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Youth Workers' Perceptions of Their Career Choice and Helping Ability in Relationship with Their Own Lived Experiences

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Youth Workers' Perceptions of Their Career Choice and Helping Ability in Relationship with Their Own Lived Experiences

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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Abstract

This research endeavor examined youth workers' perspectives of their own

helping ability in relationship to their lived experience. The intent of the project was to

determine what extent youth workers' lived experiences, especially experiences in their

families of origin, impacted their career choice, helping ability, and ability to maintain

boundaries with the youth they served.   Limited research exists regarding the field of

youth work. Youth workers of interest in this study work primarily with vulnerable

populations of youth in crisis between the ages of ten to twenty-three. Qualitative semi-

standardized interviews were conducted in an exploratory study of 10 voluntary

participants who identified themselves as youth workers, working in the Twin Cities

metro and surrounding areas of Minnesota. Several themes emerged from the analysis of

data including: youth workers' perception that helping is a way of life; youth work is

more than a job; youth work provides a connection to something greater; youth workers

describe the influence of lived experience including experience in the family of origin;

youth workers identity as a caretakers; and the importance of boundaries in youth work.

Findings support the hypothesis that youth workers' lived experience impacts their career

choice; youth workers have a high tendency to take on caretaking roles in both their

personal and professional lives; the maintenance of boundaries is difficult but important

in the field of youth work. Implications for further research and professional training are

discussed.

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Youth Workers' Perceptions of Their Career Choice and Helping Ability in Relationship with Their Own Lived Experiences

A significant body of research exists regarding the lived experiences of social workers, therapists, and other helping professionals in relationship to their career choice. Much less is known about the reasons behind youth workers' decisions to enter a field often categorized by odd hours, low pay, and little recognition. It is difficult to find a definition of youth work or youth worker in the literature and even more challenging to find research detailing youth workers' lived experiences. Based on the researcher's experience in the field, this researcher has come to find that youth work tends to be more of an identity, with a focus on social justice, social change and strength-based approaches to working with youth. For the purpose of this project, youth worker will be defined as a profession that does not necessarily require a college degree, however relies heavily on experience working with youth. The youth workers of interest in this study primarily work with vulnerable populations of youth who are in crisis, currently facing homelessness, or are precariously housed, and are between the ages of ten to twenty-three.

This project's intent is to examine youth workers' perceptions of the reasons behind their career choice and their perceptions of how lived experience, especially how their experience in the family of origin impacts their helping ability, and their ability to maintain boundaries with the clients they serve. Since very little research exists regarding youth workers and youth work in general, the majority of the literature reviewed will focus on professionals in the social work profession, a profession similar to youth work but with more academic backing and accreditation. The lack of information available regarding youth workers in general prompted this research endeavor. More

research on the profession is needed. The intent of this exploratory research is to act as a base for further youth work research to build upon.

Numerous studies have shown that social workers and social work students do not enter the field based on a naïve interest in the helping profession. The contrary has been shown to be true: social workers and social work students surveyed have identified significant histories of trauma and parentification (in which social workers as children were made to take on responsibilities of their parents) (Lackie, 1982; Black, Jeffreys, Kennedy Hartley, 1993; Woody, et al. 1993). Social workers as a whole appear to build upon the knowledge they gained from their families. Over two thirds of the 1,577 social workers surveyed by Lackie (1982) described their role in their family-of-origin as the parentified child, the over-responsible member, the go between, or good child.

There is a suggestion that one does not simply stumble upon the helping profession, but that one is conditioned from childhood to take on the role of the helper. One hundred forty-seven graduate-level social work students were surveyed along with graduate students studying other professions. The graduate social work students were significantly more likely to come from families experiencing substance abuse, have a family member who was victim of a violent act, or be victims of sexual abuse. The social work students had the highest incidence of coming from dysfunctional families of origin (Woody, et al. 1993).

Not only do social workers and social work students come from difficult childhood and life experiences, it has been proposed that these difficulties have shaped their career choice. One hundred sixteen social work students were surveyed and found

to have experienced significant psychosocial trauma factors in their early life histories, these instances of trauma were found to motivate the student's career choices (Black, et al., 1993).

Without healing the wounds of childhood or their earlier lives, social workers and helping professionals run the risk of neglecting themselves and not providing the most beneficial and therapeutic services to clients (Holtz Deal, 1999). Social workers who come from highly stressed families of origin have been found to take on high caretaking roles in their families and in their careers. This creates difficulties, and it becomes challenging to moderate overextending behaviors including: working extra hours, taking on client problems as their own, and exhibiting difficulties tolerating uncomfortable feelings. All these behaviors lead to the potential to burn out instead of flourishing in the helping community (Holtz Deal, 1999).

With the risk comes the potential for amazing work, the capacity to build relationships and normalize feelings of clients who are struggling through their own life changes. Research warns that helping professionals may be allured by the potential for personal growth and healing old injuries through their professional helping role; this need to fit a caretaking role, possibly an extension of a role played in the family of origin, presents great risk of providing conflictual care to the client (Black, et al., 1993). Without healing the wounds and addressing the roles played in childhood, the need to fill the caretaking role puts these clinicians at great risk for potential boundary violations with clients. The research suggests the need for practitioners to be mindful of countertransference and burn out (Black, et al., 1993; Lackie 1983).

For the purposes of this paper, countertransference will be defined as occasions when practitioners respond to clients with emotion, behavior, or affect influenced strongly, or triggered by their own personal histories (Briere & Scott, 2006). Burn out is defined as the effect of a persons' capacity to care being overtaxed too early, causing the individual who has developed hypersensitive abilities to read and relate to social cues to have little faith in their own abilities causing the individual to become overwhelmed and ineffective (Lackie, 1983).

Boundaries become difficult to maintain when the practitioner cannot move beyond his or her own story. It is the necessary duty of helping professionals who have experienced their own hardships to seek out necessary counseling and supervision in order to prevent unethical care to clients (Lackie, 1983). Research suggests school programs that offer degrees in the helping professions provide mental health resources and encourage students to seek necessary care for themselves prior to going out into the workforce (Black, et al., 1993).

The research suggests that social workers and helping professionals can utilize their incredible life experiences in order to connect more deeply and authentically with their clients (Buchbinder, 2007; Lackie, 1983; Lawson & Brossart, 2003; Racusin et al., 1981; Poal & Weiz, 1989; Wolgien & Coady, 2008). With the incredible gift they have to relate to their clients, comes the immeasurable responsibility to protect the client, serve their needs first, and be increasingly mindful of maintaining healthy, protective boundaries with the client.

This research project investigates how lived experience, especially with reference to experiences in the family of origin, impacts youth workers' career choice as well as their perceptions of their helping ability.

Review of Literature

A variety of research has been done on helping professionals' reasons for entering the field and how those reasons have affected their performance with clients. Special attention has been paid to how professionals' experiences in their families of origin have impacted both their desire to work in the helping field and their effectiveness with clients. Further attention has been paid to social workers' lived experiences and families of origin with relation to their practice. The research is both hopeful and guarded when discussing social workers' and other helping professionals' abilities to help clients in light of their own experiences. Caution is advised to clinicians with their own personal histories of trauma as it appears these clinicians have the ability to relate empathetically, in deep, meaningful ways, however they can tend to get lost in their own stories and histories when listening to the stories and histories of their clients (Holtz Deal, 1990). Lackie (1983) touches on this point when noting social workers get caught up with the empathy for their clients but often times have difficulty finding empathy for themselves. The intensity of the work coupled with the tendency for social workers and other professionals to come from troubled backgrounds produces a powerful warning to practitioners to provide self-care first so that they may better care for their clients.

Why Enter the Helping Profession?

Emerson has been famously quoted as saying:

 To laugh often and love much; to win the respect of intelligent persons and the

affection of children; to earn the approbation of honest citizens and endure the

betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to give of

one's self; to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden

patch or a redeemed social condition; to have played and laughed with enthusiasm

and sung with exultation; to know even one life has breathed easier because you

have lived—this is to have succeeded" (Emerson, (n.d.).

This quote touches on the sense of calling and the sense of purpose that helping

professionals have related to their career choice. These individuals do not appear to be

basing their decisions to enter the field on monetary gains. Helping professionals'

decisions to enter the field appear to be rooted in finding meaning in their own lives, by

connecting the past, present, and future into a meaningful whole (Buchbinder, 2007).

Research conducted on the meaning behind helping professionals' decisions to

enter the field identifies a need to find purpose, to align and join with others in order to

contribute to a greater sense of belonging. Buchbinder (2007) examined the existential

commitments social workers discerned as reasons for entering the field. The social

workers interviewed in Buchbinder's study identified a sense of "calling" that drew the

practitioners to the field. This sense of a greater purpose attached to the work seemed to

root the practitioners into meaningful relationships with their lives and lives' purpose,

which they also identified as their careers. Helping professionals appear to invest in

career choice with a sense that their occupations align with who they are. Wolgien and

Coady (2008) propose clinicians' relationships with their clients aren't dependent on the

professionals' abilities to dictate theory from textbooks, rather relationships are

strengthened because of clinicians' abilities to be sensitized to the clients' experiences

based on clinicians' own life experiences.

The practitioners' abilities to relate to their clients must be balanced by awareness

of the impact that the practitioners' experiences have on the helping relationship.

Therapists' awareness of the covert reasons for entering their career should facilitate

professional growth as well as self-awareness (Racusin, et al., 1981). The ability to

conduct oneself in a manner that acknowledges the impact of personal biases allows for

greater insight and gains. Practitioners interviewed by Wolgien and Coady stated that

their work with clients was most rewarding due to the reciprocal nature of the exchange;

the work with clients was seen as an opportunity to connect to the human experience and

help others feel that connection.

Often times the role that helping professionals take on when working with clients

offers fulfillment that money cannot buy. Having the sense that one has the ability to

help another in a consequential way enables helping professionals to ascribe meaning to

their profession in a world so heavily influenced by monetary gains. Social workers have

identified the instilment of values in their childhoods, such as helping and giving to

others, as major influences in their career choices (Buchbinder, 2007). Caretaking allows

the practitioner to learn about one's self, affirming the "good self" and raising the self-

esteem of the practitioner (Lackie, 1983).The ability to provide a service in which the

practitioner has power and is administering aid allows for a sense of self that may not have been experienced in the practitioner's early life (Holz Deal, 1999).

An individual cannot control, nor dictate the messages he or she receives in childhood, and these messages instilled in childhood go on to impact the individual's adult life. Power has a seductive nature for clinicians raised in homes that were dysfunctional. Their lack of power as children left them vulnerable and unstable in their early lives. The career choice of therapist, helping professional, or social worker has been described as a defense against helplessness and ensures control over intimacy (Racusin, et al., 1981). This need for control and safety is ideally balanced overtime. Social workers who have identified themselves as adult children of alcoholics acknowledged bringing their own experience into their work early on. Overtime these practitioners identified the capacity to increase their self awareness and the ability to deal with their past experiences (Coombes & Anderson, 1998).

Practitioners' Strengths Brought from Experiences in the Family of Origin

Numerous studies have looked at social workers' and social work students' lived experiences and life histories as a reference point for entering the helping field (Black, et al., 1993; Buchbinder, 2007; Coombes & Anderson, 2000; Lackie, 1983: Rompf & Royse, 1994; Woody, et al., 1993). A study of 116 social work students compared to 46 business students found that psychosocial traumatic factors in the early life histories of social work students have been found to be associated with social work career choice (Black, et al., 1993). Another study comparing 147 graduate social work students to 100 guidance and counseling students, and 100 business students found close to 75% of

graduate social work students surveyed experienced some form of dysfunction in their

family of origin; the social work students showing the highest rate of dysfunction out of

all three groups (Woody et al., 1993). Social work and helping careers appear to be

outlets, perhaps ways of coping with the past.

