

THE STORIES THAT BIND US:
SOCIAL SERVICES CASEWORKERS' EXPERIENCES AND NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Caroline Miller: The Stories That Bind Us: Social Services Caseworkers' Experiences and Narratives
(Under the direction of Patricia Sawin)

Using in-depth analysis of interviews with five caseworkers, this thesis explores how caseworkers at the Department of Social Services in Alamance County, North Carolina use narrative to negotiate and perform their identity, indoctrinate new caseworkers, establish hierarchy and community in an office atmosphere, combat negative public perceptions of caseworkers, and cope with an often emotionally taxing career. In order to accomplish this caseworkers use narrative strategies such as reported speech and generalized experience narratives. Many of the existing studies on laborlore focus on the dynamics between workers and supervisors. This research, however, allows us to understand how narratives function in an office environment where stories are shared primarily amongst workers of roughly the same status. It also provides insight into how narratives are used to establish community in an environment where office dynamics are changing rapidly in response to high turnover rates and hostile popular opinion about public assistance.

To my parents, Lynne and Bruce Miller, whose unwavering patience, support, and example have taught me the importance of pursuing one's dreams and the value of curiosity.

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

Introduction

In every county, in every state social services caseworkers take on the difficult task of trying to help fellow citizens who have fallen on hard times during a period when popular sentiment toward public assistance is exceedingly hostile. I was privileged to interview five such caseworkers currently working in Alamance County, North Carolina. By listening to their stories we can begin to understand their underrepresented experiences and hear their often-hushed voices. Furthermore, attention to these stories reveals the roles that they can play in the functioning of this office environment, showing how they function as tools to facilitate bonding, to train new caseworkers, to enact and negotiate identity, and to regulate stress. These stories give us a glimpse inside a world that impacts our daily life, yet one that most people almost never see.

In many ways my consultants' experiences are similar to that of caseworkers in other counties across the country. However, the experiences of social services caseworkers in Alamance County differ substantially in some ways due to the county's limited funding and geographical location. Alamance County is situated in the "Triad" region of North Carolina near the more populated, and better funded, counties of Guilford, Orange, and Wake. Alamance County is historically working class. It was once prosperous with booming textile and agricultural industries at its center. As both of those industries have declined its economy has fallen behind that of many of the surrounding counties. Due to its lack of funding and location, Alamance County is often used as an unofficial training ground. New caseworkers with

Bachelor's or Master's degrees receive training and experience for approximately two years in Alamance County before moving to better paying jobs in other counties. The high turnover rate and increased workload that results from this has drastically changed the office dynamics of the Social Services Department in Alamance County. As the office dynamics change so too does the role that narratives play in caseworkers' professional and personal lives.

Understanding the roles narratives play and how certain narrative strategies, like reported speech, are used allows one to understand the messages that cannot always be communicated outright, especially in a system in which confidentiality and bureaucracy are of primary concern. This is an important aim of folklore study. However, Folklore has so long concentrated on those involved in "dying" or romanticized trades that the stories of the people who most influence our lives, our neighbors and those who keep the wheels of contemporary society greased and moving, are often left in the background without a voice.

Relationships among caseworkers are important both in getting their job done successfully and in negotiating their experiences. All of the caseworkers expressed that they are not able to communicate their workplace experiences effectively to the people in their personal lives because people who have never experienced being a caseworker simply cannot understand many of the most important aspects of their experiences as caseworkers. This makes the stories that they share with fellow caseworkers especially important. The stories that they share with other caseworkers serve various functions. They contribute to the establishment of hierarchy and community and sometimes function as training tools that indoctrinate new caseworkers into the office culture of the Department of Social Services.

The use of narratives in helping caseworkers to negotiate an emotionally taxing career is especially important because caseworkers are constantly witnessing or interacting with stories of

crisis. Therefore, it is vital that these workers have an outlet for venting the frustrations they feel as well as for remembering what motivates them to continue in this career. Sharing these stories helps to motivate caseworkers in part because it allows them to reassure themselves and their coworkers of the value of what they do in a career that is often underappreciated or even resented by the public. The use of stories to negotiate their experiences is especially important as the caseworker turnover rate and negative public opinions of public assistance continue to increase, unlike pay and benefits.

Many of the stories that my consultants shared with me serve to demonstrate to an outsider the values that they feel are vital for a successful caseworker to possess and to combat what they feel are common negative perceptions of their career, such as its association with the “idle bureaucrat” or the enabler of the “lazy poor.” Their stories also illustrate the experiences of being a caseworker in a smaller county in which they live and work with each other and their clients without many of the divides and distances that one might expect when living in a more populated city. Furthermore, although their experience is certainly affected by the fact that they work in a Southern county the narratives shared in these conversations rarely revealed this as marked or self-conscious identity. A comparative study might further explore this issue.

History

From the time of the Poor Laws of Elizabethan England governments have recognized some need to provide help for those unable to support themselves, temporarily or permanently, but public policy has been used to distinguish the “deserving” poor from the “undeserving” poor. This difference was often defined by separating the unable (deserving) from the able-bodied (undeserving). In these early years poverty in general did not carry as heavy of a moral stigma

because it was viewed as a fact of life mostly outside of one's control. Pauperism¹, however, was seen as a result of moral inadequacies. In the 19th century the perceptions surrounding pauperism began to taint the public perceptions of all poverty. This came as a result of the increase of industrialism and capitalism that demanded a cheap labor force in order to function. The social stigmas associated with accepting aid and unemployment ensured that this demand was fulfilled (Katz 1989). Because it became shameful to be poor or dependent on aid, people were often pushed into taking jobs that they otherwise would not have taken. While the reformers of the progressive era attempted to decrease the stigma surrounding aid, at least to "deserving" women, aid continued to be racialized and subjected recipients to strict regulations designed to control behavior that might be considered morally questionable, such as unconventional parenting strategies or having romantic relationships with men (Seccombe 2011).

Although stigmas surrounding poverty decreased during the Great Depression, its association with moral turpitude still lingered. As part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal welfare was to be "synonymous with well-being, good health, and high-spirits" (Seccombe 2011, 29). During this time some groups, such as the elderly and the disabled unemployed, were spared from much of the stigma although others, like female heads of households with dependent children, continued to be "morally tarred, as always by their association with aid" (Katz 1989, 16). This only increased in the 1950s when a renewed faith in the economic system and in the American Dream created a social climate in which affluence was seen as attainable for everyone (Seccombe 2011). In the 1960s in an atmosphere of a renewed academic interest in poverty Oscar Lewis introduced his idea of a "culture of poverty." He stressed that the culture of poverty differed from economic deprivation in that it was "a way of life passed down from generation to

¹ Pauperism is distinguished from simple poverty in this case because the people who were

generation along family lines” (Katz 1989, 17). It rested on the assumption that dependent people were not able to overcome poverty and “break the cycle of deprivation” without the leadership of intellectuals. This assumption came despite the fact that more precise data collection and analysis demonstrates that many Americans receive public assistance briefly during their lifetimes.

However, the notion that the same people “eat at the public trough,” so to speak, throughout their lifetime and across generations is well established in popular discourse. Although it was not his intention, this made Lewis’ culture of poverty model a convenient new label for conservatives to apply to the “underserving poor” (Katz 1989, 19).

In 1965 Daniel Patrick Moynihan published “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action.” This became one of the most controversial documents in the history of American social science largely because critics often distorted the findings (Katz 1989, 24). This report stated that it was the “disintegration” of African American families and traditional social structures that was to blame for the number of African Americans living in poverty. It called for reform aimed at “the establishment of a stable Negro family structure” (Katz 1989, 25). The pushback that the Moynihan report faced eventually became part of what hastened the divorce of the idea of a culture of poverty from its liberal beginnings and toward its adoption as a conservative rationalization for cutting welfare. They associated with individuals’ moral shortcomings and the idea that the poor perpetuated their own poverty through a “self-enclosed world of dependency” (Katz 1989, 29).

When President Kennedy was elected in 1960 he stressed the importance of addressing welfare as an issue of human capital and worked to put job skills training in place. These initiatives were continued after his assassination when President Johnson declared an unconditional War on Poverty. The efforts in the War on Poverty were concentrated on helping

people lift themselves out of poverty (Seccombe 2011). In the 1970s and 80s, however, the Nixon and Regan administrations introduced a starkly contrasting approach to welfare. During these years policy was informed primarily by the desire to decrease the number of people receiving assistance rather than by the goal of helping people out of poverty. Reagan used the popular anecdote of the “Welfare Queen” who was African American and had “80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards, and a tax-free income of over 150,000.” Although these figures were grossly exaggerated (it was actually two aliases to collect 8,000 dollars in overpayments) they had an enormous impact on public opinion about the image of welfare recipients (Seccombe 2011). Although the public image of the welfare queen had been racialized for decades, this anecdote added new fuel to the fire even though it directly contradicted the actual statistics about the race of people who were actually receiving assistance (Hancock 2004). Public opinion about aid has continued on this trajectory in shaping public policy.

Although Bill Clinton attempted to push through legislation that emphasizes the importance helping aid recipients find employment, the legislation (the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act) that was eventually passed by Congress left much room for states to deny benefits to recipients. A year after signing welfare reform legislation Clinton proclaimed it a resounding success by citing statistics that indicated a 1.4 million drop in the number of welfare recipients (Seccombe 2011, 13). However, what these statistics failed to reveal is the reality with which social services caseworkers contend everyday – that a decrease in the number of people receiving assistance does not necessarily mean a decrease in the number of people living in poverty (Seccombe 2011, 13-14). In fact, this reform rewarded states for enforcing punitive policies that simply cut people off of assistance regardless of the fact that they were not out of poverty. This is the world of opinions and assumptions in which the consultants

in this research perform their jobs, one in which the service they perform is stigmatized in mainstream media outlets and often resented by the majority of the public.

