Abstract

The work of caring for children and youth in group care is a type of “mental demand,” in Kegan’s (1982) phrase, and in this study we used Kegan’s constructive developmental theory to interpret the experiences of front-line practitioners. The research questions were a) how do different meaning-making systems influence how practitioners cope with and experience the demands of the job, and b) what do child and youth care practitioners, with different meaning-making systems, identify as the primary challenges and the most satisfying experiences, and how do they experience and cope with these challenges? Eighteen front-line practitioners were selected from a pool of 99 participants to participate in “subject-object” interviews about the work. All participants were at the self-authoring or socialized orders or transitioning between them. We used thematic coding to identify patterns within and across participants. For those at the socialized order, job satisfaction was the experience of making others happy, being liked and positive feedback from significant others, and challenges were coping with personal atacks, conflict, and ambiguity. These practitioners coped by escaping/avoiding people, with responsive supervision, and validation from supervisors and peers. Those at the self-authoring order job satisfaction was experienced in meeting one’s own goals and expectations, being competent, and facilitating growth in others. Their challenges were not living up to their own standards and witnessing others’ pain, while they coped by taking control, and seeking consultation from others and from theory.

The work of caring for children and youth in child welfare is complex and demanding (Braxton, 1995). In North America, group care is often used as a placement of last resort for children whose behaviors have become too challenging for foster parents; as a result the residential environment can be volatile for staff and the young people. More than fifty years ago Konopka (1954) described the ongoing tension in group care between all-out permissiveness and total control – both of which can be equally damaging – and the difficulties associated with helping front-line staff maintain an appropriate balance between the two. This work demands professional staff with patience and the ability to care for children and youth, and front-line child and youth care practitioners are not always equipped to adequately respond to these demands and the associated pain. Moreover, there is a “profound separation” between the ideal of child and youth care as described in the literature and what commonly occurs in practice (Gaughan & Gharabaghi, 1999).

Many solutions to these problems have been prescribed such as new treatment modalities, better staffing models, better education of staff, improvement in working conditions, or better supervision. Yet the problems persist. Perhaps some of the challenges of professional care are not addressed by these solutions, and that some elements of care have yet to be adequately theorized. One approach that has not been systematically used to study group care practitioners is constructive-developmental theory. In this study we interviewed staff about their work and interpreted their stories from this perspective.

**Constructive Development and Meaning-Making**

Kegan (1982, 1994) proposed that life experiences are “mental demands,” and when those demands are too high we experience distress. According to Kegan, being human is an activity of meaning-making. We are constantly organizing our experiences and making sense of them. “There is thus no feeling, no experience, no thought, no perception, independent of a meaning-making context” (Kegan, 1982, p. 11). Constructive-developmental theory posits that the way in which meaning is constructed changes and becomes more complex over time (Kegan, 1982, 1994). As articulated by Strang and Kuhnert (2009), “In general, as individuals develop through the constructive-developmental stages, their self-definition changes from externally-defined to internally-defined, their interpersonal focus changes from self to others, and their understanding of the world changes from simple to complex” (p. 422).

As individuals move through the life cycle, the balance between what one is subject to (embedded in) or can perceive as object (separate from self) continually undergoes a process of transformation into increasing complexity. Moving from subject to object is analogous to “getting outside of oneself, “a gradual, transformative process that results in a more complex way of seeing, experiencing, and understanding oneself and the world (Kegan, 1982, 1994). The transition is “a process of emerging from one way of constructing the relationship between self and other and ending up with a new way of constructing that relationship that contains the old way” (Drath, 1990, p. 486). The meaning-making systems are often referred to as “orders of consciousness” (Kegan, 1982), and there are six of them. Because all participants in this study were in just two of these orders, we describe here only these two, the “socialized” and “self-authoring” orders.

Individuals at the socialized order have developed a n ew capacity for abstract thinking, to “think about thinking,” to reflect upon one’s needs, wishes and interests, and to have an internal dialogue about oneself (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Individuals can simultaneously consider their own perspective and that of someone else and can put the needs of others ahead of themselves in order to remain connected (Strang & Kuhnert, 2009). They can bring into the self the views, opinions, and feelings of others and experience empathy for others.

However, the cost of this developmental capacity is becoming subject to the expectations of others: Individuals at this stage do not just have relationships, they are their relationships. They are unable to separate their own sense of self from the values, beliefs and judgments of significant others, they view the world through their relationships (Kegan, 1982, 1994) and are subject to the ideology of influential others (Drath, 1990) who are perceived as co-constructors of the self and as sources of authority (Popp & Portnow, 2001). The “other” can be relational: important people in one’s life such as friends, colleagues, teachers, supervisors, or anyone in a position of authority. “Other” can also be ideational such as religious, political, philosophical. Whatever the nature of the other, a person with a socialized way of knowing gets from it a sense of self, a sense of identity, belonging, validation, acceptance: a sense of sameness, of commonality, of shared experience with others (Popp & Portnow, 2001).

Those at the self-authoring order are no longer subject to these relationships; instead, they are autonomous selves, and they now “have” these relationships. They possess an internal authority and have developed the capacity to differentiate the self from others and others from their points of view. This new self therefore has the ability to regulate and evaluate its own values, goals, and interpersonal connections, and individuals in this meaning system can transcend their own needs and those of others in accordance with their own personal value system (Kegan, 1994). The individual is able to release the other from the responsibility of being their co-constructor of reality (Lahey et al., 1988) and has developed the capacity to not assume responsibility for others’ responsibilities (Drath, 1990). The self-authoring system can also hold contradictory feelings simultaneously and is characterized by “its capacity to take responsibility for and ownership of its own internal authority; its capacity to internally hold, manage, and prioritize the internal and external demands, contradictions, conflicts, and expectations of oneself and one’s life” (Popp & Portnow, 2001, p. 57). The limitation at this stage is that individuals are subject to the internal guiding principles their system has created and are subsequently invested in maintaining psychological control over its autonomy (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Individuals in this stage are not able to reflect on their underlying “guiding principles” (A. Howell, personal correspondence, March, 2011). How these constructive-developmental ideas may be useful needs explication.

