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# Case Study of a Participatory Action Research Process to Examine Burnout and Generate Change Oriented Strategies among Workers in a Human Service Environment

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CASE STUDY OF A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS TO  
EXAMINE BURNOUT AND GENERATE CHANGE ORIENTED STRATEGIES  
AMONG WORKERS IN A HUMAN SERVICE ENVIRONMENT

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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May 2010

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Title: Case Study of a Participatory Action Research Process to Examine Burnout and Generate Change Oriented Strategies among Workers in a Human Service Environment

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This qualitative case study examines the efficacy of a participatory action research approach process by an inside researcher and colleagues to address burnout in a local human service context. Thirteen middle management professionals from twelve organizations came together for sixteen months to examine the issue of burnout in their local human service system, eventually leading a number of local initiatives. Burnout is a constellation of symptoms related to stressful work that limit the helping relationship. The literature on stress and burnout suggests that it is possible to design interventions to build support for workers to reduce burnout. This study explores how more sustainable results can be obtained when workers themselves design the interventions, and explores how participatory action research is uniquely suited to address problems in the workplace by putting the problem in the hands of those who own it. Challenges emerging in the organizing phase of this process were analyzed in the course of the study. Participants struggled with grasping the intention and focus of action research, and with initiating the actual research itself. A matrix of power relationships in the human service workplace wound through the themes that emerged from the data. The findings indicate that most workers enter the human service field with passion and commitment, only to be challenged by the marginalization of their profession and influences of the organizational culture, including worker and organizational communication. These systematic issues are exacerbated by the scarcity mentality which workers share with those they help; but they

are alleviated by support received from their organizations and from their colleagues, families, and their values. Many workers without adequate support systems exhibit the constellations of symptoms which are categorized as burnout. As co-researchers worked their way through an iteration of an action research cycle of planning, acting, and reflection, they found their voices. They found the confidence to apply understanding of the lived knowledge and experience, leading a number of local initiatives that contributed to worker autonomy and control over one's work. The outcome is positive and sustainable change in a local context of the human service workplace.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### FOCUS AND CONTEXT

#### Introduction

This dissertation is a qualitative case study of a participatory action research process that was conducted to generate change-oriented strategies among workers in a human service environment. I examine the appropriateness and effectiveness of this approach in changing the dysfunctional symptoms and dehumanizing attitudes shared by many in human service that are characterized as burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 2001).

The research question for this study is, “In what ways and to what extent did this process of participatory action research enable human service professionals to examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace?” The case study of the participatory action research process was conducted through observation, interviews and document review that were not a part of the participatory action research project itself.

Studies have indicated that greater worker autonomy and control over one’s work have been shown to moderate the effect of job related stressors (Bond & Bunce, 2001; Dollard, Dormann, Boyd, Winefield, & Winefield, 2003). I anticipated as a result of participating in this process that human service workers would take action on their own behalf to seek the autonomy and control necessary to reorganize the workplace and reduce structural stressors, thus improving the quality of the human service system.

In this dissertation case study, I explore how, in what ways, and to what extent a participatory action research process can guide the action of human service workers to address the workplace stressors that lead to burnout in a specific local human service organizational context. I examine the human service system at the micro level, in a

specific human service workplace context, the human service system in my local community, to discover the local knowledge that human service practitioners bring to the examination of the problem. I discuss the implications of articulating this local knowledge to the broader human service system in the conclusion of the dissertation, and examine the extent to which the results of this research process are transferrable to other settings.

In this introductory chapter, I will discuss the structural crisis in the human service workplace that contributes to the marginalization and alienation of the human service worker. I argue that this marginalization and alienation is related to a constellation of psychological symptoms collectively known as burnout; and I suggest that participatory action research can contribute to the understanding of the stressors that occur in the human service workplace, because it is informed by the lived knowledge of human service workers.

## The Crisis in the Human Service Workplace

### *Manifestations of the Crisis*

Three decades ago, Cherniss (1980) observed that a crisis in the human service workplace was emerging, caused by fewer resources, larger workloads, and a more stressful work environment. At the time, human services were increasingly provided through organizations with a bureaucratic organization structure. This crisis that he described led to deterioration in the effectiveness of services and consequently ebbing public support for these programs. A manifestation of this historic crisis in the human

service workplace was worker burnout, a phenomenon that had been unknown a decade earlier (Maslach, 1982).

The accuracy of Cherniss' warnings was documented in a policy study sponsored by the Anne C. Casey Foundation (2003). The study found that the three million human service workers in the United States were underpaid, inadequately trained, poorly supervised, had limited opportunities for professional growth and advancement, and were restricted by rule-bound jobs with little latitude for decision-making. As a result, many qualified professionals have left the field (Maslach, 1982). Those who stay in their jobs are motivated by a sense of mission that outweighs the work's disincentives (Pines & Aronson, 1988). Although the Anne C. Casey Foundation (2003) policy study fell short of calling for a participatory approach, it suggested that the cornerstone of reform is to find out from frontline workers what they need to perform their jobs more effectively.

A major barrier to addressing this problem is the system of categorizing funding by different client groups and specific problems, with each category employing a variety of different services (Smale, 1995). This categorical method of funding influences the nature of human service work. At the local level, practitioners see the need both for coordination of services and for collaboration, yet their efforts are hindered by the categorical funding 'silos' in which their organizations operate.

The method of funding also focuses on problems that the organization addresses at the expense of ignoring the context in which problems occur. The attendant labeling of people with problems into separate categories and multiple treatment services hinders the effectiveness of the helping relationship, as systemic or ecological problems are overlooked (Stringer, 1995). The focus of the organization's efforts to meet specific

needs takes the focus away from the assets the individual brings to the situation, and to how the underlying conditions that cause the problems can be best addressed by a 'power with' partnership of the organization and the client (Poppo & Leighninger, 1998).

There are emerging theories of empowerment to support the practical initiatives for reform that many practitioners are attempting. These theories encompass holistic interventions and collaboration within and between the human service system and in the community.

This major reform movement in the human service professions moves beyond a model based on assistance to one based on empowerment and partnership. This strengths perspective involves replacing a professionally based expertise ("assistencialism") model with one where the client is actively involved in learning and exercising choices, and it is being increasingly implemented by human service organizations. The strengths perspective calls for using individual and community resources to create opportunities for inclusion and self-determination (Dunst, Trivette, Boyd, & Brookfield, 1994; Noelker & Harel, 2001; Tice & Perkins, 2002).

However, as reforms are implemented and best concept practices are introduced to assist those in need; continued ambiguity exists about the role and status of the human service profession. The expertise model is solidly entrenched and changes occur slowly, which creates additional stressors in human service work (Tice & Perkins, 2002).

Although workers are expected to interact with consumers in an empowering way, they still work in a bureaucratic environment whose institutional culture they are unable or unwilling to change. This restricts the ability of workers who attempt to implement these reforms to provide services they recognize as needed. Further, these workers are faced

with concerns about available resources, lack of community and social support, categorical “silos” of funding, fear of litigation and the resultant layers of regulations and paperwork.

### *Alienation of the Human Service Worker*

Since the beginning of the study of the phenomena of burnout, critical theorists have pointed to a relationship between burnout and the Marxist concept of “worker alienation” (Farber, 1983; Fay, 1987). In one of his earlier works, *Estranged Labour*, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx described work as the natural expression of and catalyst for the individual’s skills (Tucker, 1972). However, under the pressure of the capitalist economic system, the worker’s contribution is devalued. That this is true in the human service profession today is shown by the fact that what is measured in human services is not the helping relationship, but what can be measured in quantitative terms as the unit of service (Cherniss, 1980).

Marx went on to say that because the worker’s contribution is devalued, the product of labor is alienation (Tucker, 1972). This can be seen as applying to workers in human services. When labor becomes only a means of satisfying the worker’s need, she is estranged from his life activity, her essential being. The worker’s labor is not her own, it ruins her body and his mind, and she/he only feels human outside of her work (Tucker, 1972).

The worker becomes estranged from her/his life activity, in this case it is the human service profession. Thus, human service work becomes the means of satisfying the worker’s physical needs. Marx’s maxim that the worker becomes the servant of the wage can be heard today in many workers’ lament that their job is only a paycheck.

Alienation is a condition of society. Individual workers experience the impact of alienation psychologically as burnout. Marx said the political result of alienation is servitude. This is reflected today by the fact that the human service professions are marginalized and most human service workers today are 'at will' employees. What Marx said about the worker of the industrial revolution, that universal human emancipation becomes bound up in the emancipation of the worker (Tucker, 1972) is also true of today's human service workers.