Methods

Over the course of three months I conducted recorded conversations with caseworkers at the Alamance County Department of Social Services. My interest in this research came from my long-standing concern with illuminating the experiences and stories of underrepresented groups. As an undergraduate this interest led me to participate in the Voices of Welfare project at Elon University. The Voices of Welfare project is a multi-year project in which Elon's Program for Ethnographic Research and Community Studies (PERCS) partnered with community agencies in order to undertake a collaborative ethnographic research project that examines the perceptions and realities surrounding the welfare system (Voices of Welfare 2015). The project addresses the stereotypes about welfare and welfare recipients conveyed through the stories told in the mass media, in political discourse, and interpersonally among friends and family (Mould 2014). My experience working on the Voices of Welfare project at Elon University gave me some idea of the kinds of stories other aid providers often told.

In 2011 I worked with the director of the project, Dr. Tom Mould, as an undergraduate research intern in the beginning stages of the project. In 2012 I was part of a course by the same name in which Elon students went into the community and conducted recorded conversations with community members to better understand the perceptions of welfare held by people in various parts of the community. In this class I was exposed to the transcripts of interviews that my classmates and professor conducted with numerous social services employees as well as other aid providers, recipients, and other community members. The stories that my classmates and I collected were overwhelmingly negative. Many of the stories were told as personal

experience narratives but seemed to be heavily colored by well-known legends. This sparked my interest in how caseworkers negotiated an environment that seemed to be filled with negative public opinion about the work they performed everyday and how that might affect their identity and how they feel about the service that they provide.

When I began my own research on service provider stories I used snowball sampling in order to establish contacts. In other words, I asked consultants which other caseworkers might also be interested in talking with me and how I might contact them. I had to adapt my research methodology to the situation because, with the exception of my first contact, even with the entrée provided by my former professor, Dr. Tom Mould, and introduction from the director of the office, I could not simply wander around the office and approach people in the break room in order to establish contacts. This was because of the security necessary in the Social Services building. Since security is a concern, most of the caseworkers are in offices that are located down key code protected hallways and are therefore not easily accessible. These security concerns speak to the disconnect between caseworkers and clients that my consultants all mentioned working hard to overcome since the perceived hierarchy that it creates makes it difficult for them to do their jobs effectively.

Fortunately, Kim Price, the consultant with whom I first made contact is located on the first floor in an office behind the reception desk. This was much more accessible to me and I was able to establish additional contacts through her recommendations. I also found that caseworkers were much more receptive to speaking with me after I had explained my research and objectives via email, had been introduced by a fellow caseworker, and officially scheduled a time to meet with them instead of simply approaching them in the office. I have been able to conduct in-depth interviews with five caseworkers that ranged from an hour to an hour and a half in length. These

interviews have been fruitful in allowing me to collect narratives and discourse that address the experiences of the caseworkers with whom I spoke. Four out of five of the consultants have been in social work, though not necessarily in the same position or with Alamance County, for many years. This is a reflection of the fact that these caseworkers were the most willing and open to talking about their experience. More importantly, these consultants were chosen because they possess a connection to and understanding of the office culture at Alamance County Social Services and the changes that it has undergone which newer caseworkers simply do not possess.

It is worth noting that the necessity of using snowball sampling also made it more difficult to obtain a more racially diverse group of consultants. Although there are African American caseworkers and clients at the Alamance County Social Services office, my limited sample only briefly reflects one African American voice. This voice is Jasmine's, a fairly new employee who happened to be passing by during my conversation with Shea and briefly joined the conversation. If I had been able to include conversations with a more diverse group of caseworkers I might have seen some variations in the themes discussed.

There is much consistency in the type of stories that the consultants told about their interactions with clients. After comparing the conversations I recorded to those that the Voices of Welfare program collected from caseworkers the same office, I believe that one could expect to find similar patterns in conversations with a larger sample of caseworkers in the Alamance County office. However, there would likely be some new dimensions and variations in the patterns with a more diverse sample group. One such important dimension that is not addressed in this work is the question of the extent to which African American caseworkers would be aware of or share some issues with their African American clients that my consultants did not.

The consultants represent a range of seniority and roles;² thus there is enough variety of the caseworkers' experiences within the workplace dynamic and with members of the general public that it gives a window into differing experiences. Therefore, an in depth analysis of these interviews offers valuable insight into the experiences of caseworkers in Alamance County. It is important to note that the experiences of caseworkers in the Alamance County Department of Social Services is likely to differ in substantial ways from the experiences of those in better funded departments since limited funds are a primary contributing factor in the high turnover rate and therefore greatly influence the workplace dynamic.

Although the consultants were cooperative and forthcoming in their responses, one must consider that due to the nature of their careers there were limitations on the information that they were able to disclose especially with regard to their feelings about superiors, public policy, and – for legal confidentiality reasons – any potentially identifying details about clients. Due to the concern for client confidentiality some stories that caseworkers would have told with more specificity to each other were told to me in a way that more closely resembled discourse or generalized experience narratives. All of the consultants declined my offer to use pseudonyms instead of their real names. Many expressed that this was partly due to the fact that the specific stories they shared and way that their individual voices came through in the narratives would make them identifiable to coworkers and superiors regardless of whether or not a pseudonym was used. However, they did request that pseudonyms be used for any names or places that could identify clients.

² Seniority is defined in this context as the amount of experience that a consultant has as a social services caseworker at Alamance County Department of Social Services. This is usually reflective of the amount of time spent in the office but may also be dependent on how proficient a given caseworker is perceived to be at performing his or her job.

After completing the transcriptions of all of the interviews I sent each consultant a copy of the transcription of their interview and asked them to read over it to ensure that they felt that their words and voice were accurately represented. More importantly, I asked them to make sure that after reflection there was nothing that they did not feel comfortable having on the record and to confirm that they still did not wish for me to use a pseudonym. Most of the changes that the consultants requested were minimal, primarily involving small changes in wording. However, the variety in the extent to which consultants felt comfortable divulging information about specific cases became even more apparent since, after reviewing the transcripts, some consultants expressed concern with any mention of previous cases while others were satisfied with the use of pseudonyms for clients.

During this research I observed patterns in the way in which the consultants used narratives. Due to the small sample size, there might be dimensions or variations of these patterns that I was not able to observe. However, having only five consultants allowed me to analyze the narratives in greater depth. In each conversation the narrative of how the consultant came to be a social worker, or their origin story, was among the first narratives they shared.

Origin Stories

All of the caseworkers came to their careers by different paths. These varied paths affect the way each caseworker approaches their job and how they negotiate their role as a caseworker within their larger identity. I have included the caseworkers' stories of how they came to their current job in their own words followed by some clarification about how it has affected the way they approach their role as a social worker.

Kim Price

Kim Price is a senior caseworker who is responsible for handling new client intakes. She talks with clients in order to determine what services they need and what help might be available to them, a sort of gatekeeper between the clients and the rest of the financial side of the social services system. She described how she came to her career.

One of the things that brought me here, my dad got sick with cancer. He had worked two jobs his whole life and I'm like, "You know, you need to go over and see if you can get some help." And that was really hard, especially for men. In my experience it's a pride thing with men. They have a real hard time coming here. But [he] came over [to the social services office] and he left feeling more ashamed than he did when he came in.

So that made me decide that I want to work there because I want to make a difference in people's lives. And that is something that I have really tried to keep within myself, is you treat everybody the same. You know everybody has a story, not everybody wants to be here just because they don't want to work. Sure there are some people that aren't going to work period, it doesn't matter if it's doing nothing but handing out money all day; they just are not going to do it. But then you have some people that their husbands have left them, their husbands have died, [or] the wife has got on drugs and left and they are desperate and this is their last option. Some people come in and they are angry, but I try to realize I don't know what they left. They could have just left home with an abusive husband. They could have left home [because] their house is being padlocked.

So I always try to have empathy and compassion that, that's my number one rule in this position. Never lose empathy with people, always have compassion no matter if they are not being truthful or whatever their story is. You're only one paycheck away from you could be that client. You always treat people like you want to be treated. Some days my job, as you can see today, can be very *very* overwhelming. The life of a caseworker can be very overwhelming. There are always problems, there is always paperwork. People always need food assistance, medical assistance. There are never enough caseworkers for the amount of work that we do have. Some cases you try to get to a lot quicker because of the urgency and some they can wait a little longer than others. I try to be fair and go in order, it just depends on what they have going on. If we have a sick child come in versus a healthy child I'm going to go ahead and try to approve that sick child if I can. But that's kind of what brought me here. I really enjoy it. I've been here 16 years. I've seen some very funny stories, I've seen some ironic stories, and I've seen some really sad.

Here and throughout the conversation Kim reiterates the importance of treating the clients with the same respect that she would give to even the most respected members of the community. She prides herself on being as non-judgmental as possible, a goal that comes partially from the inspiration that she received from her father's negative experience requesting assistance.

Shea Malpass

Shea Malpass, another veteran caseworker who handles the SNAP program (the official term for what is commonly known as "food stamps"), was also inspired to become of caseworker by a parent, but by a parent who was on the "other side of the desk," so to speak, from Kim's father.

I'm a 2nd generation caseworker. My mother was a caseworker in Canada. No one ever says that, right? Some people will, say if you go to Duke University, "Well what made you decide to be a doctor?" "Well my mother was a doctor, my father was a doctor or my grandfather was a doctor." "Why did you want to be a teacher?" "Well my mother was a teacher." "Why did you want to be a nurse?" Why did you want to do this or that? It's usually a parent or something like that, my father or my mother. Well I took this job because it was what my mother did and I had great respect for what my mother did.

I used to think it was neat that I could go to the grocery store with my mother and everyone knew her. That these scary looking people would come up and touch her coat or touch her arm like she was Mother freaking Teresa. And I would say, "Who is that?" And she would say, "That's my client," just very quietly. And I knew that meant don't ask any more questions because of privacy.