**Constructive Development and Child and Youth Care Practice**

Child and youth care practice—the front-line work--in group care has implicit demands for practitioners to operate from a particular “logic” or way of knowing that may exceed the actual capacities of practitioners. In particular, child and youth care workers are expected to be able to separate their own needs from the needs of young people. Second, they are expected to engage in reflective practice and make use of their “self” in their interactions and interventions with the young people. Third, in many organizations child and youth care workers are expected to be innovative, creative, take initiative, and work independently without ongoing supervision or direct feedback. Fourth, they must be able to manage the pain of others and themselves, and the capacity to do this may be related to the ability to think complexly (Modlin, 2019). Fifth, they are required to set limits and maintain boundaries, which consists of “the continuous creating and recreating of roles rather than just the faithful adherence to the demands within them” (Mann-Feder, 1999, p. 96). According to Kegan (1994), “the demand that we be in control of our issues rather than have our issues control us” (p. 133) is a demand for a self- authoring system of meaning-making, and these demands are implicit in the work.

To examine the possibilities of constructive-developmental theory as a way to interpret practitioner experience, we studied practitioners at the self-authoring and socialized orders of consciousness and others who were transitioning from socialized to self-authoring. The research questions were a) how do different meaning-making systems influence how practitioners cope with and experience the demands of the job, and b) what do child and youth care practitioners, with different meaning-making systems, identify as the primary challenges and the most satisfying experiences, and how do they experience and cope with these challenges?

**Methods**

The data in this paper were collected as part of a study of the relationship between constructive-developmental level and practitioner experience that also included quantitative data about developmental order, compassion satisfaction, burnout, and the experience of secondary trauma. The study also included an analysis of qualitative data about a) meaning-making and challenges, and b) meaning making and organizational supports. We report here on the qualitative data about meaning making and the experience of and criteria for success, satisfaction and challenges.

**Participants**

In the larger study participants were 99 front-line child and youth care workers and supervisors from 31 organizations providing residential care to young people in Canada, Scotland, Australia, and the United States. From the initial pool of participants, we selected 18 for in-depth interviews. More detail about how this was done is provided in the Procedure section. Four were males and 14 were females, and all were between the ages of 30 and 62. Seven were operating at the socialized level, four were transitioning from socialized to self-authoring, and seven were self-authoring. There were a higher percentage of self-authoring participants in this study, at 38%, then has been reported for the general adult population. Studies have shown that 18% - 34% of adults aged 19-55 make meaning at the self-authoring order, and 43% - 46% make meaning at the socialized order or in transition between socialized and self-authoring (Kegan, 1994).

**The Subject-Object Interview**

The first author conducted subject-object interviews (SOI) with all 18 participants to assess their constructive-developmental order. The SOI is specifically designed to elicit data on a person’s “unselfconscious epistemology” (Lahey et al., 1988), that is, their meaning-making capacity. The goal of the subject-object interview is to access the meaning-making structure underlying the participants’ descriptions of their experiences. The way to identify the underlying meaning-making structure during a subject- object interview is to look for what people can and cannot take a perspective on or about. At the beginning of the SOI participants are presented with 10 probe words intended to arouse strong thoughts and emotions. The probe words most often used are anger, anxiety, success, change, important to me, overwhelmed, proud, joy, challenged, and strong stand. Other words can be selected depending on the nature of the research. The words are presented on index cards, and participants are given 20 minutes to recall experiences conjured up by each word and to write down their responses. These cards remain with the participants as a prompt to help them recall their experiences and are for their use only. Participants can be instructed to recall experiences from any part of their life or from a specific context or setting, and in this study participants were instructed to restrict the experiences to those from their current work environment.

The SOI has demonstrated construct validity as evidenced by “high degrees of consistency among alternative forms of the measure, different domains of experiencing, different test items and different psychological themes” (Lahey et al., 1988, p. 368). Inter-rater reliability in studies using the SOI has ranged from .75 to .90 (Kegan et al., 2001). Test-retest reliability has been demonstrated with correlations of .82 (Spearman coefficient) and .834 (Pearson’s r), both significant at the .0001 level (Lahey, 1986). Inter-item consistency, with a correlation of .96, was documented by Villegas-Reimers (1988). The first author completed a training course through Minds at Work with associates of Robert Kegan on conducting and scoring the SOI and engaged in additional individual sessions with one of the trainers. For this study, all interviews were scored by a second trained scorer.

**Procedure and Analysis**

The research study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Board at [edited for anonymity]. For the interviews the aim was to locate participants from different developmental orders, so from the 99 participants three individuals from each organization were selected: Those with the lowest and highest Compassion Fatigue score, on the assumption that they may represent different constructive-developmental orders, and a third person from each organization was selected randomly, with the purpose of increasing credibility (Patton, 1990).

All interviews were analyzed twice: Once for constructive-developmental order, as described above and, again, for themes within and across developmental orders. During the SOI analysis we made note of any themes or patterns that seemed to be emerging from the interviews and used these as a starting point for the thematic analysis, using Braun and Clarke’s six-step analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This begins with reading all of the interviews. To answer the question of how participants experience the demands of the job, the analysis began with three categories: job satisfaction and success, challenges, and coping. These categories were then used to identify and code excerpts in the interviews that were related to the research question.