Another way of interpreting the helping profession career choice is that it is an

extension of the roles learned in childhood. As mentioned earlier, Lakie (1983)

discovered two thirds of the population of social workers participating in his study

described their role in their family of origin as the parentified child, the over-responsible

family member, the go between, or the good child. Buchbinder (2007) also found the

social workers he interviewed often took on the role of caretaker, a parentified role, the

role of mediator or of peacekeeper in their families of origin. These studies pose the

notion that certain childhoods appear to prepare or mold the helping ability. Continuing

to look at the social worker's role in their family of origin, it was found that social

workers, compared to business students, are more often first born, oldest child of their

gender, or youngest of their siblings (Black, et al., 1993). These studies begin to paint a

picture, an experiential vision of the journeys social workers and other helping

professionals seem to travel in their route to their profession.

The experience of having overcome the barriers set in their family of origin seems

to set the stage for an empathetic stance in practitioners. Woody et al. (1993) found that

social work students were significantly more likely to come from families with substance

abuse issues, have a family member who was a victim of a violent act, and were more

likely than other graduate students to have experienced sexual abuse. The significance in

this finding is tied to the fact that these individuals who have experienced some form of

dysfunction are applying their experiences to their career choice. Clinical social work students (defined for the content of this paper as social work students specializing in the therapeutic treatment and diagnosis of mental health) who described themselves as caretakers in their family of origin were seen as bringing significant helping skills to their practicum experience (Holz Deal, 1999). The simple act of surviving difficult family dynamics does not seem to be the key to helping ability, however. Counselor trainee's ability to be flexible and adapt to the changes and dysfunction in their family of origin was the greatest predictor in client change (Lawson & Brossart, 2003).

The ability to be a calming presence, and have an empathetic stance when working with clients is essential in the social work and helping professions. Self-awareness of one's own family of origin and flexibility surrounding their own experiences has been found to help therapist trainees be more present with their clients, and thus more effective (Lawson & Brossart, 2003). Being present with one's own history of struggles while tending to the needs of clients is not easy but appears to be a strength certain practitioners carry with them. Racusin, et al. (1981) describe the childhoods of therapists from dysfunctional homes as training grounds for sensitivity to interpersonal stress. The therapists who participated in the Racusin, et al. (1981) study had at least one family member who had a physical, behavioral or psychological difficulty; these participants also perceived the family environment as non-nurturant and stressful. When working with clients, it is essential that practitioners are authentic when relating to their clients. This is not to say that clinicians should share their life experiences with their clients; the ability of the practitioner to relate to their clients on a human level may be enough. Five out of eight therapists identified by their peers to be

effective and experienced, identified difficult family experiences in their childhood as contributing to their ability to help others (Wolgien & Coady, 2008). In a study done on therapists whose clients were mainly children found the more problems the therapists reported in the study as children, the more their clients showed improvement in externalizing problems. The study goes on to say that it may be the general experience of having coped with, and confronted childhood problems that increase therapist effectiveness, rather than the specific types of problems they faced (Poal & Weiz, 1989).

The ability of the therapist to cope with the hardships experienced seems to be the deciding factor in effectiveness in the therapeutic relationship. Social workers describing their existential commitment to the field, described their own experience of difficulties making them more sensitive to the pain and vulnerabilities of their clients. These social workers also commented on the basic need for human connection that propels their understanding of their work (Buchbinder, 2007). The therapists in the Wolgien and Coady (2008) study stated that the awareness and acceptance of issues dealt with from their childhood helped their abilities as therapists, rather than subscribing to goals of resolution. Perhaps it is the self-acceptance and compassion the helping professional feeds themselves that provides the fuel for client change and growth. With an awareness of their own issues, helping professionals are provided an opportunity for growth and self-awareness (Racusin, et al., 1981; Poal & Weiz, 1989).

Words of Caution for Practitioners with Experiences of Hardships in Family of Origin

Children willing to take on the parentified role become rescuers; altruism becomes survival (Lackie, 1983). Those children grow up to become adults who carry

with them the identity of caretaker. The very nature of helping professionals seems to draw them to the field. However, included in the help they give to others professionals must also be mindful to help themselves. Holz Deal (2010) found that clinical Master level Social Work students with a caretaking history had difficulty moderating overextending behaviors with clients, working extra hours, and taking on client problems as their own. These students were also found to have difficulty internalizing praise by their field instructor. Boundaries allow for individuals to extend portions of themselves without giving all of themselves. Clinicians who are not mindful to purposefully take care of themselves due to their overextending behaviors put themselves at risk of boundary violations with clients (Holz Deal, 2010). Social workers who have taken on the parentified role in childhood are often times more willing to help clients heal but are ineffective, or unwilling to heal themselves (Lackie, 1983). This idea of selflessness is noble, however research warns students and professionals likely to take on this caretaking role need to watch out for countertransference and burnout (Black, et al., 1993).

When a person sees injustice in the world and has the an increased capacity to empathize, to be open to sharing their passion to help, and have experienced the satisfaction of helping another human being in even the most basic of ways, it is easy to see how the act of helping takes on an addictive quality. Lackie (1983) found that social workers often times take on large case loads as a means to distract themselves from their on-going responsibilities or obligations from their past. It is easier to get lost in the caretaking role, and take on the familiar role of rescuer than to face the pain and the unknown realm of healing their own injuries from the past, often times childhood (Lackie, 1983; Holz Deal, 2010; Black, et al., 1993). When clinicians are tied so tightly

to their identity as a caretaker, their professional perspective can become lost. Those

professionals or students identified as having taken on a high caretaking role in their

family of origin may have limits on their ability to grow as therapists without permission

to lower their own standards they set for themselves; the standards they set may be so

high, they experience narcissistic trauma realizing they cannot measure up to their own

high standards (Holz Deal, 2010). Instead of identifying with their own pain and

struggle, the habits of childhood stemming from surviving by putting others' needs first

take over. Inflexibility in the therapist is often the result of increased anxiety causing

over controlling behaviors and over nurturance of the client; by trying to protect the client

from discomfort or struggle, research has suggested the therapist may be recreating their

own past experiences and need rescuing themselves (Lawson & Bossart, 2003).

The care provided the helping professional provides him or herself is of utmost

importance with regard to helping ability. As mentioned earlier, social work students

identifying with the caretaking role need to watch out for countertransference (Black, et

al., 1993). It is often the case that self-care is lacking when questionable judgments are

made, or the practitioner is unable to be present with the client. Inflexibility is often a

result of increased anxiety, clinicians are more likely to over control or over nurture when

their own feelings of anxiety remain unchecked (Lawson & Brossart, 2003). Research

has pointed out a bit of hypocrisy on the part of the helping professional. Numerous

studies cite the hesitation for helping professionals to seek help themselves, or at least

report that they have received some form of therapy or counseling with regard to the life

experiences they have endured (Coombes & Anderson, 1998; Lackie, 1983; Holz Deal,

2010). By taking care of themselves, helping professionals have the potential to model

the change desired by their clients. Developing a capacity for self-awareness and facing the family of origin experiences becomes important, especially important in supervision, which can be the key to the helping professional's success (Buchbinder, 2007). By fostering acceptance of colleagues and ourselves, we model this behavior to clients. The caretaker must see him or herself as good enough in order to tolerate the good enough client (Lackie, 1982).

Implications for Further Research

Given the research provided is based on studies of social workers and mental health professionals, what are the implications for youth workers? Though research is lacking with regard to youth worker's experiences, based on current findings regarding related helping professionals, it was hypothesized that youth workers, like social workers, are drawn to the profession based on experiences of hardship in their lived experience, especially in their families of origin. How do youth workers perceive their lived experience as affecting their career choice and how has their experience shaped their work and how they relate to youth? Examining the perceptions of youth workers and their lived experience has been overlooked, but is such a valuable topic due to the vulnerabilities of the populations served by youth workers and the high stress nature of the profession.

Conceptual Framework

Everyone sees the world in his or her own unique fashion. It is this researcher's belief that the way we see the world impacts our interactions with it, and the way we see ourselves in it. As human beings we use multiple lenses in order to perceive the ever-

changing environment in which we coexist and try to relate. Just as it is human nature to utilize multiple lenses to understand our existence, this study examined a number of conditions utilizing a variety of different lenses. This collection of writings is based on theoretical beliefs that align with the way in which the researcher views the world based on her professional experiences as well as her personal journey and life history. The researcher's views and ways of understanding the world will be conveyed in this chapter in order for the reader to capture the essence of her perceptions and how those perceptions have framed the content of this research endeavor.

Theoretical Lens

The theoretical lens that this research endeavor abides by includes the influence of Existential Psychotherapy and the Relational model of Psychodynamic theory. It is imperative to have a lens by which we view the world, and it is especially vital to have a clear sense of the therapeutic framework by which research will be conducted and analyzed. Both theoretical frameworks will be briefly described in relation to the context of this body of literature. It is the researcher's belief that individuals are deeply shaped and moved by their lived experience. Their experiences shape the way in which they relate to the world. Along with their experiences, the meaning individuals ascribe to their views of the world frames the way in which these individuals relate to the world. The Existential model and Relational model of Psychodynamic theory both exemplify these beliefs and relate directly to the researcher's beliefs about what draws youth workers into the demanding field of meeting youth where they are.

The relational model of Psychodynamic theory asserts that we are all driven by a need for human connection. The mind organizes mental representations of the self, others and relating to others, this sense of relating to others becomes the center of our emotional life(Messer & Warren, 1995). This relational model differs from the classic Freudian stance in that it puts great emphasis on the qualities and significance of relationships and the drive for authentic connections over being driven by sex or aggression.

Object relations theory asserts that every current relationship is influenced by past relationships; organizational themes in personality structure become reenacted in the present (Strupp, &Binder, 1984). It is as if we carry an emotional map in our minds that shapes the way we interact in our current relationships based on the impact of past relationships.

Who we are today very much relates to the experiences we've endured in the past. According to the relational model, people form intentions based on the dominant self-representations they have developed from their experiences in past relationships. These dominant self-representations or internalized representations of the self, and feeling states serve as indicators of where we are and where we want to go, these indicators then create wishes of the self, the other, and the relational interaction (Messer & Warren, 1995). If a child developed a role as caretaker in his or her family of origin growing up, it becomes difficult if not impossible for that role to manifest into something different as an adult.

From an Existential standpoint, the past becomes less of a focus, and the relationship individuals have with their present and future become significant. Yalom

(1980) asserted that there are 4 basic truths: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness that individuals confront within their own existence. For the purposes of this paper, the Existential framework exploring the search for meaning becomes significant. Humans struggle to understand their situation in this world, human suffering is universal, and confrontation with the universal truths is thought to be painful but ultimately healing (Yalom, 1980). The idea here is the importance of understanding the individual's experience as, just that, a unique viewpoint, the focus is on the experience and not how the viewpoint differs from the norm.

What is our sense of being? The relationship between a person and his or her potentialities is the focus of Existential theory (May, 1983). The importance of relating to an individual based on his or her understanding of the world, and what brings meaning to that individual's life without judgment is the essence of this framework. The view of an authentic self relates to the study at hand. How do youth workers relate to the world? What do they ascribe as their sense of purpose and meaning? What is their perception and understanding of being "called" to this work? How do these assertions affect the way in which they relate in their professions? All these questions evolve from a framework that places great meaning on how individuals evaluate their sense of themselves in the world.

The theoretical framework shaped the way in which the topic of youth worker's perceptions of their decisions to enter the field and their reasons for staying in the field was posed throughout this research project. The belief that youth workers decide to enter the field due to their tendency to be caretakers throughout their lives was explored. The belief that youth workers are also drawn to the profession due to a greater sense of

meaning and purpose was also explored. Finally this project explored the degree to which youth workers feel a sense of being called to this work.

