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A Job Full of Conflicts
The experiences of women child protection social workers in New Zealand

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for degree of Master of Social Work

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Abstract

This qualitative study researched the experiences of ten women who worked as care and protection social workers in the Children, Young Persons and Their Families Service in New Zealand. Although there is an extensive literature on social work theory and practice, little has been recorded internationally or in New Zealand about the experiences of women social workers throughout the span of their working lives. This thesis sought to redress that imbalance.

The participants had a minimum of three years and a combined total of eighty-three years, working in the agency. They were interviewed about their general work experiences, the way they practised social work, the effects of the work on them, the influence of feminist ideas on their work and about identifying as lesbian or as heterosexual in their workplaces.

The participants' general work experiences were analysed within the framework of a theory about women's career choice and work behaviour. Their social work practice was analysed against a number of sets of practice principles in the feminist social work literature. A chapter was devoted to exploring the experiences of lesbian social workers.

The participants found their work satisfying and challenging but also stressful. This stress was greatly compounded by changes to the organisation's management practices which had arisen from the State sector reforms. These had generated an environment in which it was impossible to practise social work thoroughly and safely. The social workers' enthusiasm and hope was being sapped by the organisation's obsession with outputs, administration, and data collection.

Guidelines for the future of statutory child protection services in New Zealand were developed, based on the participants' experiences.
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Contents

Abstract ii

Acknowledgements iii

Contents iv

Chapter 1 Introduction 1

Chapter 2 Perspective and Methodology 9
- Theoretical Perspective and Methodology 10
- Feminist research 14
- Ethical issues 26
- The participants 29

Chapter 3 The Participants in Context 33
- The story of social work 33
- Legislation relating to the care and protection of children and young people 39
- Current legislation which defines the tasks of social workers within CYPFS 42
- The development of the Children, Young Persons and their Families Service 46
- Some issues and conflicts in social work 47
Chapter 4  Work Experiences  58
• Some models of women’s career choice and work behaviour  60
• Analysing the social workers’ experiences  62
• Work experiences which were emotionally and spiritually significant  65
• Stress and burnout  78

Chapter 5  Work Experiences Which Relate to Society and the Organisation  88
• The social workers’ experiences  89
• Trying to understand the organisation  100

Chapter 6  Doing Feminist Social Work  108
• The links between feminism and social work  109
• The literature  111
• The influence of feminist ideals on the social workers’ practice  111
• Three themes:
  feminism as a base for analysis  131
  practice values  133
  practice methods  138

Chapter 7  Lesbian Social Workers’ Experiences  141
• Lesbian feminist theories  144
• Theorising about homosexuality and the concept of lesbian identity  146
• Working in a statutory social work agency - the lesbians’ experiences  147
Chapter 8 The Dinner Parties

• The group discussion process
• The information sent to the social workers
• Dinner party conversations

Chapter 9 Conclusions

Appendices

1. Information Letter
2. Consent Form
3. Interview Questions
4. Transcriber’s Statement of Confidentiality
5. Letter to Participants, sent with their interview transcripts
6. Consent Form for Group Discussion
7. Dinner Party Recipes

Bibliography