After all of the relevant interview material had been initially coded, the next step was to search for themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by coding excerpts and memos; refining, dropping and merging codes, and; looking for patterns, connections, and exceptional cases. This includes looking for patterns in the data and themes within and across participants with different meaning-making systems. Patterns and themes that were specific to particular developmental orders did emerge and the next step was to engage in a detailed constructive-developmental analysis of each theme. The final stage involved weaving together the themes, data excerpts, analysis and writing the results.

**Findings**

The findings are organized by constructive developmental order--Socialized and Self-Authoring—and within each order the themes are a) job satisfaction and success, b) challenges, and c) coping with the demands of the job.

**The Socialized Mind: Job Satisfaction and Success**

The strengths of the socialized order are that individuals have empathy and can focus on the needs of others. They find support in shared experiences and mutually rewarding relationships and can be loyal (Kegan, 1994). Socialized participants in this study went out of their way to meet the needs of the young people and support their co-workers, often at great cost to themselves. One of the limits of this order is that acceptance by others is of critical importance, and others’ opinions are paramount. Socialized individuals are likely to express what they think others want to hear. Any form of conflict is perceived as a breach of the mutuality and loyalty they search for in relationships (Kegan et al., 2001). Accordingly, these participants described experiences of satisfaction and successas a) making others happy, b) being liked, and c) receiving positive feedback from significant others.

**Making others happy.**

All participants identified “little moments” as vital. For participants at the socialized order, these moments of meaningful encounters went beyond being a “beacon of hope:” They appeared to be essential to their experience of job satisfaction and feelings of competence. How youth interacted with them in a particular moment and how they felt in response to this interaction seemed to constitute who they were as child and youth care professionals in that moment. Rather than the experience comprising two separate selves who joined together to share a moment, the moment became a reflection of themselves. When things were “going right” they felt good about themselves, but when things were not going right, they struggled. For Tracy, although she enjoys being challenged and had successfully managed many challenging situations, the ideal client would be “youth that are positive who want to work with you and want to be with you.”

The notion of “making others feel good” and subsequently feeling good themselves was inherent in these scenarios. Julie said, “I was happy. The kids were happy. People I was working with were happy. There was no conflict.” Similarly, Bonnie defined success as “having happy colleagues working around you.” Bonnie explained that when employees are happy “they are more successful in their work and also having, you know, happy and engaging participants and teams in the placements as well.” Gina described engaging in positive activities as “bringing the most happiness,” and Anna relayed a story about a young person attending a special event with her and the best thing about it being that “he was so happy.”

Wanting to help young people experience happiness, as part of a holistic approach to care, is a valuable goal that was mentioned by many participants, not just those in the socialized order. For socialized participants, however, “making young people happy” was the primary goal. When participants were asked to reflect on where this or other values came from, they responded by going back to their own childhoods with comments like: “It’s always been important to me,” “It’s how I grew up,” “It’s definitely a family value,” “It's always been instilled in me by my parents,” and “I've just always known it's important to feel that you matter and are cared about and all that…. So, I just want to make sure that people got the same kind of start.”

Kegan (1994) said, “If it is because this is ‘just the way I was brought up’ […] then one has no way to stand outside of the value without feeling in violation of one’s fidelities” (p. 90). Individuals without an “internal set of convictions” (Kegan, 1994) are left with no way to interpret the experience from outside of the experience or to critically reflect on the value. For the socialized participants, the desire to make others happy appeared to be connected to values in which they are embedded. Without the capacity to subordinate this value to a larger theory or ideology, when young people were not happy it impacted how participants felt about themselves.

**Being liked.**

For all but one of the socialized and transitioning participants, being liked was explicitly identified as being important to their sense of self, like Karen:

And then I’m like okay, am I going to challenge them, am I not, what are they going to think of me if I do and…. So that’s where I get stuck in that.

Interviewer: Okay. And so what’s at stake if you do challenge them? When you’re thinking about, “What are they going to think of me,” what’s at stake there?

Karen: Whether or not they like me. All right, like that’s what comes up is, I mean, there’s all kinds of things but when you boil it down, it’s all about how safe do I feel with them and are they going to like me.

Interviewer: And if they didn’t like you, what would that mean for you?

Karen: That I was - I would devalue myself as a person.

Miranda has been told, through training she has received and discussions with her supervisor, that she “should not” need to be liked by the young people and that behaviour was not about her. Miranda had held onto this message but appeared to still be captive to her relationships with the young people. Even while trying to express why being liked was not important to her anymore, she identified that the first thought she had while in the midst of a difficult situation was, “Oh my God, they hate me.” To be successful is to be liked, and in group care this can be a trap.

**Positive feedback from significant others.**

The necessity of feedback from others, particularly supervisors, was strongly emphasized by all participants at the socialized order and those who were transitioning. Without this feedback, these individuals struggled to know how they were doing. When Bonnie was asked how she is able to assess her job performance without acknowledgment from others, she said, “I think it would suck. I think that would be hard to not hear every now and again you’re doing the job well… I think I would evaluate it [by] how my relationships are with other people. So if people weren’t communicating with me I would feel like maybe I’ve been a bit off this week.” Similarly, Julie identified herself as a “people pleaser” and defined success as “moving up into higher positions” accompanied by “acknowledgment from supervisors and feedback.” Julie stated, “So if I feel like I've been a part of them in achieving something, then I would feel ridiculously successful and valued….”

**The Socialized Mind: Challenges**

In the residential care environment, if one’s sense of self is enmeshed in the social context, a socialized meaning-making system is particularly vulnerable in some key areas, including a) dealing with personal attacks, b) conflict, and c) ambiguity.

