Recognizing Learning in All It’s Forms at Work: The Struggle of Welfare Workers from a Symbolic Interactionist Perspective.

In a world that is constantly changing, we often look to the stable and the reliable parts of our everyday world to find solace, peace of mind and in many cases, meaning. For the countless people engaged in paid work, the stability and reliability that makes our lives more manageable often comes from the time that we spend at work. The time spent working usually accounts for a very large portion of our day and all too often, greatly affects the time that we spend outside of our jobs. For those individuals who are fortunate enough to be passionate about their jobs, the time that they spend at work blends in quite nicely with the time that they spend at home, but for the people who are less than satisfied with their jobs, the transition from ‘work’ to ‘home’ is a difficult one to navigate. In many cases, the drive home is simply not long enough to unravel the problems and frustrations that occur during a day’s work so that frequently, an individual’s home life is at the very least, minimally affected by the unsolved challenges that remain at work. All too often, that pile of problems that gently greets you at the start of each day and bids you farewell at the end haunts your drive home and every hour in between. Since working has become an absolute necessity for survival, job satisfaction is often not a luxury that most can afford. The rising cost of living, the necessity of dual earner incomes and an almost insatiable desire for material wealth keeps many people trapped in jobs that they dislike and the increasing demand for technologically based skill requirements makes changing careers extremely difficult. Though it is true that no one said life would be easy, for millions of people stuck in unsatisfying jobs, life is just plain hard.

Whereas all the goal of all employees, all over the world is to perform to the best of their ability, for those who work in the ‘helping professions’ the ability to perform their jobs efficiently and effectively often means that a person or family in need will have food to eat and blankets to keep them warm. It means that their babies will have diapers, their children will have eaten breakfast before school and that their rent is paid for another month, while the parents (or increasingly often, single parent) try to find employment. The drive home for the social service workers that fail to perform their duties is a long one and the hours that pass by them are haunted by the eyes of the tired, hungry and frustrated clients that didn’t receive the cheque that they were expecting.

For the people that help people, the job is fraught with organizational change, never ending cutbacks and harder to employ clients. Larger caseloads, a faulty software program, increasing administrative duties and limited training are just a few of the hurdles that social service workers have to overcome in order to perform their duties effectively. This is especially true in Ontario where welfare reform—reshaped by the Progressive Conservative (PC) government in 1995 and recently reincarnated by the newly elected Liberal party—remains a prominent bone of contention for policy makers, social service workers and virtually anyone else that comes near it.

It is unquestionable that a certain amount of stress is a part of everyone’s job. Who among us haven’t had good days at work and bad days at work and how many of us fall prey to the ‘Sunday night blues’ as we dread the start of another work week? For decades however, research has shown that social service workers experience higher levels of
stress than many other workers and recent literature (Jones and Fletcher, 1998) shows that workers in the human services or caring professions are vulnerable to ‘burn out’. A cursory review of the literature (Winston and Rank, 1986; Calnan and Wainwright, 2002; Jensen and Walker, 2002) shows that burnout among social service workers is related to job satisfaction, professional self esteem, work autonomy, discrepancies between attainment and aspiration, coping ability, and assertiveness. Findings indicate that a social service agency will obtain higher worker effectiveness and less worker exhaustion by recognizing the need for worker independence, self-esteem, acceptance and support (LeCroy and Rank, 1986). Additionally, recent academic contributions focus on the increases in strain and tension across workplaces due to the changes in work characteristics such as technological innovation, introduction of new managerial techniques, increased job insecurity or increases in working hours (Calnan and Wainwright, 2002). Social service work is rarely easy but when your hands are tied by what is the equivalent of a foreign language, working makes the life of a social service worker a modern day technological nightmare, especially in Ontario, where the best of conditions were transformed into a set of ongoing problems and frustrations with the implementation of Social Delivery System Technology (SDMT) in 2001. Currently at the forefront of the Canadian political scene, the beginnings of the implementation of a faulty computer program first surfaced with Progressive Conservative Mike Harris and his ‘Common Sense Revolution’.