But yeah, just what she did and how she did it and how the people she worked with did it. And how you treat people and how you treat people when they are down on their luck and how you keep people from going rangy in your office. Rangy means like spaz out or freak out, spastic. I had great respect for that. So when I had the opportunity to become a caseworker that's what I wanted to do. I liked what she did. My mother did it close to 30 years so that's all I saw. So when I came in here and told Kim she was like, "Okay, don't hear that often." But she [Shea's mother] knew how to be in her community so when someone came and said do this and do that that made sense to me because that was how my mother behaved. You hold your own. Of course in Canada they have unions so it's a slightly different dynamic because she is on the union with everyone she works with. So that's a whole community in and of itself. And I said, "So it's you against

the management?” and she said, “No, it’s two different families.” And I thought, “Gotcha, but you are the one outside in the freezing winter picketing, I’m just pointing that out.” And my mother was exceptional at what she did and people talked about her and what she did and told me how good she was. She never told me she was good. Other people told me she was good.

When she got married my last name and her last names were different and people would recognize my last name from who she was before. They never called her by her new married name, they just didn’t. I went to college and this girl said, “Are you related to Joan?” and I said, “That’s my mom.” “Your mother used to come to our house because my mom was on assistance and your mom used to bring me a pack of gum every time she came. And your mom made sure that my mom’s boyfriend didn’t show up, and your mom I know put food on our table. And blah blah, but you know, what I remember is that your mom always brought me a pack of gum, a pack of Juicy Fruit.”

Caroline: That’s so sweet.

Shea: Yeah, it’s not actually she never bought me a pack of gum [laughing]. And I’m like, “Is that so?” and she said, “Yep, and I remember that she had a necklace, a locket that had your picture in it and I would sit on her lap and open it and it had your picture in it and I would ask, ‘Who is that?’ and she would say ‘That’s my little girl.’ ‘That’s your little girl?’ ‘Yes that’s my little girl.’ And whenever she would come over I would say ‘Let me see your little girl’ and she would open it. And she would have the gum for me.” She said, “It was my treat I never got it really any other time.” And she said, “It made me excited for your mother’s visits.” And she said, “You are so lucky and I wanted that.” And I said, “That’s funny because I didn’t know my mother did that. I didn’t know she had that effect on people.”

And so I thought I want to do that. I want to be that. I want to bust my ass and work hard and learn and grow. I wanted to be what I am now. I wanted to be ten years in and be the go-to. And in a lot of ways I am, I am the person people go to. I know it backwards and forwards, up and down.

Although Shea’s mother was her primary inspiration for becoming a caseworker, she credits Kim Price as being a formative figure in her development and success as a caseworker since she was the one who hired and trained her.

I watched my mother but I learned my craft from Kim Price. And I wanted to be who she was. When I started, when Kim first trained me, that was one of the first people I met was Kim Price. And she trained me not only how to do my job, but

how to be a caseworker. It was like someone taking a freshman in high school and teaching them how to be in high school, how to go up the stairs the right way.

[Kim was] like, “When so and so from the department emails you, you give them an answer. Stop what you are doing and help them out. And I’m like, “Okay?” “Doesn’t matter if you are busy, doesn’t matter if you know them, it doesn’t matter if you like them. You help them out because you want to create allies.” And I’m like, “Why? Okay?” “Because you have to have friends to do your job. To be successful you got to have friends so you make friends wherever you can, Shea. You got to have people who like you and owe you favors. Medicaid, child support, Child Protective Services, clerical, IT; wherever you can go you make friends and you pull in favors because you are going to need them in your career and that’s how we get our job done. We create allies.”

Like I said, its not so *so* much that anymore, but that to me is kind of sad because that, to me, made sense. That to me was right. That’s why you treat people decently... My husband says, it’s like the military. He was in the military and he says, “That’s very military, Shea. It doesn’t matter if everybody's boots look like crap, but if everybody's boots look like crap and yours shine then it means you haven’t been being part of your team.” And so I’m like, “All right.” She taught me about being a caseworker. Not just how to do the job – what form to use paper, pencil – but how to fit into this community, how to treat people, how to treat my clients.

When people came in, I would come in dressed in a suit because I thought, “This is appropriate. This is a government building, this is something I have to do.” And she was like, “Please don’t do that because you are sitting across from people who don’t have two nickels to rub together and you don’t want to intimidate them because people who are intimidated don’t tell you anything.” And I was like, “Okay.” She said, “And don’t interrogate them, talk to them. You get so much out of people just talking to them.” And that’s something I have done my whole career.

That is something she taught me that has served me so well is that when I am asking questions don’t interrogate them just talk to people. Believe that, and you have to have them believe that you want to help them. Because if they are sitting across the desk and they feel it is adversarial then there is no flow, there is no information passing forth. So the first thing I do is "How can I help you?" Most people say, “What can I do for you?” I say. “How can I help you?” I immediately put myself out there as I want to do something for you. And I think subconsciously that registers. I can’t prove that, I just think it does.

Tiffany Dunn

Tiffany has been in a social work position for the shortest amount of time of the consultants with two years in Work First after a brief employment as a Human Resource Placement Specialist. She was raised in Alamance County and earned her undergraduate degree in nearby Greensboro. Shortly after, she took a job that required a great deal of travel but left that job when she had her first child. When it was time to return to a career she decided to go into social work.

Caroline: You were telling me a little bit earlier about how you came to doing Work First. You said you were traveling a lot, right, for your other job and wanted something different?

Tiffany: Yep, I decided that I wanted a change. I took a little time off to make a family, had a child, things like that, and then decided that I was ready to go back to work. And I started doing some job searching of my own and applied for a job called the Human Resource Placement Specialist. And what that position consisted of is a small caseload and establishing work experience sites and arranging job fairs, things like that. So I did that at first and then there was an opening that came open for a Work First position and I was like, “Yep, that’s me,” because I really liked the caseload part of my original position. And so I was like, “Yep, that’s a thing to do that I would like.”

I have been doing this [Work First] for 2 years; it has gone fast it seems like. It really has. I really like the job. It is rewarding because I feel like I am helping people help themselves because it is making families, participants, moms, dads be responsible for themselves to get that assistance. Because it is cash assistance and some childcare assistance, some transportation assistance, things like that, but I'm the person that says, “Okay you have to make sure you get this done. If you don’t get it done, you don’t get your check.” So I feel like I am helping kind of push people when there is sometimes not someone else there to push them.

Hunter Walsh

Hunter Walsh, who is case manager at Child Protective Services, is currently writing a book about the experiences he has had over his last twelve years as a caseworker. Hunter came to his career as a caseworker later in life than many, which has

given him a different perspective than some of the younger caseworkers. This has partly contributed to him viewing his role as a calling rather than simply a way to make ends meet.

I started this job 12 years ago. I was 40 years old, so in Child Protective Services that's really unusual, it's mostly people straight out of school. Here it's usually people that don't have a Master's. I'll try to not go into too much detail, but we don't pay as much as Guilford or Orange so people who have Master's, they are going to snag them. I had majored in Sociology at Appalachian and I always wanted to do social work. It's a long story, I went into the military through ROTC and did other things that paid more and then got divorced and started all over. And I said, "Here is a chance to go with my first love, really." So I interviewed here and a couple people who interviewed me wondered why anybody my age and what not, or doing what I had done, would want to get into this. But I had been doing volunteer stuff of all kinds over the years and I still had a passion for it. So, 40 years old had been divorced, had been laid off from a career that lasted 14 years. I really felt like I had some life experience and my two kids at the time were teenagers so I had the parenting experience and I really still had a passion for it.

So I came and I've been doing this for twelve years now. I've been the person that knocked on the door when you get a report and try to figure out if it's real or not. I did that for three years and for the past nine I've been a case manager, which is someone who takes a case where there has been proven abuse and neglect. And instead of working with them 30 or 45 days we work with them 3 months to 6 months. You stick around long enough to see | They are families that we feel like we can't just let them leave it. We need to stick around to make sure they follow our recommendations and monitor their progress. So I've been doing that for 9 years and that is truly what I like to do. I always felt frustrated before because I couldn't stick around long enough to see results, to really get to know the family. The only other thing that you would do here is foster care where you reunite kids with their families who have been taken into foster care. And I've done that but the case management piece, the middle person if you will, is really what I like to do because you are trying to prevent kids from coming into foster care and you are really working with the family to get them stable and make sure you never have to have that conversation.

Hunter tries to approach his job from a spiritual standpoint in order to help clients make a genuine positive change in their lives, instead of simply getting them up to the minimal standards required by law. This approach comes from the many life experiences

that have deepened his connection with his faith. When asked what keeps him motivated to do this job even through the hardest cases he replied,

I really feel like this is my calling and it is more than just a job. I don't say that to make it cheesy or anything, I just really feel that. And as tough as it has been some days and weeks, I feel like I know every day when I go home that I have given it my best and there are a lot of social workers that don't. There are a lot. I've always told my wife that if I quit who is that going to leave doing this job if I don't keep going.

I look at what we do, it's a government job, but I look at it from a spiritual standpoint because it's a ministry, it's a real ministry. Easily above 90 percent of the people I work with are unchurched – they are not part of a church family, or a lot of people just feel like they wouldn't even be accepted in a church family, or they had a bad experience from a so-called church person in the past. When I write my book this is going to be in there, it breaks my heart to see the breakdown of the family. I know what kind of negative impact my divorce had on my two kids; probably 90 percent of the families that I work with are mostly single moms. It is just such a struggle.

I just think unless America has a spiritual renewal, this is my personal belief, where people realize that all the government programs and all the other things we are trying to do | The answers have been in the Bible all the time...I really believe that we can throw money at problems; we can provide government programs out the ying yang. I just really believe until people have a change of heart and we really try to live the way Jesus modeled, we will just be spinning our wheels.

God says when you work at your job work as if you are working for him and not for man. And if you keep that perspective and you look at things through a spiritual lens and you realize that we are all infected with sin, these are the type of things that we are all capable of doing – the bad things that we see. As long as people are infected with sin and selfishness children are going to suffer. So that's the way that I look at my job and my calling and my understanding of what I see.

Leslie Jones

Leslie has been in social work the longest of any of the consultants. Unlike the other consultants, she knew that she wanted to do social work before experiencing another career.