**Dealing with personal attacks.**

Having to deal with young people who were angry, aggressive, and in pain was identified by all but one of the participants as a challenging aspect of their job. The biggest challenge was the personal toll it took. Tracy talked about how depressing it was for her to be continuously threatened and sworn at: “And let's face it…. you just don't feel very good. I mean, nobody wants to be cursed at. And after a while, it doesn't matter how many times that everyone says, “Oh, don't take it seriously.” If you've been cursed at for, basically, off and on for 12 hours or something like that, then it's pretty hard not to take it personally.” For individuals with a socialized mindset a personal attack is not experienced as an interruption in the relationship, it is experienced as an interruption of the self (Kegan, 1982).

Miranda was aware that the young people’s behaviour was “not about her” and she tried to remind herself of this when she encountered a difficult situation. Being told that she should not take things personally made her feel worse. Susan also internalized comments from young people and described the emotional reaction she has to young people trying to “manipulate” her:

I just think like “What are they getting from it? What do they want?” And like, they're trying to get something from me to make me, separate me from staff, something like that…. I don't know if they're trusting or if it's like them not liking me or whatever of that, not exactly sure what it is…. but there's something there that, they want something from me and they're doing it purposely to get something out of me and then that pisses me off.

In this example Susan holds the young people responsible for her reaction to their behaviour.

Socialized individuals also assume responsibility for the feelings of others (Kegan, 1994). This was illustrated by Bonnie, who said that it was hard for her to be a supervisor because sometimes her employees only saw her as a friend. When asked what the hardest part of this was for her, Bonnie replied, “Because I want to be Bonnie the friend. I really hate being the manager.”

**Dealing with conflict.**

In addition to her difficulty with “being the boss,” Bonnie acknowledged that she has difficulty dealing with conflict. “Gosh! I don't know. I just don't like it…. I don't like other people to see me in that light because I don't think it's… a part of me that I want people to associate with me.” Conflict was identified as a stressor by all participants at the socialized order and three of those who were transitioning. Cathy described herself as becoming “anxious and nervous” when dealing with situations in which the outcome “may not be favourable.” “I'm going to get screamed at…. I don't like conflict. I don't like anger [chuckles].” The avoidance of conflict stemmed from a combination of wanting to be liked and not wanting to make others feel bad. Sharon talked about her difficulty in providing constructive feedback to families because she does “not want to hurt their feelings.”

Supervisors who were socialized or transitioning experienced the same issues with personalizing the behaviour of their employees as the front-line practitioners did with the young people. Karen described her response to a negative altercation with an employee:

And actually, this week…. I still have not had a chance to chat with them and say, “What was that about?” And so the initial reaction was anger… and I thought, “What are you here for if you’re going to allow that to go on?” Right? The other piece was a little bit of me feeling a little bit let down, thinking, “What, I thought you were invested here like, what are you doing? What’s this?”

**Dealing with ambiguity.**

Individuals making meaning at the socialized order struggle with ambiguity and rely on clear direction and external guidelines. They need to know what others expect from them (Kegan, 1994). Julie talked about the challenge of working in new homes, saying, “I don't know what people expect of me, and then in the houses, like the different rules. I don't know the kids very well. I don't know how they react to things…. So that was a challenge.” Taking on new and unfamiliar experiences can be difficult for anyone, regardless of how they are making meaning. Yet individuals making meaning at the socialized order do not have the confidence that they can handle whatever comes up, regardless of where they are or who they are with, because they do not know who they will be in those contexts. Who they are as practitioners is subject to who they are working with.

“Dealing with change” was a common problem. According to Cathy, “too much change can create too much chaos.” Miranda described her distress when dealing with change:

I don't like change very much. I do whatever I can to get used to it. It makes me really anxious and nervous and upset sometimes for change, but I know, I try to find, like, the good in it too. Like, it just takes me more time to kind of get used to it because I like to know what to expect. I think you just get used to things the way things are and then when something like throws a wrench in it, it kind of makes you overwhelmed…

The most troubling part of change for participants was “not knowing what to expect.” Individuals at the socialized order rely on external authority for values, standards, direction, and a sense of identity (Popp & Portnow, 2001). Without external guidance, and in the absence of a self-governing system that can take control, socialized individuals can be left floundering (Kegan, 1982).

**The Socialized Mind: Coping with the Demands of the Job**

In the previous section we described the challenges of the job, and here we present the ways in which participants responded to these challenges. For the socialized individual, the “looming failure to preserve a collection of irreconcilable experiences may be experienced as a difficulty holding himself together” (Kegan, 1994, p. 167). This sets up a dynamic in which practitioners, without their own internal system that can mediate and regulate their experiences, may regularly encounter situations in which they feel like they are falling apart, and they have no way to put themselves back together. People cope by escaping or by relying on skillful supervisors, and we begin with examples of escape.

**Escape.**

Five socialized and three transitioning participants discussed the urge to “check out” or “get

away” when they were faced with situations that they found extremely challenging. One way to escape is to disengage from youth. Tracy, while talking about how she copes with young people swearing and yelling at her, said:

I guess the best thing to do is try to shut down as much as possible so that you're not offering anybody, you're not offering yourself as a target. And disengage and try to find something…. Appeal to your teammate. If it's a teammate that you know quite well, say, “I can't do it with so and so today because they're just not responding to me. They don't like me or maybe they've never liked me period and they're just not giving me any slack at all. So can you deal with Johnny today and I'll deal more with the kitchen work.

As Tracy put it, “You look for whatever relief you can find.” When asked what happened when she couldn’t get any relief, Tracy said, “Well, it's very draining. It's very soul draining. It's very disheartening.”

