
The Experience of Career for People Who Have Moved into Supervisory and Management Roles in a Social Service Organization

Alison M. Stevens

Surrey, B.C.

Norman Amundson

University of British Columbia

ABSTRACT

Funding cuts and organizational restructuring are among the factors that contribute to making the social service sector a stressful environment in which to work. This qualitative study explores how the values, beliefs, and motivation of supervisors and managers in the social service sector change over time and how they make meaning in their work life. Participants have specific expectations of what they need from their work environment, and they want to affect their environment through using their particular knowledge and skills. Mitigating factors that enable success include having a supportive agency, seeing that one's work has an impact on the environment, and having a voice.

RÉSUMÉ

Parmi les facteurs qui contribuent au stress dans le milieu des services sociaux sont les coupures de fonds et la restructuration organisationnelle. Cette étude qualitative examine comment changent avec le temps les valeurs, les convictions, et les motivations des surveillants et des directeurs dans le secteur de services sociaux, et comment ceux-ci donnent une signification à leur travail. Les participants ont des attentes spécifiques du milieu de travail, et ils désirent l'influencer en utilisant leur connaissances et compétences particulières. Parmi les facteurs atténuants qui permettent leur succès sont le soutien de l'agence, la perception de l'impact de leur travail sur le milieu, et d'avoir une voix.

INTRODUCTION

One of the values frequently cited as important by those who decide to enter the social service field as a career choice is altruism (Hanson & McCullagh, 1995; Knezevic, 1999; Wakefield, 1993). For the purposes of this study, altruism is defined as action that is motivated by a desire to benefit another even at a cost to oneself (Piliavin & Charng, 1990; Wakefield). Often coupled with the motivation of altruism is a desire to succeed in one's career, that is, self-interest. Studies that have looked at career success have tended to focus on the corporate world rather than the human service world (Arthur, Claman, & DePhillippi, 1995; DePhillippi & Arthur, 1994; Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Parker, 2002). Several studies (Baines, 2004; DePhillippi & Arthur; Ezell et al., 2002; Inkson & Arthur; Riley & Guerrier, 1993) have looked at the market shift in which jobs have moved from being stable, clearly defined, and existing within a hierarchical structure

to flexible, changing, and designed to meet a specific but often temporary need. They note that this shift is due in part to pervasive organizational change and restructuring.

Studies that have looked at the impact of the work environment on human service workers have tended to look broadly at how people are affected (Erera, 1991; Erera-Weatherly, 1996; Heinonen, MacKay, Metteri, & Pajula, 2001) with specific focus on issues such as burnout (Leiter, 1991; Seifert & Jayaratne, 1991) and resiliency factors (Zunz, 1998). No studies were found that looked specifically at how workers' desire for and experience of career success is impacted and how people in social services make meaning of their experience over time, particularly in terms of values, beliefs, and motivation.

Given that the human service work environment is frequently characterized as stressful (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Baines, 2004; Erera, 1991; Erera-Weatherly, 1996), it is important to know what enables people to work successfully in this environment. This study sought to understand the interaction between values such as altruism and a desire for career success and the environmental demands and expectations. Understanding whether people maintain a commitment to their values, beliefs, and career success over time and how these evolve will add to the ability of individuals and organizations to attend to the needs of employees, to make informed employment decisions, and to increase the likelihood of individual and collective success in human service endeavours.

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to seek to understand the lived career experiences of supervisors and managers in human service work in the present and over time. Accepting the notion that career is holistic and integrated with other roles in one's life (Brott, 2001; Carr, 1996), we sought to understand how people conceptualize their experience in social services, how they interpret their experience and articulate it in terms of values, beliefs, and motivation. The intent of this study was to conduct open, semi-guided interviews with supervisors and managers and through this interviewing process to explore values, beliefs, and motivation (Creswell, 2003).

METHOD

Participants

We were particularly interested in the experience of people in supervisory and management positions in social service organizations. Our intention was to include only those who had worked in the social service system for at least five years with at least the last three years in a supervisory or management capacity to ensure that their exploration of the environment could be linked to their work context in concrete ways and over time. As it turned out, the eight participants had all worked in the social service sector for at least 10 and as many as 35 years. The study was carried out in a large urban centre in western Canada. The social service system in this western Canadian province is organized with primary social services such as child protection, foster care, and adoption services being provided

by government employees (Ministry of Children and Family Development, 2007). The majority of other services are contracted out to non-profit and for-profit agencies that vary in size depending on the number of contracts and services they provide. Contracts are renewed annually according to the discretion of the government. To recruit participants, executive directors of all agencies with more than 50 employees within the urban centre were contacted by letter. Participants voluntarily participated in response to information provided through their directors. To qualify as “supervisor” or “manager” for the purposes of this study, participants needed to have responsibility for overseeing at least one program providing some type of social service.