I am a Child Protective Services Investigator Assessor. What Hunter does is he does case management, so I am the front end. I go out and initiate the case. I find

out what's going on, find out what their needs are. And we are only supposed to keep a case a maximum of 45 days and if their needs are such that they will need continued services then it goes to Hunter.

I have been a social worker for 33 years and I went to college and didn't know, like most people, what I wanted to do. I started out wanting to do something in the criminal justice part because that fits my personality a little bit, so I started out in that. While I was doing the criminal justice they also had some social work classes mixed in with that and I started thinking that I really like this. I really liked social work when I was in college at App State, like Hunter. I graduated several years before him, but anyway, I liked the social work. I liked the classes. I tell you what, it was the classes because I had a lot of psych and stuff like that and I really liked that kind of stuff. And back in the 70s, of course, things were a lot different. You know, there were a lot of different social issues.

Anyway my first job right out of school was as a medical social worker and years ago there were two hospitals in Alamance County. There was the County hospital and there was Memorial. So I was the social worker at Memorial Hospital. I was the only social worker there and I did everything like discharge planning or if they had financial issues I would help them get financial like Medicaid or Medicare, whatever they needed getting ready for discharge from the hospital. So I was pretty busy. And then they started hiring other people and County and Memorial joined and it became ARMC. I left shortly after it became ARMC and I left to work in Guilford County in Child Protective Services.

So I went from hospital social work right into Child Protective Services. I kind of had experience through the hospital because I spent, I would say 70 percent of my time, in [the] pediatrics unit because there were a lot of babies that were being born and the families didn't have money to provide a lot of things for them and get services together. So I was doing a lot of those things. And there were babies that came in injured, which would be the Child Protective Services sides of things. And back then in the 70s we still had Child Protective Services here, but in the 80s when I started I would go out and try to figure out what was going on and then I'd call it in. But hospitals don't do home visits anymore. That went out years ago.

I went to Guilford County and I did only investigations. I don't know if he [Hunter] explained this to you, but it used to be cases were abuse or they were neglect. There was no in between, like services needed. When I was in Guilford I was only doing investigations and that was the abuse cases like sex abuse, physical abuse, moral turpitude, and some dependency. So I really got a lot of experience with the really hard cases, the really difficult criminal cases where people were being charged with crimes.

I did that for a few years and then I came to Alamance just because I live in Alamance County and I had a small child that was starting school at the time. I just wanted to be closer so I could go to school functions and stuff like that. When I started at Alamance I was only doing investigations because it's hard to find, believe it or not, it's hard to find workers who will just do investigations because you see a lot of really really bad stuff. But since I already had the experience in Guilford I just came right in and started doing the investigations here. And I did just investigations for seven years until they came up with multiple response where you have several different categories. You take investigative and family. Now instead of abuse and neglect, the way it used to be, it's investigative and family assessments.

As the consultant with the most amount of time spent in the career, Leslie has different ways of coping with the stress of the job. While she does rely on some fellow caseworkers for moral support, she repeatedly stressed the importance of separating oneself from work and not developing close relationships with coworkers outside of work.

CHAPTER 2: CASEWORKERS' NARRATIVES

Identity

One of the primary ways in which people use narratives is to perform and renegotiate their identity (Sawin 2004). Since people use narratives to demonstrate their identities, one can use narratives – especially personal experience narratives – to glimpse both the way that narrators perceive themselves as well as the characteristics they value or denounce in others. In the caseworkers' narratives the value that they all place on helping others is clear. In fact, when asked if they believe that their career is a significant part of their identity many initially respond that it is a substantial part of their identity but quickly rephrase their answer to make clear that it is not the job with which they identify, but rather that they chose a career that fulfills their desire to help those in need. Tiffany's description of the part that her career plays in her identity demonstrates this. She explains, "I guess social worker is me now. I wouldn't have thought that before, but yeah it is. Definitely, it's very rare that I can go somewhere and not see a client." However, she quickly corrects herself saying,

I feel like I don't judge people when they come in here and I think that is a part of that I just want to help. I think helping people, not so much social work, is a part of my identity because before [my job as a social worker] I helped people find jobs. Now I help people find their own jobs, not find jobs for them. Helping people I think would be my identity, not so much social work in general but helping people.

This demonstrates the dialogic nature of identity enactment, which is to say it illustrates the way that people shape and renegotiate their identity in conversation with multiple audiences, both actual and imagined as well as past and present (Bakhtin 1981). This makes their stories multi-

vocalic, or in response to and repeating or repurposing the expressions and opinions of others (Bakhtin 1986). During our conversations the caseworkers expressed their identity to me through both narrative and discourse in a way that takes into account the positive perceptions of their work that they believe me to hold, as well as previous interactions that demonstrated to them contrasting negative and positive – although predominantly negative – public opinions of their work. They are also addressing their imagined audience of those who might read this work. Although the consultants may never meet the readers of this work or other people with whom I share my findings, these anticipated audiences join in conversation with real and imagined audiences – past, present, and future – to become part of the chain of “speech communion” (Bakhtin 1986, 94).

The caseworkers internalize the negative public perceptions of their work that they have encountered in the past and although they believe in the value of their work, they choose not to explicitly identify with their career but rather certain values that led them to their career. Hunter Walsh connects his career choice to the moral principles of his Christian faith with which he strongly identifies rather than simply with the career in itself.

It really is about the family unit, the mom and dad putting the children first and raising them to be kind to other people to serve other people, just all of the things that God challenges us to do... I try to incorporate that in my job by just showing a lot of respect to my clients. People have said, “Share the Gospel, if necessary use words.” I always try to somehow work their faith into the conversation and I always invite them to my church. And I always want to attend a church that would accept somebody that looked different, smelled different, and didn’t fit the mold. And I didn’t invite people to my church just to see if they would, I wanted them to come and have a change in their life. And the people that I invited that actually came my church loved on them. That’s how I look at things. I look at this job as a calling. I really do.

Due to the emotionally taxing nature of their jobs, all of the consultants discuss a need to separate themselves from their work when they go home. However, the degree to which they

kept themselves or their identity separated from their job when at home and the reasons for this separation varied between caseworkers. Many of the consultants indicated that separating themselves from their jobs while at home is crucial to their continued success in their career.

Leslie explained,

I don't ever talk about it and if I talked about it or dwelled on it when I leave here I don't think I would have been able to make it this long. I don't. The key to social work, I truly believe, is to cut it off at five o'clock or whenever you are able to get out of the building. Completely shove it out of your mind and not think about it. Just don't think about it because the problem is still going to be there tomorrow.

Although all of the consultants echoed that being able to completely separate oneself from the job, or "turn it off", is ideal some discussed the difficulty they face in trying not to take the hardship that they witness or hear about home with them. Kim Price mentioned a recent case that she felt was especially difficult to leave at the office, so to speak.

I had a lady a couple of weeks ago and her husband actually molested her children and casework work doesn't end at 5 o'clock. You take that home with you. There are days that really bothered me. How could someone do that to their own child? But you just have to never become hard, I guess.

However, even if caseworkers are able to detach themselves from specific cases after office hours, Hunter described the way that one's perception of the world is forever altered after spending time as a caseworker, specifically as a Child Protective Services worker.

It affects you though. Because for me I love to get away to the beach or mountains or whatever but it's kind of like you have this little veil ripped for yourself and you know that even in Mayberry there is still some kid getting abused. You know that when you go to Disney World, or wherever is supposed to be a magical fantasy, something nasty is happening because there are people there and there is somebody that is suffering because of it.

Like most of the consultants, Tiffany places great emphasis on the importance of reflecting on the gratitude that they feel for the stability of their own situations. She said,

“Sometimes it’s hard. Sometimes the heart-pullers are the ones that I go and I say to my husband, ‘I’m thankful.’ I have to be thankful. The heart-pullers are the ones that I definitely tell my husband about as well.” Verbally acknowledging this gratitude helps the caseworkers to cope with the emotional toll of spending their days investing energy into helping to stabilize the often chaotic lives of others – or as Hunter put it, being “knee deep in O.P.P or other people’s problems.”

Some caseworkers expressed that they cope with the demands of their job by seeking solitude in their private lives or at least not taking an active role in social situations when possible. In one example, Hunter uses a narrative of a recent encounter on a train to describe how the way in which he chooses to interact with strangers in his free time has changed as a result of his career experience.

Oh the way it affects me when I’m off the job, because I am definitely what people would call a people person but *oooh wee!* When I clock out its like I want to retreat. I am so comfortable when I get home really not seeing anybody. That might sound kind of bad. But just being with my family and being thankful that I go home to the home I go to and that my little boy has what he has.

It’s kind of funny. My father-in-law and I and my son went to DC on the train last weekend and he was just engaging with everyone on the train and telling all these stories and all and for me I’m just so, so content to just sit there with my book.

Don’t get me wrong I wouldn’t be rude to anyone. I just feel no desire to engage... So at the end of the day and you’ve been knee-deep in O.P.P., other people’s problems, you got to recharge your batteries or you wont be able to keep doing this. So I find myself being very content when I’m in social settings being the guy who sits there and...I let people come to me.

This need for separation is not brought on solely by interactions with clients. Shea Malpass was insistent that recent changes to people’s perceptions of her job make the attempt to separate her identity outside of work from her role as a caseworker imperative. She explained

that in the past that the hard work associated with those successful in her career was appreciated and the work that she did was more respected by the public – the taxpayers who pay her salary. She described how although she once felt that her identity was inextricably tied up in being a caseworker the more undervalued she feels the more she has to seek other ways of defining herself apart from her role as a caseworker.

I am wrapped up as much as I can be in being a caseworker. It's what I believe. It's about what I value. Being a caseworker reflects my history. My mother, she was [a caseworker]. I wanted to be like her. It reflects my social values, my commitment to social justice, my feminism. It is, everything about me is tied up in that identity; more so than when I was a bank teller, more so than I was a daycare worker. Being a bank teller wasn't who I was; it was the job I did. This is about who I am at my core and I guess this is it. I didn't mean for this to be a therapy session.

