

The Effects of Manager Support on the Well-Being and Job Satisfaction of Child Welfare Employees

By Jennifer Rooney and Bruce Leslie

Introduction

There were two major considerations in the development of this study. Firstly, within the field of child welfare, there is a paucity of research identifying managerial support strategies that positively impact the well-being of staff. In the broader organizational research, many published studies have pointed to the critical role that managers play in motivating and retaining staff (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Thompson, Beauvais & Lyness, 1999), but without detailing the specific behaviours and actions of supportive supervisors.

Secondly, 'workload' control strategies have been overly focused on quantitative worker activity perspectives. Recruitment and retention issues identified in the 90's frequently led to workload and job demand assessments, with a particular focus on case and task weighting systems, an approach that was somewhat one-dimensional. Less consideration has been given to other methods of stress reduction such as the provision of supervisory support and other interacting vantage points. However, as noted by Regehr and colleagues (2000), the manageability of job demands involves more than the adjusting of caseload sizes and activities; it includes an assessment of the type of work and its impact on employees, and the availability of various forms of support.

The focus of the current study was to examine the effects of various expressions of manager support on the well-being and job-related attitudes of employees working for a child welfare agency¹. In addition to exploring and identifying more specific supportive and unsupportive behaviours of supervisors, the present study will also expand the understanding of support in a child welfare agency by taking a more holistic, organizational perspective, assessing the effects of supervisor support for staff in all areas of the agency – Management, Administrative and Direct Service. The study process was designed to support organizational well-being through

¹ The terms 'supervisor' and 'manager' will sometimes be interchanged. They are used to refer to the person an employee directly reports to.

obtaining detailed feedback from employees and applying survey results to educational training initiatives.

Method

The Catholic Children's Aid Society (CCAS) of Toronto was contacted by the lead author to collaborate on a staff survey of management support behaviours shown by supervisors and managers. This opportunity was viewed as a means to explore and expand the agency's understanding of issues identified in an earlier staff survey examining retention issues, which found the quality of supervision to be a key part of staff turnover intentions.

Once the study was approved through the agency research review process, a series of meetings was held at the agency in order to obtain broad support from the organization's management, other staff groups, and the Union. Additionally, these meetings facilitated a clarification of the survey process and content. Once finalized, the survey and procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Guelph's research ethics committee.

Surveys were sent to all employees at the CCAS connected to the internal e-mail system. Hard copies were also distributed to employees without e-mail access and to those who specifically requested a hard copy. A two-week period was initially provided to complete the survey, although this was later extended to two and a half weeks.

A number of scales were included in the survey that tapped employees' perceptions of various aspects of their work and supervisor. These included:

- Frequency of supportive and unsupportive behaviours displayed by supervisors
- Work demands
- Autonomy on the job
- Confidence in their ability to cope with various aspects of their job
- Confidence that their supervisor regards them positively
- Tension related to their work
- Indicators of stress and strain

- Satisfaction with their job
- Commitment to their supervisor; and
- Intentions to leave the organization.

Survey Respondents

The survey was completed by 252 employees, out of approximately 630 employees (yielding a response rate of about 40%). (NOTE: some staff were on leave or on vacation and did not have the opportunity to return the survey in the two and a half week time frame.)

The majority of the sample was female (83%) and the largest proportion was between the ages of 40 and 54 (42%). Close to two-thirds of the sample had female supervisors (66%) and had been working with their supervisor for over one year (60%).

The agency uses two broad frameworks for identifying staff. One categorizes staff into either the unionized bargaining unit, or administrative/management (both of which are non-unionized). The other classification framework divides all staff into either direct service or corporate functions (e.g. human resources, public relations, and finance).

For the survey, about one-quarter of the respondents were in the administrative category; about half were bargaining unit, and just over a quarter belonged to the management category. About three-quarters of the survey respondents worked in direct services and the remaining worked in corporate services. The majority of the sample had been working at the organization for four years or more (58%). The respondent characteristics mirrored closely those of the full agency staff profile. However, employees in the management group were most likely to return the survey (60% of management group completed the survey). The percentage of employees who returned the survey was lowest among those in the bargaining unit (33% completed the survey). Among the administrative group, 43% returned the survey.

Summary of Findings: Supportive Behaviours:

How much support do employees report receiving from their managers or supervisors?

Employees were asked to rate the frequency with which their supervisors displayed 26 different kinds of supportive behaviours that had been identified in an earlier interview study with employees at two other organizations (conducted by the lead researcher). Employees were asked to respond to the questions based on the person they directly report to. Each behaviour was rated on a 5-point scale from occurring "Never" to "Always". The behaviours assess the following six major dimensions of support.