We attempted to have a fairly even split among supervisors and program directors/managers and between male and female participants. We were able to interview four supervisors and four managers. However, the number of women working for social services is greater than the number of men, and in the end we interviewed six women and two men. We selected supervisors and managers rather than line workers due to their unique role of standing between the direct service providers and those in upper management who have the decision-making power. An assumption was made that, because of their position of authority, supervisors and managers have been more directly exposed to changes in government and the ensuing changes in the social service delivery system. The larger the agency, the more central the role it tends to play in decision making during restructuring of services because it has more contracts with the government. Six of the eight participants were employed by organizations with more than 50 employees. Two participants worked for agencies with between 40 and 50 employees. Two participants worked for the same organization though in different parts of the city. Following are brief biographies focusing on the professional backgrounds of the participants.

Lori is between 36 and 45 and has worked in the social service field for 11 years, almost entirely with one agency. Her roles have included working with people with special needs primarily in a residential setting, supervising the program, and for the last three years acting in a management position. She is currently completing her master’s degree. The agency for which she works has between 100 and 150 employees and provides a variety of social service programs to children and families.

Don is between 46 and 55 and was born and raised in Hong Kong. He has worked in social services since immigrating to Canada as a young man. Previous work experience included working in employment services and as a social worker for the government in child protection and family services. He has nine years’ experience in supervisory positions. For the last three years he has worked for an agency with fewer than 50 employees, where he supervises family counselling and social work services.

Ellen is between the ages of 46 and 55. She has a bachelor’s degree in psychology and a counselling certificate in addictions. She has worked as an addictions counsellor in treatment programs for 10 years, eight of these being as a coordinator. For the last five years she has supervised an outpatient clinic for people with addictions in an agency that has just under 50 employees including volunteers.

John is between 46 and 55 years old. He has worked in social services for 35 years, almost entirely with the government. He has approximately 30 years' experience in supervisory and management positions including oversight of social work teams, foster homes, group homes, and contracted services. He retired from the government and for the last 10 months has worked for an agency with between 150 and 200 employees as a manager of a large youth service program.

Lauren has worked as a supervisor for a drug and alcohol treatment program for youth for the last five years and on occasion was also the acting manager for other programs. She is between 36 and 45 years old and has worked in the social service field for 10 years. Past experience has included positions in women's shelters, group homes, addictions counselling at an outpatient clinic, and prevention work in the community. The agency in which she works employs between 150 and 200 people.

Shelley is between the ages of 46 and 55. She has a master's degree in counselling. She has worked with children with behavioural difficulties and as an in-home family support worker. She was a supervisor of community living and youth workers under contract to the government for two years. For the last five years she has worked as a supervisor of child and family services for an agency that has between 150 and 200 employees.

Claire is in her early 30s and is completing her MBA. Previous experience has included positions in school programs, women's shelters, outreach programs, and employment programs. For the last 10 years she has worked for an agency with between 50 and 100 employees. She worked for five years in a supervisory position in the addictions field, for four years moving between supervisory and management positions in addictions, and then one year ago she became a senior manager.

Elizabeth is age 56 or older and has worked in social services for 34 years. She works for an organization that has more than 200 employees. She has worked with youth at risk, as a child protection social worker, as a consultant to the social work field, and as a manager of a program providing services for women and children. She worked for many years as a child and family therapist and then as the supervisor of the program. Several years later she became the supervisor of a second team of therapists and in the last year had several other programs added to her responsibilities.

Procedures

The study included interviews with each participant of approximately one hour in length. All interviews were audio-recorded. Interviews were conducted at a site that was convenient for the participant. All participants chose to be interviewed at their work sites.

