertaken as a qualitative inquiry and, other than the focus provided by the list of questions, the analysis was handled inductively, i.e., themes were identified and refined from the essays themselves rather than identified in advance.

The 20 "guided" autobiographies used in this paper range in length (6 to 10 pages) as well as depth. Some are highly descriptive and insightful while others are more guarded and less personal. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of study participants.

Findings

For the Children

Some of the narratives describe childhood recognition of the desire to provide care as a social worker while others explain that they arrived in their position by accident or some odd course of events in their career path. Many include "for the children" in their list of reasons. What follow are typical explanations.

"When I was 10 years old I read a story about a New York City social worker. I thought being a social worker was surely the most wonderful and exciting job in the world (remember, I was only 10 years old). From that day forward, my only career aspiration was social work."

Barbara, 9 years service

"To be fulfilled and content in what I do . . . it is important that what I do is making a difference and is a contribution to society."

Bonnie, 17 years service

"I thoroughly enjoy working with children and families and I believed if I could save one child or family in my career then I would be considered successful in what I was doing and ultimately in making a difference in society."

Susan, 15 years service

"I [have] always believed I was working for the children and families I encountered, not the state."

Megan 9 years service

"I believe the main reason people stay is the chance to make a difference in a child's life, to have some positive impact. This is the reason I have stayed. As my position within DCF changed through promotions, the rewards have grown. I now find rewards in working with staff and supervisors in mentoring and teaching them my knowledge of the job."

Louise, 10 years service

"The most important characteristic in a career for me has always been feeling I was doing something worthwhile for people and society. It helped—I enjoy coming to work. I feel blessed for the life I have and want to help people; especially children improve their chances for a happy, productive life."

Marie, 24 years service

The Counterstory

The DCF counterstory has two components. The first addresses the issue of their jobs as "dirty work" as defined in the media and the second defines their role as essential for society. I will address each of these in turn.

As a group, DCF workers are extremely sensitive to the negative public perception of the agency. A clear component of their counterstory is that media coverage is biased toward the negative. There is a high level of agreement that the media are not likely to cover DCF successes—some of this is due to privacy issues and some because success is not as interesting (i.e., sensationalist) as tragedy. In their words:

> "The Department works very hard to keep children safe and does not get the recognition it deserves. All the media is concerned about is the negative, not the positive. You will never hear on the news the good things the Department has done. That would just be too boring to report."
>
> Lisa, 3 years service

> " . . . the public has a negative perception of what the Department does . . . the public is only informed of things which go wrong, not the good things that happen on a daily basis. Due to this, many employees feel that they are undervalued and often leave the Department due to scrutiny from the public and the media."
>
> Susan

> "I've learned over the years not to expect others from the outside to praise the department. Most often they have no idea what child protection employees have to do in their daily work. They do not understand the risk of going into crack neighborhoods and in homes of domestic violence, the difficulty of assessing child safety and the lack of successful service resources in the community."
>
> Kirsten, 9 years service

> "When I first arrived in Florida, I saw a bumper sticker that read 'HRS-Florida's Gestapo' [Health and Rehabilitative Services, HRS was the name of the agency for many years]. That was the perception at the time."
>
> Edna, 18 years service

The same woman, in another part of her story, also said:

> "All of us live with the specter of our name in the paper as a neglectful DCF worker who was responsible for a child getting injured or killed, even though we work an average of 110 hours every two weeks to try and prevent any tragedy. The Department

is damned if they do and damned if they don't, an easy target for the press and politicians."

Edna

Comments such as these, that acknowledge a negative public image, come closest to recognition of theirs as "dirty jobs." They describe threats of damage to their personal identities as theorized by Nelson (2001) and provide a counterstory with alternative explanations as Nelson predicted. They turn the criticism back onto the media themselves, claiming that media coverage of DCF is sensationalist and shallow.

The other essential component of the DCF counterstory identifies their role as essential to the future of society. In their stories, the DCF workers describe their willingness to withstand criticism and work long hours in a sometimes hostile environment by explaining their belief that they are contributing to the larger good. They see themselves as providing essential services—in spite of the difficulty of their jobs and the public's lack of appreciation. Here are three typical examples:

> "The Department as a whole plays a critical role in our society. Each community relies on the services it provides for children . . . By assisting with the welfare of the public and its children, the Department proceeds to shape the future of each generation. I feel honored to be a part of touching the lives of so many families."
>
> Marie, 24 years service

> " . . . working in social service makes me feel complete because I am making a difference in people' lives . . . I know I am helping children that are our future."
>
> Lisa

> "If it were not for people within the Department protecting children on a daily basis, there would be much more tragedy in the news. I feel proud to be a part of this agency and although the community may not see it, I know that I have made a difference in the life of a child. I would recommend this field of work to anyone who feels the desire to help others in need."
>
> Andrea, 10 years

These women present evidence of a powerful counterstory that operates to mend the damage done by the negative aspects of their

jobs. Their female socialization has prepared them to seek lives of service and, as Gold points out, this structurally determined fact is experienced as personal (1998). Their narratives illustrate how this group of women makes sense of their work lives by constructing a counterstory to replace the power they lose by doing "dirty work" in society. Their explanation is that they are actually saving the society from itself, in spite of the obstacles put before them.

Conclusion

Much has been written from the deconstructionists' perspective that calls into question the very idea of representing a life in the form of text. Derrida, for example, holds that there is "no clear window into the inner life of a person" (Denzin, 1989, p. 14, summarizing Derrida, 1972). Our only insights are ultimately filtered through linguistic signs and cultural codes. Philosophers like Sartre and Ricoeur assert that narratives are creations rather than accounts. Constructing meaning from the events of one's life is an ongoing activity; memories and explanations are never finished. We may identify a nonunitary subjectivity within which an individual's core (identity) lies and it is necessarily multi-faceted and dynamic. Personal narratives are always open to reinterpretation as situations and circumstances change.

The accounts analyzed here provide a snapshot of these women's explanations of how they mediate compassion and compromise in their work. While these observations may not be widely generalizable (due to the limitations of the study), there are important lessons here about negotiation of terrains in which a negative public image prevails. We have seen how positive self worth may be established within negative work environments. I have explained this within a larger theoretical context that focuses on the importance of counterstories to mend the damage that is built-into positions such as theirs. The counterstory provides an alternative explanation with which they may identify. They must have strength of conviction that their counterstory is true—and theirs is a powerful one. It helps them tolerate the contradictions inherent to their jobs and it provides a means to prevent or repair damage to their individual identities. The stories they tell portray

the lived experiences of real women who, in many ways represent the stereotypical "mothers" we (women) were socialized to be. But they also explain how individuals find the strength to maneuver the obstacles inherent to doing society's "dirty work" in a way that is sustainable in spite of the "broken" system they work to improve.

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