Both the human service worker and the client experience the impact of alienation as a social condition. To paraphrase Marx in current human service terminology, the empowerment of the recipient of human service becomes bound up in the empowerment of the human service worker. To the extent that the human service worker is objectified by her relationship to the material economic system and bureaucratic method of work organization, they are more likely to treat others as the objects of their actions.

In Marx's day, professionals were largely self-employed. Since Marx's era, a bureaucratic mode of organization in the field of human services has replaced the professional mode (Cherniss, 1980). In the professional mode, professionals participate in a lengthy program of training and socialization in which they collegially establish and internalize professional norms. In the bureaucratic mode of organization, those at the top of the bureaucracy establish norms and make most important decisions, while those at the bottom, the direct service human service workers, have limited autonomy and a high turnover rate.

To the extent that bureaucratic organizations do not allow their workers professional autonomy to establish norms and make most important decisions, the



idealistic human service worker is at risk of moving from idealism to cynicism, at which point they become increasingly alienated from their clients and their organizations. The human service worker is estranged from her/his life activity.

Even when the human service workers and their organizations perceive themselves as “agents of change”, their work is based on relations of authority and involves manipulation (Freire, 2005). Freire has diagnosed this problem as “assistencialism”, or assistance mentality, which makes the client dependent on the provider and unable to help themselves. This type of professional practice of social work, insofar as it consists of non-reciprocal relations between experts and “helpees”, is fundamentally flawed.

The alienation particular to human services as compared to other professions may be related to the tension between social services as a means of social control and the idealistic motivations of human service workers for social justice. Even though the concept of burnout first emerged in human service contexts, the psychosocial symptoms that comprise it are common to most workers in today’s service based economy.

This phenomenon suggests why burnout, which as Marx indicates is a consequence of estranged labor, is so common in today’s American workplace. This dissertation suggests that this may be true because human service reflects society’s response to the human victims of the alienation of society. The objective conditions of human service workers are similar to those suffered in the fields of healthcare, education, and other service industries.

The human service workplace is a socially constructed reality. Social work, a leading discipline in the human service workplace, grew out of the Progressive social

movement in the late Nineteenth Century. It was a reaction to the poverty and its effect on living conditions caused by unregulated capitalism (Poppo & Leighninger, 1998). The first practitioners of social work combined theory and practice to struggle on behalf of and with people against social injustice.

As a discipline social work is more reformist than revolutionary, but that is at least partly because of its attempts to be a science in Kuhnian terms. Other critical theorists also note that early in the Twentieth Century social work abandoned its goal to achieve social justice in an attempt to become an exact science, adopting the positivist paradigm as its worldview (Fals Borda, 1988; Poppo & Leighninger, 1998).

However, radical social work is as old as the profession itself, having been advocated by some of its most acclaimed founders including Jane Addams (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). During the years following the First World War, radical social workers had to deal with a concerted attempt by conservatives to discredit their efforts (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). Somewhat later, during the time of the New Deal, radical social workers formed the Rank and File Movement which linked social work with the labor movement and a wider campaign to promote the ideals of socialism. Many radical social workers were inspired by a Marxist analysis of society, and some believed that communism offered the best hope for the future. This engagement resulted in retaliatory action being taken against them during the McCarthy era. Many were ostracized and some even lost their jobs.

During the 1960s and 1970s, radical social work experienced a revival as the War on Poverty encouraged community action and a welfare rights approach. It was also a time when many more publications explicitly committed to radical social work were

published. However, since the Reagan era of the 1980, radical social work has become less influential. Reisch & Andrews (2001) cite this lack of a critical perspective in the profession as a road not taken.

The bureaucratic organizational structure of most human services does not intrinsically foster shared values and beliefs. Human service workers find the rules and procedures established by their organizations as both infringing on their autonomy and harmful to their clients as the hierarchal structure of public human service organizations has created more stringently controlled work environments (Cherniss, 1980). Cherniss suggests that worker alienation and the resulting burnout increased in direct proportion to the human service professional's loss of control over her/his work. The ebbing of public support for human service programs has exacerbated the negative consequences of the bureaucratic mode of organization.

As Habermas observed, the contemporary welfare states downplays the role of "citizen" and enhances the roles of 'client' and 'expert' as a means of social control (Sitton, 2003). In doing so, the discipline both objectified and dehumanized its 'subjects' (Freire, 2005), and at the same time relegated human service workers to the role of 'mechanic/technician' (Stringer, 1999).

This discussion begs the question of what is the nature of human services in terms of labor, products and relationships. Many practitioners in the field of human services see the product of human services as improvement in the quality of life of the recipient of services. However, Freire (2005) suggests that human services based on the expertise and authority of the worker can be used as a means of social control. Thus, there is a tension

between social work as a means of achieving social justice, as advocated by critical theorists, or as a means of social control.

In some ways, the crisis in the human service workplace is similar to the crisis in business management in the 1980's. At that time, rigidly hierarchical business management was challenged by a participatory style of management (Palshaugen, 2006). The concept of participation of workers and administrators in the organizational system as a "learning-organization", which has its roots in the industrial democracy movement whose origins include Lewin's principles of action research, has been a focus of effective business management theory and practice for many years (Patton, 2002; Senge, 1990; Stringer, 1999). This suggests that human service workers could benefit from the adoption of a similar participatory approach to organizational management, just as they are currently adopting a participatory empowerment and partnership model with their clients.

To summarize, there is a relationship between the phenomenon of burnout and the Marxist concept of "worker alienation" in which the worker becomes estranged from her/his life activity. This is of particular concern in the human service professions, where workers are usually employed by bureaucratic, often publically funded organizations, whose stakeholders may seek some form of social control. This estrangement and this method of organization create barriers between human service organizations and the people that they serve. Estranged, or burned out workers are perceived as insensitive or judgmental by their clients, and a helping relationship based on mutual trust becomes problematic. This problem also has become widespread in other sectors of the service economy, and burnout, stress, and coping have become much studied phenomena.

### *What is Burnout?*

Clients of human services frequently complain about insensitive and judgmental human service workers. This complaint surfaced locally in the research my colleagues and I recently completed on social conditions in Fayette County, Pennsylvania (Evans-Rhodes, Jankoski, Rapano, & Cohen, 2006). A commonly accepted explanation for these attitudes in human services and other helping professions is that the unique role strains involved initiate a process of stress reactions characterized as “burnout”. However, the widespread prevalence of burnout among human service workers is a warning that something is seriously wrong both with how we view the workplace and the nature of helping relationships (Maslach, 1982, Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

The most commonly accepted description of burnout is that it consists of three related clusters of symptoms; physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization and dehumanization, and reduced personal accomplishment and cynicism (Maslach, 1982, Maslach & Leiter, 1997). These clusters of symptoms, or dimensions, of burnout develop over time. For example, idealistic human service workers who suffer from emotional stress from being helpless at easing the impact of chronic poverty become progressively less idealistic and more judgmental (Pines & Aronson, 1988). They tend to dehumanize their clients, blaming them for their problems, categorizing them with diagnostic labels that take the place of the helping relationship. Such workers also resist workplace reforms.

The term “burnout” originated as a colloquialism in the 1960’s describing the effects of long-term drug use. Although there is extensive popular and scholarly literature

on the phenomena of burnout and its negative consequences to human services, there was no research on burnout until the 1970's (Farber, 1983; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). In the meantime, this new concept became a psychological fad that came to be applied to almost every interpersonal situation. Much of the early writing on burnout appeared in professional magazines and journals in people-oriented professions such as human services, education, health and mental health, criminal justice, and religion. A scholarly literature on burnout soon emerged in many disciplines, most notably in the behavioral sciences, especially social psychology, and health care (Farber, 1983; Lovallo, 2005). It finds responsibility and risk inherent in such "people work" makes workers susceptible to chronic stressors (Dollard, Dormann, Boyd, Winefield, & Winefield, 2003; Pearlin, 1989).

One of the constant themes the many studies of burnout have consistently demonstrated is that the phenomenon of burnout is related less to the individual circumstances of the worker than to situational stressors in the workplace (Maslach, 1982; Maslach & Leiter, 1997; Maslach & Schaufeli, 1993; Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). Social stress is an inevitable consequence of social organization. This is true on the macro level in the capitalist system with its cycles of business failure and unemployment (Aneshensel, 1992); as well as in human service work, with its cycles of public support (Stone, 1997). At the micro level, the body's reaction to environmental stimuli, such as psychological distress and social role strains, causes physical symptoms (Selye, 1985), to the extent that as few as 16 percent of somatic complaints have an identifiable organic cause (Levant, 2005; Mirowsky & Ross, 2003).