Research question. The research question guiding this inquiry was "How do people who have moved into supervisory and management roles in a social service organization experience their career over time?" The following opening, orienting question or statement was used in each interview to provide contextual information: "I would like to talk about your experience of working in a social service

organization from the time you started until today.” From here the interview became more focused and explored how they personally experienced the work environment and how the environment affected personal values and motivation over time. Prior to conducting the interviews, a list of open-ended questions was developed to explore broadly what led the participant into social services and some of the values and beliefs that underlay their work. The questions offered guidelines only. The line of questioning depended on what each participant brought forth. The questions could then be used to go deeper into areas of importance, particularly relating to values and motivation over time. Motivation was looked at in terms of what led people to stay in the field and what promoted satisfaction in their particular role.

Analysis. The process of analyzing the data followed the steps suggested by McLeod (2001) and Miles and Huberman (1994). Before we began the analysis, we developed a provisional list of codes or meaning units that had a clear structure and rationale. The codes “are tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during a study” (Miles & Huberman, p. 56). The emphasis here was on what a statement might mean to the participant rather than to the researcher (McLeod). The codes were given clear operational definitions and were used to “chunk” information into categories of “meaning” with emphasis being placed on the research question. The list of codes changed and developed as the analysis continued and our understanding of the phenomenon grew.

Initially, the responses to the open-ended questions from the interviews were divided into domains for each participant (McLeod, 2001). We then constructed core ideas or brief summaries for all the material within each domain. At this stage, we then looked for consistencies in the core ideas within domains across interviews from which we could create categories (Hill, Thompson, & Nutt-Williams, 1997). The pattern codes that emerged became a part of the code list and were reviewed for fit throughout the process of data analysis to determine whether the pattern continued to fit, whether the language used was accurate, whether the categories fit in all cases, and so on (McLeod). In addition, memos were used to capture conceptual ideas, things that were surprising or puzzling, or seeds of thoughts that arose during coding. These were used to make connections between ideas, to clarify concepts, and to make distinctions between the idea and already existing codes.

Before proceeding with the write-up of the analysis we reviewed the code list, the themes, and the outline for the data with three professionals to attain an outside perspective. One of the reviewers was a supervisor in the social service sector who works for an agency contracted by the government, and the other two reviewers were professors from different university departments. There was almost complete agreement for each reviewer with the codes that had been developed from the data. Two of the reviewers had some questions pertaining to the logic of the order in which we had placed the themes in the outline. Their advice made sense, and the themes were rearranged in accordance with their recommendations.

RESULTS

From the data analysis, five themes emerged in relation to how supervisors and managers made meaning of their experience. The first theme that emerged was the integrated manner in which participants spoke about values, beliefs, and motivation in their work. This theme laid the foundation for the other themes in that it reflects the fluid, dynamic, integrated manner in which people approach life and, thus, career. There is some overlap among the themes, which is described in the introduction to each theme.

Interaction Among Values, Beliefs, and Motivation

As stated, participants unconsciously spoke about values, beliefs, and motivation in an integrated manner. In spite of attempts during the interviews to draw out distinctions between these, the participants repeatedly integrated them, as though they experienced them as indivisible, suggesting the holistic manner by which work life was approached and the unified manner with which people make sense of the world. Participants spoke about values, such as social justice, that were especially important to them and then linked them to experiences that illustrated the value, at times referring back to childhood experiences. Lauren stated, "I think I always wanted to be a helper without knowing that ... you sort of do that with your friends and everything. You just follow, you become that, you are that person." John noted,

I also was very political as a young man, extremely political, and had a firm belief in the need for social change ... and social justice and those kinds of things, and so that's the kind of stuff that led me into the work and also kept me in that kind of an area.

Motivation appeared in some ways to be a product of congruence between one's values and beliefs and those of the work environment. For example, John reflected, "Well, why do we, you know, we come to work because kids are abused or because women are abused, or because [of] handicap needs, you know whatever your piece of the work is." When there was dissonance, in that the environment no longer allowed participants to behave in ways that were consistent with their values and beliefs, they described changing roles or considering it. John again described this dissonance:

So, it just, they just, they just squeeze down your creativity and you spend so much time trying to fight your way around them and ... that takes a lot of time and energy and sometimes you know after awhile it's like, I just can't do it.