Professional Lens

The researcher's experience as a youth worker over the past 6 years drew her to the topic of exploring youth worker's perceptions of why they entered the field, the significance of their experience in their family of origin, and their perception of what keeps them in the field. Youth workers often work odd hours, do shift work, and place themselves in the midst of the crises experienced by the young people they encounter. Over the years that the researcher worked in a crisis shelter for youth, she has heard youth workers tell stories of their own lives. These stories seem to hold great significance in their desire and ability to relate to the youth they serve. This researcher has always wondered how professionals in the fields relate to their own past and how they are able to do meaningful work while still maintaining professional boundaries.

Personal Lens

The researcher's experience as a youth worker in a crisis shelter in Minneapolis, Minnesota has truly impacted the researcher's interest in this topic. The researcher came into the helping profession because she always had a sense that is where she belonged. It is a curiosity to the researcher, as she reflects on her journey in the helping profession. The researcher is aware the significance her family of origin played in her interest in the helping profession. It was not the researcher's intent to work with adolescents in crisis when she graduated from college; however something drew her to the field of youth work and kept her there. Taking a more honest look at her decision to enter and stay in the

profession of youth work, this researcher became aware that her family's hardships as well as the realizations of her own struggles growing up had a significant impact on her decision to take on the role of youth worker. It has been the researcher's experience, in listening to her coworkers over the years that something greater than monetary gains drew them into the field of youth work, and something is keeping them there. The intent of this study was to explore through qualitative interviews, the meaning youth workers attribute to their careers. The researcher's belief that a common thread is woven throughout youth workers' stories, connecting them by experience, purpose, and a sense of something greater motivating them to work will be tested.

Methodology

The intent of this study was to utilize qualitative methods to gather data about youth workers' perceptions of what influenced them to enter the field and how their lived experience impacts their work. The study utilized qualitative methods as they provide deeper, and more insightful data than other methods (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2011). Due to the exploratory nature of this study, it was optimal to allow participants the opportunity to voice their unique perspectives, and therefore enable further research to be enriched. The qualitative method employed was the semi-standardized interview. Utilizing a semi-standardized interview acknowledges the importance of the use of predetermined questions and topic, while at the same time allowing for digressions and probing beyond the answers when needed (Berg, 2009). This method of questioning was desirable due to the content of the research. Participants were asked to share their lived experiences, which inevitably varied. In order to honor the participants' integrity it was appropriate to offer the opportunity to expand on questions that dignified a more detailed

response.   The opportunity to ask unscheduled probing questions offered the ability to elicit more information and clarity (Berg, 2009).

Sampling Plan

A purposive method of sampling was utilized in order to obtain subjects for this study. Purposive sampling includes using judgment and prior knowledge to chose the sample with the ability to best serve the purpose of the study (Monette, et al., 2011). The researcher has worked in the community for a number of years and therefore has developed a collection of contacts. The researcher contacted supervisors of local youth shelters and youth serving agencies, and requested permission from the supervisors to ask their staff members to voluntarily participate in the study. With permission from the supervisors, the researcher announced the study during designated portions of staff meetings and also handed out flyers containing a description of the study.   The flyers included a brief description of what would be asked of participants and the researcher's contact information. The researcher provided supervisors with extra flyers to post and hand out to youth workers unable to attend the designated staff meetings. Finally the researcher also posted information on a blog for youth workers working in the Metro and surrounding areas as a way to recruit participants.

Six of the participants who responded were recruited from staff meeting visits and four participants were recruited from the blog posting. Once individuals agreed to participate in the study, participants were offered a more specific description of the study detailing what was to be asked of them. After participants agreed to the terms of the study, individual interviews were scheduled. A list of interview questions was asked of

all participants individually. With permission to interview participants, the researcher conducted a qualitative interview in which participants were asked to share their perceptions about why they entered the field and what compels them to do the work that they do.

The population sampled included youth workers in Minneapolis and St. Paul who currently work in youth shelters or drop-in centers designated for youth between the ages of 10 to 21. Two youth workers who lived and worked outside of the Metro area in Minnesota responded to the request for research participants and participated in separate interviews over the telephone. All youth workers interviewed including the two youth workers who participated in interviews over the phone consented to the researcher audio-recording the interviews and were made aware of their rights prior to the interview.

Instruments

The author of this study conducted audio-recorded interviews of individual youth workers working in youth-serving agencies and shelters in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota (and outside of the metro). The instrument utilized was a semi-structured interview including survey questions. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, open-ended questions were asked in order to provide a degree of flexibility. Open-ended questions also provided the opportunity to be more conversational in order to gain the most genuine opinions and feedback from the participants in the study (Monette, et al., 2011). The questions were formulated and ordered to elicit the most authentic responses of participants with regard to their career choice, the reasoning behind the work that they do, and their use of boundaries when working with clients.

Validity and Reliability

Validity refers to the ability of the measure to accurately measure the variable it intended to measure (Monette, et al., 2011). Questions were formulated from the data gathered from the literature review related to the topic of this study. Utilizing measures developed based on peer-reviewed literature ensured the validity of the measures utilized in this study.   Face validity is based on common sense and is subjective in nature; it ensured there is a logical relationship between variables and the proposed measure (Monette, et al., 2011). All questions in this study were selected based on their relationship to the greater research question, thus they display face validity. The questions asked of participants included:

- How did you decide to become a youth worker, and when did you know youth work was what you wanted to do?

- Some helping professionals have said their careers help create a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives, is that true for you? How so/or why not?

- Research has shown that some helping professionals' career choice is influenced by their experience in their family of origin. How did your experience in your family of origin impact your career choice (if at all)?

- Did your own life experiences impact your decision to enter the profession? How?

- Research has found that individuals sometimes take on roles in their families such as: the responsible child, the scapegoat, the clown, or the lost one (these are only examples). What role did you play in your family of origin?

- Some helping professionals have the tendency to identify with a caretaking role. Do you have the tendency to take on a caretaking role? How does this impact your work with clients?

- Have you ever noticed similarities between the experiences of the youth you work with and your own life experiences?

- If yes, can you talk about these similarities and how they impacted your work with the youth?

- How do you maintain boundaries with clients who you identify with or who's story shares similarity to your own?

All of these measures maintained content validity, in which the measuring device covers the full range of meanings or forms included in the variable to be measured (Monette, et al., 2011). The measures' content validity was ensured based on the fact that the measures were developed from the review of pertinent literature. The validity of the measures was further examined utilizing the method of jury opinion. Jury opinion involves surveying the opinions of those knowledgeable of the variables involved regarding whether the particular operationalized definitions utilized in the interview questions are logical measures of the variables (Monette, et al., 2011). The researcher surveyed committee members in order to make sure the interview questions were accurately operationalized.

Reliability measures the ability to yield consistent results each time a measure is applied, and, in general, valid measures are reliable (Monette, et al., 2011). Due to the exploratory and qualitative nature of the study, it was difficult to achieve reliability. In order to ensure the greatest reliability, participants in the study were informed of the

concepts being measured. The wording of the questions was asked in the most straightforward and concrete manner possible in order to make sure the study was conducted in the most reliable fashion possible.

Data Analysis

The interviews were recorded on audiotape and transcribed. The researcher then reviewed each transcript utilizing grounded theory methods in order to analyze the data. Grounded theory methods involve inductive and deductive processes in which the researcher first 'immerses' himself or herself in the data pulling out codes (units of data in the larger context). Examining the repetition of codes leads to the discovery of more prominent themes in the data (Berg, 2009; Padgett, 1998). By frequently interrupting the coding process to document theoretical hunches or notes, the researcher ideally is able to code the data without tainting it with his or her own theoretical beliefs (Padgett, 1998). Open coding was utilized to interpret the data, meaning the researcher scanned the data line by line, coding the data by pulling out key ideas or phrases (Berg, 2009). After looking at the codes and potential themes pulled from the data, the researcher returned to the transcripts, pulling quotes, further qualifying the themes.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was the sample size. Due to time constraints and the limited resources available, the sample could not be larger than 10 youth workers. The study relied upon volunteers who may not, and most likely are not a representative sample of youth workers in the Twin Cities, let alone youth workers in the United States. A representative sample is ideal when conducting studies, however the sample was not

representative because the study cannot guarantee that the sample has all the characteristics of the broader population of youth workers (Monette, et al., 2011). The sample was also a non-probability sample, which is not ideal. A non-probability sample is defined as a sample in which the investigator does not now the probability of each population's element's inclusion in the sample (Monette, et. al, 2011).

Another limitation of this study was that the researcher performing the interview had limited experience performing qualitative interviews prior to this research endeavor. Novice interviewers often need to battle their own anxieties and make sure that their interactions do not affect the research and interview process (Berg, 2009). Rehearsal of the interview process helped to alleviate a majority of the potential for interference, however the researcher's lack of experience interviewing in a qualitative research setting must be acknowledged.

Biases

The fact that the researcher conducting this study is a youth worker and sampled other youth workers' perception raises the concern for interviewer bias. The researcher must be aware that the interviewer's attitude toward the research and interview process strongly affects the interview (Berg, 2009).

The researcher's history in the field of youth work was the catalyst for this study. The researcher became interested in this topic due to noticing and reflecting upon her own process in entering the field, and her own realizations about what has kept the researcher in the field of youth work. The researcher conducted this project with the bias of her own lived experience and was biased by her belief that youth workers do have

common difficult experiences in their past which lead them to the field of youth work. It

was the researcher's intent to study her own hypothesis based on her own biased

experience as a youth worker. As mentioned previously, there is a strong possibility that

the study was affected by interview bias, in which the researcher may misinterpret

participants' answers because of the researcher's own feelings and experience with the

topic (Monette, et. al, 2011). The interviews with participants were audio-recorded in

order to maintain the integrity of the participants' responses. During the interview

process the researcher was intentional in her own responses to the participants' answers

to questions. The researcher was especially careful to remain neutral when respondents

answered in such a way that validated or challenged the researcher's hypothesis. During

the coding process, the researcher, again being mindful of her individual biases, paid

attention to and sought out data that contradicted the hypothesis.

Measures for Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were given the opportunity to volunteer for this study without

pressure from the researcher. The researcher first contacted supervisors of youth serving

agencies in Minneapolis and St. Paul to obtain permission to attend a staff meeting in

order to announce the study and solicit volunteers. The researcher then attended staff

meetings, announcing the study and handed out a description of the study containing the

researcher's contact information. The researcher did not solicit participation above and

beyond asking youth workers directly, or by distributing the flyer describing the study

and listing the researcher's contact information. A consent form was given to

participants who agreed to be interviewed served to address confidentiality and the

voluntary nature of the interview.

The risks and benefits were explained and the interview was briefly outlined for all participants prior to the interview. Though the participation in the research was voluntary, potential risks were involved in participating in the study. Risks of participating in the research project included divulging personal information, including information that may have been sensitive regarding the participants' past experiences that they may not have previously explored. The interview questions asked participants to probe into their own life experiences, which may have caused participants to feel emotions they were not expecting. Certain questions asked participants to examine their current functioning with clients, including topics difficult to discuss such as: use of boundaries and instances of countertransference. There were no direct benefits of participation in the study. A potential benefit of participating in the interview included the opportunity for participants to reflect on their own experience and journey related to their life's work, as well as a the chance to feel a renewed sense of purpose related to their career.

The researcher advised participants of their rights of protection of their privacy and the confidential nature of the study. Prior to the interview, participants were informed that the interview would be audio-recorded and transcribed. The interviewer notified participants that the transcriptions and recordings will be stored in a locked file in the researcher's home and identifying information will be not be shared in the study itself. The researcher attempted to ease participants' concerns and answer participants' questions throughout the research process in order to keep participants fully aware of their rights to terminate their participation in the study at any time. The researcher notified the participants that some of the questions in the interview have the potential to

bring up distress. Due to the personal nature of some of the questions, and the potential

for some questions to bring up difficult life experiences, the researcher provided a list of

resources for local counseling and therapy services. The resource list included the

opportunity to meet with a licensed therapist who agreed to meet with participants free of

charge for a single session if participants were in need of support as a result of the

interview. These resources were provided prior to the start of the interview so

participants had access to additional support after the interview if desired. The

interviewer monitored participants' affect throughout the interview process. The

researcher was prepared to utilize her expertise in crisis management when conducting

the interview and stop the interview if participants showed signs of distress. All

participants involved in the study showed no signs of distress during the interview

process, therefore the researcher took no further action.