And I am getting burnt out and the reason that I am getting burnt out is tied into being a caseworker and being a caseworker doesn't pay. It doesn't pay emotionally, it doesn't pay financially. So it's like being in a loveless marriage. But I've been with him so long and I remember when I loved him but its not there and I don't know how to change the behavior to spark that piece. But I need to be a caseworker, I need to pay my bills. And I have 10 years in so, like in a loveless marriage, I go and find alternate things that feed me and I find out that being a caseworker isn't who I am. So I start taking classes and do improv and standup and all kinds of stuff that's very different than what I do.

Shea's analogy of being a caseworker to being in a loveless marriage and her need for separation also comes is in no small part the result of the perception that her work is underappreciated or even resented by the public. Many of the consultants expressed beliefs similar to Shea's that if you ask a member of the public what they think caseworkers do they will say that caseworkers are, "just giving away the farm and don't do anything all day except sit at our desks and take numerous breaks and long lunches and just have all these wonderful things you know all these wonderful perks...[caseworkers] give benefits to blacks and Mexicans and everybody but white folk." Some of the consultants saw the decrease in bonuses and the lack of raises, even for

experienced veterans, as a manifestation of the public's lack of respect for and under-appreciation of their work.

Since the caseworkers are sharing these narratives and discourse in dialogue with multiple audiences both real and imagined, it is important to realize the social implications of the stories that they tell and the identity that the caseworkers portray through these stories. Discourse and especially narratives that highlight how hard they work or the level of work expected of them in their job serve as a counter narrative to the "lazy bureaucrat" narratives that they often encounter through social media, acquaintances, and disgruntled clients. When the consultants are speaking with me these counter narratives enter into conversation with these imagined audiences as well with the conversations that they imagined I have encountered as a member of the general media consuming public. Simultaneously, they seek to confirm my positive evaluation of their work ethic.

The theme of hard work was by far the most prevalent in caseworkers narratives and discourse. In fact, when asked what is the one thing that she wished that the general public knew about her job as a caseworker Kim Price replied, "I wish people knew how hard we worked. I really do because we are really underpaid. And I know everyone in the world thinks that they are underpaid." She continued by recounting an interaction that she had with a temporary employee, Spencer, only moments before saying, "Spencer came over earlier and asked me for a case and I pulled out all of these cases and he was like 'Wow' and I said, 'You know this isn't even all of them this is just in the last two weeks.'" In this case Kim uses both discourse and narrative to demonstrate the amount of paperwork and actual time that goes into her job. She also identifies that the feeling that other imagined audiences would not understand how hard she works is of primary concern to her. She addresses the idea that her job is hard work because of the far-

reaching consequences that result from her decisions, not only from the sheer amount of time and effort it involves.

Yeah, its not a job where you sit behind a desk and do nothing all day. Honestly when I got this job I actually thought that. I thought, “I’ve got it made. I’m going to sit behind a desk and type all day.” But I never realized that I would impact [people] by what I do; the kids that I would feed, the sick kids that would get medication, the grandmothers with the heart problems, and just the stories that we hear everyday. I had no idea that it was so much. Sometimes as a caseworker you feel like you are the lawyer, the counselor, the mother, the father. You are just all of that in one is what you really feel like. So our outlet is each other, it really is.

The frequency with which consultants mentioned how hard they work is especially ironic when one considers that the stigmas associated with casework are often rooted in a public belief that those receiving aid are lazy and therefore caseworkers are enabling laziness. This perception has increased drastically in the years during and after the Reagan administration when the public rhetoric shifted from “the language of a ‘need’ to a culture of ‘dependency’” (Turgeon et al. 2014, 657). Although the consultants recognize me as a sympathetic figure who does not hold the same prejudices and misperceptions that they often encounter, they still feel the need to emphasize their work ethic through the stories that they shared with me. This is similar to what Patricia Sawin found in her work with Bessie Eldreth. Sawin found that when Eldreth was talking about work she often was responding to her present listener but also “responding to those historical local discourses relative to which she has over the years developed her sense of self and her self-presentation as a moral actor” (Sawin 2004, 56).

Although many of the consultants’ mentions of their own work ethic come in the form of discourse, their efforts to defend the work ethic of the clients whom they serve are almost exclusively passionately told personal experience narratives. One such example is Tiffany’s story

about a client whom she called one of her “heart-pullers,” or clients whose stories particularly affected her.

Tiffany: I have a family right now... they used to both have job – both work full time. [They have] a son that’s in school and he [the father] lost his job first. She lost her job second, she got another job and she lost transportation to get to the 2nd job. They were sharing cars at one point then lost that car as well and lost the 2nd job she had. So they lost everything. And they tried to get into housing, [but they] couldn’t get into housing because of previous eviction, or something like that, that they had on their report. So they ended up with a trailer in a trailer park that the owner had said if you pay me 1,500 dollars the trailer is yours and you will just have to pay the lot rent. So their focus is on paying for the trailer and paying for the lot rent. And their Work First check pays the payment on their trailer and pays their lot rent and pays nothing else. So that’s what they paid for with their Work First money, a payment on their trailer and their lot rent and so lights get turned off...

But then she called me Wednesday and said, “Mrs. Dunn, my lights have been turned off.” And we started talking about her job search and potential jobs and things like that. She is actually one that had gotten a job while she has been on Work First. She got a job and they found out that she didn’t have transportation and she was going to walk to work. She had walked to her interview, she had walked to her orientation. And then they asked her the third time or fourth time that she had shown up for training, they said, “How do you get to work?” And she said, “Well, I walk.” And they asked her how long it took her to get there and she said, “An hour.”

Caroline: An hour? In this heat? Wow.

Tiffany: Mmhm. But she was walking and her second day she asked if there was any way that we could help buy shoes. I was like, “I will definitely help with shoes.” This was something that I was like, “Yep, you need some shoes, you are walking to work. Let’s do this, let’s get you some shoes.” I went and I picked her up and I took her to buy shoes because we are allowed to do certain amounts of money for employment and things like that. So I took her to buy shoes. And she walked, I think it was maybe two more days and they asked her, “How are you getting to work and she told them it takes an hour to get here, blah blah. And they said, “Yeah that’s not going to work.” But she had not been late or anything. They terminated her because she did not have a car.

Caroline: They can legally do that?

Tiffany: We are an at-will state. They can fire her for any reason. Is that not crazy?

Caroline: That’s like getting punished for dedication.

Tiffany: That's what I thought! Like she was walking an hour to work and I think that week was the hottest week we had. It was in the 90's, mid to upper 90's the whole time. And I'm like, no, why do that? That just bothered me. She was like "I hadn't been late." She called me very upset and crying because she was excited because it was *just* an hour away from her home, an hour *walk*, just an hour. And she thought that was great and she was thinking that maybe with her first or second paycheck she was going to try and buy a bike. And I was like, "That would be perfect. That would cut out on some time and that would make things easier." She had found a pawnshop that would let her put down like five dollars and then she could make payments and I was like, "That would be great, a bike would be good. That would be some kind of transportation." And then they let her go.

So that bothered me a lot. I didn't bother verifying things like that because I knew they [the employer] wouldn't give me that information. All they would tell me is the last day of employment because we can pull it up and that's all they would say to me if I asked them. It was sad. I didn't like that. [It was in a] restaurant. She was walking an hour then working 6 hours and then walking an hour again. So walking 8 hours a day. That one bothered me.

This demonstrates not only the willingness of clients to work hard at a job but to go above and beyond what most people would expect of someone to find a job. It directly contradicts the narratives they encounter from the media and members of the public that paint the picture of the "welfare queen" who is taking advantage of the system. All of the consultants told narratives like this one as the rule rather than the exception while acknowledging that the general public holds the opposite opinion, where laziness and fraud is the rule and a genuine desire to better oneself is the exception. Shea recounts a time when she witnessed attempted welfare fraud and the reactions to those around her in order to underscore how rare it actually is and the public's skewed perceptions and disproportionate reactions to it.

I will tell you one thing. I was at Food Lion one day and you know how there is that urban legend about the woman who uses her food stamps to buy birthday cake? And most of the urban legends are like her daughter just finished chemo or something that makes you feel awful?

Well, I saw a woman who used food stamps to buy birthday cake and the woman behind me was talking a bunch of smack. "That's terrible and blah blah blah."

But I thought, “You don’t know. You don’t know what that cake means to that child. And by the way all little kids want cake; little kids don’t care what your financial situation is. Every little kid wants cake. And don’t say, ‘Well it’s cheaper to buy a mix.’ No, so you buy a mix say that’s a buck. You got to have eggs. Say you go to the dollar store, you need milk that’s a buck, oil that’s a buck, it adds up. So instead of paying six or seven bucks she paid five bucks.” And I think to myself, “Why are you being so judgey? What do you care if this little kid has a birthday cake? Really is that where it’s at for you?” And I felt very self-righteous and I wanted to turn around and say, “Stop that! You don’t know her, you don’t know her story!” But I didn’t ‘cause I didn’t want to get arrested.

But I was standing there getting ready to pull out my stuff and this young young girl taps me on the shoulder and asks me if I want to buy some of her food stamps. I’m a food stamp worker. And I thought, “Wow.”

You know how in books and movies like in the matrix time stands still? That’s what happened I swear to you that’s what happened. When I tell this to my husband and say time stood still he says you’re so dramatic. I’m like I’m telling you!

I just looked at her and I couldn’t come up with her name but I knew her and I said, “No. I won’t but here is why,” and I flipped my badge and said, “Because I’m a food stamp caseworker, you might want to go on.” And she made a beeline. And the woman beside me who had just finish being rung up said, “Well that’s just typical of food stamp clients, that’s just typical of people on welfare.” And I had to stop her because the girl ringing me up was my client who I had taken an application for who was working two jobs. And so when the woman got through I said, “Not for nothing, Ma'am, but you know what, I’ve been a caseworker ten years and that’s the first time this has ever happened to me.” I said, “Most of my clients are very hard working people working two or three jobs. That’s very rare what you just saw.” I said, “Most people are hard working people who are trying to make ends meet, I promise you.” But she wouldn’t listen because that met her expectation. That’s what Fox News told her. That’s what her community has told her. So somebody who says that’s not true, and I felt so bad because the woman ringing me up that’s my client too working two jobs doing what she’s supposed to do and she has to hear that and what do you do with that...