Give and Take Relationship with the Environment

The second theme emerged as participants talked about what was important to them in their work. Each participant described a dynamic give-and-take relationship that they had with their work environment. Environment refers to the workplace, including colleagues, job duties, opportunities for advancement, and work culture. They spoke clearly about expectations of what they wanted the environment to provide for them and what they wanted to give to the environ-

ment. Overall, participants were very clear about the importance of working in an environment that enabled them to act out their values and beliefs and to be challenged toward growth in a dynamic way, at least to the degree that their motivation to carry on was sustained. Examples of peak experiences when this experience of congruence and challenge was particularly salient were described in animated terms by six of the participants. Lauren spoke about the opportunity to be creative and flexible: "I got to do all the things I wanted to do. I got to create everything I wanted to create. So I got to do all the things I wanted to do and hook the kids in and basically I got to be as creative as I wanted." Claire focused on her need to be challenged:

And again, after about three years of managing, again I started to think, okay, everything I can, I've learned this job, and you know, know everything there is to know about this particular job. It's time to find something else.

John described the opportunity for growth in his work, stating, "It gives you all kinds of opportunities to, to reinvent yourself in the sense of your skills, and be aware of your weaknesses. And then if you're weak at this, then how do I get better at that?"

In terms of the importance of giving to the environment, one participant stated, "and then I found out I still can be working with people and I guess making a difference, impacting my community and yeah, I think contributing." Another stated, "When your ideas come to fruition and you see a need and you figure out some way to solve it. So I guess that making a difference ... is what I like the best." Participants spoke about the importance of seeing the impact of their work and how this related directly to their motivation to do the work. Claire described it this way: "I'm lucky 'cause I get to be here and see clients change over a six-month period from being incredibly resistant to being here and to actually being, you know, quite comfortable." Elizabeth stated, "but people do change, you know, people do feel they've gotten something out of it. And I guess that's, that continues to be the motivation."

Navigating the Give-and-Take Relationship with the Environment

The theme of navigating the environment emerged as the participants managed the changes and fluctuation in the environment, how they responded to what they were giving and what they were getting, and how they evaluated whether the balance of give and take met their needs. All of the participants described environments that were highly challenging, stressful, changing, and, in some respects, unpredictable. They spoke candidly of ways in which the environment was difficult and burdensome and spoke also of ways in which it was rich and fulfilling. In response to this multifaceted context in which they worked, they described how they navigated their way through it, facing the challenges, appreciating the strengths, yet somehow monitoring the balance of positives and negatives.

Seven of the eight participants described relatively negative experiences of the government's role in the social service sector. All of the participants spoke of the environment in terms of constant change usually initiated by the government.

Elizabeth stated, "Constant change. I've been in one place working for one agency but it's just been constantly changing, certainly in the past 10 years I can't imagine anything not changing." John commented, "The Ministry's always going though changes, always, always, always going though changes."

All eight of the participants also spoke of the environment as stressful or difficult. Shelley described her experience of the environment:

It's been a really tough time. Morale has been horrible. So they're feeling these heavy caseloads. 'Do more, do more, continue. We're going to cut your program back. We're going to take' ... It's really hard and I think, I do think it's really hard to stay afloat.

Lack of consultation in government decision making was spoken of by seven participants. Don noted, "I don't see any truly professional people really being invited to, to help, you know, formulate those policies." Shelley described her experience: "And so it was no consultation, no nothing. It was just this is the way it's going to be. And it feels hard. It was hard for our team. It was hard for me." The general sense among participants was of powerlessness, of being excluded from decisions that could greatly affect their lives and of seeing the government as controlling and autocratic. Various perspectives were provided in terms of the sources of the stress or difficulty. Commonly cited sources included government cutbacks and resulting program closures or reshuffling, the lack of consultation or rationale for changes, and limited funding or a competitive process for obtaining funding that conflicted with the government expectation that agencies work together to provide services.

All eight participants had remained in the environment for at least 10 years, had taken promotions, and described positive feelings and thoughts about their work history. This suggests that positive aspects of their work outweighed the negative and that they had found ways to negotiate the environment that enabled them to succeed in spite of the challenges, difficulties, and stressors they described. The common factor with all of the participants was a positive experience within their own agency that seemed to counterbalance the more negative experience of the government and the broader system. Mitigating factors identified included support from agency leadership, agency values that were congruent with their own, rewards for success, and being trusted to take on new projects. Claire stated, "I think at the management level there's lots, there have been lots of rewards, and support and encouragement and opportunity as a result of, you know, respect for the work you do so there's lots of benefit to keep going." Elizabeth noted the importance of having a voice and being able to influence the situation: "This is an agency that I find very supportive of staff, very, you know, an agency that really put staff first and when they make decisions, they often come to staff and ask for feedback. There's always lots of consultation."