The study took place after meeting the standards of the Institutional Review

Board (IRB). The study was examined and critiqued by the IRB in order to make sure

that participants were to be treated ethically and participants' rights would be maintained

throughout the completion of this study.

Findings

The study includes interviews of ten voluntary participants who identified

themselves as youth workers and who currently work with youth in Minnesota. Eight out

of the ten participants lived in and worked in the Twin Cities metro-area at local youth

serving agencies. Two of the participants identified themselves as youth workers who

lived and practiced youth work outside of the Twin Cities; these individuals participated

in audio-recorded interviews over the telephone. Seven of the participants were female and three were male. As noted in earlier in data analysis, the transcripts were analyzed through grounded theory and open coding methods. The following themes emerged: helping as a way of life: youth work is more than a job; a connection to something greater; the influence of lived experience; the influence of experience in the family of origin; identity as a caretaker; and the importance of boundaries in youth work.

Helping as a Way of Life: More than a Job: Connection to Something Greater

All of the youth workers interviewed echoed the same sentiments: youth work is more than a career. It is a way of life, a way of relating to the world. Participants spoke candidly about their careers and the greater sense of meaning attached to their lives because of the work that they do. They spoke of the significance of the relationships they build with youth on a daily basis. These relationships are the reason that many of them entered the field and stay in the field of youth work. The potential to touch and impact lives in meaningful ways is enough.   It drives many of the participants to continue to do the work at times described as both emotionally and physically draining. Some youth workers described their passion as found on a journey, others describe a life-long passion for the work discovered when they were youth themselves. Many workers paid homage to adults in their past that made an impact so significant during their youth-hood, they now aspire to pay it forward in a sense, and touch the lives of their clients just as their lives had once been touched.

Career Choice Gives Meaning and Purpose

Individuals who identify themselves as youth workers do not indentify a desire to be well-known or to make monetary fortunes. Many of the individuals interviewed

described a sense of being grounded, and better connected to humanity as a result of their career path. Some participants voiced discomfort in owning a sense of meaning or purpose derived from their work. Even through their humble stance, the interviewer could not help but notice a common theme: youth work is meaningful and purposeful work.

One participant spoke of the sense of duty and purpose related to her career choice. Remaining humble even after describing the battles she endured and overcame in her life. She simply stated this about her career:

> It's something that I'm passionate about, so…as long as there's youth out there, or young adults that need help…I know the resources, so it makes it more of…a duty.

Talking with youth workers, there is a sense of uniqueness attached to the profession. Some participants mentioned society's misunderstanding of the profession. Another participant spoke about the ethical importance she attributed to the career choice. She spoke about the pressures she felt both internally and externally to take on a more established profession but in the end she stayed with youth work due to the impact her career has on herself and on her clients:

> My work is meaningful…I don't care that I'm not a lawyer, or a science teacher or whatever. You know? I have purpose in my life and that's how I feel. Like I get up everyday and I go to work and like I'm here to help people.

One participant articulated the impact of, and the importance of building relationships with youth; he attributed great meaning and purpose to his work due to the formation of those relationships. Unlike the previous interviewee, he initially objected to attributing meaning and purpose derived from his career choice. He spoke about the moments when he is able to relate on a human level with his clients. The authenticity and

integrity of the work that goes into building significant relationships with youth who have

been through much more than any human should have to endure provides a sense of

meaning and purpose that cannot be denied:

> I go to work to keep building, keep building the relationship…And so what gives
> me the meaning in it is the building of the relationship. (The youth) feeling like
> there's someone who listens and trusts, and that they can trust. And I think that's
> the critical piece that makes me feel like this is a meaningful job...So all these
> youth who are, you know, living with trauma and living in crisis to be able to stop
> for long enough to build a relationship. And I think that that's the most
> meaningful part…There's moments where I feel like the relationship is actually
> authentic and that's where I feel like it's meaningful. If there's some authenticity
> in the conversation and in um, the trust that is built, then that's where I feel the
> meaning…I think it's the relationship between the worker and the participant that
> is going to create the meaning."

Perhaps one of the most important and impacting benefits of youth work is their

connection to humanity, to the human experience. Youth workers are exposed to rich and

meaningful interactions on a daily basis. Their purpose, often defined as helping others,

is actualized on a daily basis. Youth workers are not defined, nor are they confined by

their office spaces, their computer chairs, or their cubicles. Often times youth worker's

'offices' are on the streets, on the bus, at a shelter's dining room table. A participant

describes the intrinsic benefit of the work, the beauty in the basic interactions he

maintains with young people:

> We live in a world that is very materialistic. We are very bombarded with devices
> and things and I think somehow we lose the humanity, we lose the sense of
> compassion, and a lot of the times we just try to keep up with our neighbors and
> things like that. But I think that uh, just working, in this case with youth, to me it
> keeps me feeling younger, you know trying to keep up with them you know,
> playing ball, playing soccer, or doing activities, or even listening to some music
> that they listen to just to keep in connection. But just to see the successes that
> they achieve and maybe at one point they didn't have hope and just to see that
> they have gained those things is very fulfilling. And it gives you some sense of
> it's worth it, what you are doing.

That same youth worker verbalized a sense that his career choice was related to something greater than his own experience, or his own desire to do the work: "To go into this field, I think that it was more of just like a call, like a, I know that this was for me to do."

Longevity: Hope to Make an Impact; To Be a Part of Something Greater

The belief that even one life has been positively impacted by their efforts is enough for most youth workers to continue battling the day-to-day grind of youth work. Participants interviewed were not interested in becoming the next Nobel Peace Prize winner, or interested in any public recognition for that matter. What matters most to the youth workers interviewed is the potential to reach out and positively impact just one life. Positively promoting change in one person's world seems to create a passion in youth workers interviewed unrivaled to personal gains.

One participant first took issue with the words 'meaning and purpose' ascribed to youth work. He spoke to the passion youth workers bring to their work only for the sake of contributing something positive to the world. He voiced his frustration with society's tendency to generalize the profession into some form of very meaningful and fulfilling work that the participant 'must feel so lucky' to be a part of on a daily basis:

> There's times where it's so hard…that I don't ever want to go back, but I keep going back. And so I know that it's meaningful to me. I don't wake up everyday feeling like that…A lot of people when…you meet them or they ask you what you do, they're the ones that say 'oh that must be so meaningful' and…I just get this weird feeling...Generally, I don't think that I consciously feel like 'this is so meaningful'. I think what I do consciously do is that I make the decision to go back everyday. As difficult as it may be…my hope is...even if I don't ever get to see anything, or growth in them, that maybe someday, keeping the hope, or the belief that some day they'll remember something that I said, or a conversation that we had together rather that meant something to them, and impacted them, and maybe will help them at some point in their life. Because I think that the

misconception is that people think I get to see all this change and that it must be so meaningful, and I don't go to work to see the change.

Youth workers echoed one another's sentiments regarding their belief that one day the dedication they put into their work will produce something positive, something significant for the clients that they currently serve. Many of the clients youth workers encounter are in serious forms of crises, simply desiring to survive much less thrive. The potential to be the cornerstone of hope for an individual is enough to supplement the lack of monetary gain. A youth worker describes her understanding of the significance of the longevity of her support:

> Even though you are not making big bucks, you're doing it for the love of what you're doing and for the longevity of seeing what could possibly happen for this youth. And knowing that you may have been that one person in their life that 10, 15 years down the road they make a different decision because of something you did or something you said or a way that you acted toward them, and they'll always remember that.

Youth workers describe a desire to provide tools enabling youth to survive and overcome their current struggles. One youth worker captures the desire of many in the profession to promote greater change through individual interactions:

> You don't see those results until much later. And…when youth after many years come back and say 'thank you for what you guys did.' Then you say 'yeah, we're doing the right thing.' And you know, to me it's like a domino effect. We are able to help one person, I'm sure that person can impact many people. And that's very fulfilling.

Participants talked about focusing on the intentions of their interactions as a way to promote the continuation of their efforts. By focusing on the strength of the positive engagement they create, they are better able to face the more difficult aspects of their jobs. One youth worker describes his focus on the longevity of his efforts:

I look at the long, the big picture I guess. You know when I think about the troubles I went through that I couldn't get through without teachers or a counselor that I was working with at school. And I always think about longevity. Even if it's minimal contact that I have with a youth…I think about how that's going to turn out for them in the long run. And here I've been a part (of)...not solely responsible, but I've been a part of helping that youth get to a place where they might not otherwise gotten to…and you think to yourself that you might have just saved a life, or like ten years down the road that person might, might think of you, you know as say 'it was great that that person, whatever that person's name was I forgot', or if they remember my name great! (laughs) But whoever that person was helped get me to this uh, from point A to point B. And it might have been a small chance encounter but uh, those small encounters and those small things you do for people make a big difference.

Provide Corrective Experience/Hope

Youth workers interviewed were deeply in tune with the struggles faced by the youth they serve. Many spoke of the desire to provide a corrective experience, to offer a sense of hope in dark and sometimes dire times. They are not interested in creating big moments of life altering change. They are not interested in being recognized or honored in any way. They are interested in the opportunity and the privilege to instill hope and a belief that the world has something greater to offer.

Youth workers spoke of their awareness of the privilege and opportunity they are given by being offered the opportunity to relate to another in such a meaningful way. Many spoke about their own experiences as youth and a desire to provide the support and compassion that they were given by certain individuals.

A youth worker described an understanding of the meaning her job creates. She described her own struggles and hardships as a youth and the understanding of just how important one person can be. She spoke to the power of her own experience and the impact and influence she is able to create through the translation of hope:

Just giving them that sense of hope. And just letting them know…'even though you have all these youth workers and you don't want to listen…most of them have been through a lot of what you have. And they do it because they had someone in their life that gave them hope.' So it's all about…translating that…from one life to the next.

Another youth worker talked about his philosophy of helping. He described a desire to provide a corrective experience for the youth he works with, in order for them to develop the strength of knowing they are capable and worthy:

I think that I try to just show them the ropes and that there is different ways to do things…I'm a believer that you have to give your kids, or people a couple of things: one is roots and wings. You know roots to give you their beliefs and things like that and wings for them to make their choices, then it's up to them. But in the mean time, you have to show them that you care because at least from what I see, that is one of the things we are suffering from in this society. You know we have a lot of youth that, they don't see that anyone cares about them…We have to tell these youth that there's people that believe in them, and there's people that trust that they are going to be successful. And give them hope.

Career Choice as a Journey

Many youth workers interviewed told stories of falling into youth work, starting out in different fields, or not knowing what specific role they would take in the helping profession. Six out of ten interviewed spoke of the journey their career path took, often beginning with a desire to help people and finally landing in the realm of youth work. Many youth workers spoke of the surprising nature of the discovery of their passion for the work.

One participant talked about her process of discovery evolving from the pressure to decide on an internship site. She attributed her decision to enter the field of youth work to the encouragement of her professors. Hesitant to enter the field at first but now securely planted in her career she stated:

Well actually I fell into youth work. I was doing my bachelors program in social work and we had to pick our internship semesters, where we were going to go…I didn't know where I was going to go…My professor at the time…had worked at a youth serving agency in Minneapolis and she was telling me about it…I also had a teacher who had also worked there…It was an accident really. But I feel like… things happen for a reason and it is what it is.

Other participants discussed their original desire to work with people in the helping field but having to experience working with different populations in order to realize their desire true desire to work with youth.