Other socialized participants also expressed that they felt overwhelmed when they did not get the opportunity to get away on their own. Julie talked about “checking out and checking back in.” When asked what that looked like, she said she liked to play games on her phone or watch TV, where she was “not thinking.” Escape also showed up in attempts to control the work schedule. Some participants tried to minimize the amount of time they would have to spend with particular young people, preferring to work late evening or overnight shifts. Others used sick leave or vacation time. Joel stated, “For me the big thing is to run away. Sometimes you need to take that sick leave thing and go out of town for a few days. And I'm lucky to have a doctor that is very supportive of my mental health. So when I need it, it's there for me.”

**Responsive Supervision.**

All participants reported relying heavily on direction and guidance from their supervisors to help them cope with the demands of the job and, in some cases, to help promote growth. Cathy illustrates the important role her supervisor played in assisting her to stop taking on the young people’s “stuff”:

It actually took one of my managers at the time sitting me down and going, “What are you doing?” I’m like, “What do you mean, what am I doing? I’m doing my job.” “No, you’re not. You’re not doing your job. You’re doing more than your job. You shouldn’t be doing this. You shouldn’t be doing that.” And I was like, “Oh my God, you’re right. You're right, I'm not doing that.” But it was her… having to almost like slap me across the face to realize like, “Stop what you’re doing!”

Susan said that she counts on her supervisors to make visible to her that which is invisible: “If we're in negative head space, if we're burned out… They're like, “Okay, so there may be some of the stuff going on with the young people that is impacting your personal life that you may be taking home and not realizing.” Sharon referred to her supervisor as her “grounding” and said, “She's really good at sort of bringing me back to earth…”

Sharon and Miranda described experiences of a supervisor being literal about helping. Sharon’s supervisor taught her to provide “negative” feedback to a client: “She started off having the conversation. I could listen to how it would go. Then, it would go where we would both have that. Then, she'd sit in the room while I had that conversation. And now, it just comes naturally and I don't even realize that I'm doing it.” Miranda emphasized the importance of having someone to “go through things with you” and “debrief after a big incident.” According to Miranda, without the supervision “you just get overwhelmed by it and if something gets intense you're kind of anxious.”

Julie shared that if she did not receive constructive criticism she would feel “very discouraged” and “feel like the environment is not one that’s promoting, like, being self-aware and learning and continuing and getting better.” Julie added that feedback helps her evaluate herself. Tracy, on the other hand, needed support that was more directive: “The type of support that's going to let you know that maybe what you're doing is the best thing at that given time…. It's most important to feel supported by your team members and your supervisor. I'm a great believer in every ship needs a captain. If you don't have someone to set the pace and sort of have the expectations for what should happen, then it's very easy to feel scrambled and I don't know, misaligned and just confused.” When asked what would happen without the support and supervision they received, participants did not mince words. Julie replied, “That would be horrible. I would probably leave.”

**Acknowledgment from management and co-workers.**

All participants talked about the importance of management being available and attentive. Socialized participants were mostly concerned about being noticed, acknowledged, and validated. The importance of “being seen” by senior management was raised repeatedly. Sharon said that these did not have to be extravagant actions: “It might be, ‘Sharon, how are you?’ It might be walking down the hallway and the manager putting his hand on my shoulder and going, ‘Are you all right?’ ….it's nothing over the top.”

Inherent in Sharon and others’ statements is that their work is “important” when it is acknowledged by others. They have few internal standards through which to assess the value of work in the absence of external feedback. Natasha said: “I guess for me that was really important because it wasn't just support when things went wrong, it was that constant support.” Bonnie talked about being “moved every day” by “little feel-good emails” sent out by the staff “when something great happens” with youth. For Bonnie, “It just brings so much happiness because, you know, they are so happy, and that young person and participants are so happy, and it's great that you can have that experience in residential care. That makes me feel good.” Gina highlighted the importance of everyone on the team “being on the same page.”

**The Self-Authoring Mind: Job Satisfaction and Success**

Self-authoring individuals have a self that “owns” their connections to the ideologies, relationships, or institutions in which they were previously embedded (Berger, 2002). They may still hold the same values and beliefs – or not – but their relationship to them has changed. They have developed an internal framework, a “self-governing system” through which they can filter their experiences. Unlike those who are socialized, self-authoring individuals have developed the capacity to regulate their activities through an internal set of convictions rather than the confines of a single value (Kegan, 1994). Instead of wanting to be liked and making others happy, what makes work satisfying for self-authoring participants is a) meeting one’s own goals and expectations, b) demonstrating competence, and c) promoting personal growth.

**Meeting own goals and expectations.**

Unlike those operating at the socialized order, none of these participants mentioned “being liked” as a benchmark of success, and there was little consistency about the content of their idea of success. However, there was consistency in the *source* of the content. All self-authoring participants demonstrated the capacity to evaluate how they and youth were doing outside of the interpersonal interactions. They could articulate and reflect on their own criteria for assessing their performance beyond simply referring back to their childhood or stating that it was “just who I am.”

I think part of it is setting it up right from the very beginning to realize that it does take a lot of time or you may never ever see this. Setting up, like, those guiding principles that we're not ever fixing anyone or curing anyone, we're not saving anyone. We're providing an opportunity to offer a change in skills, give them other options to use as coping, to learn better ways to deal with the things that they had working previously for them… (Kyra)

Kyra mentions the “guiding principles” she creates and relies on to measure success. She does not equate how she is doing with how the young people are doing. She appears to recognize that these are separate issues. “The immediacy of interpersonalist feeling is replaced by the mediacy of regulating the interpersonal” (Kegan, 1982, p. 102).