### *The Stress and Coping Model*

The research on stress and burnout discussed above was conducted within the framework of a paradigm that seeks to deductively find truth by investigating hypotheses derived from theory. One such theoretical model, the stress and coping model (Aneshensel, 1992; Pearlin, 1989), examines the interactions of stressors, stress reactions, and mediating resources. In this model, the emotional problems and bodily malaise that result from workplace stressors can be mediated by the development of self-efficacy (mastery), problem-focused and emotion focused coping strategies, and social support.

Insofar as the stress and coping model and related theories of burnout describe a process that occurs over prolonged exposure to stress in the workplace, researchers predict that it is possible to design interventions (Pines, 1993; Pines & Aronson, 1988; Thoits, 1995). Theoretical models indicate that occupational problems, which arise from structural conditions in the workplace, do not lend themselves to resolution by the coping responses of individual workers. They suggest that intervention can address the effects of the workplace environment on the social needs and psychological resources the individual brings to the workplace.

However, to date it appears that planned initiatives have not achieved the predicted outcomes of increased job satisfaction and reduced burnout (The Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2003). One purpose of this dissertation is to suggest that an alternative approach, participatory action research, can be more effective for planning interventions to address situational stressors in the human service workplace. The participatory action research approach focuses on problem solving, with the ownership of research to solve that problem located in the hands of those who own the problem.

## Significance of the Study

### *An Alternative Approach*

The stress and coping model holds that it is possible to design interventions (Pearlin, 1989). This model predicts that awareness and analysis of the workplace stressors that cause burnout provide the opportunity to examine demands, build support systems, and improve coping strategies. However, the model implies that someone comes in from the outside to fix the problem. In the interventions in this model, the locus of control of the process is external to the worker and the organization, rather than a tool that they use to address their own problems. The researcher who designs these interventions is uninvolved and objective.

This dissertation explores how an alternative approach, participatory action research, to enable human service workers to conduct holistic interventions to address the problems caused by chronic situational stressors in the human service workplace that are related to the constellations of symptoms known as burnout. Because burnout is both a consequence of individual stress reactions to workplace role strains, and a systemic, societal problem, interventions to achieve the elusive goal of human service reform must be effective at both the individual and systemic levels (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). I argue in the findings of this study that the co-researchers in this participatory action research planned and implemented successful interventions at the individual and systemic levels.

I have argued in this chapter that burnout as an individual stress reaction to workplace role strains goes beyond the strains that may be present in any particular



organization. Rather, burnout is a reaction to the strains caused on the individual human service worker by the alienation and marginalization of the human service profession itself. At the same time, collectively these strains are related to the larger systemic societal crisis in the human service profession caused by fewer resources, larger workloads, and a more stressful work environment. By empowering the human service worker to find understanding of and resources to address workplace role strains, participatory action research may be a promising approach to reducing workplace stressors.

### *The Participatory Action Research Approach*

Participatory action research is an action research process that grew out of liberation movements that first emerged in developing countries, focusing on critical consciousness that leads to response/action (Fals Borda, 2001). It supports those with less power in their communities, opening up communicative spaces among social practices, social structures, social media, and participants' knowledge (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). I argue that human service workers can be numbered among those with less power in their communities in terms of social status, gender, and income. This contributes to marginalization of the human service profession.

Action research is a participatory, democratic family of approaches that integrate knowledge and action (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire, 2003). Action research consists of a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. It is democratic in that it changes human systems by involving their members. The choice of emphasis on participatory action research is that it stresses a broader role for the participant both in the

commissioning and the carrying out of research in all stages of the research. This process of participation could change the balance of power in the human service workplace.

This study examines the ability of the participants in the project to develop a deeper understanding of the stress on the human service worker in the workplace. As participants explored the systemic stressors in their workplace, they became more aware of the larger societal crisis of the human service profession. Increased understanding of the participatory action research process changed participants' consciousness of the problems related to their workplace and their profession. In the process of their participation in the research, participants became co-researchers, able to use their unique local knowledge to develop and test interventions to solve the problems in their own workplace. They applied their new understanding of their workplace as the basis of a series of actions to contribute to a less stressful, more productive workplace.

## The Context

### *The Community*

This dissertation research was conducted in the human service community in Fayette County, Pennsylvania. Fayette County is a mid-sized county in Southwestern Pennsylvania 50 miles south of Pittsburgh that borders the Appalachian areas of North-Central West Virginia and Western Maryland. The county experienced a steady population and economic decrease since shortly after World War II when coal mining, which had been the county's leading industry, declined. Fayette is one of the poorest counties in Pennsylvania and leads the Commonwealth in several negative socio-economic indicators (Pashek Associates, 2003).

According to the 2000 U.S. Census (2002), the county's population of 148,644 was characterized by a high percentage of female and elderly-headed households, nearly one-half (45%) of which earned \$25,000 or less annually. Eighteen percent of the county's population was identified as living below the poverty level (compared to an 11% rate for the state), and 24% of adults over the age of 18 had not finished high school. Fayette County experienced an economic revival in the 1990's that brought new employment. However, brought mostly temporary low paying jobs that do not provide a living wage or adequate benefits, with retail sales, tourism, health, and human service direct care jobs as the largest growth industries (Beaver & Cohen, 2004). There are a high percentage of female and elderly headed households, people below the poverty level, and people without a high school degree compared to Pennsylvania as a whole (Beaver & Cohen, 2004). As a direct result of these demographics, there is substantial funding for human services to employ a growing number of workers. However, funding is fragmented and supports a wide number and variety of organizations.

There is a structural approach to poverty that emphasizes the effects of economic forces at the local, national, and global levels (Duncan, 1999). The structural approach explores the unequal distribution of resources in a capitalism economy. Fayette County experienced this phenomenon as coal, its primary natural resource, was exhausted. Based on the findings of a multi-method study of social conditions (Evans-Rhodes, Jankoski, Rapano, & Cohen, 2006), variant subgroups of the poor, or a typology of poverty, exist in the county.

This typology can be broadly characterized as ranging from the working poor who are not eligible for most forms of assistance but who work multiple low-paying jobs

without benefits, to the poor who have a home but rely on some form of assistance from the government, to the most destitute who revolve in and out of homelessness. Evidence for the feminization of the poor, was particularly salient in that among the poorest households in the study, there are twice as many female as male heads-of-household (Evans-Rhodes et al., 2006). In the same study, gender and income were the two most significant demographic characteristics identified when looking at differences between survey respondent groups in the study. It is not inconsequential that gender and income are major characteristics of the predominantly female human service workplace, whose employees are paid less than those in professions that require comparable training and responsibility.

#### *The Local Human Service System*

Many human service organizations in Fayette County meet the growing need created by the county's negative demographics. Over the years, I have been involved in dialogue and research into the plight of the county and the efficacy of agency efforts to address its problems, engaging in practitioner research and economic development initiatives. This research culminated in a large scale, mixed methods action research study (Rapano, 2006). One of the findings of that study was that the study's participants identified the numerous dehumanizing ways they were treated by human service workers as one of the chief reasons they do not use available service. This suggests that burnout is common in the human service community.

The clients' dissatisfaction with the existing service system is widespread (Evans-Rhodes, et al., 2006). People from all income levels reported that services do not meet their needs at satisfactory levels. Initiatives to address concerns in this area might focus

on developing a coordinated system that both serves and empowers those in need. However, systemic improvements will not be complete if they do not address the perceptions that the poor have of service professionals.

When these results of the study (Evans-Rhodes, et al., 2006) were disseminated to the leading collaborative entities in Fayette County, there was widespread agreement with the finding about the dehumanizing impact of using human services. Each collaborative expressed a commitment to take steps to address the problem. However, there has been little or no subsequent research into the causes of the problem until the present study. Human service organizations' resources are limited and there are many human service workers with low paying jobs without adequate benefits striving to fulfill the mission of these organizations, allowing fewer resources to devote to research.

On a positive note, cultural, diversity, and wellness trainings have been initiated in response to the findings of the 2006 study. This indicates that there is much interest among stakeholders in the human service system about the present inquiry. These trainings have helped professionals increase their understanding of, as well as empathy toward, consumers of social services and the specific challenges they face. However, these initiatives treat only the symptoms and not the underlying causes of the problem. A more holistic approach is suggested in this study.