In 1966 and for thirty years after, the focus of the Canadian welfare state was the Canadian Assistance Plan (Canadian Assistance Plan) that served as the primary funding mechanism used to contribute financially to the cost of provincial and territorial social assistance and social services (Herd, 2002). In addition to extending welfare to those deemed ‘in need’ the CAP also classified the existing system of cost-transfer payments. Funding was on a 50/50 basis with Ottawa matching dollar for dollar what the provinces invested in social policy. Whereas CAP recipients were required to look for work and accept any job that they were physically capable of performing, at that time, mandatory work programs were ineligible for federal-shared cost support. In April 1996, the Canada Health and Social Transfer (CHST) replaced CAP as the vehicle for federal transfers to provincial/territorial governments for social programs. The transfer to CHST represented a “watershed in the history of Canadian social policy” (Battle and Torjman, 1995:1). By collapsing federal payments for a variety of social programs in favour of a one block grant, CHST undermined the national objectives and standards of CAP and found provincial leaders trading more power for fewer dollars. Since then, the role of the federal government has increasingly decreased in terms of both cost and responsibility. Because federal contributions have diminished to a fixed amount, provincial incentives to devote more funding into social programs have also shriveled and have consequently magnified the detrimental effects of the initial cutbacks. Additionally, provinces found themselves with more freedom to experiment with welfare programs and the conditions under which potential recipients are rendered eligible for social assistance. Faced with greater autonomy and less accountability, more than any other province, Ontario, under the Progressive Conservative leadership of Mike Harris embraced this new found freedom.

In 1995, the newly elected PC party promised to transform welfare through a ‘Common Sense Revolution’. Historically, the Ministry of Community and Social Services (now called Ministry of Community, Family and Children’s Services) provided
assistance to those in need through one of two programs—the Provincial Allowances and Benefits program (commonly referred to as Family Benefits) and the Municipal Allowances and Benefits program (commonly referred to as General Welfare Assistance) (Provincial Auditor, 1998). In an effort to reconfigure and streamline these ‘outdated’ programs, the Ministry replaced them with the Ontario Works (OW) program and the Ontario Disability Support Program (ODSP). ODSP replaces Family Benefits payments with “an income and employment support plan that better meets the needs of the people with disabilities” (p. 31). OW is a compulsory program that requires welfare recipients to take placements in the charitable or voluntary sector in order to receive welfare benefits. Ushered in amidst a flurry of skepticism and critique, OW continues to be a controversial and yet unresolved issue as for many, social reform in Ontario has focused on two areas: reducing welfare services and tightening eligibility (Herd, 2002). Rather than supporting the successful transition from welfare to work, an attempt to achieve drastic cuts in caseload reductions has merely meant, for some, that the Harris government simply created new ways to disqualify people and because of the increased complexities in program requirements, deter them from applying for benefits in the first place. To facilitate the proposed changes that came with the newly created OW and ODSP in 1995/96 the Ontario government, in partnership with Andersen (now known as Accenture) Consulting (a private sector firm) launched the Business Transformation Project (BTP). The main objective of the BTP was to develop new business processes and technologies to support the changeover to OW and ODSP, as well as replace the outdated information and technology systems that Family Benefits and General Welfare Assistance used. 1 Entering into a Common Purpose Procurement (CPP) in 1997, the Ontario government teamed up with Andersen Consulting—the first large public-private partnership for the Government of Ontario—to design, develop and implement new ways of delivering services and benefits to eligible recipients. The product of this union was Service Delivery Model Technology (SDMT), a software system designed to support the delivery of social assistance benefits. Revamping the delivery of benefits meant changes for potential clients in the application and ongoing maintenance processes as well as changes for the social service workers who had to learn how to use this technology. With the advent of the SDMT software, clients and workers alike found themselves floating amidst a sea of change, often without direction. The Niagara Regional offices were the first offices to ‘go live’ and all employees found that they would need at least some training in order to become proficient with the use of the new software. Though some workers were already highly computer literate, most workers felt that even if SDMT was a flawlessly designed system, the ability to master it would take a bit of time. Virtually no one was prepared for the debacle that accompanied SDMT and few thought that three years later, they would still be struggling to use it, let alone master it. Although formal training sessions, designed to enhance the skills of even the most adept worker were offered, it was the informal learning (that still continues on a daily basis) that allowed these social service workers to do their jobs. Regardless of where or how the learning took place at work, it is unquestionable that the acquisition of new skills and