It kind of just snowballed from there. One thing led to another, one door opened, one door closed, and…I decided to go to school for my criminal justice degree and wanted to be a juvenile probation officer, thinking that I could have an impact on youth. That really wasn't where I ended up wanting to go so I ended up following different avenues to find my niche and youth homelessness is definitely where I want to be.

Still others described a sense of knowing early on that they desired a career in the field however they began their careers in another profession entirely. That sense of knowing eventually led them to their homes in youth work. One participant describes his journey:

I used to be a part of church youth groups…when I was younger, a long, long, long time ago. I was a member of …active youth groups that would visit…hospitals and places like that... I always liked… working with people. And I then I started to go to school for business. I moved to Minnesota, I didn't finish my school over there (the country where the participant was born). Then when I got here, I started working for (an adult) shelter…working with adults is very hard in the sense that you are trying to give your point of view and a lot of times they don't listen too much because you know, they maybe already made their decisions when they were younger…I love to work with youth…and I knew people that was working in this agency (where the participant currently works) and I saw the relationship that they had. And then I was like 'yeah, I think that that was what I would like to do, work with, work with the youth.

Desire to do Youth Work as a Youth

Four out of the ten youth workers interviewed spoke of an intrinsic knowing and desire to work with youth ever since they were youth themselves. Some described their

journey career journey beginning in their teenage years, working with, and supporting peers. Others described a budding interest and knowing that they would end up in the field of youth work one day.

A participant describes her experience of being mentored by older youth and in turn mentoring other youth. She was exposed to a community of youth work on a college campus while her mother attended classes. She described the significance of her early experiences and the almost seamless transition her career has taken from her youth to adulthood :

> I've kind of been doing it since I was a youth…I had some great mentors at during that time and right away I started mentoring other youth…so I've just been doing it since then.

It is as if there is an awareness that is planted in youth workers in an early age, though they may not immediately act on that awareness, they carry it with them on their career path. Another participant described her sense of knowing and wisdom developing from her interactions with her peers. She articulated a sense of greater knowing as a youth that many other youth workers describe:

> I first new when I was 16 years old. I was pregnant and went to an alternative high school. So I actually had started to see some of the youth that were struggling and kind of wanted to use my situation as more of a story.

Influence of Mentor or Supportive Adult in Career Choice

The importance and consequence of the role of supportive adults in the lives of youth workers cannot be stressed enough. Many of the youth workers interviewed remarked on the impact one person had on their lives, and their career choice as a result of that impact. Many described the life changing and saving effects the compassion and care of one person. Often times the care and compassion shown to them when they were

young is precisely the care and compassion they strive to show to the youth they work

with today.

One youth worker talked about his initial desire to become a teacher simply

because of the impact of the support he received from his teachers during a very difficult

time in his life. He talked about the life changing and life saving quality of the

relationships he had with his teachers:

> I wanted to be an arts teacher because I was…really into arts...(I) had a lot of
> support from teachers at that time. And I don't think without their support of
> me...I don't quite know what…avenue my life would have gone into had it not
> been for those supportive adults in my life.

Another youth worker speaks of the deep sense of gratitude she has for her school

social worker. She talked about the hardships she faced as a child opening her eyes to a

deeper sense of connection with people. She attributed her survival to her school social

worker whose radical acceptance and availability, she attributed to saving her life

(mentioned in a later finding):

> I think it was just because of all of the stuff that I had gone through as a kid. And
> I had one social worker who I liked, who really cared about me and made a
> difference, and I wanted to do that (youth work) because of that one person…that
> really just told me who I wanted to be as a worker.

Another youth worker remarked on the life changing impact supportive adults had

in his life. He spoke of traveling down a 'wrong path,' feeling lost and at the end of his

rope. He attributed his progress and success to the powerful impact of the support he was

given: "I was able to turn it around with supportive adults in my life. And so now, I'm, I

kind of ended up being the opposite of all of those things."

It is clear, by listening to youth workers' stories, that helping is truly a way of life, a natural way of being and relating to the world. Youth workers' careers offer them a connection to something greater, a chance to contribute to the greater good, to make an impact, and to experience a greater sense of purpose. The chance to provide a corrective experience, to give back, or impact a life in a meaningful way provides a compass by which youth workers relate to their experience and to the world. Some knew all along that they were youth workers, others described their career choice as more of a journey. In the end, it is safe to say that youth work is more than a job.

Influence of Lived Experience

From an existential perspective our lived experiences create meaning and purpose in our lives. All of the youth workers interviewed attributed powerful meaning to their lived experiences and attributed those experiences as opportunities to connect to the greater cause of youth work and helping youth succeed. Participants shared stories regarding their own life experience creating an openness to the work. Many of the participants experienced some form of hardship in their own youth-hood and spoke about the power in the ability to relate to youth on a genuine and human level. Participants discussed the feeling that youth work provides the opportunity to give back to the world those powerful connections that they had with the important adults from their youth. Participants described a sense of pride in their career choice. This is not an easy career choice and as they said, it takes a special type of person to last in the field for very long, and that is something they take great pride in. Finally, as they conveyed the difficulty of the work, some attribute their sense of grit, strength and desire to succeed in the field as a

response to those people in their lives that told them they could not, or would not

succeed.

Personal Experience Creates Openness to Working with Youth

Youth workers described a sense of relating to the youth that they work with that

strengthens their ability to comprehend where youth are coming from and also allows

them the opportunity to respect the struggle the youth face on a daily basis. Four youth

workers were cautious to relate to the youth experience, making sure to discuss their

belief that their own struggles are not comparable to those of the youth that they work

with. Still others found profound connections to the painful struggles and identified those

struggles as a way to connect.

Seven of the youth workers interviewed discussed the powerful impact of serving

youth in agencies and programs they utilized (or programs similar to those utilized) when

they were in crisis. They spoke about finding their way back to the services that helped

them when they were in crisis. The act of re-entering the services once utilized in crisis

now as service provider proves to be a very powerful experience for survivors of such

difficult experiences. One youth worker shared her experience of rejoining the

organization that helped her get on her feet when she was in need as teenager:

> I ended up being in the teen parenting program and I aged out at about 21…when
> I chose to go to school, and I had to do my internship, I came back there to do my
> internship…it was probably more of the teen parenting program (aspect) of what
> we offered that…drew me in and that…made me decide that I wanted to do that
> because I wanted to do that for other girls.

Another youth worker spoke of his sensitivity and appreciation for those who

identify as outsiders, because he too identified in such a way as a teenager:

I was typically kind of one of those…quiet, …quirky kids in high school, one of those back of the room kids you know, that no one really understood…I …relished the underdog and…the kids that got picked on, that was kind of my crowd. And…getting into the field of working with homeless youth, I realized that a lot of those kids I worked with are…the same kind of kids. Kids that sort of feel ostracized, and obviously probably don't feel like they fit into many places because they're not accepted in many places, a lot of them…And so I really identify with kids who are considered…more of the underdogs and are out there not getting the same opportunities or aren't understood as other kids their age.

Lived Experience Influences Career Choice

Many of the youth workers shared stories of their own hardships as teenagers both in their lives as they searched for independence and in their homes growing up. Seven of the youth workers interviewed identified experiencing homelessness, or pregnancy as a teen, or both. Their experiences can't help but flavor the work that they do.

A youth worker spoke of her experience with homelessness and how that experience allowed her to feel what it was like to need help and be helped. She now uses that experience as a way to strengthen her work with youth on the street:

I was homeless once myself actually, as a youth. So I feel that I was helped by youth workers and I was helped…by youth agencies and I felt like I could give back to the people that helped me…I can relate to being like a homeless youth and relate to the feelings and…the situations that they are going through…So I kind of know and can relate to…(and) maybe assist them because I knew what was going on.

Another youth worker talked about her experience of being a teen mom and the difficulties her pregnancy created with her family leading to fallout, leading to homelessness, and eventually leading to a story of overcoming her adversities:

I became pregnant when I was fifteen…my parents had a really hard time dealing with my pregnancy…I ended up in foster care, in foster care for about five months. And I had to go, we had to do like an independent living skills plan...So I actually moved out on my own when I was 17 ½…I ended up being in the teen parenting program and I aged out about 21…When I chose to go to school and I had to do my internship, I came back there to do my internship.

Eight out of the ten youth workers interviewed spoke about a lack of family support. Some were able to stay in their families' homes and some were not. One youth worker described the pain and emptiness he felt after coming out as a teenager, dropping out of school and using drugs as way to escape:

> I didn't have a support, I didn't have a family anymore, I didn't have a home that I stayed at consistently…I think that experience definitely had kind of given me some insight into the feeling of stress and trauma and what that can do and how that can maybe take you out of your normal element and you make choices to possibly escape that.

Relating to Experiences of Youth: Remembering What it was Like/Empathy

As youth workers reflected upon their lived experiences, those experiences that impacted their lives, they reflected upon their insight and ability to remember what it was like growing up. All of the youth workers interviewed told stories of the importance of their remembering and owning their own histories when working with youth. Their experiences helped shape and impact the work they do with the youth they serve. They described a sense of pride in the authenticity that they bring to the work. It is proposed that the ability to remember what it was like assists the youth worker in maintaining a deeper, more authentic relationship. One youth worker questioned whether a person can truly do the work well without experiencing certain hardships:

> I think it's harder for professionals in my field to be able to help people walk through things if they've never lived it themselves, so they can show that empathy, and really know and really relate to them (youth)…if you've never, ever experienced that then how can the kids relate to you?...I can put myself in those people's shoes. So that's helped incredibly. Um, just that insight too.

Eight out of the ten youth workers interviewed experienced distress in their families of origin. So much so that five told stories of running away or being kicked out,

couch hoping, living in shelter, or staying on the streets as youth. Even those that did not

stay on the streets and experience homelessness, described the ability to relate to that

feeling of powerlessness. A youth worker spoke her deeper sense of connection to the

youth that she works with from the remembrance of her own hardship:

> You know, the population that I serve right now, they're runaway and homeless
> youth. So to hear kids…13, 14, 15 saying that they just can't go home, (their)
> parents say 'no, you know that you're just not welcome here'…I can put myself
> in that shoe when I got on that greyhound bus with a one-way ticket and five
> dollars, and (my mom) said you know 'here you go, I don't want to see you again'
> type of thing…and just all of those feelings that go along with that…and that
> sense of just having to do it…on their own…I've been on my own since about 16
> and ½.

Youth workers described the experiences they faced as opening them up to a

greater capacity for empathy and awareness. One youth worker talked about the alliance

she formed with a youth whose story reminded her so much of her own. This youth

worker pointed out the natural and potential risk of identifying closely with a client:

> When I first started, there was a young lady that I worked with…the kind of
> person that she was kind of reminded me a lot of myself…and…to tell you the
> truth, I think I tended to work a little harder with her because I really wanted her
> to be successful, because she really reminded me of me.

As mentioned earlier the impact and importance of supportive adults cannot be

stressed enough. Many youth workers described a deep sense of connection that they had

with a social worker, school counselor, or helping professional in their teenage years.

These experiences of positive support and empathy translated into a desire to give back,

or pay it forward in the now-adult youth worker's lives. One youth worker described

how her school social worker quite literally saved her life when the youth worker was

growing up. She spoke to the power of this interaction and holds it as a reason to do the

work that she does today:

By the time I was 13 I put myself into therapy at school…there was a social worker there…so over time…I built a really good rapport with this lady, and…she basically saved my life…I'd…try to like kill myself…I was depressed…I had severe anxiety…I was obsessive compulsive…I had high-risk behaviors, having promiscuous sex, just doing all these really bad things and I had no one really to be supportive…and then I'd go home and be a full time mom and have no kids of my own…when I would go to school, it was my only way out of the house. So when I would be at school, it was like the happiest time in my life….I dedicate a lot of my life to her because…she really opened my eyes to a gift that I had, but she also…saved my life too…I want to…give that to somebody…I want to like save somebody's life. I want to give them something that maybe I didn't get until I met her".