Tara talked about the feeling of success associated with accomplishing a goal and the anticipation with which she begins each new work day: “Yeah, like when I drive into work every day, I look forward to going to work, right? You’re like driving, “Oh my God, tomorrow.” You know what I mean? I’m thinking of those things and then… I can’t wait for tomorrow to do this and next week we’re doing this.” Raymond also mentioned this excitement;

When I wake up every day to go and I have this wonderful purpose I get to go to every day. And I'm not interested in striking gold. I'm not interested in not showing up. I'm not interested in doing half a job…. our mandate and our vision deserves excellence…. it's absolutely imperative that I lead with confidence and certainty. I don't need to be right, but I need to be able to make confident decisions, certain decisions, have a vision, be able to foresee obstacles in advance and be able to plan for them.

**Demonstrating competence**.

These participants are motivated by the practice of competence. Natasha discussed the satisfaction she derived from being able to support staff through crisis situations and, in particular, extricate them from “power struggles” with the young people: “So, I guess working with kids that are really angry, I've always been really good at giving them an out when you can see that they've backed themselves in, but they don't want to lose face. So they don't want to be humiliated by backing down. So I've been good at giving them an out.” Dennis talked about having pride in his ability to be a “calming force:”

Even if I can’t calm a situation down, sometimes it’s about just stepping back and making sure that nobody gets hurt and waiting for the storm to pass. But I think the thing that I’d like the most of that part of myself and this job is that, sometimes, I don’t need to tell you, sometimes, it can be really hard. Sometimes it can be extremely frustrating, and heartbreaking and I think that over the years I have developed a good sense of being able to walk people out of that.

Dennis said his main source of joy in being a supervisor was “seeing youth care workers have fun on shift even if something bad has happened. Some negative thing has happened, and they're still able to laugh about it afterwards.” Kyra compared her view of success to that of some of her staff:

Even like my staff, having a great night or had a really good weekend, but the young people had no issues and look back through the information it was because you gave them everything they wanted - that was not successful. So, was it successful in the moment for you, to get through a weekend of days, of 12-hour shifts? Sure. But what did it mean in the larger scheme in trying to sort those things out?

Kyra’s frustration is that the staff consider a “good shift” to be one in which there are no behavioural issues from the young people and everyone gets along. This is not enough for her.

**Facilitating growth**.

Dennis described the magic of watching the youth care workers on his team becoming competent. He went on to say, “It's hard to not feel good about it selfishly, in a sense. ‘Ah! That is so awesome to see, and it's good to know that stuff's happening when I'm not here to guide you.’ It makes you worry less.” Similarly, when talking about the growth of staff on her team, Kyra said, “I know how good it feels to feel confident and competent, and you approach things in a very different way and I think that then translates into other aspects of your life as well. So, I think that when I see that, then you just get this warm and fuzzy feeling, like this person is doing okay. Ryan talked about success in terms of adding something to people’s lives that they did not have before:

Because sometimes, you get that sort of ... there is that sort of rigid thinking around certain clients…that low-functioning, they've reached their pinnacle or their plateau and there's not going to be any further change… I think it's always good to bring something to them that you can see that they really liked to do that they didn't have before…. That shows you that you're actually doing something worthwhile…. you're actually helping promote positive growth and development, not just maintaining where they are.

Kyra suggested that the biggest indicator of that growth is when the staff “recognize themselves.” She explained, “That is, sometimes, where success comes from, from that really rough experience that you had. There's just a difference when you can see staff that you know that they got it, and how good they're feeling.”

**The Self-Authoring Mind: Challenges**

All self-authoring participants in the study worked in supervisory roles. The content of their interviews, therefore, was more focused on issues pertaining to the supervision of staff than direct care of the young people, although the latter was raised. Their challenges were a) not living up to own values and standards, and b) witnessing others’ pain.

**Not living up to their own values and standards.**

All self-authoring participants reported struggling when they did not meet their own standards. Being and appearing competent was important to them, and this was defined by their internal ideology. Dennis, in the example below, talked about his struggle to recognize that he would not be able to effect change with all employees:

I think part of it was just coming to a realization that no matter how skilled I think I am in certain things, I'm just not going to be able to effect change with everybody. It's just not reality. But I remember those, specifically with a couple of people…. We're talking about things, “Have you ever thought about looking at it from this angle?” and “You thought about this, you thought about that,” and it's getting nowhere.

The pressure to “effect change with everyone” was internally driven. Unlike individuals at the socialized order, who are focused on meeting others’ demands, Dennis is under pressure to meet his own demands.

Situations in which they felt like they might be required to compromise their values or principles were particularly difficult. When asked to identify the most challenging part of his job, Raymond quickly replied, “The compromise and the sacrifice of some values and beliefs that I have surrounding how to be with people.” Lucy said it was knowing what is in the best interests of a client and having to accept less than that due to funding and other systemic constraints. For Tara, “it’s generally things about not having… a say…nothing is being done that I think should be done or I want to be done.” Tara elaborated:

The worst thing about that is that I know that it’s not necessarily the right decision and I think they know that, but their hands are tied and they proceed--not that they don’t care, but that’s what it appears, that they don’t care, because they’re doing it anyway and say, “Okay, we’ll figure it out.” Or, “We don’t have any options.” Generally what happens, it seems like everyone is in agreement but we’re not doing it… So how come? How come we can’t push back a little bit more?

Raymond too discussed his discomfort with “playing the political game” and his refusal to compromise his integrity:

In working with families there's an authenticity, a genuineness, a very real sense of what people want to accomplish. I'm finding it different in the world of politics…. The power and justice there seems to be something less than genuine ways of being with people. You know, I'm learning that sometimes that has to be, so I'm finding that very conflicting.

Natasha said that one of her biggest challenges and the only time she had been angry working at her organization was “… when changes are not communicated and around…. things that I feel are unfair because they are in a position of power to the kids, or when changes have happened that haven't been communicated across the board, it has caused harm to the team or to the kids. As a support you could have changed that with just one phone call. That's when I get angry.”