While participants were generally positive about their experience in their own agency, they were also realistic and seemed to be constantly monitoring the overall balance between positives and negatives. Factors such as being challenged or the expectation to learn new things were viewed as positive up to a certain point,

beyond which they became stressors and unmanageable. This was evident in the declaration of the majority of the participants that they would leave if the negative aspects of their work outweighed the positives. Lauren noted, "If it stays like this long enough that I get frustrated, then I will go and do something else. So I'm prepared for either." Claire similarly commented, "If I'm not contributing, then I'll go somewhere else. If I'm not learning, then I'll find that place too."

Values, Beliefs, Motivation Change Within Life-Span Development

The fourth theme that emerged had to do with how participants looked at their roles in the context of life-span development. The natural connection participants made between present experience and past experience indicated their sense that the span of life is a continuous whole. Participants described experiences from childhood and youth that set the course of their lives and connected those experiences to career choices they had made and to personal interests, beliefs, and values. This theme builds on the first theme of the integrated manner in which participants spoke about values, beliefs, and motivation and then demonstrates how this integrated approach to career extends over time. Shelley recalled early experiences that shaped her life: "So I think I've just always been passionate about social justice issues. I mean I was 10 years old and, you know, going to protests so, you know, I was just one of those kids ... So I think I just brought that from my childhood right through." Don described his youth:

So I was pretty much like that, you know, because of my early experiences. When I was younger [we] lived in a kind of ghetto in Hong Kong. It's poor ... the area. So that poverty and also very difficult ... living environment, it kind of ... provided me with a, you could say a social environment where I could see a lot of suffering.

The notion that values remain stable over time was expressed not as an empirically based belief but more from an intuitive sense that there is something essential about what is right or wrong that stays with people through life and finds expression in different ways as one grows, learns, and develops. Lauren stated,

I think the more experience you get, the more knowledge you get, the more comfortable you feel about what you know and what you see. And I see that as more, not so much a value shift. I think, like I said, there was a method to my madness. I think it just went in this direction. It was meant to be because of my values and who I was and I think the values were pretty much there. I probably expanded on them a bit just being able to actually voice them more and enhance them and the confidence to do something with them.

In contrast to the perceived stability of values, participants described continual and progressive change in beliefs, understanding, behaviours, and motivation. They described ways that they had matured, insights and understanding they had gained, and changes in what was important to them. The changes were usually a result of personal experience, although they also seemed to be a natural process of moving through stages of life. Changes described included becoming more realistic, communicating more openly and directly, and becoming more flexible. Flexibility also became evident in the beliefs of participants. For example, several

participants spoke of becoming less directive, as they came to believe that change for clients comes from the client rather than from an external source such as a counsellor. Elizabeth reflected,

I think that probably early on I was more authoritative. I think I had to really work hard at letting go of the sort of police officer in me around child protection. Um (sighs) yeah, I have some sadness when I think of some of the kids that came into care ... They had to work way too hard to get him [a particular child who had been removed from his parents] back.

Relationship Between Ambition and Life-Span Development

The final theme that emerged was the relationship between life-span development and ambition. Participants also connected changes in ambition with maturing over time. This theme again relates to the other themes and particularly flows out of the previous theme. Surprisingly, seven of the eight participants expressed the perception that their promotions were almost more due to opportunity presenting itself than to personal ambition. One participant stated,

I got the position and I've been in the position for three years so ... it's just happened so a lot of people have said 'You know, you're ambitious.' I thought, 'Really?' It just sort of all has fallen into place. I didn't start out with thinking I want to be here. I'll try that and I'll try that and when I'm done with this I'll try that. It's just all worked out so ...

Five participants talked about appreciating the breadth of influence leadership positions afforded them. One of the factors that seemed to become more important with age was the desire to mentor others, to pass on one's skills and knowledge, and to broaden influence. Ellen noted:

It's just that I think I'd be more useful talking to people that are doing the work and helping, helping people that are doing the work get to another level of thinking about what they're doing so that they are more useful in a situation because I think there is a graduated sort of a step of evolvment.