And I tell people about that and most people have the same reaction as that woman because that’s what the news tells them. They never show you on the news that most of my clients work retail. Most of my clients are single parents who work retail and another job. Most of my clients who are single parents and work retail and another job can’t get child support and they have pursued it and they have children.

Both of these stories not only to serve as a counter narratives to what caseworkers hear from the general public and media, but also enforce a sense of the legitimacy of their work. Although caseworkers acknowledge the flaws of the system of which they are a part, they continue to retell these stories of client determination and hard work. These stories are used to point out the rarity of abuse of the system and simultaneously defend their clients' character. The caseworkers' ability to defend their clients is especially important because they often closely identify with them. These stories also allow them to portray to me – an outsider – the value of the service they provide to these families and to society as a whole. Furthermore, it highlights the irony that the stigma that they feel they often face from the public is that they share the characteristic of laziness with their clients when in fact the quality they share is that both groups are overworked and underpaid.

The consultants described encountering different types of stigmas depending on the type of work that they do. That is, caseworkers who are involved with Child Protective Services encounter stereotypes that are different from those who work with the financial aspects of providing aid, specifically those involved with intake, Work First, and SNAP or “food stamps.” The consultants who work in Child Protective Services are often accused of being “baby snatchers” whose sole goal is to take children away from their families. Hunter explains,

I think people think a couple of things. Number one they think all we do is remove kids. It's really rare that we remove kids. It's like they think that that's the fix that you just go in and remove them and everything is cool after that. The research shows that kids are best with their families if you can provide the services to make the home environment safe. So I think people's perceptions of us is just removing tons of kids.

Leslie Jones, another Child Protective Services worker, echoes this adding more detail about the practical reasons for avoiding “baby snatching.”

Well, a lot of people in the community still look at CPS as baby snatchers. Believe me that is the absolute last thing that a CPS worker wants to do. Number one because of the effects on the children from being taken away from the only people they know. Good bad or ugly that's the only parent they knew. And then [to be] put in a strange environment, that's hard on the children and that's going to be hard on them forever. They will always remember that. So the last thing the average worker wants to do. Plus there is so much paperwork and going to court. It's no fun. I'm telling you snatching babies like they say we do is no fun. We have the first 7 days, second 7 days, and 30-day adjudication. I mean that's a lot of court. Plus you have all the court paperwork and for court cases documentation has to be perfect because that paperwork has to be looked at during adjudication. So it's no fun at all but still people think, "Oh god."

It amazes me how many houses I go to even now and people say, "Please don't take my children because the house is dirty." And I'm like, "No, don't even worry about that. We can fix this. This is fixable, okay? Don't worry, I'm not going to take your children."

Although the stigmas that caseworkers face vary depending on the type of work they do, several consultants in other areas of Social Services described encountering members of the public who apply their misperceptions of Child Protective Services onto all areas of social work. Tiffany Dunn described a recent encounter with these stigmas.

It's a Facebook thing that I have seen lately. It's "apply to be a social worker" and then they make all these comments underneath it and I had never seen it before until just recently. And so see all the things that people post on it... "They are taking children and why would you want to do that? The people that do this are low lifes and scum..." People just bash social work – bash it.

Because a lot of people only think that social work is CPS work. They think that it is only about taking children. They don't think there are any other parts of social work. So most of the time that people start talking about social work type things and they don't know who I am or what I do I don't say anything. [Laughs] And that sounds kind of odd.

I have been in situations where they would say "Well, where do you work?" and I will say, "Well I work for the county." I leave out the I'm a social worker part and just leave it at that because I feel like social work is one of those things that some people understand it's not just about taking children and some people don't.

This demonstrates how the negative conversations with which consultants have been engaged can reflect how they present themselves to outsiders and therefore how they choose to enact their identity in social situations. Kim Price demonstrates how these misperceptions can even become a source of physical danger for the caseworkers.

Kim: A lot of people think that they [the children taken into custody by CPS] come here and they don't.

Caroline: People think they stay here?

Kim: Yeah, we have had bomb threats before. They think that when they go out and take the children they bring them here and they don't for that reason. But we have had several bomb threats because of that and that is one thing that has always worried me about this place – no metal protectors, we actually just got a security guard a couple of years ago.

In addition to also having the aid they provide confused with that of Child Protective Services, the caseworkers that provide financially based aid to families encounter an entire additional set of stigmas. Tiffany explains her frustration with the common mistake of people conflating Work First, or “the check” as it is often described, with unemployment or “free money.”

Yeah, they just don't know what they are talking about because Alamance County is pretty, not large, but it's a good sized county and for there to only be about 167 people [on Work First] it's not bad. Especially when the Work First program has that reputation that everybody gets it, and I don't know why. I guess they think welfare, welfare is assistance it's not Work First. It's any type, well not any type, but its assistance in general... Nobody knows that a Work First social worker doesn't just give away money. We do a lot more. We coach and counsel and guide. I will go pick somebody up and take somebody to an interview if I feel that they are going to be successful in that position and they are going to be able to get there on their own eventually. So people don't know that type of thing. To me those are the good things that people don't know about the Work First program and it's not about, as they say, “free money” or the free daycare... And people don't realize that Work First is not meant to live off of. It's meant to be temporary assistance. I wish more people knew that.

I had to do a presentation on how to explain to the public what Work First is. I always feel like I am the cheerleader of Work First. In the presentation I talked about the way that I know Work First shouldn't be advertised, but it's kind of like a word of mouth type thing and that's not always a good thing. We know that the original message by the time it gets to the end message its something completely different by the time that it has been told from one friend to number twelve it's going to be completely different. Normally it ends up starting good and ending bad like, "You get a free check and free daycare," to the first person saying, "You gotta to some job searching, you gotta go to class," but by the end person it's, "Oh you can get free daycare, you can get a free check." But that's how Work First is advertised. It is not unemployment, it is cash assistance. I wish that they knew that it wasn't as much money and it's not meant to live off of.

These caseworkers also face criticism from the very clients whom they are trying to help. Kim describes how clients often accuse her of being prejudiced,

I used to have clients say, "If I was white I could get it or if I was black I could get it."

And I actually told one lady, we used to have paper files, and I said, "Do you see a black, white or Hispanic manual up here on the wall?" and she said, "No." And I said, "That's because we don't have one. We don't judge you based on your color. I don't care if you are white, black, or Hispanic. The rules are the rules." So that is I guess my biggest pet peeve is don't just assume you are a certain color that you are going to be treated, not by me.

However, not all stigmas are communicated in such an outright manner. All of the caseworkers expressed a sense of unease talking about their job with people in the greater community that stemmed not from direct comments but rather from a feeling that those outside their profession had little interest in what they did. Consultants also mentioned that they believed that others found the often-difficult situations caseworkers witnessed on a daily basis not suitable for casual, or as several consultants described it "cookout," conversation. Leslie expresses this saying,

I don't really talk about it. Pretty much everyone knows what I do but I don't sit around and talk about it, so my job doesn't come up in a conversation. Very rarely am I sitting around at a cookout and someone is like, "So what's going on with Child Protective Services?" No one wants to know. And so I'm not going to talk

about it because nobody cares. I mean they care, don't get me wrong, but nobody wants that to be the topic at a cookout.

Hunter echoes this sentiment saying,

When you do tell people what you do very few people ask questions at all. And most of us do identify[with being a caseworker]. They always say men especially identify with their work, so you would kind of like to share with people but nobody wants to hear this stuff because most of it is pretty sad. And that's kind of sad.

In addition to this feeling of uneasiness, there are a myriad other reasons that caseworkers feel that they cannot share their experience with those outside the office. The most frequently mentioned reason was the sense that no one who works outside of social work understands what they do. Shea expressed that she tends to socialize mainly with other caseworkers because she feels like no one else could understand what she does and the environment in which she does it. She believes that even her husband, whose parents were social workers, cannot sufficiently understand because he himself has not experienced her job.

I'm really lucky. My husband comes from a family of social workers so he knows not to talk shit to me. When we get together at the dinner table he says, "I'll talk about politics, I'll talk about religion, I'll even talk about sports; I don't want to hear about the shitty shit shitty people do. I will talk about anything else can we just *not* talk about social work?"

Because that's what happens. Most of my friends work here and what does that tell you, right? My husband is like, "You got to get new friends, Babe. You got to go out and join, like don't you want to knit or scrapbook or something?" Because all of my friends are here. Like my good friend Kim Price, Kim and I hang out. We have lunch together, I watched her daughter grow up. All my friends are here. I have friends in Adult Services, I have friends in CPS. We go and have lunch and talk crap about our job.

That's it, all my friends are here. I don't have outside friends. How can I talk about my life with outside friends? No one is going to understand! It's sort of the same sort of thing; it's that kinship it's that "I understand." So yeah my friends are in it with me.

Another prevalent reason for caseworkers' inability to share their experiences with non-caseworkers is concerns about the clients' right to confidentiality. Even if they do not share clients' names they must be careful not to share any indirectly identifying information about their clients.

Although Tiffany agreed with the other consultants in that she felt that she could not talk to acquaintances in the general public about her job, in some ways she did not express the same sense of isolation as the other consultants because she felt able to talk more with her spouse than other consultants.

I try not to talk too much about my caseload and things like that [to non-caseworkers] because I never know who is going to know who. I do tend to talk to my husband the most. He is a police officer so he understands the importance of confidentiality and I always leave out names. I like to tell the good stories, that I had a client come in and she got a job after I helped her with doing some interviewing tips and things like that. I always like to tell him the good things because he knows that I like to help people and I want to help people succeed. But then I always have the ones that are not very happy with me and leave terrible, horrible, no good messages for me and then I still have to call them back and talk to them and explain things. So sometimes it's, "I got cussed out today" and that type of thing.