- **Open Communication:** Behaviours that foster closer lines of communication between managers/supervisors and employees and that keep employees informed of organizational/departmental activities.
- **Encourages Decisional Discretion:** Behaviours aimed at enhancing autonomous work behaviours and fostering creative ideas.
- **Task Guidance and Assistance:** Behaviours intended to offer clarity surrounding job-related tasks and the use of managers/supervisors' expertise to assist employees to complete work-related tasks.
- **Genuine Concern:** Behaviours that involve the communication of empathy and concern for employees and understanding of their family obligations.
- **Recognition:** Behaviours that recognize employees' contributions and their value to the organization.
- **Professional Development:** Behaviours that assist employees to attain their career goals or to advance in the organization.

The most frequently reported kinds of supportive behaviors in the survey were:

- communicating in an open and honest manner
- granting time off work when needed
- answering questions in a timely manner
- allowing the employee to decide their work schedule
- smiling/appearing happy to see me
- providing clear instructions.

These items were reported to occur "often" or "always" by about 70% of the respondents.

Smaller proportions of respondents reported that their supervisors frequently recognized their efforts. For example, only one in two reported that their supervisor thanks them for the things they do "often" and "always". Similarly, about one in two reported that they are given positive feedback "often" or "always".

Frequent support for professional development was also reported by a smaller proportion of employees. However, because employees were not asked about their expectations for support or their desired level of support, it is not known how much support was needed in the first place. For example, employees may not need or expect their manager/supervisor to *always* "encourage work for professional development."

Were there any differences in the amount of supervisor support between employees in different occupational categories?

Based on frequency counts for each item, employees who belonged to the management occupational category reported receiving more support from their manager/supervisor compared to employees in a bargaining unit or administrative categories in many areas. A few noteworthy differences are highlighted below:

For the item *"My manager/supervisor keeps me informed about things going on at work"*

- 67% of the management group reported this occurred "Often" or "Always", compared to
- 43% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 40% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item, *"My manager/supervisor communicates with me in an open and direct manner"*

- 81% of the management group reported this occurred "Often" or "Always", compared to
- 65% of employees in the administrative group; and
- 70% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item, *"My manager/supervisor asks me how I am doing and means it"*

- 59% of the management group reported this occurred "Often" or "Always", compared to

- 47% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 53% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item *“My manager/ supervisor works with me on things using a collaborative style”*

- 57% of the management group reported this occurred “Often” or “Always”, compared to
- 47% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 55% of employees in the bargaining unit.

In contrast, for the item, *“My manager thanks me for the things I do”*

- 46% of the management group reported this occurred “Often” or “Always”, compared to
- 60% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 50% of employees in the bargaining unit.

Summary of Findings: Unsupportive behaviours

How often do employees report that their manager or supervisor does something unsupportive?

Employees were also asked to rate the frequency with which their managers/supervisors displayed 19 different kinds of unsupportive behaviours. These 19 behaviours were also generated in an earlier interview study at two different organizations. Each behaviour was rated on a 5-point scale from occurring “Never” to “Always”. The behaviours assess the following three major dimensions.

- **Belittling:** Behaviours that undermine employees’ confidence in their competencies or that undermine their efforts to achieve work goals.
- **Apathy:** Behaviours that convey a lack of interest in the employees’ work or disregard for the difficulties and demands they are facing.
- **Controlling:** Behaviours that limit employees’ decision-making capacity or discourage input and innovative ideas on the job.

Unsupportive behaviours were displayed much less frequently than supportive ones. Although the following items were the most frequently mentioned behaviours,

they were reported to occur “Often” or “Always” by only about 10% of the respondents:

- giving insufficient notice about meetings or deadlines
- making substantial revisions to employees’ work, and
- monitoring how long it took for employees to accomplish tasks.

There appeared to be very slight differences in the perception of unsupportive behaviours between employee groups. Employees who belonged to the management occupational category appeared to report less unsupportive behaviours from their supervisors. A few noteworthy differences are highlighted next:

For the item, *“Becomes over-involved in projects or tasks that are supposed to be my responsibility”*

- 3% of the management group reported this occurred “Often” or “Always”, compared to
- 10% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 3% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item, *“Gives me insufficient notice about meetings or deadlines”*

- 10% of the management group reported this occurred “Often” or “Always”, compared to
- 8% of employees in the administrative group; and
- 17% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item, *“Makes substantial revisions or suggestions related to the work I do”*

- 1% of the management group reported this occurred “Often” or “Always”, compared to
- 15% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 17% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item, *“Makes decisions that affect me without checking with me first”*

- 1% of the management group reported this occurred “Often” or “Always”, compared to
- 10% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 2% of employees in the bargaining unit.