Don stated:

For myself, there's one additional kind of push for me to do this (supervise) because you're getting old, you know, and you realize that even if you spend 24 hours of your day to help people it's not as big as the impact that you can have when you have four other people trained by you who are doing maybe eight hours a day.

Several participants noted shifts in ambition over time—what was important to them had changed. With increasing age, their relationships and the satisfaction with who they were as people seemed to be more important, and achieving material or status measures of success were less important.

DISCUSSION

Donald Super spoke of occupational choice as a gradual developmental choice that he supported empirically through longitudinal studies. He described the concept of career adaptability as “the ability to cope with developmental and adaptation tasks, while recognizing that the capacity to do so is not curvilinear and that it may have many peaks and valleys” (Super, Thompson, Lindeman, Jordan,

& Myers, 1988, as cited by Super, Osborne, Walsh, Brown & Niles, 1992, p. 75). Super's Work Importance Study (WIS) was a cross-cultural exploration of people's life roles and values that they seek in their careers and life in general (Niles & Goodnough, 1996; Sverko, 2001). The results indicated that the importance of any role was dependent on whether the individual perceived there to be opportunities to attain their salient values through that role (Sverko). The study found that the fulfillment of one's potential or self-actualization stood out as a significant life goal for most people. Consistent with the findings of Super and others, participants in this study spoke of their experience of career as relating to life-span development with changes described as evolving through increasing maturity, becoming wiser about what can be accomplished, and (later in their careers) wanting to move into more mentoring relationships in which they could influence greater numbers of people. In addition while participants related fulfillment to the drive to grow and to "self-actualize," their perception of fulfillment changed over time with maturity and life experience. Further, what emerged in this study was the need for congruence between values, beliefs, and motivation; dissonance among these often motivated choices to make changes such as decisions to pursue promotions.

An overall finding among participants was that while there was commonality in terms of values that underlay their work, they thought about values in very tangible, behavioural terms. For example, rather than use terms such as "altruism" or "caring," participants gave examples of what they do and why they do it, such as coming to work to prevent abuse of children or to advocate for youth. As Zytowski (1994) noted, there is a lack of empirical research to determine "the function of work values in behaviours of interest, such as occupational and educational preferences, career maturity, self-efficacy, and the like" (p. 30). The use of qualitative methodology in this study allowed participants to explore how their values related to occupational choices, to self-efficacy, and, on a more immediate scale, to daily decisions in the workplace. It also allowed exploration of how values interact with the environment—the work context. The general experience of participants was that, while values seem to be more stable, changes occur in terms of how they are acted out as people mature. Results of this study, such as the drive for growth and development through the life span, reflect earlier theories of personality that look at life-span development, for example Erikson's emphasis on the adult stage of generativity versus stagnation motivated by a drive to develop one's strengths (Schultz & Schultz, 2005).

Several studies (Baines, 2004; DePhillippi & Arthur, 1994; Ezell et al., 2002; Inkson & Arthur, 2001; Riley & Guerrier, 1993) have looked at the market shift in which jobs have moved from being stable, clearly defined, and existing within a hierarchical structure to flexible, changing, and designed to meet a specific but often temporary need. They note that this shift is due in part to pervasive organizational change and restructuring. In the social service sector the response to these trends has been somewhat controlled by the sector's dependence on funding sources, primarily government, and decisions made by funders to cut or reduce funding. While several authors speak to how the changes have altered the

notion of career success (Arthur et al., 1995; Inkson & Arthur), it was interesting to note how participants in this study managed the changing environment. Contrary to the flexibility necessary for success in the model suggested by Arthur et al., and Inkson and Arthur, an approach they term the “boundaryless career,” all of the participants in this study had worked for the same agency for at least 10 and as many as 35 years. They were very clear about what they needed from the environment and what they wanted to give to the environment to experience success and were prepared to make changes if the environment failed to satisfactorily provide a balance. Still, the changes each had made were promotions within their own agency. Participants chose the boundaries and limitations of an agency and larger social service system, although they found it stressful and demanding. The primary difference appeared to be in their definition of success, the values that continued to guide their choices, and the desire to be part of a supportive community at work.