**Witnessing others’ pain**.

One of the prompt words in the subject-object interviews was “pain,” so it was a topic that all participants discussed. Those who were socialized tended to focus on their own pain, and self-authoring staff talk about being witness to the pain of the young people and the staff as a challenging part of their role. Ryan shared the way in which front-line practitioners “take on” the pain of the young people: “You see their emotional suffering and you do take a bit of that sort of stuff. I mean to be, I notice with empathy, you wanted to be careful. You don’t want to just directly experience all that stuff to yourself.” Ryan is able to reflect on the experience of absorbing the young people’s pain with some distance from the relationship. He recognizes that he has control over how emotionally involved he can become and that he has the ability to extract himself as needed. While talking about the impact of seeing the young people in pain, Natasha said:

But pain, I think the first thing I thought of is the pain that you see on the kids' faces. How hard that is to watch. I think everyone that works in youth care is empathetic. It's almost like when they feel that pain, you feel it too. So, like Dad doesn't turn up to contact. Or they are embarrassed at school because they are not allowed to go on an excursion and everyone else is. Or whatever it is, you, I think more so than your own stress or physical pain from assaults or whatever, it's more watching the kids go through pain that is really hard about this job.

Kyra talked about the challenge of seeing the staff in pain:

When you take it, you take it with you, like you take it, you breathe it day in and day out, and if you don't do anything about it then it has real implications… compassion fatigue… I think some of the things I've struggled with the most is actually seeing a change in the staff. These amazing, wonderful people who do amazing work and you see their personalities change… but in the same way that you can't make a young person, you can't do the treatment, we also can't save the staff.

Although challenged to deal with the pain of others, for self-authoring participants the challenge was not internal but was related to having empathy and providing support for the individuals who were in pain. Another concern, mentioned by Joel, was related to not making a difference, which is one of his internal guiding principles: “The idea of not being able to, in the long term, effect change within his life and his behaviours, understanding the type of trauma he could potentially inflict on others down the road, to me that was the hardest part of it.”

**The Self-Authoring Mind: Coping with the Demands of the Job**

For self-authoring participants, coping was related to their ability to perform their jobs to their own standards, and they did this by a) taking control, and b) obtaining consultative supervision.

**Taking control**.

When feeling overwhelmed, rather than automatically rely on others for direction, all self-authoring participants talked about their need to take control of the situation, even with little things like paperwork, as Lucy says:

Because I feel if I can get that paperwork done… I do feel like I could be a bit more in control, and then I can project when it's going to even out. So irrelevant of behavioural issues or, you know, all that sort of stuff that comes along with the unpredictability of working with clients, I can sort of go, “Well, I know in three weeks’ time, paperwork is not going to be an issue.” And I can focus on that other stuff. I think there’s predictability in chaos, in terms of when I’m working with clients, I can respond to that… “Okay, well, this is what we’re doing now, so I will just put a support in place for that.”

Joel outlined the process in which he will “sit down and start rewinding, start thinking about everything that's happened, trying to focus on the positive things and the accomplishments.” Joel further went on to describe the content of his thinking during these times, “Well, did this make a difference for someone? Did this make a difference for youth? Did I help another worker on my team accomplish something, or grow, or be able to build that relationship with the youth that the youth have trouble building?”

Natasha described asking herself similar questions when reflecting on a challenging situation: “So, did I do everything I could have? If I didn't, what stopped me? Was it unsafe for me to keep pushing one angle? Was it that I didn't have the skills? Was it just that it wasn't supported by other people? But usually, it's talking about it with the team. Because then they are like, “Did you ever think of this?”

**Consultative supervision**.

Those who are self-authoring use relationships as a means of enriching their own understanding and experience. All participants who were self-authoring talked about support in terms of having someone they could go to as needed to vent or try out ideas. Dennis talked extensively about adapting to his new role as a supervisor and the support he received from his own manager in the early days. He described the supervision process:

I've gone in and specifically met with her a few times and said, “Okay, this is what happened. This is what I did. I'm pretty sure I'm right”…. Part of it I guess is probably looking for, like, acknowledgment, but I want to know if, “Have I missed something?” Because hello, I could miss a lot of stuff in the beginning, right?

Ryan emphasized the importance of having someone “to vent to, to just throw a whole bunch of stuff out.” He also valued “consulting with himself” when he forgets to practice his own self-care strategies. Raymond mentioned his tendency to “consult with theory.” Like Tara and Dennis, who consulted their supervisors as a sounding board for their own internally generated ideas, Raymond used professional literature to do the same. He often went back and re-read material to keep himself connected to the field: “I think those cornerstones, those tenets, guide us when we don't know what to do, like when we're a little lost. You're not sure what's going on… ‘Okay, I thought I've abandoned that one, what's going on that I abandoned that?

**Discussion**

The research questions focused on how the structure of meaning-making shapes individuals’ experiences. Among the 18 participants who were interviewed, there were developmental differences between those at the socialized and self-authoring orders in their constructions of job satisfaction and success, and there was coherence among participants of the same epistemological order.

The strengths of the socialized order are that individuals can demonstrate empathy and put the needs of others ahead of themselves in order to remain connected (Strang & Kuhnert, 2009). They have developed the capacity to internalize and identify with the values and beliefs of their social surround and are able to subordinate their own interests on behalf of this greater loyalty (Kegan, 1994). Those at the socialized order are typically focused on identifying commonalities and feeling a sense of shared identity and purpose (Kegan et al., 2001). The socialized participants in this study demonstrated considerable commitment to the young people with whom they worked and to their organizations. Socialized employees can be dedicated, very good at aligning with and meeting the expectations of others and following an “externally supplied directive” (Kegan, 1994, p. 125).