### Summary

This chapter discusses the unique problems of the human service workplace and suggests the relevance of the participatory action research to those problems. The crisis in the human service workplace has its roots in the change in the provision of human services from individual professional practitioners to an organizational delivery model,

with competing categorical funding streams paradoxically contributing to overall lack of resources, overwork, and an increasingly stressful work environment. The worker's contribution is devalued, and the result is worker estrangement and alienation, which expresses itself in the symptoms constituting the phenomena of burnout.

A reform of human service practice is underway which includes a strengths based empowerment approach to addressing the needs of families. A barrier to reform is the bureaucratic organizational structure through which most human services are provided. This study examines the use of the participatory action research approach to enable human service workers to examine the demands of their profession, to build support systems, and to improve coping strategies.

In the following chapter, I will present the theory behind this approach. This study will utilize that theory to examine this attempt to bring change to the human service system through participatory methods. I will discuss how theory suggests that through process of participatory action research, practitioners begin to see themselves as researchers, involving their 'common sense' knowledge and converting it to 'good sense', knowledge that grows from experience with nature and the time honored cultural wisdom, to resist the dominant knowledge production system and move toward a participatory 'knowledge culture' (Gaventa, 1993). I will argue that the emphasis on participatory action research, which assists people to appreciate the truth of their own reality and that of others (Wadsworth, 1998), can be particularly effective in dealing with the demands for change needed to address situational stressors in the human service workplace.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the theoretical location of this dissertation. After several years of reflexive consideration of my inquiry and myself, I now believe that the emerging research paradigm, the participatory worldview is the most appropriate theoretical context for this study. Guba & Lincoln suggest, “Different axiom systems have different utilities depending on the phenomenon to which they are applied”, and that each person must select the axioms “that are the best fit for his or her own life space” (1989, p. 82). The assumptions of the participatory worldview match those that have guided my activities throughout my career. I then discuss how this paradigm is best suited for an inquiry to examine the occurrence of burnout in the human service workplace.

Within this chapter I explore four important research paradigms that shape the research initiative: the prevailing paradigm, constructivism, critical theory, and the participatory worldview. I will first briefly summarize the research paradigms and the philosophical axioms that underlie them. I will compare and contrast them from the perspective of their place in the history of science, and their relevance to the problem studied in this dissertation. I will describe how the participatory worldview can be used to understand the multiple, interweaving perspectives of those in the human service workplace.

I will then examine the theory and practice of action research. In particular, I will examine the reciprocal relationship of the participatory worldview with the action

research approach, particularly the approach that is studied in this research, participatory action research. I will then discuss the literature on action research that has been conducted in workplace settings, including the use of participatory action research conducted to explore workplace burnout. Finally, I will describe the unexplored niche that this dissertation fills in the action research literature.

## Theoretical Location

### *An Overview of Research Paradigms*

I begin my discussion of the theoretical location of the study with an overview of research paradigms, or worldviews, each of which provide a basic set of beliefs which can guide one's actions (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Epistemology, the branch of philosophy that asks how we know what we know, points to axioms, philosophical assumptions that lead to ways of thinking and acting. Paradigms consist of philosophical axioms, which are paradigm defining questions. Our choice of axioms leads us to choose paradigms, ways of looking at the world or worldviews that serve as a guide to how we conduct research.

The main philosophical axioms include: 1) epistemology, which asks how we know the world and asks about the relationship between the inquirer and what is known; 2) ontology, which addresses beliefs about the nature of reality, what is there that can be known; and 3) methodology, which addresses how we learn about the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 2005; Lincoln, 2001; Merten, 1998). I will explore my epistemological and ontological choices more fully in the following sections of this chapter. I will address my methodological choices in the next chapter.



Because paradigms are based on axioms, which are systems of beliefs, they are ultimately not able to be proven. However, the body of beliefs that constitutes a paradigm is important in that what you believe suggests what facts you consider relevant to the research enterprise. Kuhn (1996) points out the difficulty of clearly seeing what lies beyond the paradigm in which we operate. There is philosophical confusion between the frame that a paradigm creates to explain the world and reality as it is given. While some argue that this implies that a paradigm is beyond the grasp of the human mind, others say a paradigm can also be viewed as a cognitive construct that our minds are able to contain (Heron and Reason, 1997).

The creation of a new paradigm involves a complete re-evaluation of previous theory and beliefs, a process that occurs over lifetimes (Kuhn, 1996). The criteria for judging paradigms are their persuasiveness and utility (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1989). As the process continues, the new paradigm becomes more useful as its adherents become committed to the same rules and standards for scientific practice. New paradigms are adopted by researchers because they are more successful than their predecessors for solving problems.

The prevailing paradigm that reflects the training and worldview of most researchers today is the postpositivist paradigm, the successor to the positivist paradigm that emerged in the Seventeenth Century in the intellectual ferment of the Enlightenment. I will briefly describe these positivist paradigms, positivism and post-positivism, in the following section. I will examine the impact of their hegemony in the research community and how that has affected and limited the approaches that have been used to study the social/behavioral phenomenon that is the subject of this research.

Critics of the positivist and postpositivist paradigms (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 2005) acknowledge that they have led to improvements in our material welfare and control of our lives. However some argue that this has been accomplished at the cost of damage to our ecology, human and social fragmentation, and spiritual impoverishment (Reason & Bradbury, 2001b). Alternate inquiry paradigms evolved in the Twentieth Century to challenge the hegemony of the received paradigm in reaction to its perceived shortcomings in social/behavioral research (Lincoln, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wadsworth, 1998). These alternate research paradigms are constructivism, critical theory, and the emerging participatory worldview (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, Heron & Reason, 1997).

There are important differences among the alternate paradigms, based upon their emergence in different disciplines and perspectives. However, they are commensurate, that is, they share many major axioms, just as positivism and postpositivism do (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 2005; Lincoln, 2001; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the sections below I will provide background information on the received dominant paradigm, postpositivism; and on the alternate paradigms, constructivism and critical theory that first challenged its hegemony. I will then show how the participatory worldview borrows from each of these to create a unique, holistic, pragmatic, relational worldview which I argue can be of great utility in the human sciences. I conclude that the latter research paradigm is well suited for solving interpersonal problems in the human service workplace.

### *Positivism and Postpositivism*

The positivist worldview which emerged during the Enlightenment represented the liberation of human society from the orthodoxies of superstition and religion (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). It is also known as hypothetico-deductive research, in that it focuses on efforts to verify a priori hypotheses, usually stated in mathematical language (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

Over a period of several centuries, the positivist paradigm was the emerging paradigm. Study of the history of science shows new theories that emerged during these centuries, such as the Copernican revolution, Galileo's laws of motion, Newton's theories, Darwin's theory of evolution, and Einstein's theory of relativity to name a few, are more than just increments to what is already known (Kuhn, 1996). Each in its turn expanded the worldview of practitioners in its discipline. Each holds in common the positivist beliefs shared by most in our society today that there is a knowable universe whose mysteries will ultimately be apprehended by science.

The objective, deductive procedures that grow out the positivist paradigms have led to a quantitative methodology that has had success in many fields at predicting and controlling nature. Since the Enlightenment, there has been an emphasis on the 'hard sciences', those that lend themselves to quantification (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Their successes have led those disciplines that are considered the 'soft sciences', including the sciences whose chief subject of study are human, to emulate and adopt these quantitative methods. Less quantifiable sciences, such as psychology and sociology, are included among the 'soft' sciences. This designation implies that there is a lack of dependability of their findings, and that not until quantification in these fields develops, will they achieve

scientific maturity. Until that time arises, these disciplines may be considered by historians of science to be in a pre-paradigmatic state (Kuhn, 1996; Sternberg, 2005). Concern about the epistemology of these 'soft' sciences raises issues not only for the methods employed by the disciplines involved, but also for some of the assumptions underlying the paradigm as a whole.

The major axioms of the original positivist paradigm that emerged during the Enlightenment include the ontology of realism, which holds that there is a single reality that we aim to apprehend. This axiom implies an epistemology that accepts a dualistic, subject/object relationship between the knower and what can be known, which leads to objective findings that can be seen as true. These axioms in turn lead to a manipulative/experimental methodology based on verification of a priori hypotheses through quantitative methods, and value free inquiry whose aim is prediction and control (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, 1994, 2005).