All of the participants expressed a desire to be creative in how they provide services and at the same time expressed frustration with the limitations and restrictions of being part of the larger system. Yet, in spite of an environment that they described as quite stressful and unpredictable, participants were able to maintain a positive focus. The mitigating factor appeared to be their more positive experience within their own agency with particular focus on emotional support and congruence between the agency’s values and their own. It is possible that participants in this study were willing to stay with one agency because they reflect a profile that fits the particular environment and that is different from that of those who would have success in the flexible, boundaryless environment that DePhillipi and Arthur (1994) describe. In this respect, the application of the model requires some rethinking of how to strive for a competency-based approach in a restrictive environment and the profile of people who are likely to succeed in this context.

Parker (2002) describes the shift to the new market “successful” career as a shift in paradigm from objective to subjective career emphasis, in which career success is no longer measured by externally defined work roles but by internal, subjective criteria for success that allow the integration of values and beliefs into a more holistic approach to career decision making. This paradigm fits well with the data collected from the participants. As the themes that emerged indicated, all participants approached career from a holistic perspective of integrating values and beliefs into their work and viewing the development of their career identity as spanning their lives from childhood to the present. What stood out, however, is the conflict that all of the participants experienced between internal subjective criteria for success and working as part of a larger, necessary system that exerted considerable force on employees to meet externally defined roles and standards. The common thread running through all of the interviews was the balancing act carried out by participants—pursuing success; seeking congruence in values, beliefs, and the environment; and evidently choosing to remain in a context that each noted to be stressful and unpredictable, yet supportive and challenging.

The choice to use qualitative methodology in this study allowed exploration of the intricacies of how values, beliefs, and motivation are related over time in a workplace and, in this study particularly, in a workplace that is experienced as stressful. One of the limitations, however, is that in not using direct measures of values, beliefs, and motivation the terms can be left vague and unclear, which can muddy the results both for participants in thinking about these things and for the researcher in attempting to express the results in the language of the participants. A second limitation was created through conducting the research in a large urban setting; this restricts the results to this population, as the experience of working in the social service sector in small towns and rural settings may be quite different. A third limitation was the choice to interview only supervisors and managers. While this allowed greater homogeneity among participants, the results may not relate to people who provide direct client service. At the same time, however, the results may relate to supervisors and managers within other human service organizations contracted by the government, such as health care or education.

One of the contributions of this study is the global perspective that is provided on how social service supervisors and managers make meaning within the work context. In addition, it looks at the relationship between values and dynamic factors such as beliefs, behaviour, and motivation related to work within life span development. While research on career success has focused on the corporate world, this study offers an initial look at career success in the human service field. Extensive research has been done on the experience of human service workers in a stressful environment and how organizations respond to such an environment. By using the lens of looking at individuals' personal understanding of their values, beliefs, and motivation over time with the stressful environment as a possible context, this study informs understanding of how balance is maintained in a chronically stressful environment. Finally, the correlation between career path and life-span development that emerged in this study is important for career counsellors in terms of recognizing the need to take a holistic and lifelong approach to facilitating career decision making. Insight into how the environment affects values and motivation over time for supervisors and managers may add to a more realistic perspective for those who have not yet entered the field, who are new in the field, or who have had negative experiences while employed in this field.

Further study on particular aspects of personality development would enhance understanding of who succeeds in highly stressful human service fields and how that happens. Examples of this might include the work of Julian Rotter on locus of control (Schultz & Schultz, 2005), the work of Marvin Zuckerman on sensation seeking (Schultz & Schultz), or the work of Martin Seligman on positive psychology (Schultz & Schultz). Further research on how the intelligent career as defined by DePhillipi and Arthur (1994) fits with the social service sector would clarify whether the model can be transferred to this sector or at least which aspects are useful to understanding how one succeeds in the current social service context. In keeping with the work of DePhillipi and Arthur on the intelligent

career, what is applicable to the social service sector is the notion that human service providers can most productively provide service as they simultaneously foster both organizational success and individual career success of supervisors and managers. The findings in this study may add understanding of how better to do this in the human service field.