For the item, *“My manager/ supervisor gives preferential treatment to certain employees”*

- 4% of the management group reported this occurred *“Often” or “Always”*, compared to
- 15% of employees in the administrative group, and
- 9% of employees in the bargaining unit.

What were the levels of job strain and work related stress?

Close to two-thirds of employees agreed (somewhat or strongly) that they worked under a great deal of tension. The Bargaining Unit staff reported the highest levels of strain in four of the five strain-related questions, followed by management and administrative staff.

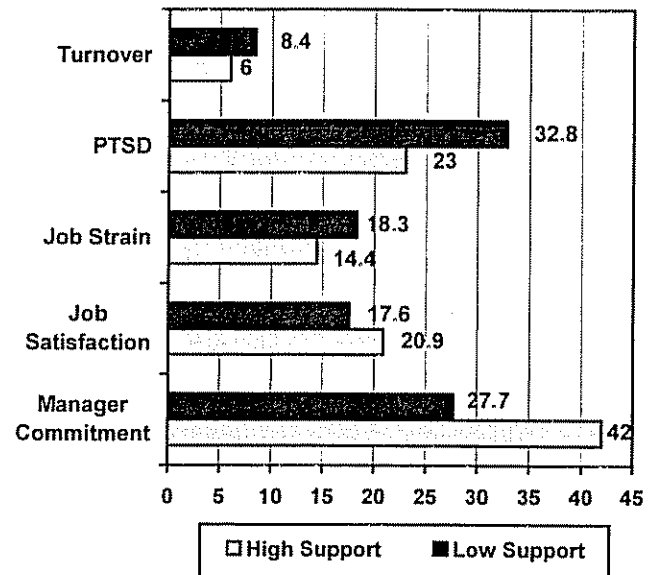
The scale used to determine work related stress was the same used in the Regehr et al., 2000, study that identified higher levels of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) scores in child welfare staff than fire fighters and ambulance drivers – an overall staff average of 29.5 at the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto. Almost the same overall staff average score was obtained in the present study – an average of 28. The cut-off score used as an indicator of clinical PTSD is 26. The bargaining Unit staff scored the highest on average at 30.4 and the administrative staff the lowest, at 23.5. The management staff averaged 27.

Were perceptions of manager/supervisor’s supportive behaviours associated with job-related attitudes and strain?

Employees who reported receiving more support from their manager reported higher levels of commitment to their supervisor (e.g. *“My supervisor really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance”*) and more job satisfaction (see Figure 1). For example, the average summed score of the manager commitment scale was 42 among employees who reported receiving more frequent support from their manager compared to 27.7 among those receiving less support. The summed score of job satisfaction was 20.9 among employees with high supervisor support compared to 17.6 among those reporting less support from their supervisor. As can be seen in the Figure, employees with supportive managers

also reported less work-related strain, less symptoms of PTSD, and lower turnover intentions.

Figure 1
Differences in Job-related Attitudes and Strain between Employees with High versus Low Supervisory support



Employees reporting more frequent support from their manager also reported more autonomy in their work role and were more likely to feel that their manager regarded their work positively. Conversely, employees who reported more frequent displays of unsupportive behaviours reported to have less autonomy on the job and were more likely to believe their manager had low regard for their competence and contributions to work.

Unsupportive manager behaviours were related to the perception of higher work demands, less commitment to the supervisor, lower levels of job satisfaction, higher job strain, higher PTSD scores and higher levels of turnover intentions.

Is the relationship between supportive supervision and job-related outcomes more or less pronounced for certain types of workers?

There are several reasons to expect that the relationship between supportive supervision and job-related outcomes (e.g. job satisfaction) might differ between certain types of workers. First, the nature of work and level of expertise required on the job make certain forms of supervisory

support more or less relevant. For example, employees who work with clients on a daily basis may benefit more from supervisor support, given the interpersonal stressors inherent in the job. However, one could also argue that employees who work in direct client services are less affected by what supervisors do or say because they work more autonomously on the job and have limited contact with their supervisors.