The postpositivist paradigm gradually replaced the positivist paradigm in the Twentieth Century to address concerns raised with each of these axioms. Many of these concerns emerged as the human sciences adopted positivist methods (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). When quantitative methods were adopted, ontological concerns grew out of the emic/etic dilemma. The etic, outsider, a priori theories, the grand theories that were employed in inquiry, often had little relevance or meaning in the emic, insider, context of individuals, groups, or cultures. Epistemological concerns were raised by the exclusion of the discovery dimension in inquiry. The discovery dimension is concerned with the source of hypotheses. Often hypotheses are not a priori, but are 'discovered' in the context of what is studied. The methodological axiom of positivism was challenged by a

new understanding of the interactive nature of the inquirer and phenomena. This understanding first emerged in the physical sciences, in contexts such as the Heisenberg uncertainty principle in quantum physics, which says there is observer effect in measurement of position by an observer, which necessarily disturbs a particle's momentum (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The effect of measurement on phenomena was soon seen to have even more relevance to the social sciences.

The epistemological axiom of postpositivism addresses these concerns by substituting the ontological axiom of critical realism, which maintains that reality is only imperfectly and probabilistically apprehendable, for the naïve realism of positivism. The epistemological axioms of the postpositivist paradigm share a dualistic subject/object approach with the positivist paradigm; however, the findings of research are no longer seen as incontestably true. Objectivity is still seen as the goal, but a critical tradition was acknowledged that allowed external guardians, such as editors, referees, and professional peers, to judge the objectivity of the findings of research. Findings are viewed as probably true if replicated, but they are always subject to falsification. The methodological axioms of positivism are also modified, as the emphasis shifted from verification of hypotheses to the use of triangulation to falsify, rather than verify hypotheses.

This allows the use of qualitative methods in examining the results of experimental findings, opening the door to inquiries done in natural settings and taking into consideration the meanings that people ascribe to their actions (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To the extent that the postpositivist paradigm addressed the dilemmas created by

the positivist paradigm, the postpositivist worldview in which these worldviews emerged has become orthodox view of researchers today (Kuhn, 1996).

Although the postpositivist paradigm replaced many of the assumptions of the positivist paradigm, it did not challenge one of the ‘unwritten’ rules of science, that it is conducted, “...by a uniquely competent professional group and acceptance of its role as the exclusive arbiter of professional achievement...” (Kuhn, 1996, p. 169). In the postpositivist paradigm, the researcher is the expert who has the power to define issues, to divide knowledge into disciplines and sub-disciplines, and to act independently of the non-expertly based public interest (Gaventa, 1993). This privileged position creates hierarchies of knowledge that reinforce existing social and economic hierarchical forms of organization, and raises serious questions about the argument of positivism that research can be completely value free.

### *Constructivism*

The value free epistemology of the postpositivist worldview has been challenged by qualitative interpretive approaches such as constructivism and critical theory (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Schwandt, 1994). The constructivist paradigm, also known as the naturalistic, hermeneutic, or interpretive paradigm, is the first to explicitly challenge the postpositivist paradigm. Although this paradigm has been in existence for hundreds of years, in recent years it has found better acceptance as its axioms are proving to be appropriate for conceptualizing human inquiry.

The consideration of values in the inquiry process has several consequences (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Values not only affect the choice of the

researcher's paradigm and theoretical framework, but also influence the choice of the problem to be studied, the methods of data gathering and data analysis, the context of the research and the values that already exist in that context, and how findings are presented. The difference between the value neutral position of postpositivism and the value bound nature of the constructivist paradigm is of major importance in defining the differences between these paradigms. This is why the received postpositivist paradigm and the alternate constructivist paradigm are not commensurate, while the alternate paradigms of constructivism, critical theory, and the participatory worldview are commensurate.

The ontology, what is there that can be known, of constructivism is that reality consists of multiple mental constructions that are based on the experience of specific individuals, groups, or cultures (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; 1994; 2005). These constructions are not true in any larger sense, although they can be more or less informed, and they are changeable. This undermines the privileged position of the researcher to define issues.

This ontology leads to a subjectivist, transactional epistemology that does not separate the inquirer from that which is inquired into. Only interactivity can lead to a construction and findings are created as the investigation proceeds. The relativist ontology and interactive epistemology of constructivism lead to an interventionist methodology, and methods are both based on explaining social and mental constructions. Methods are dialectical and hermeneutical; they aim at a more informed consensus construction. Because inquiry is subjective, the human is the instrument and inquiry is value bound. The aim of constructivism is understanding.

The constructivist paradigm provides a wider role for qualitative methods to be used in the study of the human service workplace. The ontological axiom that there are

multiple realities suggests that research be conducted in a natural setting, in the context that the inquirer seeks to understand (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The interactive epistemology suggests that inquirers not enter their investigations with a priori assumptions, that is, with someone's etic construction of reality. Constructivists enter the context of the research as learners. This implies the use of qualitative methods, such as talking to people, observing their activities and reading their documents, and the use of tacit as opposed to propositional knowledge.

Applications of the qualitative methodologies allow the use of methods to understand the emic knowledge of participants in the research. In the context of the present study, this enables researchers to examine practitioners' perceived lack of autonomy and control of one's work in the human service setting. As the needed reforms in human service are instituted, organizations increasingly realize that successful outcomes depend on understanding the relationship between the practitioner and the receiver of services to create a new socially constructed workplace reality. The discovery of ways to increased worker autonomy and support can enable the inquirer to help the human service practitioner to empower service recipients to address their problems.

### *Critical Theory*

Critical theory is a paradigm that encompasses axioms from many distinct critical theories. As such, critical theory is constantly evolving (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). Critical theory includes liberation movements, feminism, and postmodernism. There are major disagreements not only between these movements, but also within them. However, what they have in common is that they constitute a number of ways of thinking that call upon the inquirer to take action against oppression.



Broadly speaking, critical theorists accept that social and historical factors mediate power relations in society, and that certain groups are privileged over others (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005). This leads to oppression that has its worst effects when subordinates accept their social status as natural. Mainstream research practices reinforce class, race, and gender oppression, because under the axioms of postpositivism, facts which are value free cannot be separate from values related to these unequal relationships. Research findings are value mediated.

The ontology of critical theory is that reality is not only socially constructed but also historical. It consists of crystallized social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The epistemology of critical theory is transactional and subjectivist. Critical theory gives attention to voice, critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and sharing the prerequisites of privilege (Patton, 2002). The aim of critical theory is transformation.

The axioms of critical theory can be used to illustrate the social issues that that explain the crisis in the human service workplace. Freire (2005) differentiates between naïve consciousness that objectifies facts, leading to irrational adaptation to reality; and critical consciousness (“conscientizacao”), which applies causality to analysis in context, and leads to dynamic understanding. This transformative critical consciousness suggests how the balance of power might be changed in human services by practitioners at any level of the employment hierarchy, in order to address the feelings of alienation and the attitudes that dehumanize clients developed by professionals who suffer from emotional exhaustion and cynicism. The postpositivist paradigm has not successfully systemically addressed ways to meet human needs, social change, or increasing social alienation. In

some cases, the reliance of professional researchers on the postpositivist paradigm has disenfranchised the lived experience of other stakeholders in sectors of society (Lincoln, 2001). This alienation and disenfranchisement can be altered by critical consciousness which leads to response/action that transforms situations involving injustice, oppression, and domination.

For that reason, the critical theory paradigm has relevance to the study of burnout and the crisis in the human service workplace. Viewing human service work through the lens of critical theory indicates a rationale for the physical and emotional exhaustion, dehumanization and cynicism that comprise the constellation of symptoms that constitute burnout. A deeper reading into one of the roots of critical theory, Marxism, suggests not only the relevance of critical theory but also suggests a remedy to this alienation.

Marx argues that the worker is estranged from his product and from nature (Tucker, 1972), and that the product of labor is alienation. The worker's labor is not his own, affecting the body and the mind, and the worker becomes the servant of the wage. But humans are redeemable through, "an enlightened re-ordering of their collective arrangements" (Fay, 1987, pp 2-3). This reordering changes the self-understandings (false consciousness) of the manipulated through education and enlightenment. Or, to put this in the context of the burnout literature, interventions to achieve the elusive goal of human service reform must be effective at both the individual and systemic levels (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001).

### *The Participatory Worldview*

The paradigm that guides this research is the participatory worldview, which is emerging to stand beside the leading non-positivistic paradigms of constructivism and

critical theory (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Reason, 1994; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The roots of the participatory worldview grow out of several similar theoretical approaches that have appeared in recent decades. These include holistic and systemic thinking (Bateson, 1972), liberationist education (Freire, 1993), an extended epistemology (Habermas, 1984), new visions of spirituality (Heron & Reason, 2001), and contemporary physics (Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

Some postmodern thought, such as the deconstructionism of Derrida, says that there is no basis or ground of knowledge that has any claim to truth (Heron & Reason, 1997). This nihilistic thinking is related to the perceived failure of the constructivist paradigms to articulate the relationship between constructed realities and the phenomena which we perceive. The participatory worldview addresses this through an experiential approach to participative realities. The participatory worldview rejects both the positivist worldview that one “adapts” to reality as an object, and loses the ability to make choices (Freire, 2005), and the relativism of the constructivist and critical theory paradigms that no reality has any ultimate claim to truth. The participatory worldview articulates reality in the sense that it allows us to know we are part of the whole of the world we live in.