1 The BTP intended to provide technologies for single-tier delivery of the new social assistance and employment initiatives and to replace the interim computer systems of Caseworker Technology and Ontario Works Technology, as well as the outdated Comprehensive Income Maintenance System (CIMS) and Municipal Assistance Information Network (MAIN) computer systems. (Provincial Auditor, 1998).
knowledge became a new responsibility for social service workers at all levels. What is also clear is that the formal training that was provided was at best, insufficient. Housed under the greater rubric of workplace learning, the differences that exist between the formal and informal learning processes that occur at work cry out for a reconsideration of the value and worth of each method as a viable tool for the acquisition of knowledge as it relates to information technology.

Upon the implementation of SDMT, workers were sent home with a laptop computer and a CD-ROM, which enabled them to work through the main components of the program and to become familiar with some of the screens and terminology that they would be using. This self-directed learning primarily took place after work and most often was done at home. Workers were paid overtime (the general consensus is that they were paid an equivalent of 33 hours) while they worked through the tutorials at home. Though the CD-ROM did indeed ‘walk them through the process’, it was strictly a visual aid and provided no vocal narrative. In addition to the self-directed learning, employees were also required to attend three full days of ‘in-class’ or formal learning. Eraut (2000) portends that formal learning takes place in a situation where there is:

- A prescribed learning framework
- An organized learning event or package
- The presence of a designated teacher or trainer
- The award of a qualification or certificate
- The external specification of outcomes (p. 12)

With the exception of the awarding of a qualification or certificate, the three day training sessions that the workers attended were, for all intents and purposes, the extent of the formal learning that was provided prior to the ‘go live’ date. Training sessions were held on three successive days and the learning was very intensive. Workers were ‘clumped’ together in classrooms, without regard for their levels of computer literacy. Consequently, some workers had difficulty comprehending the material and many others just felt lost:

"The instructor sessions from BTP were very frustrating because there were times when they didn't know what was happening. There were several levels of learning ability and basic computer functioning. There were so many different levels involved with my coworkers. So I'd have someone on this side of me who was not even a regular computer user - we're not even talking new technology - just things like how do I get the monitor on and sign in. And then on my other side, I've got someone who's advanced as I am or maybe around the same level and you're going 'oh my gosh - you shouldn't even be here right now'. Really, some people shouldn’t have been there because knowing that I was advanced, they kept asking me for help and I don’t have a problem with it, but at the same time, I'd be missing out on stuff that was going on. I became very frustrated with these people who were beside me and my level of compassion kind of diminished (SC02DB0303)."
Though the formal training that was provided for these workers did provide them with a basic familiarity with the screens that they’d be using, it is unquestionable that most of these workers did their learning, and continue to do so, outside any formalized setting.

The discussions that workers had during coffee breaks, over lunch hours or just in passing have become an invaluable type of informal learning which must be investigated beyond the simple setting of these interactions. An exploration of the processes and experiences that are involved in this kind of learning will illustrate the hidden agendas, social and political structures that often provided the foundation on which much of this learning took place. Among the vast abundance of literature that investigates learning in all its forms, modern conceptions of what constitutes learning as opposed to education are often confused. Amidst the flurry of definitions that surround any ideas related to learning lies a burgeoning belief that “more learning needs to be done at home, in offices and kitchens, in the contexts where knowledge is deployed to solve problems and add value to people’s lives” (Leadbeater, 2000 p. 111). Though difficult to define, Dale and Bell’s (1999) definition of informal learning best describes the everyday learning that occurs in the lives of these social service workers:

“Learning which takes place in the work context, relates to an individual’s performance of their job and/or their employability, and which is not formally organized into a programme or curriculum by the employer. It may be recognized by the different parties involved, and may or may not be specifically encouraged” (p. 21).

The value of informal learning, whether tacit or overt becomes obvious for the social service workers who fight to master SDMT through the creation of what I term the ‘culture of ‘work arounds’’. ‘Work arounds’ can best be described as a newly created universe of knowledge and skill employed to bypass the inherent flaws that are found in defectively created software, namely SDMT. It is within this universe of knowledge created by the workers that we find the true gist of learning at its best. It is here we discover that for the social service workers faced with a defective operating system, the ‘work arounds’ were not mere tools that would help them do their job, but survival skills that determined whether or not their job could be done.