The findings did reflect a differential pattern between supportive supervisor behaviours and job-related outcomes between the staff groups. Supportive behaviours were strongly related to job-related attitudes of administrative employees, but played a smaller role among those in the bargaining units. Among employees in administrative categories, job satisfaction was largely influenced by how much supervisor support they received. Although supervisor support was positively related to the job satisfaction of employees in the bargaining unit, the strength of the relationship was weaker. A similar pattern emerged for the other work-related outcomes. This suggests that other features of the work environment are more influential in determining work-related attitudes for employees who are members of the bargaining units.

Were there any differences in job-related attitudes (e.g. job satisfaction) and job-related well-being (e.g. job strain) between employees in different occupational categories?

Employees in direct client services were significantly more likely to report higher work demands, higher levels of work-related strain and symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder than those in corporate services. Higher levels of work demands and strain were also reported by employees who belonged to a bargaining unit or management category compared to those in administration. Not surprisingly, those in the management category reported more autonomy on the job.

As an example, about two-thirds (65%) of those in the management category and 72% in the bargaining unit somewhat or strongly agreed that they worked under a

great deal of tension compared to 43% of those in the administrative category.

About three-quarters of those in the management category indicated that it was mostly or strongly true that they have a lot of say over what they do on the job, compared to 45% of administrative employees and 54% of those in a bargaining unit.

In terms of job-related attitudes, those in management and administrative categories reported more satisfaction with their jobs and were less likely to think about leaving the organization compared to those in bargaining units. As an example, about three-quarters of employees in the administrative and management categories were satisfied with their jobs compared to 62% of those in bargaining units. Only 10% of those in administrative and management categories indicated that it was likely (quite likely or extremely likely) that they would actively search for another job in the next year, compared to 17% of those in bargaining units.

Do employees with a longer tenure in the organization rate their work environment differently than newer employees?

Employees who had been working at the organization for a greater number of years reported more confidence on the job, were more likely to feel like their supervisor viewed them in a positive light, reported more autonomy in their work, but also experienced higher work demands. Those employed longer tended to be older and were proportionally more represented in the management group. They were not different from newer workers in the amount of support they reported from their supervisor (using an average score across items), or in their satisfaction with their work, or plans to leave the organization.

General Conclusions

The 2003 supervisor support survey revealed a strong association between how managers/supervisors behave towards their employees and employees' work-related attitudes and job strain. Employees who reported receiving more support from their supervisor were more satisfied with their jobs, more committed to their

supervisor, and were less likely to think about leaving the organization. Further analyses demonstrated that these supervisory behaviours had the strongest positive bearing on work-related attitudes and job strain for employees in administrative positions.

Supervisor support is manifested in various ways such as giving frequent positive feedback, communicating in a direct manner, being flexible with work schedules, ensuring their employees have adequate work resources, working collaboratively with employees, sympathizing with their difficulties, and showing a willingness to go to bat for them in times of need. The survey instrument assessing supportive and unsupportive managerial behaviours provides a useful informal tool for self-assessment for supervisors to reflect upon their own strengths, as well as areas they would like to improve on.

The survey results also showed that unsupportive behaviours on the part of the supervisor (e.g. getting visibly upset when mistakes are made; focusing more on negative things than positive things; blaming employees) had a negative bearing on work-related attitudes and were associated with greater job strain. These behaviours were displayed much less frequently than supportive behaviours. The findings suggest that these kinds of behaviours may negatively impact employees, even if they are only displayed once or twice.

The levels of PTSD scores identified here were very similar to those found in an earlier study conducted at a large Children's Aid Society (Regehr et al., 2000). In both studies, staff working in child welfare services report higher levels of stress than fire fighters and ambulance drivers but also high levels of support. The present study clarifies the nature of that support and that, although stress levels are still high, supervisory support has been shown to reduce stress levels.

Finally, the results suggest that supervisors may be able to positively affect employees' work-related attitudes and well-being through empowering employees to feel they have autonomy in their work and through communicating to them that they are valued, both professionally and on a

personal level. Supervisory support will not eliminate staff turnover but the study findings indicate that it could be influential in reducing it and contribute to a more positive work environment.

Next Steps

The results have been reported to and discussed with the agency Senior Management Team and several other agency committees to expand the understanding and meaningfulness of the findings. It is anticipated that the findings will be incorporated into agency training materials in an effort to increase the effectiveness of supervisory support, across all groups of staff.

About the Authors

Jennifer Rooney is a recent Ph.D. graduate in Applied Social Psychology at the University of Guelph. She is now working as an Organizational Consultant for the Public Service Human Resource Management Agency of Canada. Correspondence concerning this article can be sent to Jennifer Rooney at jrooney@uoguelph.ca

Bruce Leslie is Manager of Quality Assurance at the Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto.