The axioms of the participatory worldview include a subjective-objective ontology that there is a given cosmos in which the mind actively participates (Heron and Reason, 1997). This leads to a subjectivist value-based epistemology that involves self-reflexive attention in which the mind, as Bateson (1972) suggests, can detach itself from pre-existing frameworks and chooses its premises. Personal knowing exists in a context of critical intersubjectivity, in the context of both linguistic-cultural and experiential shared meaning.

These axioms suggest the desirability of collaborative inquiry undertaken by co-researchers and co-subjects. Because such an approach does not separate the enquirer from what is being inquired into, this approach aims at the participatory transformation of the social world. While this research paradigm shares an extended epistemology with its immediate predecessors, constructivism and critical theory (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Kemmis, 2001; Reason & Bradbury, 2001), its axioms lead us to an experiential knowing that views the world from a different perspective.

Heron and Reason (1997) suggest that in addition to ontology, epistemology, and methodology, that a fourth axiom be considered as basic to the fundamental description of an inquiry paradigm. This axiological question is one that asks about values, what is intrinsically worthwhile. Ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions all deal with truth. The axiological question of values deals with being, and with what is to be valued because of what it is, in short, with what is good. The answer to this question is human flourishing; a practical knowing that enhances personal, social, and ecological knowing. Guba & Lincoln (2005) described this as,

“Congruence of experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical knowing, (which) leads to action to transform the world in the service of human flourishing” (Guba & Lincoln, 2005, p. 196)

Thus, the role of values is central to the participatory worldview. This differs from the role of values in the positivist paradigms, which argue that research is value free. The fact that values play a key role in defining the axioms of the other alternative research paradigms is one of the reasons that they are not commensurate with the positivist paradigms. But only the participatory worldview

holds that values are as basic to the research enterprise as ontology, epistemology, and methodology.

The participatory worldview fosters the value of human flourishing through the democratic and spiritual dimensions of life systems, and understands the complexity of society as expressed in regional contexts (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Fals Borda (2006) believed that the new participatory paradigm is merging with emancipatory non-Western liberationist theory, and will transform society by casting off the inherited structural flaws of modernism.

The participatory worldview is emerging in the context of shifting boundaries among the non-positivist paradigms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This borrowing, or bricolage (from the French: “bricoleur”, quilt maker), occurs as multiple perspectives are viewed hermeneutically and dialogically (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

However, I have specifically chosen the participatory worldview because of its emphasis on fostering human flourishing through the democratic and spiritual dimensions of life systems. The participatory worldview points to the successes of other non-positivistic paradigmatic approaches in assisting practitioners to improve their self-understanding through arriving at a critique of their social or work settings.

While both constructivism and critical theory can contribute to understanding the conceptual location of this study, they emphasize representation over action (Reason, 2006). The participatory worldview guides this study because it views all of our actions as relational. Freire (2005) says, “To be human is to engage in relationships with the other and the world” (p.3). Our relation to the other can be expressed in political science

terminology as the individual in a social contract, our relationship to space and time in the world can be expressed in the physical sciences by the quantum metaphor; our understanding that mind and matter are not distinct substances is an ontological position; our relationship to our environment is studied in ecology; and our relationship to the world in a spiritual sense is to re-sacralize it, restoring meaning and mystery (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The participatory worldview maintains that we create the world by our actions, interactions, and construction of language.

## An Overview of Action Research

### *Origins of Action Research*

There is a close relationship between the axioms of the participatory worldview and the theories underlying action research. This section is an overview of action research, describing its origins, its theory and practice. In this section, I show how the axiomatic assumptions of the participatory worldview support action research praxis.

Action research is the name applied to a number of diverse and often divergent practices conducted by a group of stakeholders aimed at creating social change (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Although action research is often led by a professional action researcher, it is not an academic discipline. There are networks of colleagues in many disciplines who share an interest in action research. Sometimes this hinders common knowledge and even communication among action researchers. Thus, the separate action research traditions are not always compatible. Not only are these traditions outside the mainstream of academic research, all of these lie outside the postpositivist hegemony. Practitioners of action research can be found in many disciplines, such

as organization development, teaching, health, and community development (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, Reason, 2006).

One of the foundations of action research is pragmatism. As conceptualized by John Dewey, pragmatism maintains that we learn by doing; that all humans are scientists, solving problems as best as they are able; and that thought should not be separate from action (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). Early in the Twentieth Century, Dewey was applying his philosophical work to experiments in education (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). Similar perspectives were employed in early labor organizing traditions, and in faith based movements like Catholic Action and later liberation theology.

The earliest form of practice that identified itself as action research was developed and named by John Collier, a social worker and community organizer who became a policymaker during the Roosevelt administration, and a friend of Kurt Lewin (Neilson, 2006). In his work with immigrants in 1917 and later as the Commissioner for Indian Affairs, he developed 'laboratories of method' which he described as 'sociology in action'. In a 1946 article titled "United States Administration as a Laboratory of Ethnic Relations", he coined the term 'action research', and called attention to multiple forces and multiple systems levels in his work empowering Native American communities to take control of land management projects.

However, it is Kurt Lewin who is credited with originating the conceptual framework of action research (Bargal, 2006; Burnes, 2004; Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Lewin, a Gestalt psychologist, came to the United States from Hitler's Germany before World War II. His seminal work as a social, organizational, and developmental psychologist focused on individual personalities,

interpersonal conflict, and situational variables. As a member of a persecuted minority group and immigrant, he espoused the democratic principles of cooperation among researchers, practitioners, and clients.

A principle of Gestalt psychology is that an individual can only change by reflection and gaining insights into the totality of their situation (Burnes, 2004). This emphasis on perception and cognition led Lewin and his colleagues to become pioneers in the area of social psychology, which they differentiated from the psychoanalytic and behavioral schools of psychology which were dominant at that time. When he came to the United States, Lewin developed practical applications of theory to contribute to the war effort, including studies of the morale of front-line troops and psychological warfare (Burnes, 2004). He maintained, “There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951).

Lewin developed four major theories, which he meant to form an integral planned approach to change (Burnes, 2004). Each of these theories can be applied in small groups and involve “re-education” that leads to a change of behavior. Lewin’s Field Theory, deals with the totality and complexity of interdependent symbolic interactions that affect group structures and individual behaviors. Lewin’s theory of Group Dynamics, the way group norms, roles, interactions and socialization create disequilibrium and change is seen as a forerunner of complexity theory. Lewin’s Three-Step Model of organizational change: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing, has become a staple in organization consultation. The fourth major theory was action research.

Action research emerged as part of Lewin’s commitment to social change (Bargal, 2006; Burnes, 2004). In a 1946 article “Action Research and Minority problems”, he stipulates that



successful action is based on a felt need, followed by a spiral of steps including analyzing the situation correctly, identifying all possible alternatives, and choosing the most appropriate one. Lewin developed further principles of action research in two other articles over the last years of his life, but died in 1948 before he was able to systematize them.

There are eight principles of action research that can be derived from the three articles Lewin published on action research (Bargal, 2006). First, it combines study of a social problem with endeavors to solve it. Second, it consists of a spiral process of data collection, action, and reflection. Third, it provides feedback on the results of the process to all parties involved in the research. Fourth, it involves continuous cooperation between researchers and practitioners. Fifth, it is based on the change phases in group dynamics: unfreezing, moving, and refreezing. Sixth, it includes values, objectives, and power of all participants. Seventh, it creates knowledge, principles of intervention, and training. Eighth, it emphasizes recruitment, training, and support.

Action research emerged as a tool for social change with an emphasis on practical solutions to problems, and as a research process which values a partnership with participants (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In this sense, all action research is participatory action research. The key is a process of reflection and reflexivity. Reflexivity is a dynamic process that involves becoming observers of other and ourselves to enrich knowledge, insight, and practice.