Here she explains how her husband's career as an Alamance County police officer gives him a shared appreciation for the importance of confidentiality that often isolates other workers. This shared understanding allows her to feel that sharing highlights and low points of her work with her husband is acceptable as long as she leaves out clients' names even though she would not usually feel comfortable sharing these stories with people who did not have this mutual appreciation.

The other consultants, like Shea, all frequently mentioned that though their spouses were supportive of their work, they could not understand the consultant's experience as a caseworker. Tiffany, on the other hand, never made this claim about her husband although she did assert this

about other acquaintances. While she only directly mentions the similarity to her husband's work as a police officer in that it increases his understanding of confidentiality, it is important to note that he also has a career as a public servant. His career is also centered largely on interacting with members of society who, like Tiffany's clients, the media and popular culture portray as undesirable and rejected.

Since most caseworkers feel that non-caseworkers cannot understand their experiences or have little interest in hearing about them the narratives that caseworkers tell each other are crucial tools for coping with the stress of the job and for negotiating a stigmatized identity. Kim explains,

Well we normally talk to each other because nobody understands and we all say that you don't understand this job unless you do it. And I can go home and tell my husband, now I never use names, but I say I had this crazy client today and he will just look at me like, "Okay, you sit behind a desk and type all day."

And that's the misconception with this job. When you sit behind the desk and type all day you are dealing with people's lives. Every move you make affects a family and that's the big thing that people don't realize. There is just no telling what comes to roost. Our release is each other because we can turn to each other and say, "I've been so busy today. It's been crazy, I can't get this done." That is a lot of where we are out now with the two systems merging. As a caseworker I have always took pride in my work and like to be ahead and that is just not possible at this time, as you have seen.

As Kim describes, the caseworkers rely on each other for help completing the responsibilities of their job as well as for emotional support. This makes the narratives that they share in order to establish community even more important. It also strengthens the bonds between the caseworkers who engage in narrative sharing since the exchange of personal information is a means of maintaining intimacy (Tannen 1998, 106).

Generalized Experience Narratives

In a career in which client privacy is of great concern it is not surprising that many of the narratives that the caseworkers shared with me would be in the form of generalized experience narratives rather than narratives that contain specific details that could potentially identify certain clients. I found, however, that generalized experience narratives were often used to perform an even more telling function; they were often used to recount experiences that caseworkers themselves had so often that it became difficult for them to quickly recall a specific instance. In their classic study of personal narrative William Labov and Joshua Waletzky suggest that people usually tell stories about unique or unusual experiences (cited by Tangherlini 1998, xxii). While this is true for personal experience narratives, my research suggests that for these caseworkers generalized experience narratives most often serve the opposite purpose – to demonstrate the high frequency with which the narrator has a certain type of experience.

This differs significantly from what Pauline Greenhill found in her work on the use of generalized experience narratives and personal experience narratives by English immigrants living in Canada. Greenhill found that these speakers used the generalized experience narratives primarily to describe the actions of others and to compare them to the expectations they held based on their experience living in the United Kingdom. Similarly, in my work on Irish settled people's perceptions of Irish Travellers, my consultants almost exclusively used generalized experience narratives to describe observations about the Travellers and personal experience narratives to recount their direct interactions with them. Therefore, in these cases the generalized experience narratives were a result of the consultant's attempt to form and describe a reaction to something with which she has little direct experience. The consultants with the least contact with Travellers told the most generalized experience narratives. The caseworkers' generalization

narratives on the other hand, indicate the opposite. They are a melding of innumerable personal experience narratives and show that a certain type of experience occurs so frequently that it is almost too unremarkable for a seasoned caseworker to remember specifically. Conversely, the tone in which the caseworkers told some generalized experience narratives about interactions with clients indicated a narrator who was envisioning a specific personal experience narrative although their concerns about client confidentiality necessitated that it was told to me in more general terms.

Despite these variations, the caseworkers' generalized experience narratives share a function with those in the other two studies – that is for the narrator to establish differential identity by distancing herself from another group. In the other two studies generalized experience narratives were used almost exclusively to perpetuate an “us versus them” mentality. With the caseworkers however, this depends on the subject of the narrative. Typically, if a consultant was describing his or her interactions with clients the creation of an “us versus them” mentality was not the purpose, although this was almost always the case when using generalization narratives to discuss the general public. This is not surprising when one considers the frequency with which caseworkers mentioned the importance of connecting with their clients and of clients seeing them as part of the same “team.” Using these generalized experience narratives helps consultants perform their identity as a caseworker as one that is distinct from that of the general public. It helps to emphasize the extent to which non-caseworkers cannot understand their experiences. Simultaneously, they serve as a way to present caseworkers as a finite group and so, in a way, perform the importance of solidarity among caseworkers as well as among caseworkers and clients. Although personal experience narratives can also perform these functions, it seemed to

be more frequently the aim of generalized experience narratives rather than more a product of the telling, as was often the case with personal experience narratives.

Reported Speech

The stories that consultants share with me often fulfill very different purposes than those they share with coworkers because the real and imagined audiences for which they are performing change. In these narratives is often used to establish aspects of their identity and even, in some cases, separate themselves from other caseworkers. Reported speech can serve a variety of functions such as to illustrate the character of others involved, economically convey action, and encourage praise from the audience (Tannen 1998). In the narratives caseworkers shared with me it is often reports of their own speech that offer insight into how they want me to perceive them and what traits they believe an effective caseworker should possess. For example, in order to demonstrate the lack of tolerance Shea has for many of the other caseworkers' preoccupation with the few male employees she reenacts the following speech sequence jumping seamlessly between speaker roles.

But the first time a guy shows up it's, "Did you see the new guy? Do you think he's cute? Do you think he's gay?"

"Well I don't want to fuck him, so I don't care."

My friend Jason used to be across the hall, he is upstairs now. Jason calls himself The Stallion, so you have to appreciate that.

"Did you see the cute guy?"

"You mean Jason? Jason that works across the hall?"

"Oh you're so lucky!"

"Yes I feel lucky. I feel lucky to look at his shiny bald head everyday." And he will sit there and go, "Shea, Shea, check out the gun show!"

"Jason, have you got any of these recerts done? Can you do as many as me?"

"No."

"Then shut up. I don't want to hear it. I ain't interested, that don't play here."

Here not only does Shea use a sarcastic tone in her own responses to criticize the reactions of other female caseworkers, she also uses this opportunity to position herself as superior in a

competition of skill with a male coworker. These two acts allow her to demonstrate the value that she places on her own skills. Although Shea, like the other consultants, prefers to identify with the value of helping people rather than with the career centered label of caseworker, this emphasis shows that proficiency at her job is part of the identity that she wishes to share with others. Although this might have been accomplished by simply retelling a story without reported speech, Shea uses reported speech as an aesthetic choice in order to entertain the listener and keep him or her engaged in what she is saying. This use of reported speech allows Shea to demonstrate a sense of humor with which she strongly identifies. It also allows her present herself as tough but not self-important. This makes her more sympathetic and relatable to her audience. At the same time, the reported speech that Shea uses to distance herself from these caseworkers also connects her to them. This is because reporting the dialogue between oneself and another speaker requires the appropriation of others' utterances and therefore binds them together in a "community of words" (Tannen 1998, 133).

Tiffany employs reported speech in order to convey to the audience both the difficulty of her job through the struggles that she sometimes faces in communicating with clients and in order to characterize herself as patient, non-judgmental, and caring – the importance of which she explicitly states in discourse. Tiffany describes a difficult time that required a lot of patience in which a man refused to fill out the necessary paperwork and confusion ensued from a lack of communication.

At the end he asked me if I had ever been homeless.
I said, "No I've never been homeless."
He said, "Have you ever gone from having everything to having nothing?"
I said, "No, I haven't but this is one of the situations that I am able to help. This Work First program is one of the opportunities that I am given to offer you assistance to get back to where you were or as remotely close as possible."
And he said that he needed a social worker.

“I’m a social worker,” I tell him.
“No, I mean a real social worker.”
And I said “Okay, let’s talk about this.” I was like, “Have a seat again. What does a real social worker do?”
He was like, “House calls.”
“Check, I do that.”
“Point me in the right avenue to help me find jobs or get a resume or help me find a doctor.”
“Check, I do that.”
“Help me get daycare.”
“Check, here is a list of childcare providers that you can look at and find childcare.”
“Well what about a social worker that just helps in all aspects of my life?”
I said, “Like what kind of aspects?”
“I would rather talk to a social worker”
“Okay.”
And then he said, “Where do you think the good social workers are? Do you think they are in Charlotte? Are they in Raleigh?”
And I was so confused, I didn’t even know how to respond. I just said, “I’m not sure. I can find out but I’m not sure.”

That was a very confusing orientation.

She recounts the details of what was said by both parties instead of explaining the situation more generally in order to more effectively place the audience in her shoes, so to speak, so that they can better appreciate the patience that is necessary for her to be successful at her job. Simply stating that she was confused because the client did not consider her to be a “real social worker” would not have had the same effect on the audience as recreating and performing the conversation for them.

Both Shea and Tiffany use reported speech to engage the listener but for different reasons. Shea is using the reported speech to demonstrate that she is authoritative and competent. Tiffany on the other hand demonstrates a degree of feeling helpless by recounting a time in which she was not upset that her competency was being questioned, rather she was frustrated that she felt unable to help her client.

Establishing Hierarchy

Caseworkers use narratives to establish a hierarchy among each other that is based primarily on seniority and experience. Shea explains a typical exchange of stories that might take place between caseworkers in a conversation about the strange names that clients give their children.

Shea: But I can tell that [story] to someone here and it's like playing the dozens. There is always one-upmanship. So I might tell a story and say the kid's name was Chapstick just to give you something, well my friend...

Caroline: Did that actually happen?

Shea: [Pause] No, but see I had to think. Immediately my friend will go through her Rolodex and if I said Chapstick she will come up with one who was Toilet Paper. And they get it. It's like, "Can you believe this?" "Yeah and I can do one better I had a client that did X" and then someone else is like "No, I had a client that did such and such."