References

- Buckingham, M., & Coffman, C. (1999).** *First, break all the rules: What the world's greatest managers do differently.* New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Regehr, C., Leslie, B., Howe, P. & Chau, S.** *Stressors in Child Welfare Practice, O.A.C.A.S. Journal, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2000, 2 – 4.*
- Thompson, C., Beauvais, L. L., & Lyness, K. S. (1999).** *When work-family benefits are not enough: The influence of work-family culture on benefit utilization, organizational attachment, and work-family conflict. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 54, 392-415.*

Predictors of Post-traumatic Distress in Child Welfare Workers: A linear structural equation model

By Cheryl Regehr, David Hemsworth, Bruce Leslie, Phillip Howe and Shirley Chau

An important body of literature explores the issue of work related distress in social workers. Within this literature, there are two major approaches; that of investigating the concept of burnout, and that of investigating the effects of traumatic events. Burnout is generally defined as a state of physical, emotional, and mental exhaustion caused by exposure to chronic stress in the workplace. Researchers and theorists in this area have suggested that burnout is accompanied by an array of symptoms including physical depletion, feelings of helplessness and hopelessness, disillusionment, and the development of a negative self-concept and negative attitudes towards work, people involved in the work (clients, colleagues and managers), and at times even life itself (Kahill, 1988; Pines & Aronson, 1988). Factors, which contribute to burnout and ultimately job exit in child welfare workers, are role conflict, role ambiguity, equivocal successes, lack of control over the working environment and high workloads (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994; Collings & Murray, 1996; Drake & Yadama, 1996). That is, chronic work stressors combined with a sense of powerlessness in the organization reduces the worker's sense of professional competence and ultimately leads to burnout (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994). Social supports, particularly the support provided by co-workers, has been identified as one of the key protective factors in burnout (Davis-Sacks, Jayaratne & Chess, 1985). Interestingly however, two recent large-scale studies have suggested that perceived support from managers and supervisors is a poor predictor of stress and burnout in social workers (Collings & Murray, 1996; Um & Harrison, 1998).

A second field of inquiry has focused on response to acute stressors or traumatic events on workers. As a consequence of exposure to trauma in the line of duty, workers may suffer from secondary traumatic stress disorder (Figley, 1995a) or vicarious traumatization (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). For child welfare workers, this includes exposure to child deaths, traumatic deaths of adult clients, threats of violence against themselves and assaults against themselves (Regehr et al 2002a, 2002b; Horowitz, 1998). In this model of understanding, exposure to the atrocity that one human commits against another can result in post-traumatic stress symptoms

including intrusion, avoidance, dissociation and sleep disturbance (Chrestman, 1995; Kassam-Adams, 1995; Figley, 1995b). Most studies in this area to date have focused on rescue workers such as police, fire, ambulance and military personnel. These studies have suggested that factors which influence secondary response to trauma include the intensity of the traumatic event (Fullerton, McCarroll, Ursano & Wright, 1992; Weiss, Marmar, Metzler & Ronfeldt, 1995); the organizational environment and social supports (Fullerton et al., 1992; Weiss et al., 1995; Leffler & Dembert, 1998); and individual factors such as cumulative life stressors (Mollica, McInnes, Poole & Tor, 1998; McFarlane, 1988a), previous mental health problems (McFarlane, 1988b; Skodol et al., 1996); and cognitive coping skills (Janik, 1992; Hart, Wearing & Headley, 1995).

The current study attempts to integrate the two fields of research described above (chronic stressors and critical incident stressors) to better understand the contribution of each concept to trauma response in child welfare workers following a tragic event on the job. In this model we hypothesize that several factors contribute to levels of post-traumatic distress in child welfare workers. These factors include variables specific to the individual factors, which are related to the organization in which the individual works, and factors related to the traumatic event itself. In addition, beginning with the early work on crisis theory, it has been assumed that crisis events not only cause distress, but also present opportunities for growth and positive change (Caplan, 1964). While post-traumatic stress symptoms are an expected outcome of exposure to traumatic events, increasingly studies of trauma have begun to consider positive changes resulting from traumatic events including changes in perceptions of self, changes in interpersonal relationships, and changes in philosophy of life (Tedeschi, Park & Calhoun, 1998). As a result, the proposed model includes not only traumatic responses but in addition, considers the possibility of positive growth subsequent to exposure to trauma on the job.