Today, there is disagreement among those who see action research as being done in small communities of practice (Reason, 2006) and those who see it as part of a broader social movement (Burns, 2007; Gustavsen, 2006) who argue that action research must move beyond the level of the 'single case' and create social movements, events

interconnected in a broader stream. The core concern is to create a broad movement toward participation and democracy. Reason (2006) disagrees with what he perceives as the attempt to make action research more diffuse and spreading resources into distributive networks to intervene in as many places as possible. He suggests that more immediate goals could be achieved within communities of practice, focusing on a world worthy of human aspiration, of justice and of sustainability.

Reason (2006) suggests that we think in terms of first person (high quality personal inquiring practice), second person (co-operative inquiry where a face to face group engage together in cycles of action and reflection), and third person inquiry (tying first and second person inquiries into the wider movements described by Gustavsen. For example, the small group can open its inquiry space to the wider community, after it acquires the inquiry skills through cycles of action and reflection. This must not be done prematurely, and first and second person inquiries need boundaries for critical exploration.

Reason (2006) also questions whether action research should take on the established social sciences and funding bodies. He suggests that perhaps action research is fundamentally counter-cultural, subversive to Western thinking that focuses on form and patterns instead of substance. Or perhaps action research could be considered homeopathically, healing through small doses: lots of individuals and small groups acting in their personal and professional lives, perhaps leading to an enormous groundswell of change.

There is still a performance management orientation in some action research based on the positivist hegemonies in the social sciences (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006).

The model treats mental models of human behavior as objects that are more real than observing what people do in naturalist settings. The epistemology of some action researchers is that knowledge can be discovered, can be organized into laws, and applied in like-to-like settings. The logics are linear and one dimensional, mechanistic and functional, and imperialistic.

Whatever the outcome of this debate, today action research is practiced in diverse places and has influenced many fields (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, and Maguire, 2003). From its origins in philosophy, psychology, social work, and organizational development, action research has come to be practiced in education, economics, sociology, anthropology, health care, and other disciplines. However, since action research not itself a discipline, few practitioners receive their original training in action research. Most practitioners discover action research after receiving training in research methods. Many have prior experience in community development, political activities, or mainline research before discovering the appropriateness of action research to their work, often after experiencing dissatisfaction with their previous work. Many are attracted by the congruities between their values and those espoused by action research practitioners, such as democratic principles, social change and social justice, and empowering people.

In the next sections I examine the practice of action research, and revisit the theoretical context which underlies the practice of action research is conducted. I then discuss the families of action research that developed in the Western world and the related movement that began in the majority (Third) world that took the name participatory action research. I conclude the chapter with an examination of participatory action research in the workplace.

### *The Practice of Action Research*

Action research differs from other types of research in that it is a dialogue between researcher and practitioner. This has the epistemological implications that it is guided by values, it is praxis driven, there is no hierarchical relation between scientific and practical knowledge, and results are evaluated not according to theoretical criteria (validity, reliability, etc.) but according to their problem solving capacity (Fricke, 2006). Training for action research, while beginning with an overview of sociology, organizational theory, and regional economics, has to include practice. To develop empathy, imagination, courage, and intensive reflection an experienced practitioner must guide the trainee. Writing is a key and often-neglected part of action research, and the researcher should be visible in his/her text. It should be made clear how theory was informed by praxis and vice-versa, as action research transforms both.

Action research is democratic and participatory because human systems can only be changed by involving the members of the system. When action researchers moved experimentation out of the lab and into social life, and invited the subjects of research into the community of research, they removed the distinction between the knowers and the known. This is an emergent process, which begins as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice (Reason, 2006).

Action research emerged as a tool for social change with an emphasis on practical solutions to problems, and as a research process whose elements are a cyclic process and a partnership with participants. Lewin's concept of action research was a combination of research and practice to develop knowledge to achieve social action (Day, Orr, Ankara, & Norris, 2006). In every action research process, practitioners have the opportunity to take

ownership of the principles of action research and of their actions and interactions. Communities of practice encourage reflection to enrich the individual's and the community's knowledge, insight, and practice.

A key to action research is critical reflection, or reflexivity. The concept of critical reflection includes self-understanding, and cultural and political consciousness (Patton, 2002). It is deconstructive in the sense that we look at ourselves, participants, and the study's audience through reflexive screens such as culture, age, gender, class, and values. It involves personal introspection, and a hermeneutical circle of interpretation of the perspectives of others.

As noted by Marja-Liisa Swantz, a pioneer in the study and implementation of participatory action research projects, from an individual perspective, action research is more than a methodology or research process, it is a way of life (Day, Orr, Sankaran, & Norris, 2006, Swantz, 2001). Participants initially view it as an innovation that will be adopted as work-related benefits emerge. A process of reflection leads to a sense of control that empowers and develops the researcher, the participants, and the community. Those who employ this process will internalize it, involve others, and apply it to other situations.

#### Action Research in the Workplace

Shortly after Lewin's untimely death in 1948, his work was being adapted in organizational settings by the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in England and the Norwegian Industrial Project (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). By working directly with miners in England, the Tavistock Institute showed there was a link between production

technology and work organization, and that workers' skills could be better utilized than by the Tayloristic 'production line' model of repetitive actions.

The industrial democracy movement, as it soon came to be known, quickly spread to other countries (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). In Norway, in many locations, with government support, semi-autonomous work groups took charge of production. Lewin's methods spread to Sweden, then to Japan, whose 'quality circles' were widely admired for contributing to the success of the Japanese economic miracle of the 1980's.

The process of regionalization in the Scandinavian perspective led to organization-sponsored demonstration programs, with the cooperation of labor and management, and by the 1980's to generative programs aimed at improving the capacity of each organization into learning organizations (Gustavsen, 2006). Organizations in many countries became involved in the 1990's in response to increasing global competition, encouraging networking between enterprises, leading in this decade to clusters of networks. However, as these models were copied from country to country in the industrialized world, the emphasis on increased production often came to replace the emphasis on workers' participation in the workplace.

A key practice used to accomplish the goals of action research in the organizational context is the development of learning organizations. There is no universally best way to develop learning organizations; it depends on specific historical situations (Gustavsen, 2006). Diffusion of learning organizations is not just a matter of knowledge transmission; it is based on characteristics of the social environment, chief among which is trust. Further, learning is a process that requires participation and unfolds over time, making transition at a distance difficult at best. The creation of regional

networks implies that learning is balanced, and that each party benefits from the relationship.

The prime role of action research in the organizational context is “constructivism”, in the sense that it provides building materials to make something in the real world. In a democratic order, the actors grant each other a certain freedom in responding to specific situations, while pursuing their interests in dialogue. Also, networks provide a social context that is a safeguard against removal of a learning organization pattern and its replacement with non-learning forms. Action research can contribute to the creation of learning regions by fostering democratic collaboration among all actors in the several stages of bottom-up practical learning that fosters new practices.

The literature on action research in the workplace can be examined from the perspectives of the worker, the organization, and the broader community and social structures in which they exist. While sociological theory tends to begin with the latter and organizational theory with the organization, it is appropriate that an action research approach undertaken from the perspective of the participatory worldview take into account the level of participation of the individual worker.

From an organizational perspective, research and practice are also intertwined, and there is considerable discussion in the literature of the learning organization. Argyris and Schon (1996) maintain that organizations are not impersonal agents whose learnings are mechanical; in fact organizations know less than their members. Organizational action is logically prior to organizational learning. Before an organization acts it must be political, there must be procedures for making decisions, delegating authority, and setting

boundaries for recurrent tasks. Inquiry may start with individuals in their organizational roles, and can lead to changes in thinking and organizational practices. Organizational knowledge can exist in the minds of its members, or in files, and is directly represented in its routines and practices. Practitioners are designers in their strategies of action, they are interested in explanatory models, but their hypothesis testing and testing “stops” when something works (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

Communities of work are shaped by how and how far individuals identify with the group or organization, and create social capital (Schoemaker, 2006). Action research provides the framework for the change agent to facilitate communities of work and organizational change. In 25 organizations in which Schoemaker worked as a consultant, he found that in most cases a clear organizational identity is crucial in developing communities of work and that identity is a socially constructed phenomenon which comes about in a interaction between people. Groups strive to achieve a certain level of convergence around organizational identity; and that the identity of the organization that he studied was literally discovered through exchanging views and making meaning of their shared behaviors and values. Further, corporate values are initially identified by the members. The basis for collective action in communities of work is trust and a collective set of norms. Leadership is an important issue and talent development is critical.