References

- Aronson, J., & Sammon, S. (2000). Practice amid social service cuts and restructuring: Working with the contradictions of "small victories." *Canadian Social Work Review, 17*(2), 167–187.
- Arthur, M., Claman, P., & DePhillippi, R. (1995). Intelligent enterprise, intelligent careers. *Academy of Management Executive, 9*(4), 7–22.
- Baines, D. (2004). Pro-market, non-market: The dual nature of organizational change in social services delivery. *Critical Social Policy, 24*(1), 5–29.
- Brott, A. (2001). The storied approach: A postmodern perspective career counseling. *Career Development Quarterly, 49*, 304–313.
- Carr, J. (1996). Comprehensiveness of career planning: The third C—Comprehensiveness. *Journal of Career Development, 23*(1), 33–42.
- Creswell, J. (2003). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- DePhillippi, R., & Arthur, M. (1994). The boundaryless career: A competency based perspective. *Journal of Organizational Behaviour, 15*, 307–324.
- Erera, I. (1991). Supervisors can burn out too. *Clinical Supervisor, 9*(2), 131–148.
- Erera-Weatherly, P. (1996). Coping with stress: Public welfare supervisors doing their best. *Human Relations, 49*(2), 157–170.
- Ezell, M., Casey, E., Pecora, P., Grossman, C., Friend, R., Vernon, L., et al. (2002). The results of a management redesign: A case study of a private child welfare agency. *Administration in Social Work, 26*(4), 61–79.
- Hanson, J., & McCullagh, J. (1995). Career choice factors for BSW students: A 10-year perspective. *Journal of Social Work Education, 31*(1), 28–37.
- Heinonen, T., MacKay, I., Metteri, A., & Pajula, M. (2001). Social work and health restructuring in Canada and Finland. *Social Work in Health Care, 34*(1–2), 71–87.
- Hill, C. E., Thompson, B. J., & Nutt-Williams, E. (1997). A guide to conducting consensual qualitative research. *Counselling Psychologist, 25*, 517–572.
- Inkson, K., & Arthur, M. (2001). How to be a successful career capitalist. *Organizational Dynamics, 30*(1), 48–61.
- Knezevic, M. (1999). Social work students and work values. *International Social Work, 42*(4), 419–430.
- Leiter, M. (1991). The dream denied: Professional burnout and the constraints of human service organizations. *Canadian Psychology, 32*(4), 547–555.
- McLeod, J. (2001). *Qualitative research in counselling and psychotherapy*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Ministry of Children and Family Development. (2007). Retrieved August 15, 2007, from <<http://www.mcf.gov.bc.ca>>.
- Niles, S. G., & Goodnough, G. E. (1996). Life-role salience and values: A review of recent research. *Career Development Quarterly, 45*, 65–86.
- Parker, P. (2002). Working with the intelligent career model. *Journal of Employment Counseling, 39*(2), 83–96.
- Piliavan, J. A., & Charng, H. (1990). Altruism: A review of recent theory and research. *Annual Review of Sociology, 16*, 27–65.

- Riley, M., & Guerrier, Y. (1993). Human resource policy in social work management: A response to enforced market orientation. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 4(2), 481–491.
- Schultz, D., & Schultz, S. (2005). *Theories of personality* (8th ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Seifert, K., & Jayaratne, S. (1991). Job satisfaction, burnout, and turnover in health care social workers. *Health and Social Work*, 16(3), 193–202.
- Super, D. E., Osborne, L., Walsh, D. J., Brown, S. D., & Niles, G. (1992). Developmental career assessment and counselling: The C-DAC model. *Journal of Counselling & Development*, 71(Sept/Oct), 74–80.
- Sverko, B. (2001). Life roles and values in international perspective: Super's contribution through the work importance study. *Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 1, 121–130.
- Wakefield, J. (1993). Is altruism part of human nature? Toward a theoretical foundation for the helping professions. *Social Services Review*, 67(3), 406–458.
- Zunz, S. (1998). Resiliency and burnout: Protective factors for human service managers. *Administration in Social Work*, 22(3), 39–54.
- Zytowski, D. G. (1994). A Super contribution to vocational theory: Work values. *Career Development Quarterly*, 43(1), 25–31.

About the Authors

Alison Stevens graduated in 2006 from the University of British Columbia Department of Educational and Counselling Psychology and Special Education. She worked for many years in the social service sector as a supervisor and manager. She is now working on her Ph.D. in counselling psychology, also at the University of British Columbia.

Norman Amundson, Ph.D., is a professor in the Counselling Psychology Department at the University of British Columbia. Norman's research interests are in transition in the workplace, counselling methods (active engagement model), and career/life balance.

Address correspondence to Alison Stevens, MA, CCC, AM Stevens Consulting, 9563 125A Street, Surrey, BC, V3V 4Z3, e-mail <amstevens@shaw.ca>.