Structural equation modelling (SEM) centres around two steps, validating the measurement model and fitting the structural model. In this study, the SEM framework

was used to test a hypothesized model for understanding traumatic response in child welfare workers. Stemming from both a review of the literature and the previous work of the researchers, three latent variables, or constructs were selected *Individual factors*, *Organizational factors* and *Incident factors*. It was hypothesized that individual, organizational and incident factors combine to create distress in workers and that distress subsequently mediates post-traumatic growth.

Individual factors

It has been hypothesized that two of the key elements that define self-schema related to trauma are (1) safety and trust; and (2) power and control (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). The first element, safety and trust, is a component of relational capacity. Relational capacity affects an individual's ability to elicit and sustain supportive relationships with others in the aftermath of crisis. Previous research has demonstrated a relationship between relational capacity and traumatic responses in emergency workers (Regehr, Hemsworth & Hill, 2001). Powerlessness or lack of control has been related to burnout in child welfare workers (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994) and to their levels of post-traumatic stress. (Gibbs, 1989; Regehr, Cadell & Jansen, 1999). That is, individuals who, following a traumatic event, manage to retain a belief that they can control outcomes have been found to have lower levels of trauma than individuals who believed they were controlled by external forces (Gibbs, 1989; Regehr et al., 1999).

Organizational factors

The second set of predictors in this hypothetical model is related to the organization. On the basis of previous research on burnout, it was hypothesized that organizational factors include both ongoing workload stressors and social supports. Ongoing workload stressors in the jobs of child welfare workers have been found to include unwieldy caseloads, court appearances, overwhelming paperwork and negative public perceptions (Vinokar-Kaplan, 1991; Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994; Collings & Murray, 1996). The influence of social supports on reducing distress is questionable and researchers report conflicting results (Davis-Sacks et al., 1985; Um & Harrison, 1998). We hypothesized that

support may come from supervisor/managers and from the union.

Incident factors

Incident related factors are hypothesized to include length of time since the event and number of traumatic events encountered in the past year.

Distress

Both post-traumatic stress and depression symptoms have been hypothesized to be measurable aspects of the construct of *Distress*.

Post-traumatic growth

Researchers investigating a wide variety of stressful and traumatic life events have discovered that individuals frequently report positive outcomes in addition to the expected negative effects. Reported positive outcomes of life stressors include increased appreciation of social supports, higher self-efficacy, social and personal resources, the development of new coping skills and increased self-knowledge (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In this study it is hypothesized that post-traumatic growth, or the capacity to perceive positive outcomes emanating from a stressful or traumatic experience will be predicted by the degree of distress that a person is experiencing.

Method

The study was completed at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and 175 staff participated in a survey process. Small focus groups were also used to amplify and illuminate initial findings (details can be seen in the Children and Youth Services Review article or in Regehr, Leslie, Howe and Chau, 2000a).

Discussion

The hypothetical model tested in this study integrated two important areas of inquiry into the experiences of child protection workers; that of burnout related to chronic stressors and that of secondary trauma related to exposure to the tragedies of others and exposure to risks of personal harm on the job. The model included individual factors, organizational factors and incident-related factors. The influence of each of these factors on symptoms of

post-traumatic distress and ultimately post-traumatic growth was tested.

Individual factors, which included relational capacity and sense of control, were found to contribute significantly to distress. This is consistent with other studies measuring the association between relational capacity and trauma reactions (Regehr & Marziali, 1999; Regehr et al., 2001). That is, individuals who are mistrustful of others, are shy and nervous in relation to others and are sensitive to rejection are more likely to report higher levels of distress. In addition, greater amounts of control that individuals feel over the outcomes of events appears to lower the level of post-traumatic stress and depression symptoms that they experience. This finding is consistent with that of other research which equates powerlessness and burnout (Guterman & Jayaratne, 1994).

Organizational factors proved to have the strongest association with distress in this model. This included the support of the union and ongoing work stressors. Thus, while the Impact of Event Scale (the measure of post-traumatic stress used) measures the symptoms of re-experiencing and avoidance related to a particular traumatic event, the existence of ongoing stressors related to workload, difficult clients, organizational change and public scrutiny appear to have a profound impact on the individual's experience of traumatic events. Interestingly, as union support increased, so did distress. We would suggest that as workers felt increasingly distressed about workload issues, they turned to the union for support. Indeed, at the time of this study, a major issue that the union was dealing with was ongoing workload issues. Interestingly, social support from supervisors and managers appeared to be of limited value in relieving symptoms of distress in this study. Some studies have found social supports to be mediators of both burnout and post-traumatic distress in child welfare workers and other occupational groups (Davis-Sacks et al., 1985; Fullerton et al., 1992; Weiss et al., 1995). Others have suggested that perceived support from managers and supervisors is a poor predictor of stress and burnout in social workers (Collings & Murray, 1996; Um & Harrison, 1998). The findings of this study suggest that this form of organizational support does not significantly reduce the