Pride in Career Choice/Identity

All ten of the participants interviewed described a great sense of pride and

meaning in their work. Two of the youth workers, as previously mentioned were hesitant

to say outright that they felt prideful about their work and felt a sense of meaning

attached to their work. Instead they described the sense of meaning and purpose they

receive from their work without fully endorsing the terminology. Three of the youth

workers felt more comfortable describing their work and the importance they attach to

the role that they play in providing services to a very vulnerable population. One youth

worker was able to articulate the sense of pride of being a youth worker quite elegantly

when he said:

When you're in this field, I've noticed this from other people who work in the field, that you really kind of introduce yourself by the kind of work that you do because…number one, it's not typical to say "you know I'm a case manager for homeless youth, or I'm an outreach worker for homeless youth, or I work in a transitional living program." Most people in the larger society are like 'what's that, I've never heard of that'. You know? So…kind of being a part of that fringe is something I personally kind of take pride in because it's again…not typical work that a lot of people would choose….I think that there is just a pride that people take in this kind of work because it's not typical work and…I think it takes a special kind of person to really remain in it for a long amount of time."

Negative Messages Fueled Desire to Succeed and Pursue a Career in Youth Work

Six out of the ten youth workers interviewed were told they would not amount to much if they made it past 18. Four youth workers described the pain of hearing such disbelief from their own fathers. Yet something about the youth workers interviewed made them fight harder to succeed in the face of negative messages. Again referencing the grit or the tendency to identify with 'the fringe' seems to propel at least some youth workers to make that much more of an effort in their careers. One youth worker described her experience as a young woman being told by her father that she wouldn't succeed:

> (Participant's Father) used to tell me that I wasn't going to do anything but make tortillas and sell tortillas on the side of the road. And so between having a family that were teachers and having a father who I was kind of like 'fuck you, I'm going to do the opposite of whatever you say, really pushed me into it (youth work). I got a drive, both positively and negatively pushed into it. I needed it both ways because it's been that little bit of fighter in me that's been able to keep me going and realizing that I was able to do so at a younger age, rather than realizing it later.

Another youth worker described the dissonance his career choice created between himself and his father, which created a deeper desire to be successful in the youth worker's own endeavors:

> I followed a non-traditional career path, that for a number of years, at least my dad didn't quite fully understand…that did open up the door for a lot of conflict and tension where my dad…didn't see me doing something that was very successful, and questioned my…pursuits a lot. And that almost inspired me to almost go for it more, I guess. So in the end, maybe selfishly, made me take a little more pride in my work…and being successful I guess.

Many youth workers spoke of a more generalized battle against more than just their fathers, against their families, loved ones and people they cared about telling them

that they would not succeed. A youth worker described her understanding of their

disbelief and her desire to overcome the labels being cast upon her:

> I had a lot of people telling me that I would never be anything and you know,
> never do anything with my life. And so naturally, as stubborn as I am, I had to
> prove them wrong.

Without a doubt, the youth workers interviewed entered the field with diverse and

influential lived experience that flavored both their career choice and their relationship to

their work. They did not just happen upon the field of youth work; many shared

experiences that directly influenced their decision to enter the field. Perhaps a reason

why many youth workers are so successful in their relationships with the youth that they

serve is because they remember what it was like, they can relate to the experiences and

they have a desire, even an obligation to give back. Though many youth workers

interviewed were humble, they took great pride in the work that they do. This pride in

their identity appears to be in part, fueled by the negative messages received growing up.

Youth workers interviewed have a score to settle, a battle to fight, and an avenue in

which to pursue their passion by engaging with the youth they serve to do the same.

Influence of Family of Origin

A dominant theme throughout the conversations with youth workers was the

impact and significance of their experiences in their families of origin, or their families in

which they grew up. Seven out of the ten youth workers interviewed spoke of direct

impact that hardship had on their experience in their families growing up. One youth

worker reported having a very strong, committed and loving and inspirational family.

While two other youth workers attributed the majority of the meaning, and reasons for

entering the field to their personal life experiences rather than their family of origin.

Every youth worker, whether positively or negatively, was impacted in some way by

their experiences in their families of origin. Some youth workers spoke about their

families introducing them to the act and importance of service.

Service as a Family Value

Acting in service of others, especially youth is a way of life for many, if not all of

the youth workers interviewed. Four youth workers spoke specifically about their

family's commitment to helping others as a significant influence to their current

relationship to service and helping and their careers. One participant described the

significance of his mother's involvement in the church and her openness to helping others

in his own sense of service and his own sense of how he relates to the world:

> My mom was really involved in our church and there were probably four or five
> different times from being little to being a teenager where there were people in
> our church…families needing respite or whatever it was, and my mom always
> opening up our home to them…so seeing her extend…the home and our family,
> and really kind of instilling in me the idea that there's always room to share,
> there's always room to give…and that there's going to be times where we need to
> be taken care of and there's going to be times when we're able to take care of
> other people…So I think that was really a big thing that kind of impacted my
> …generalized outlook on…not only…going into the field of helping but how I
> see myself and…others and how we relate and what that…means.

Another participant actively stated throughout the interview that her life growing

up was very different than the lives of the youth she works with, who often times are in

crisis, have experienced abuse, or trauma. She spoke about the values her family instilled

including using the privilege they had to give back to the community and help others who

weren't as fortunate as her family was. She talked about the value of service staying with

her and how that value impacts her work today:

> I come from privilege, I come from a privileged family…We would go at the
> Simpson Shelter and serve dinner once a month...My parents always taught me,

even though you come from this privilege, you need to help people, and you need to because not everyone comes from that…it's nice…I grew up with that mentality that you need to help others. And…it really stuck with me.

Hardship in Childhood/Family of Origin

Nine out of the ten youth workers interviewed described remembrance of at least some sense of hardship growing up in their families. More often than not the hardship was described as significant and having direct impact on youth workers' desires to enter the helping profession. Four out of the ten youth workers interviewed described the impact and significance of living with a parent who struggled with alcoholism or drug addiction. Five youth workers described the impact of witnessing their parents' conflict, leading many times to divorce or separation of the family. One youth worker spoke about the isolation she felt from her adoptive family and the deep sense of emptiness that she has carried with her throughout her life.

The youth workers in this study with the exception of one, whether they attributed their experiences of hardship in their families to their career choice or not, all experienced some experience of hardship growing up. One youth worker was very candid about her experience of hardship and trauma. She talked openly regarding the impact that her experiences of trauma growing up had on her decision to enter the field and corrective experience her career choice has offered her own life:

> The reason why I wanted to work in this field, I don't know if I per se wanted to to be a youth worker most definitely. I wanted to be a social worker because…I grew up in a pretty dysfunctional home as a kid and my parents were pretty big into drugs and alcohol. There was a lot of dysfunction…My dad was a drug dealer, my mom…was a really bad drug addict and…they had us pretty young…But once I started school for human services, then it opened my eyes up to all the stuff that I was going through, which made me like it even more. Because I was like 'oh my gosh, I could help a kid with this, I could help a kid with that'. So it made me fall in love with it even more…I've had all these years to heal and move forward and build these positive relationships.

Six of the ten youth workers interviewed describe a sense of being an individual living amongst their families. Five youth workers described the tendency to feel very much alone in their childhoods, feeling as though they must take on the 'good fight' even if their families were not able to join them in their valiant efforts. One youth worker spoke to the isolation and emptiness she felt in her adoptive family, and emptiness that has stayed with her to this day:

> I honestly can't remember a time that my mom said 'I love you' growing up…I grew up with a lot of questions and I grew up with a lot of emptiness-that's how I put it…never knowing where you fit in….so a sense of emptiness I carry throughout my life.

As stated above, a number of youth workers identified themselves as children of alcoholics or drug addiction. These youth workers in particular spoke about their childhoods in a sense that they weren't really childhoods at all, instead perhaps mini-adulthoods. One youth worker articulated the impact of her mother's struggle with a drug addiction and the youth worker's childhood desire to put others before herself:

> My mom was getting into drugs pretty bad and we were all really young…one thing lead to another and my brother and sister weren't being taken care of the way they should have because they were…significantly younger than me…so I was I was…running away, coming back, running away, coming back just to make sure my brother and sister were being taken care of.

Responsible Role in Family of Origin

Identification with the responsible role in the family of origin was a dominant theme. Five out of the ten youth workers interviewed spoke at great length regarding their responsibilities growing up. Many spoke about taking on a parentified role and again, feeling like more of an adult than a child. One youth worker captured the sentiment of many when she spoke of the sense of responsibility that she took on as a child and the difficulty of letting go of that responsibility to this day:

I am extremely responsible for everything. I take on responsibility for things that are nowhere near what I should be taking responsibility for. I am also a peacemaker…growing up, my father was an alcoholic, he still is but now he's sober…and so my mom was going back to school and working full time, so I became almost the mother in the family…so I was responsible for cooking and cleaning, and didn't do a really good job at that because I didn't know how to, but I was responsible for it.

Another youth worker spoke of the multiple responsible roles she took on to accommodate her family growing up. She spoke of the struggle many youth workers and helping professionals battle, a tendency to provide for others so much that one loses a sense of themselves:

I was the caretaker. I was the responsible child. I was the overachiever…so there was no sleep, there was no 'me time'. So yeah, I had no identity. It was always do for everyone else and go above and beyond so that no one has any room to say that I didn't do it right, you know?

A youth worker described his role in his family of origin as a mediator, taking it upon himself to attempt to mediate between his parents and calm the tension in the household:

I was definitely kind of a mediator between my mom and dad a lot. They fought a lot…especially when I got to be 15, 16, 17, they had a lot more arguments over time, over different things. And I would be kind of courageous sometimes. Especially, I remember when I was 16 or 17…I would hear them arguing in the basement and I would try and sneak down there and talk with them and kind of mediate and even kind of play…the counselor role in a lot of ways."

Responsible Role as Adult/Role Change

Two youth workers who did not identify themselves as the responsible ones as children commented on the oddity of their realization that they had taken on that role as adults in their families of origin. For both of the individuals it was difficult for them to express just how they fell into these roles, however one participant speaks his understanding of his own healing as compared to the healing of his siblings:

Now I am the caretaker for most of my family…which is a really weird dichotomy because I wasn't supposed to be that…I'm not the oldest and so I now do a lot of caretaking for my other siblings…maybe the way…they've dealt with the trauma wasn't the same as me, and they're still dealing with it, I think in a lot of ways.

Black Sheep Role/Outsider in Family of Origin

Three participants described themselves specifically as outsiders or the "black sheep" of their family. This role was described as a painful, isolated stance to take in the family. One participant describes herself as and outsider "like a house guest." Another participant talked about his feelings of isolation and feelings of shame after he came out to his family:

I definitely was the black sheep of the family…because I came out when I was like 14, I came out really young in a very religious family, very conservative minded….so it was kind of like nobody knew what to do with me. And I think that they probably expected me to become like a drug addict and probably die of A.I.D.S. …Something was going to happen to me…like I would (be) the one who would kind of shame the family."

All youth workers interviewed described some sense of relationship to their career choice and their experience growing up in their family of origin. Some described the very powerful influence of their families' dedication to service, to helping others, and to giving back. Many described the impact of hardship in the family of origin; there is a sense of understanding, a sense of knowing that they bring to their work with youth in crisis. Many describe the translation of their role of the responsible one in their families as seamless as they took on responsible roles in their careers. Others related quite elegantly to the identity of 'outsider,' taking with them a remembrance of what it was like to not fit in. The majority of the youth workers interviewed have some sense of what it is like to suffer, to long for something more, and to strive for something greater, qualities the youth they work with experience on a daily basis.