The ‘work arounds’ were created because workers often found themselves in a position where regardless of the amount learning—formally and informally—they had done, they were still unable to successfully navigate the system and produce a cheque. When staff encountered a system error, they could call the help desk and ‘raise a ticket’. Once a ticket was raised, it was assessed by the BTP and depending on whether it was found to be a problem, a misunderstanding or a training issue, a System Investigation Request (SIR) would be raised. If the problem couldn’t be fixed right away, staff were advised that an “interim business procedure” or “work around” would be put into place (BTP Newsletter, September 2001). At the initial time of the SDMT installation, workers and management alike expected glitches and problems that would be solved over time, but no one expected to become so reliant on the ‘work arounds’ that were at first, a temporary solution to a temporary problem. What has become certain however, is the transformation of ‘work arounds’ from a simple trick to get the system working to a universal culture of tools and language that workers have built into their everyday work lives. Different from formal and informal learning, the use of ‘work arounds’ presents us
with a process of ‘unlearning’ that requires IT workers to ‘unuse’ the skills that they acquired during formal training and instead, implement the tricks or ‘work arounds’ that bypass the flaws in the system ultimately allowing them to do their jobs. The importance that workers placed on the ability to use ‘work arounds’ far exceeds the importance that they placed on any of the formal training they had because the ‘work arounds’ became a part of the informal learning processes that most workers deemed essential for them to do their jobs. Over time, the ‘work arounds’ became a normal part of the delivery process as lists of ‘work arounds’ were circulated for office use. For some, the use of SDMT was not difficult to master, but many others constantly struggle to use this program. The level to which one gained mastery of this program was based, in part, by the ways in which they learned to use and ‘unuse’ the program. An investigation of the learning processes—both formal and informal—that were required to advance the workers’ ability to do their job (in essence, to produce a cheque) reveals the importance of informal learning as it relates to ongoing change.

As society becomes increasingly reliant on knowledge and information technology (IT), the study of IT and the workplace becomes vital in order to reach a greater understanding of the internal and external elements of change that inevitably surround the transformation of work and its effect on workers. This piece is not about job satisfaction per se, but the experience of work and its influence (either real or perceived) on quality of life provide an unavoidable and explanatory backdrop for it. This paper is more about job survival and the ways in which individuals invent, create and reshape the tools that they use in the processes that are required to perform their assigned duties. Specifically, this study details the working lives of social service workers and how their work and consequently, their lives became completely reshaped, redefined and recreated through the restructuring of their workplace and redesign of their jobs. This is a story about having your whole world turned upside down and having to adjust to a new way of thinking and working and living. It’s about spending your life using the tools and skills that you’ve built up through years of education and life experience to help others, and then having those tools replaced with new and foreign ones that you don’t know how to use. It’s about the simplicity of wanting to help people and the devastation that comes with the inability to do so. This story is about the plight of the social service workers who continually improvise and create ways to work around an ineffective system, in order to provide the benefits that will help those in society who cannot help themselves. Additionally, this piece details the importance of workplace learning and change. There is much to be learned from these social service workers as they fight to become effective using a new and substandard software program on a daily basis. This work adds credibility to the existing body of literature that illustrates the importance of informal learning processes in the workplace. By juxtaposing what workers learned formally and informally, we learn that informal learning was drastically more effective as a method of learning than the formal learning provided in the training seminars. The implications of this are truly mind boggling. By discovering the best methods by which workers learn to use IT, industries and corporations in the public and private sector can potentially save millions of dollars in lost productivity and wages. What becomes a veritable lynch pin in this work is the need for companies to invest more time and money in their employees. If the Ontario government had allowed the workers greater input at the start of the BTP and spent more time on formal training sessions for them, the implementation and subsequent
use of SDMT would have been far less problematic. This study tells us that we have much to learn about the relationships that surround IT and work.