experience of distress. Incident factors which included time since the last critical event and number of critical events experienced contributed significantly to the model for understanding distress. This is consistent with other research in this area (Resnick et al., 1992; Mollica et al., 1998; Marmar et al., 1999). However, these factors were less salient than individual factors and organizational factors.

Finally, levels of distress are significantly and directly related to post-traumatic growth. Thus, as levels of distress increase, levels of reported positive change also increase. This is consistent with other reports that suggest that stress and trauma can be energizing for workers (Jones, 1993). It also speaks to the ability of the individuals in this study to appreciate the lessons learned from adversity and to seek to use these insights to improve themselves and their professional practice (Tedeschi et al., 1998).

Conclusion

The work of child welfare social workers is complex and multifaceted. It is comprised both of chronic stressors such as difficult clients, excessive paperwork and public scrutiny and critical events such as the severe abuse or death of children and other individuals and threats to their own personal safety. As a result of exposure to chronic stressors, workers may experience burnout. As a result of exposure to critical events, workers may experience symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

In this study, we have tested a hypothetical model for predicting post-traumatic distress in child welfare workers. In this model, individual, incident and organizational factors combined to produce post-traumatic stress distress in child welfare workers. That is, individuals with a greater sense of control over their lives and a better ability to engage in meaningful relationships with others reported lower levels of distress. In addition, those who had less recent and less frequent exposures report lower levels of distress. However, the organizational context remains the most important factor. In this model, this factor includes support of the union and ongoing work stressors. It thus appears that critical events are encountered by individuals who are already

copied with high levels of challenge and stress. In this context, individuals who consistently face adversity may no longer have the resources to manage and overcome post-traumatic stress reactions when faced with a traumatic event such as a death of a child or threat of personal injury. As a consequence they report higher levels of re-experiencing, avoidance and depressive symptoms. Nevertheless, the finding that those individuals who experience the highest levels of traumatic stress symptoms also report the highest level of post-traumatic growth, speaks to the resilience and creative capacity of these workers. The final organizational factor, support from management, did not mediate stress reactions to a significant degree. Thus, while interventions which attempt to support workers may be important, the key issue appears to be addressing persistently stressful aspects of the job.

About the Authors

*Cheryl Regehr – Centre for Applied Social Research,
University of Toronto, 246 Bloor Street West,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6R 2W9*

David Hemsworth – Wilfrid Laurier University,

Bruce Leslie – Catholic Children's Aid Society of Toronto,

Philip Howe – Children's Aid Society of Toronto,

Shirley Chau – University of Toronto

References

- Caplan, G. (1964).** *Principles of preventative psychiatry.* New York: Basic Books.
- Collings, J., & Murray, P. (1996).** *Predictors of stress amongst social workers: an empirical study.* British Journal of Social Work, 26, 375–387.
- Chrestman, K. (1995).** *Secondary exposure to trauma and self-reported distress among therapists.* In B. Stamm, Secondary traumatic stress: self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators. Lutherville, MD: The Sidran Press.