The limits of this order of consciousness are that individuals are subject to the expectations and ideology of others and “take them as The Truth” (Kegan, 1994, p. 110). They don’t just have relationships, they are their relationships (Kegan, 1982, 1994). Success in their role was therefore experienced from within their significant relationships. Individuals at the socialized order need a clear sense of what is expected of them by others and feel a strong obligation to meet those expectations. Perhaps most limiting, as it relates to the demands of working in residential care, is that individuals at the socialized order experience others as responsible for their feelings and assume responsibility for the feelings of others, and criticism as destructive to the self (Popp & Portnow, 2001).

A strength of the self-authoring order is that individuals are able to determine their own sense of self through their internal governing system. They have the capacity to differentiate the self from others and can create and preserve roles and regulate relationships (Kegan, 1994). Individuals in this meaning system can evaluate their own values, goals, and interpersonal connections and transcend their own needs and those of others in accordance with their own personal value system (Strang & Kuhnert, 2009). Individuals who are self-authoring, because their loyalty is to their own internal system, are able to hold onto multiple loyalties in their relationships with others. Self-authoring individuals experience conflict as an inevitable part of the learning process rather than something to be avoided (Kegan et al., 2001).

Self-authoring individuals do not assume responsibility for others’ responsibilities; have less difficulty dealing with ambiguity, conflict, or criticism; and have the capacity to internally manage the demands and expectations of others (Kegan, 1994). They are concerned with consequences related to personal integrity and meeting their own standards. The self-authoring system is able to operate “in a swirling field of socially constructed realities, agreed upon constructions or traditions, and interpersonal loyalties and expectations” (Kegan, 1994, p. 173).

A limitation of the self-authoring order is that individuals are subject to the ideologies and principles of their own internal authority (Kegan, 1982, 1994). While they are no longer embedded in the relational realm, they are now embedded in their own ideology and identity. These limitations did not show up in the interviews as clearly as the strengths. This may be because the demands of the job do not require meaning-making beyond the self-authoring order. The limits of this way of knowing may not be regularly tested, at least with the participants in this sample. Individuals at the self-authoring order do not have the capacity to reflect on the limitations of their internal governing system. For example, Raymond, who is self-authoring, talked at length about his difficulty dealing with the “political games.” Raymond has a very clear sense of who he is and is governed by a core set of values and ideology. He is very flexible and adaptable, and open to new ideas and approaches within his internal ideology about how to be with people. What Raymond is unable to do is reflect on this system. One of his internal guiding principles appears to be connected to being authentic and genuine. Raymond cannot conceive of a situation in which being anything other than “himself” would be beneficial.

Individuals who are self-authoring are invested in maintaining psychological control over their identity and autonomy. When their underlying guiding principles are threatened, self-authoring individuals can experience this as a threat to their identity. They can become trapped in their ideology.

**Limitations of Constructive-developmental Theory**

These results suggest that there are qualitative differences in the way that practitioners at different orders of consciousness experience job satisfaction, success, and challenges. Although the material is presented in a way that highlights the coherence within and differences across developmental orders, it is important to emphasize that “more complex” does not equate with “better.” Practitioners who are self-authoring are not necessarily any better at performing their job responsibilities than those who are socialized. Developmental order is just one part of who individuals are as practitioners and supervisors and has less to do with their knowledge, intelligence, skill, or commitment to the role, beyond the way in which they experience each of these constructs. “People can be kind or unkind, just or unjust, moral or immoral at any of these orders” (Berger, 2002, p. 39).

Instead, the differences are in how individuals make meaning and the fit or misfit between their order of mental complexity and the demands placed upon them. As illustrated by Kegan (1994) in his analogy of the automatic versus stick shift car, the increased complexity relates to who is shifting the gears. If child and youth care in residential care requires stick shift drivers, an understanding of the ways in which the environment can provide the necessary gear shifting could prevent some practitioners from becoming “in over their heads” (Kegan, 1994).

Constructive-developmental theory has been criticized for its hierarchical nature and the presumption that more complex ways of knowing may be valued more highly than those that are less complex (McAuliffe, 2011). However, many theorists argue that developmental theory should rather be viewed as a hopeful enterprise. Berger said (2002), “Instead of seeing the ways that discussions of adult capacity are limiting, I see the ways that understanding different capacities can be supportive and liberating. This is not a stagnant typology of complexity; instead, it is dynamic and it suggests that capacity grows and changes in important ways over time” (p. 66). The value in exploring the ways in which child and youth care practitioners make meaning is to increase our understanding of what they need, and how we can best support them and help them to grow.

**Limitations of this Study and Suggestions for Further Research**

The data from this study came from 18 participants who volunteered for the study. It is the first of its kind with professional group care staff, and it needs replication with many more participants of diverse types and in different types of programs. It would further be helpful to conduct studies that test the proposed relationship between supervision and constructive-developmental order, that is, whether the type of supervision and holding environment should vary for practitioners at different orders, and how supervision in group care might provide a holding environment that both supports and challenges the “frame of mind” within which direct-care staff operate. It will be more complicated to study, but ultimately it will be helpful to study the relationship between staff developmental order and impact on group care youth. It is conceivable that staff at all developmental orders can be effective but that how they are effective, and with whom, may vary. These ideas have not been studied.

A major limitation of this type of work is the time it takes to conduct and analyze a subject-object interview. The SOI has demonstrated validity and reliability, but it is not realistic to use it with large numbers of participants. In the study from which this data came, a sentence completion test of developmental order was also used (Torbert, 2009), but there was little construct validity between the SOI and that instrument. Still, more efficient data collection and data analysis is needed. An alternative may be to sample interactions between staff, between staff and youth, and between staff and supervisors as a way to identify constructive-developmental reasoning in the work environment rather than individual constructive-developmental order.

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