Identity as Caretaker

Another prevailing theme throughout the interviews with youth workers was their identity with the caretaking role. Caretaking is a natural and arguably necessary tendency and capacity in the helping field. Nine out of the ten youth workers interviewed commented on their natural tendency to take on a caretaking role. Many attributed caretaking as belonging to a sense of their identity, it is who they are. With this natural tendency to provide for and take care of others, many described an internal struggle in their professional lives. It is difficult to promote self-efficacy and independence when in a caretaking role. Many talked about the importance of letting go of that piece of their identity to prevent over-exertion of themselves and to promote self-efficacy in their clients.

Caretaking as an Instinctual Way of Being

Nine respondents interviewed described caretaking as simply a way of being. It is not something one can turn on or off, it has been a way that many relate to the world and find meaning in their relationships. A youth worker described the natural tendency as an instinctual way of being:

> It was always kind of an instinctual thing for me. I would…always just jump without thinking in that regard…I was always the first to jump into that caregiver role and I think it was just a tendency I've always had.

Identify with Caretaking Role

Other youth workers talked about the sense of identity they relate to the caretaking role. Again, it doesn't seem to be a role that can be simply turned on or off. Many youth workers had difficulty defining themselves in other terms. They indicated they are natural givers, they are natural providers; it is a way of life. One youth worker

discussed how caretaking is so natural it is difficult to step back at times and let others do

for themselves:

> I think probably with every relationship, ask any of my coworkers, I care about what's going on and I'll certainly help anybody in any way that I can…(when working with clients): I think it's good…I think…they can sense that. But sometimes I think that maybe I expect too much. I really want to bring them where I think that they can be. And sometimes…they're not ready to look at that, but I think they're ready to move. So I need to stop and evaluate that and slow down a bit.

Caretaking with Clients

As necessary as the capacity to care can be in the profession, many youth workers

caution against fully embracing their desire to do for others all the time. Six youth

workers interviewed described their caretaking ability as way to support their clients,

however they also acknowledged that the best way to support someone is to assist them

in supporting themselves. This is a very difficult dichotomy to navigate for those so

naturally gifted at caring for others. Often times youth workers who took on caretaking

roles in their families of origin find themselves dancing with the same temptations to pick

up and provide for their clients. One youth worker described the responsibility she felt

and the balance she must maintain to ensure that her clients are not falling victim to her

tendency to takeover and take on caretaking:

> I take on a lot of responsibility for trying to make sure my youth make these changes in their life and get frustrated when they don't…I've been the responsible one for a long time, it's a hard one to give up…I find a lot of my meaning and my purpose comes from being able to take on those responsibilities and make things better for other people…learning to take a step back and say 'no, let them make it better for themselves, let them gain those skills".

Seven out of the ten youth workers interviewed described noticing that their

tendency toward caretaking with clients has subsided the more experience they've had in

the field. The natural tendency is difficult to fight and/or manage early on because it is

such an instinctual way of being. Over time, these youth workers described the ability to

relate to their clients in different ways, to develop a different capacity to care without

doing for others. One youth worker described her journey and her awareness of the

impact caretaking has on her work:

> I think early in my career I was really caretaking with clients….As I've been here
> longer, I think I've grown more and I've done a better job of allowing clients to
> do their own thing and just try to guide them and give them other options. So I've
> actually tried a lot to step back from that too in relationships as I've gotten older
> and got more intelligent. But it's still there, but…I just try to back off a little bit."

Caretaking without Balance = Burnout: Emotionally Straining Work

Youth workers interviewed spoke in volumes regarding the need for caution when

one has the tendency to take on a caretaking role. The field of youth work is very

demanding. Young people in crisis present with such a high level of need, it can often

feel overwhelming. Many of the youth workers interviewed offered the same caution:

give of yourself but also take care of yourself. Six of the youth workers interviewed

discussed the danger of giving too much too quickly. They spoke about the lessons they

learned from overextending themselves and watching coworkers overextend themselves

by not listening to their own needs. There is a certain wisdom that develops after

working in the field. Unfortunately this wisdom seems to be learned from learning the

hard way. One youth worker talked about the importance of taking care of yourself and

watching coworkers burnout because they weren't able to balance:

> You take care of yourself. Because I have seen so many years of working here, I
> have seen so many workers…come into this field and they want to…save the
> world in…one day. And they…didn't take care of themselves. You know? They
> are completely burnt out because…this is a very high demanding job, especially
> maybe not so much physically but mentally…You just hear sad stories, when you
> hear all the suffering of the people…'I got kicked out, I don't have this, I don't
> have that, so and so is in jail, and so and so got shot'...you have to take care of
> yourself."

Another youth worker described his memories of first entering the field, and his

remembrance of the desire to do more than he really could handle. There is a sense of

loss associated with balance for those who have a natural tendency to care take. Letting

go of control and accepting that one can only do so much is a difficult lesson to learn.

This youth worker described the importance of letting go in order to continue in the

profession:

> I remember first getting into the field, I mean I kind of threw everything in to a
> shift and the kitchen sink in to the work that I did…You throw everything into a
> shift and then on day two or three of the week, you're ready for the weekend.
> And I've realized that you just have to give what you can...But…you can't throw
> everything, I mean 130% into a day or you're going to burnout pretty quick. And
> so you just kind of do what you can and you rely on other people around you…"

The youth workers in this study all identified, in some capacity, with the

caretaking role. When dissecting the word, taking care simply makes sense in a

profession focused so specifically on such a vulnerable population. Those that enter the

field of youth work instinctually feel drawn to helping others; many have taken on an

identity of helping throughout the multiple avenues of their lives. Caretaking with

clients, therefore also comes naturally, though many youth workers interviewed

cautioned fully embracing the caretaking stance with youth. Youth workers in this study

spoke with wisdom, reflecting on the importance of self-determination both for

themselves and for the youth that they serve. Most importantly, they voiced the need to

exhibit restraint in the profession and not overextend themselves so they may continue

serving youth and avoid burning out. They voiced the wisdom to honor the impact of

their work both on the youth they serve and on themselves.

The Importance of Boundaries

Youth workers interviewed were all very aware of the importance and significance of boundaries. Youth in crisis are very vulnerable and often times present a need that can be overwhelming and difficult to manage. Six of the ten individuals interviewed spoke about how they learned to develop and honor their boundaries over time. Helping comes naturally to these individuals, to place limits on their capacity to give often times goes against their understanding of how to relate to others and how to show compassion. Seven youth workers stressed the importance of leaving their work at work and developing the capacity to take care of themselves outside of work. For some helpers taking care of one's self over others feels selfish or wrong. Six youth workers talked about coming to an understanding that by setting up boundaries they were actually honoring their clients' stories, and honoring their self-determination. A big part of honoring clients' stories means allowing them to be the star of their own show. Many youth workers when asked about boundaries spoke at great length about the importance of limiting and balancing self-disclosure.

Boundaries Learned from Experience in the Field

Boundaries do not come naturally for most youth workers because of their high tendency to take care of others over themselves. Seven of the youth workers interviewed talked about the process of learning to let go, to allow their clients to do for themselves. One youth worker talked about her early experience as a juvenile corrections officer and the difficulty accepting that she could not change for people but could help them along the way. She attributes this less to her ability to remain in the field:

> That boundary is very, very hard to figure out. And for so long being a youth
> worker straight out of high school, or straight out of college, you have this 'save

the world' mentality. And you know for me, being a juvenile corrections officer, it was sort that 'we can't save everyone'. It was sort of a reality check for me. And luckily for me, I've been able to find that boundary really early on in my career. Verses some people live with this 20, 30 years, you know do this kind of work and they are forever burnt out because they can't figure out that boundary. So, it's all about listening to yourself."

Youth workers interviewed indicated they have difficulty setting limits to their care giving. Three youth workers spoke specifically about the value they have found in setting boundaries so that they may impact many lives instead of just a few. A youth worker described the value in understanding his role:

I personally know my role. This is who I am and this is my job. There (are) sometimes and many times where you have heard some stories that you will want to take the youth home and offer the youth your place because they have suffered so much. But you have to understand 'as a professional I cannot, I cannot. Ok, I can bring this youth to my house and that will be the end of my career.'…I can help more youth, trying to show them the resources through maintaining those boundaries.

Separate Work from Home: Difficulty Leaving Work at Work

Many youth workers were able to articulate the value in setting boundaries; how they set the boundaries and how they leave their work at work became more difficult to explain. One of the youth workers described his unique ability to 'turn off the light' at the end of the day. He acknowledged that this seems to be a unique skill that he has developed however he describes the value in being able to experience life outside of the very emotionally taxing work:

Once I'm done with work, it's like I turn off the light and I separate with that…and…absolutely there are things that you hear and you see that you go home and think about those things, about that youth that was raped over and over, or whatever it is. But in some ways…I've developed a capacity, it's like once I'm here, it's like I turn out the light, and just put on a different hat.

Another youth respondent described the value and the difficulty of letting go. She described the pride she feels in her dedication to her work but also honors the fact that

she must set limits at some points and may not be able to do all that she desires to do for

the youth that she serves:

> It tends to be more emotionally straining and emotionally…involved. But you make it work and I've been making it work for almost 9 years. So I finally have come to a point in my career where I know where that boundary is. And I know if it's too much, it's too much. And you know, I know how to leave work at work, and sometimes some of it comes home. But for the most part it stays at work.

Boundaries as a Way of Honoring Youth's Experience & Self Determination

All youth workers interviewed acknowledge the importance of boundaries. Six

youth workers interviewed described the way they utilize boundaries as way to honor the

experiences of the youth they work with. This re-framing and re-conceptualization of

their helping role helps them to let go of the desire to do for their clients and take joy in

watching their clients do for themselves. One youth worker described the ability he has

to connect with the youth in a deeper, safer, and more meaningful way because of

boundaries:

> You can interact with youth in a very healthy way…you are not breaking boundaries but you are connecting with them…if you want to go and play outside and play basketball with the youth, we will go play outside and we will connect in a different way…We still have that professional boundary but we are able to share with the youth similar things, everyday things that they may not have…(a) support system, or a good role model to share that to…You can sit down and play chess with a youth, then we are not talking about your problems, we are not talking about your goals, we are just existing, two human-beings playing chess. And I think that helps a lot, maintaining boundaries with them.

Respondents indicate a painful reality that one youth worker cannot save

everyone he or she comes in contact with is a difficult concept to accept. Youth workers

discussed the humbling experience of letting go of their own egos and allowing for the

youth they work with to experience their own sense of mastery. A youth worker

described his re-frame of his role as a guide and support rather than a life safer:

You know you can't save everybody. You can't change for them, but you can do a little bit. And I suppose recognizing that clients tend to fair batter if we're there to support and guide, but they are really doing their own caretaking, and making their own decisions, and doing what they need to do. And we are just there to guide and support them.

Self-Disclosure

Many youth workers have rich stories to share. Their histories define so much of

who they are and how they relate to the world. It is therefore a very real and often

haunting temptation to self-disclose and share their stories with their clients. Six

respondents discussed the inner conflict they battle when deciding to disclose or not.

Three respondents discussed the realization that often times when they have such a strong

desire to tell their clients about themselves, it really is a reflection of their own desires

and not in the best interest of the youth they serve. One youth worker detailed her

process of determining the appropriateness of self-disclosure:

I always put it in the back of my mind, in terms of anything that I share with them, does this benefit them? Or I don't want the table to be turned, like I want to talk about my issues and they're going to problem solve with me. So, if it serves a really good purpose and it gives them some insight, I might share a little bit about me. But it also, you know there's two things with that:…if you share a little bit about yourself, you're opening yourself up and have that thrown back in your face. But at the same time it gives them the ability to say 'oh, I'm not the only one who's going through this' cause a lot of the kids that we're dealing with, the stuff that they're dealing with, they think they're they only ones going through it…I kind of share some information with them to let them see that, you know there is hope...I really guard myself in terms of who I share a lot of my stuff with. It's gotta be really purposeful, it can't be just because I want to hear myself talk".

Another respondent stated a simple philosophy to live by when deciding whether

to self-disclose or not: "If you ever have to get to the point where in your mind you think

'I probably shouldn't be saying this', then you don't."