- Davis-Sacks, M., Jayaratne, S., & Chess, W. (1985). *A comparison of the effects of social support on the incidence of burnout*. Social Work, 30(3), 240–244.
- Drake, B., & Yadama, G. (1996). *A structural equation model of burnout and job exit among child protective service workers*. Social Work Research, 20(3), 179–187.
- Figley, C. (1995b). *Compassion fatigue: toward a new understanding of the costs of caring*. In B. H. Stamm, Secondary traumatic stress: self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators.
- Fullerton, R., McCarroll, J., Ursano, R., & Wright, K. (1992). *Psychological responses of rescue workers: fire fighters and trauma*. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 62, 371–377.
- Gibbs, M. (1989). *Factors in the victim that mediate between disaster and psychopathology: a review*. Journal of Traumatic Stress, 2, 489–514.
- Guterman, N., & Jayaratne, S. (1994). *Responsibility at risk: perceptions of stress, control and professional effectiveness in child welfare direct practitioners*. Journal of Social Service Research, 20(1–2), 99–120.
- Hart, P., Wearing, A., & Headley, B. (1995). *Police stress and well-being: integrating personality, coping and daily work experiences*. Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology, 68, 133–136.
- Horowitz, M. (1991). *Person schemas and maladaptive interpersonal problems*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Janik, J. (1992). *Addressing cognitive defenses in critical incident stress*. Journal of Traumatic Stress, 5, 497–503.
- Jones, M. (1993). *Role conflict: cause of burnout or energizer?* Social Work, 38(2), 136–141.
- Kahill, S. (1988). *Interventions for burnout in the helping professions: a review of the empirical evidence*. Canadian Journal of Counselling Review, 22(10), 310–322.
- Kassam-Adams, N. (1995). *The risks of treating sexual trauma: stress and secondary trauma in psychotherapists*. In B. Stamm, Secondary traumatic stress: self-care issues for clinicians, researchers, and educators. Lutherville, MD: The Sidran Press.
- Leffler, C., & Dembert, M. (1998). *Post-traumatic stress symptoms among US Navy divers recovering TWA Flight 800*. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 186, 574–577.
- Marmar, C., Weiss, D., Metzler, T., Delucchi, K., & Best, S. (1999). *Longitudinal course and predictors of continuing distress following critical incident exposure in emergency services personnel*. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 187(1), 15–22.
- McCann, L., & Pearlman, L. (1990). *Vicarious traumatization: a framework for understanding the psychological effects of working with victims*. Journal of Traumatic Stress, 3(1), 131–149.
- McFarlane, A. (1988a). *The longitudinal course of post-traumatic morbidity*. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 176, 30–39.
- Mollica, R., McInnes, K., Poole, C., & Tor, S. (1998). *Dose-effect relationships of trauma to symptoms of depression and post-traumatic stress disorder among Cambodian survivors of mass violence*. British Journal of Psychiatry, 173, 482–488.
- Pines, A., & Aronson, E. (1988). *Career burnout: causes and cures*. New York: Free Press.
- Regehr, C., Cadell, S., & Jansen, K. (1999). *Perceptions of control and long-term recovery from rape*. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 69, 1–6.
- Regehr, C., Hemsworth, D., & Hill, J. (2001). *Individual predictors of traumatic response: a structural equation model*. Canadian Journal of Psychiatry, 46, 74–79.

- Regehr, C., Chau, S., Leslie, B. & Howe, P. (2002). *Inquiries into the Deaths of Children: Impacts on Child Welfare Workers and their Organizations*. Child and Youth Services Review, 24 (12) 885-902.
- Regehr, C., Chau, S., Leslie, B. & Howe, P. (2002). *An Exploration of Supervisors & Managers Responses to Child Welfare Reform*. Administration in Social Work, 26(3) 17-36.
- Regehr, C., Leslie, B., Howe, P. & Chau, S. (2000). *Stress and Trauma in Child Welfare Practice*. Canada's Children, Summer, 2000, 12-14.
- Regehr, C., Leslie, B., Howe, P. & Chau, S. (2000a). *Stressors in Child Welfare Practice*, O.A.C.A.S. Journal, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2 – 4.
- Regehr, C., & Marziali, E. (1999). *Recovery from sexual assault: a relational perspective*. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disorder, 187(10), 618 –623.
- Resnick, H., Kilpatrick, D., Best, C., & Kramer, T. (1992). *Vulnerability-stress factors in development of post-traumatic stress disorder*. Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease, 180(7), 424 –430.
- Skodol, A., Schwartz, S., Dohrenwend, B., Levav, I., & Shrout, P. (1996). *PTSD symptoms and comorbid mental disorders in Israeli war veterans*. British Journal of Psychiatry, 169, 717 –725.
- Tedeschi, R., Park, C., & Calhoun, L. (1998). *Post-traumatic growth*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Tedeschi, R., & Calhoun, L. (1996). *The post-traumatic growth inventory: measuring the positive legacy of trauma*. Journal of Traumatic Stress, 9(3), 455 –471.
- Um, M., & Harrison, D. (1998). *Role stressors, burnout, mediators and job satisfaction: a stress-strain-outcome model and empirical test*. Social Work Research, 22(2), 100 –115.
- Vinokar-Kaplan, D. (1991). *Job satisfaction among social workers in public and voluntary child welfare agencies*. Child Welfare, 70(1), 81 –91.
- Weiss, D., Marmar, C., Metzler, & Ronfeldt, H. (1995). *Predicting symptomatic distress in emergency services personnel*. Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 63, 361 –368.