Further, this study investigates the extent to which sociological theory, specifically Symbolic Interaction (SI) theory, can explain how social service workers understand and create meaning from the methods of survival they use in order to manage the ongoing influx of change stemming from the mandatory use of a technological system that is fraught with internal flaws. By using a micro-analytical theory, we can derive a greater understanding of the devastation thrust upon these social service workers by a selfish and uncaring government and a cruel and unforgiving software system. It is unquestionable that the study of such magnitude cries out for analysis on a variety of levels but to truly understand the internal mechanisms of this transformation, we must look to the individual workers that live it each and every day in order to understand and consequently, explain it. By focusing on how social service workers interact with supervisors, clients, information technology and each other, we can begin to understand the irreversible effects of this enormous transformation and the use of a micro theory affords us an intimate view:

“In its most basic form, symbolic interaction theory sees meaning as a product that results from the processes of interaction between people—“the meaning of a thing for a person grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing.” (Collins, 1985 p. 284).”

The use of a micro-theory allows the luxury of a bird’s eye view as we seek to explain the lives of these workers—one that cannot be accomplished through the use of either a meso or macro analysis. As a broad example, consider the analysis of one small concept—using SDMT to create and edit a ‘note’ page in a client’s file. Virtually all respondents that I interviewed found creating and editing the ‘note page’ to be an arduous task, at best. A recurrent and dominant theme for many workers was that they felt stupid and powerless when required to use the ‘note’ pages. For the worker that has grasped the use of SDMT, completing a ‘note page’ is relatively unproblematic but for the many that had not yet learned how to do that, we can attempt to explain it using macro, meso and micro theoretical explanations. A macro-theoretical analyst would explain the solution to this problem by indicating that the problem is one that stems from a power struggle—workers cannot create the ‘note page’ because the government failed to provide the proper training needed in order to render these workers competent in the area of creating and editing the notes page. Though this is a solid explanation for the existence of this problem, it fails to investigate the effects that this inability have on the workers and relies more heavily on an explanation that is grounded in the power structures that exist in society—those who have the power (government), make the rules and provide or fail to provide, the training for those who don’t (workers).

A meso-theoretical analyst would find the explanation of this problem by focusing on where this sense of powerlessness comes from and determine that the root of it lies at the institutional level—poor and inadequate training, provided by the private consulting firm Andersen/Accenture accounts for the powerlessness that these workers feel—again, a worthy explanation, but one that does little to express adequate depictions of the workers’ thoughts, feelings and actions.
A micro-analyst explains the inability to create and edit a ‘note page’ by asking the workers themselves how they feel about this problem. When a worker says “I feel stupid and powerless” the use of a micro theory affords us not only a greater understanding of the problem but also provides us with the pathways that will lead us to the solution. For many workers, changes within themselves were created and mediated through the changes that they experienced in their work and their relationships with coworkers, supervisors and clients. For all of the workers, the changes that took place were both external and internal and trying to acclimate themselves was more often than not, an exercise in subjectivity and self-discovery.

The use of a theoretical framework that relies on the meanings and realities that workers create amongst themselves is crucial in a study that attempts to explain their experiences. The use of symbolic interaction theory in this study will bring the workers to life and in doing so shed some light on how they manage in their topsy-turvy worlds. Had the workers themselves been consulted in greater detail at the onset of the BTP, I suggest that many of the problems that they encounter and much of the distain that they feel could have been avoided. By striving to understand how social service workers learn and derive meaning from their jobs, we can better identify the ways in which they could or should have been trained—ways that would have made for a much easier transition. Without a doubt, we learn from our mistakes and to re-examine the learning processes that were successful and unsuccessful for these workers, we create a body of knowledge that speaks to the need for more and different modes of training in the transformation of jobs and skills, in all professions. The implementation of SDMT revolutionized not only the ways in which workers interfaced with their clients, it also changed the relationships that the workers shared among themselves and their supervisors. In an attempt to transcend the boundaries between micro, meso and macro sociological analysis, the use of micro-analyses in this study offers a detailed picture of the covet relationships that exist between the social service workers and the methods by which they define their work. Housed within the grander framework of organizational change and information technology, this work is an attempt to provide voices for the workers who struggle on a daily basis to mete out social assistance to those in need.
References


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