Importance of Authenticity/Must be Genuine

Eight youth workers interviewed talked about the importance of being 'real' or genuine with their clients. They discussed the value in this authenticity and described their awareness of the benefit staying true to themselves. Many of the respondents verbalized the understanding that it does not truly matter where a person comes from, who they are, or what they've experienced when working with youth. What matters most is owning their own experience, not pretending to understand situations or circumstances that they cannot relate to. A respondent describes the importance of being genuine when working with youth: "teenagers are smart…they can tell if someone really cares and they can tell when someone's just pretending."

One youth worker disagreed holding strong to the importance of lived-experience in the field. She described the importance of experiencing that of which your clients have experienced as an important way of relating and helping: "If you've been there, you've done it, it makes a huge difference."

Intentional use of Self: Youth Work is a Craft, an Art

Youth workers interviewed describe themselves as unique, eclectic, and powerful in their differences. They describe a sense of pride in their craft that contributes to their dedication to the very difficult work that they do. One respondent summed it up articulately when he described his understanding of the intricacies of his work:

> By doing more listening and less talking, that's where we're making it a craft and not a job. And I think that the way that we do respond when we respond…we can allow them to know that we understand. Not by saying we understand but by showing them that we understand…reframing it in a way that's personal to them. And it's tailoring the conversation to allow and give space for them to share…Not making assumptions so that you are just getting 'yes's and no's ".

Boundaries are enormously important in the field of youth work. The impact of healthy boundaries enhances the interaction and the impact of the interaction youth workers have with their clients. Youth workers described the struggle to understand and master the importance of boundaries. The participants in this study illustrate that boundaries do not come naturally to helping professionals. They grew up helping and giving generously of themselves and thus when entering fulltime positions, described the importance of learning to set limits and take care of themselves. Many described the difficulty and importance of leaving work at work and carving out time for their own personal lives. Many spoke of boundaries and self-disclosure interchangeably, which proposes the importance of self-disclosure in youth work as well as the need for further education in the profession regarding the great richness and depth of boundaries. In the end it is apparent that youth work and authenticity go hand in hand. Youth work done well is an art, a craft, and is deserving of much more credit than it receives as a profession.

Discussion

The intent of this study was to determine youth workers' perceptions of their helping ability and how their life experiences and experiences in their families of origin relate to their decision to enter the field and their helping ability. It was hypothesized that youth workers did have life experiences, especially difficult experiences in their families of origin that influenced their decision to enter the field. It was further hypothesized that the experiences of youth workers directly impact the abilities of youth workers to work objectively with clients, but in the end youth workers' ability to relate to

their clients struggles allows for a deeper connection to clients, also leading to a greater risk of boundary violations.

The majority of the findings supported the existing research with some exceptions. Upon reviewing the findings, the existential theoretical lens provides a basis and a way of understanding the depth of participants' relationships to their careers. A strong theme in the research included all respondents' endorsement that indeed their work is more than a career, it is a way they relate to the world and find meaning in their existence.

A prominent finding and theme in the research is youth workers' deep connection to their career choice and the overriding feeling that their careers connect them to something greater. Many of the youth workers interviewed discussed the sense of purpose their careers have given them, and the sense of meaning that is created through the work that they do. This major theme is supported by the literature and exemplified by the Buchbinder (2007) study which found helping professionals' decisions to enter the field appear to be rooted in finding meaning in their lives, by connecting the past, present, and future into a meaningful whole. One participant speaks to Buchbinder's research when he spoke very simply of his understanding of his relationship to his work when he describes it as "a call."

Existential influence was a frequent theme in both the review of literature and the researcher's theoretical lens. Four participants do identify the significance of their families' instilment of values such as giving to others, and helping as a way of life. The findings support Buchbinder's (2007) research of social workers who identified the

importance of family values instilled in their childhoods such as helping and giving of one's self.

Youth workers' experiences in their families of origin do crucially impact their career choice and the way youth workers identify with their helping abilities. Findings support the importance of both positive and negative experiences in the family of origin. The majority of respondents who identified experiences in the family of origin as significant in their career choice told stories related to traumatic experiences or experiences of hardship. This finding supports research, which found social work students interviewed described numerous psychosocial trauma factors in their early life histories, these instances of trauma were found to motivate career choice (Black, et al., 1993).

The experience of hardship in the family of origin was a much more salient finding in the literature reviewed and the current study than perhaps employers give credit to, or are aware. The majority of the youth workers interviewed detailed at least one story of hardship growing up. Unfortunately a number of those participants detailed lengthy narratives detailing significant distress in their families of origin. Looking back at the findings 40% of the youth workers interviewed discussed the impact of living with a parent who used drugs or alcohol. Seventy percent detailed the direct impact that hardship in their family of origin had on their experience growing up and 90% of all youth workers interviewed indorsed at least one remembrance of some sense of hardship growing up in their families. These findings relate to the Racusin et al. (1981) study, which found that the childhoods of therapists from dysfunctional homes have been described as training grounds for sensitivity to interpersonal stress.   It is important to

point out not all youth workers interviewed described experiences of hardship, however the findings were prevalent enough to highlight the impact overall. Some youth workers who shared hardships from their experiences in their families growing up did state they felt other experiences outside of their family experience impacted their career choice more. Even with exceptions, the findings support the hypothesis that youth workers experiences of hardship in their families of origin impact their career choice.

Findings support the hypothesis and literature regarding youth workers' high tendency to take on the responsible role in their families of origin. The literature cited a noticeable tendency of helping professionals to take on a responsible role in their families of origin; over two thirds of social workers surveyed described their role in their family-of-origin as the parentified child, the over-responsible member, the go-between, or the good child (Buchbinder, 2007). Five out of ten youth workers interviewed also detailed notable histories of identifying with the responsible role in their families of origin. Many youth workers spoke about the tendency to take on the parentified role, caring for their siblings when their parents were not able to do so. In a sense many of the youth workers interviewed have been in the helping profession well before they were eligible to work. Youth workers described a natural tendency toward helping. Their positions in their families of origins set them up to be in tune with the needs of others. Children willing to take on the parentified role become rescuers; altruism becomes survival (Lackie, 1983). Youth workers identified with this natural way of being, which makes sense, as it has been their way of survival.

The findings further support the hypothesis that youth workers carry on an extension of this responsible role into career choice and into the career itself. Many

youth workers who identified with the caretaking tendency as children find it is difficult to separate from that role in any capacity; they speak of the role following them throughout both their personal and professional relationships. This finding is supported by the literature which states social workers who come from highly stressed families of origin have been found to take on high caretaking roles in their families and in their careers (Lackie, 1983).

Many of the youth workers interviewed discussed the healing effect their career choices have on their own lives. Research echoed this belief. Research described the healing effect that helping professionals' awareness and acceptance of their own issues from childhood had on their current practice. This awareness was perceived as a benefit to their abilities as therapists (Wolgien and Coady, 2008). Youth workers interviewed discussed the excitement in realizing their ability to relate to the youth they serve on a more human level and detailed the healing effects their careers have on both their clients and themselves.

Youth workers also describe the difficulty in letting go of control with their clients, wanting to do for the client instead of promoting self-efficacy. The review of literature supports this difficulty. The career choice of therapist, helping professional, or social worker has been described as a defense against helplessness and ensures control over intimacy (Racusin, et al. 1981). Youth workers do not endorse the practice of care taking or controlling behaviors currently with their clients. They rather describe their awareness of the desire to take control for their clients at times and some of their past tendencies to take on a more distinct caretaking role.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of the youth workers interviewed identified with the caretaking role in some capacity. Many of the youth workers interviewed feel a deep sense of connection to the care taking role and finding the capacity to care take as more instinctual than learned. Youth workers described the importance of self-care, however only a few actively asserted that they currently practice self-care strategies. The research echoes this finding when describing social workers' tendency to get caught up with empathy for their clients but often times having difficulty finding empathy for themselves (Lackie, 1983). Both the findings and literature suggest that it is much more natural and perhaps easier to give of one's self than to give to one's self when in the helping profession.

The findings also supported the hypothesis that youth workers who identify closely with their clients' life experience have the capacity to connect more deeply with clients but are also at greater risk of boundary violations. The literature states that clinicians who are not mindful to purposefully take care of themselves due to their overextending behaviors put themselves at risk of boundary violations with clients (Holz Deal, 2010). Many of the youth workers interviewed discussed the danger in overextending themselves as well as their past tendencies to do so. They describe a wisdom that comes with the job. Youth workers describe difficulty maintaining boundaries earlier in their careers but realizing, sometimes rather quickly, that they could not continue giving all of themselves without sacrificing themselves and burning out.

Though the findings supported the majority of the research hypotheses, they also suggest youth workers place greater emphasis on their life experiences outside of their family of origin. They place greater emphasis on the natural and instinctual aspect of

their helping ability, and have diverse reasons for entry into the field. Respondents were
noticeably cautious to name their career choice as "meaningful" when asked directly
regarding the meaning and purpose they attribute to their careers. Some youth workers
absolutely agreed that their career gave them a sense of meaning and purpose. Others
voiced some discomfort with the idea of receiving anything from their careers. Perhaps
asking them to define the benefit they receive from their work is asking too much of
individuals who identify so deeply with the caretaker or helper role. Acknowledging the
impact of receiving anything from giving may take away from the caretakers' identity of
being a selfless giver.

A surprising and unexpected finding was the assertion by three youth workers that
they identified with a 'black sheep role' in their family of origin. Perhaps this is less
surprising after listening to many youth workers' awareness and identity with the role of
an outsider through their experiences with homelessness, teen-pregnancy, or other
hardship. As one participant mentioned, the connection with this outsider role has
allowed a greater sense of empathy and compassion when working with youth who have
been labeled just that.

Youth workers tended to identify the importance and influence of their lived
experience outside of their family of origin more so than predicted. Their understandings
of their lived experiences seem to give them a deeper connection to the lived experiences
of the youth they work with.

When examining the findings, especially paying attention to questions relating to
youth workers' current performance with relationship to boundaries and limit setting, the

researcher wonders about the actual level of disclosure obtained by the interview questions. Some youth workers were able to go into great detail regarding their struggles with limit setting and boundary setting with clients while others addressed these questions on a more surface level. Several individuals reference trainings they've attended rather than anecdotal accounts of current struggles. Perhaps further research regarding boundaries would be best obtained completely anonymously, by written survey or documentation. Or the findings could also imply that some youth workers are simply more self-aware and reflective than others.

Implications

A majority of the youth workers that participated in this study are survivors, many are humble heroes who often times, shy away from the spotlight. The youth workers interviewed highlighted the courage and multiple strengths they bring to the profession. Youth workers interviewed give so freely of their time and energy, expecting little in return. They offer the capacity to listen, to care so deeply, and to bring forth exorbitant amounts of effort on behalf of the youth that they serve. They bring forth a multitude of strengths including deep compassion and empathy, dedication, determination, and rich histories of their own which propel them further into their roles as empowered helpers.

Further research is needed in order to understand the unique and powerful nature of youth work. More broad and expansive studies will assist in the development of a greater awareness of the impact of youth work as well as a greater understanding of the identity of youth workers. Youth workers interviewed shared stories of influential

experiences of hardship and trauma. Employers and supervisors must pay more attention to the impact of youth workers' life experience.

Special attention should be given to the importance of supportive and consistent supervision in the high-stress field often employing individuals who have experienced high levels of stress and trauma themselves. Regular trainings encouraging self-care strategies, and self-exploration should be encouraged. Youth serving agencies, and those agencies serving individuals in crisis in general, need to promote and make counseling and therapy services for employees more readily available and less stigmatized. Youth workers are asked to give so much of themselves, and have natural tendencies to do so in the first place, that the promotion of healthy limits, boundaries, and self-care must occur. Caring for others comes naturally for youth workers and helping professionals, caring for themselves may not come so readily.

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