It's a way for us to compare notes but it's also almost like flexing your muscle. Like how long have you been here? You tell stories and it's like it's never as great as it is right now. It's like your parents' stories about I went uphill both ways in the snow. That piece it's a way of being part of the community, being part of the tribe. I know that sounds very bizarre.

Shea explains how this sort of "one-upmanship" serves several functions. Foremost, it typically demonstrates seniority since those who have been caseworkers for the longest amount of time would presumably have the most extensive collection of personal experience narratives from which to draw.

After telling one of the stories that she and Kim Price often share about a client who lived with her husband and five children while her boyfriend lived in a tent in the backyard, Shea explained how when she began her career at Alamance County Social Services she always aspired to be "one of those women" who could swap stories as proof of their years of experience and therefore of their expertise and status.

We are talking about a family who when you talk about this particular family people are like, “Oh yeah, oh yeah!” You just mention the name and “Oh yeah...” And everyone has a story of this family and that’s not true anywhere else except in here [Department of Social Services]. But it’s dying because we don’t have any veterans. When you tell it to a newbie they just go, “oh, okay,” because there is no investment right...but that’s it there is no investment. And it’s that I walked uphill both ways, you know?

When I came here I wanted to be able to tell those stories. I wanted to sit at a table and when somebody said the, you know, Smith family I wanted to go “Oh yeah!” I like that. I wanted to have a crazy story. I wanted that. I wanted to be able to sit at the table and people to say a name and me just be able to follow along. That showed that you had been here a long time and you knew stuff. That’s not valued anymore. They don’t care.

This is also an example of one of the many points at which Shea discusses how the lack of veterans, and therefore the lack of people who have enough experience to participate in this type of story sharing, is changing the office dynamic. She implies that the “newbies” are not invested in becoming part of this office culture in the way that she was when she first came to the department. Roemer suggests that, like the stories that veteran caseworkers share, photocopy lore shared in corporate offices can offer affirmation of the office worker’s self worth and can be an expression of their identity (Roemer 1994, 123). Roemer finds that the more bureaucratic and impersonal an office environment the more workers share the narratives expressed in the photocopies (Roemer 1994, 123). Conversely, Shea describes the opposite experience with social services caseworkers and the expression of narratives to assert identity and establish self-worth and community. As the turnover rate rises in the Alamance County Department of Social Services office, the deep connections between coworkers wane and with it the frequency with which they share stories to establish community.

Since Shea considers the engagement in these storytelling sessions essential to establishing and maintaining a sense of community in her line of work, she believes that the

“newbies” disinterest in participating in this sharing of narratives is breaking down the sense of community within the office that once made her work especially rewarding. She believes that the newer caseworkers are not as “invested” or interested in this type of narrative interaction and community building because they likely will not stay at the Alamance County office long due to the high turnover. A few of these newer caseworkers and many of the veterans still value the type of experienced-based hierarchy that sharing these narratives help to form. However, since the newer caseworkers make up the majority of those working in the building, Shea believes that those in management positions – who make decisions regarding promotion – are increasingly devaluing seniority and experience in favor of acquiescing to the needs of the majority. Shea and Jasmine described an example of how this devaluing of seniority at multiple levels, from “newbies” to upper management, is manifesting itself.

Shea (directed to Jasmine): But the dynamics here in social services, like okay you can appreciate that all we have here is newbies and temps right?

Jasmine: Mhm.

Shea: And there is an adversarial [atmosphere], especially with me. I don't really like temps because temps took people that have been here and put them out in the training building and [management] let them have their offices. And I know what you're thinking, “Well that's petty, like having to share a room with your sister. That's petty.” No its not.

Jasmine: They are having to deal with roaches and rats.

Shea: Yeah, there was a dead rat. They brought in janitors and maintenance men and they couldn't find the rat. But my friend she has a nose for news and she found the rat. She has a nose for news, god bless her. But they don't like old-school caseworkers. Everything is new and everything is about how it *feels*.

Here, by specifically addressing that it is not petty to be upset that the temporary employees are taking senior caseworkers' offices from them, Shea is once again claiming that it is not the change itself that frustrates her but the lack of respect for her knowledge and experience that it

signifies. This is similar to her discussion of the way that the bureaucratic system no longer rewards veteran caseworkers with longevity checks.

They have taken our longevity. We used to get longevity. It was a way to thank people for their service, for their status. That's how you kept a veteran. After a couple of years you'd get two percent at Christmas time. And the longer you stayed the bigger your longevity got. And it was a thank you, especially times when you weren't getting a raise, when your workload was increasing. Well that's gone because we didn't deserve that. We didn't deserve that so they took it. And it wasn't just the loss of money, like you said it's the principle. It was a slap in the face. It means that you don't respect what I do; you don't think what I do is important; you don't like the people I serve so you don't like me. And for a lot of us that's personal. For many people who are here they have either been on the other side of the desk or they know someone who has.

When Shea started working at the Department of Social Services seniority was valued partially because it implied the ability to pass down valuable occupational knowledge. In his work with the narratives that paramedics share Tim Tangherlini found that certain types of stories, such as those about combative patients, provided experiential information and thus served didactic purposes (Tangherlini 1998, xxvi). Similarly, Shea mentioned that narratives about interactions with clients sometimes serve as teaching tools because at the same time that caseworkers were using them to “play the dozens” they were also a way for them to “compare notes” and help each other know what to expect when dealing with a given client or situation. Narratives can also serve as tools to teach newcomers how to treat their fellow caseworkers, if they choose to listen. One such example served as a warning to Shea about the importance of being courteous to caseworkers in other parts of the department in order to be successful at her job.

There was a Child Protective Services worker and she had this parking spot that she liked and a food stamp worker parked there and its first come first served. And she came to the food stamp floor and told that worker, “Don't you ever park in my spot again.” So she had a very hard time as a CPS worker getting her calls

and emails answered. And everyday she would go there and there would be a different car in her spot...for months.

But it is, it's the principle. It's about, "No you are not going to come in here and talk to mine like that, absolutely not. Who do you think you are? And not only are you not going to do it but we are going to send you a message. Not only do your calls and your emails not get answered, every morning you are going to see a different car in your spot and you are going to know why." That takes up a lot of energy. That's energy that most of us don't have anymore. But that's the legend.

Narrative Dimensions

People tell stories in different ways and for different purposes. Some tell stories to articulate a clear unwavering preformed position while others tell stories as part of the process of working through a certain event (Ochs and Capps 2001). The stories that the consultants told were almost exclusively the result of a clear unwavering stance. This led to narratives that Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps would define as having high tellability, singular tellership, closed linearity, detachedness (rather than embeddedness in the conversation), and a certain moral stance. These characteristics all fall on the same end of Ochs and Capps' spectrum of narrative dimensions and are often associated with narratives that have a clearly defined purpose. The more clearly defined the narrator's purpose in telling the story and the stronger the feelings they are attempting to communicate, the less the narrative tends to waver between the two ends of their spectrum (Ochs and Capps 2001).³

³ Tellership – Focuses on the narrative as a social activity involving participants who see themselves as more or less active tellers (Ochs and Capps 2001, 55).

Tellability – Acknowledges that some events are more or less reportable than others (Ochs and Capps 2001, 55-56).

Embeddedness – Detached narratives recount an experience in one or more lengthy conversational turns. Embedded narratives are engaged in conversational turns or varying length (Ochs and Capps, 36).

The tellability, tellership, detached embeddedness and linearity are partially the result of the semi-formal structure of the recorded conversation as opposed to casual informal everyday conversation (Ochs and Capps 2001). However, the fact that many of these stories have been shared multiple times before with other caseworkers also contributes to the stories' unwavering characteristics. The narratives that I received have been altered from these versions that caseworkers shared with each other to accommodate client confidentiality expectations and multiple real and imagined audiences. These audiences might include myself as a present "real" audience, and imagined audiences that they believe I may have encountered in the past or audiences that they imagine this work could reach in the future.

The only area in which the consultants tended to have a more uncertain or fluid stance was when they were discussing the extent to which being a caseworker is a part of their identity. Harsh public perceptions do not cause caseworkers to have a negative view of their work. Still, the fact that this is the only subject about which the consultants wavered onto the other side of Ochs and Capps' spectrum demonstrates how these public perceptions complicate caseworkers' notions of identity as it pertains to their careers.

Conclusion

Since narratives are by their nature performative, they are a reflection and a means of creating the narrator's identity. The narratives that caseworkers share are immensely helpful in understanding their experiences. But they are also a way that the narrator demonstrates to another person a certain part of who they are, how they want to be perceived, and often how they

Linearity – How events in a narrative are arranged in terms of time and causality (Ochs and Capps 2001, 40).

Moral Stance – A disposition towards what is good and valuable and how one ought to live in the world (Ochs and Capps 2001, 45).

want the audience to perceive others. The narratives that caseworkers tell are vital to their creation and maintenance of community within the office environment. This is especially important since they often feel isolated from and misunderstood by non-caseworkers. They also help to establish hierarchy and indoctrinate new workers, ideally ensuring that important career experiences and expertise continues to be valued. Different narrative strategies, such as the use of reported speech, allow caseworkers to more effectively engage their audience and portray the aspects of their identity that they seek to highlight. Their narratives also serve as a tool for combatting popular negative perceptions of their career and are a counter-narrative to the “lazy bureaucrat” characterization that they often encounter in popular discourse.

Many of the existing studies on laborlore focus on the dynamics between workers and supervisors. This research, however, allows us to understand how narratives function in an office environment where stories are being shared primarily amongst workers of roughly the same status. The narratives that my consultants have shared suggest that although workers in many careers may feel underappreciated, as is the case for the medics in Tangherlini’s study, caseworkers are actively vilified rather than simply underappreciated.

With rapidly changing office dynamics and political and popular opinion about public assistance growing ever more hostile, it is more important than ever to understand the experiences of the caseworkers who are at the heart of the system, those people who for the general public are so often out of sight and out of mind. Understanding their experiences as caseworkers can help us better understand how we might aid in their success and thus, the success of our communities.

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