Schoemaker (2006) also observed that communities of work suffer when changes involve rationalizations, too much structure and system and too little emphasis on people. Organizations are tenacious systems with dynamics and defense mechanisms. Often change focuses too much on deficiencies; and change agents often try to impose a new reality while managers are not rewarded for seeing change through. In organizations



successful in developing communities of work, change is seen as a learning process. Change is linked to problems and builds on employee's experience. Change is based on the values of democracy, humanity, authenticity, openness, and natural and free expressions of opinions and feelings.

There is no universally best way to develop learning organizations, as it depends on specific historical situations (Gustavsen, 2006). Diffusion of learning organizations is not just a matter of knowledge transmission. It is based on characteristics of the social environment, chief among which is trust. Further, learning is a process that requires participation and unfolds over time, making transition at a distance difficult at best. Regional networks can be created when learning is balanced, and each party benefits from the relationship.

The prime role of research is providing structure to make something happen in the real world. In a democratic process, the actors grant each other a certain freedom in responding to specific situations, while pursuing their interests in dialogue. Also, networks provide a social context that is a safeguard against removal of a learning organization pattern and its replacement with non-learning forms. Action research can contribute to the creation of learning organizations by fostering democratic collaboration among all actors in the several stages of bottom-up practical learning that fosters new practices.

Organizational deficiencies and defense mechanisms prevent the development of alternative coping strategies that create the stressors which lead to worker burnout (Schoemaker, 2006). One anticipated outcome of this study is to observe how and to what extent participatory action research will allow human service organizations to address the

development of such coping strategies. In this research, I examine to what extent participants in the workplace can learn to replace these negative behaviors with a culture of learning that can avoid the clusters of adaptive behaviors that are categorized as burnout.

### *Theoretical Context of Action Research*

Theory is a claim to knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Theory, knowledge, logic, and values are intertwined. There are three types of theories. Each can be understood in terms of both its content and its form. Propositional theories (Aristotle) make statements about the way things are. Dialectical theories (Plato) are grounded in contradiction, from Plato's the one and the many to Hegel's conflict of opposites, transition of quantitative into qualitative, and negation of the negation. The third type, living theory, is described as real-life theorizing and includes research on our own ideas, validation of them through the critical feedback of others, and awareness that we are living contradictions.

Action researchers have adopted the ontological values of Polanyi that people possess a store of tacit knowledge; of Plato, who says we can know the one and the many; and of Chomsky, who speaks of our innate capacity to create knowledge (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). This contributes to the epistemological position that knowledge exists in many forms. Their methodological values are based both on the need to systemize this knowledge and to engage in the systemic inquiries of others to improve their understanding of their work, an educational influence. Their social purposes are knowledge and democratic practices, which translate into pedagogical values of interrogating our own assumptions and the normative values of our cultures to search for

more inclusive and relational ways of living. Action researchers ask ‘to what extent are our values denied in our practice?’

The distinction between theoretical discourse and practical discourse is that to have theoretical knowledge of something means to understand it, while practical discourse leads to action (Palshaugen, 2006). Since knowledge of phenomena is interpretation of phenomena, the power of knowledge is dependent on the ability to participate in practical discourses. Discourse yields to the power of the better argument, granting participants the power of judgment.

Action researchers should find practical answers to theoretical disagreements among practitioners. This implies not that they agree upon a solution, but on a process by which a practical solution can be generated. The big challenge in democratic organizational development is to organize those who perform the action into practical discourses. Then, as part of this process, the participants may choose to enter into the theoretical discourse as a way of understanding the problem. Action researchers are not only a part of the events; they also participate in creating the events.

The epistemology of action research mirrors the epistemology of constructivism, critical theory, and the participatory worldview (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). It reflects constructivism insofar as knowledge is grounded in lived experience. Action research also reflects the epistemology of critical theory in that its aim is change. And action research is grounded in the participatory, democratic practices in pursuit of practical solutions of a problem.

Reason and Bradbury echo Greenwood & Levin’s (1998) call for a democratic forum. A democratic forum would be similar to the ancient Greek classical forum, which

was a public sphere and center for discussion (Eikeland, 2006). Action research is democratic, empowering, and humanizing (Stringer, 1999). This implies a different social organization of knowledge management and knowledge generation, a ‘reshuffling’ of learning and knowledge production where the ‘natives’ start dialectical gatherings that alter the relationships between research and educational institutions and work life organizations.

Since in this research I have undertaken the task of studying an action research process to determine both its effectiveness in the field and in the creation of new knowledge, I am very concerned that I am able to identify quality in action research. Fals Borda (2006), drawing from the classical roots of the search for quality, provides a rule of thumb that serves as a preliminary guideline:

“The Greeks have given us a good rule for this: direct praxis should be complemented by ethical phronesis. That is, simple activism is not enough: it needs to be guided by good judgment in seeking progress for all” (Fals Borda, 2006, p. 358).

Similarly Lewin, like both Aristotle and Dewey, grounds his theoretical philosophy in the practical experience of the inquirer-knower-thinker (Eikeland, 2001). Action research has been called the “hidden curriculum of the Western tradition,” in that it resurrects the practical context of classical philosophy in which the philosophical concepts of science and research emerged. The theoretical basis for this in Greek thought is that every inquiry should be directed at how it is possible to live well. Action research goes beyond the positivist notion that theory informs practice to the recognition that theory can be generated through practice, and be used for positive social change.

The culminating role of the researcher is not only focusing on the solution of a problem, but also on human development (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Postmodernist theories provide action research with a set of holistic concepts that deal with the interrelationships of systems. Success in this approach to studying interrelated systems can be measured by the ability to solve problems. These approaches take into consideration Foucault's discussion of power in relationships and Habermas' theory of communicative action (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003). Action researchers embrace messes; that is, multi-dimensional intractable problems that cannot be addressed by single discipline knowledge systems.

The occurrence of burnout in the human service workplace is one such intractable problem. I argue that action research is well suited to the investigation of this problem by involving human service workers as partners who, through the processes of group dynamics, bypass the restrictions placed on research by the value free and ontologically naive realistic positivistic method of inquiry.

Practitioner/researcher collaboration can take place in action research: researchers discover what practitioners already know and appreciate their inquiry. Researchers can help discover the hidden rationalities, pattern causality of which practitioners seem unaware (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Lewin's conception of action research is prototypical, providing empirical grounds for Dewey's principles of participation and collaboration.

Lewin's principles of action research, as viewed through the lens of the participatory worldview, pave the way for Reason and Bradbury's 2001 widely cited working definition of action research:

“...action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowledge in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participative worldview, which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities”  
(Reason & Bradbury, 2001, p.1).

Action research encompasses many ways of knowing. It requires a democratic forum with a decision making process that occurs among diverse groups and gives voice to all participants (Greenwood & Levin, 1998). This characteristic way of knowing grow out of one’s own experience, and others may choose to emphasize different characteristics. In the spirit of transparency every practitioner of action research should be clear about which characteristic ways of knowing she/he chooses, and each of us make our own choices transparent to themselves, their inquiry partners, and their wider audience. It “...is a participative and democratic process that seeks to do research with, for, and by people...” (Reason, 2006).

### *Families of Action Research*

Today, the term action research is applied to a family of research approaches and practices that integrate knowledge and action (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, Reason, 2006). Because action research approaches start from different premises, they emphasize different aspects of participative inquiry (Reason, 1994). Many action research approaches have differing ontological and epistemological axioms. However,

each approach has its strengths, and they can be integrated in different ways with each other.

An overview of action research practice has been discussed in the preceding sections. In this section, I will take a closer look at related action research processes that are more specifically participatory in nature, because aspects of each proved to be relevant to the current research. Reason (1994) singles out three action research approaches that are particularly suited to the participatory worldview. They are cooperative inquiry, participatory action research, and action science. I have added a fourth, community based action research (Stringer, 1999). I address cooperative inquiry, action science, and community based action research in this section, and the participatory action research, the subject of the current study, in the following section.

Cooperative inquiry has its roots in the principle of humanistic psychology, that persons are self determining (actually or potentially), so that research on persons should involve them as co-researchers and co-subjects, who generate the ideas, design and manage the project, and participate in the activity being researched (Reason, 1994). Differences exist in the extent of members' contributions, roles, and power.

Reason (1994) describes cooperative inquiry as occurring in four phases: Phase one is primarily propositional, co-researchers identify initial research propositions: explore an aspect of their experience, try out in practice particular skills, or change some aspect of their world. Phase two is primarily practical, it is the application of these ideas and procedures in everyday life, then observing and recording each other's and their own behavior. Phase three is primarily experiential as co-researchers become immersed in this activity. Phase four is propositional again as researchers consider and modify their

propositions in light of their experience. Validity in cooperative inquiry grows out of the critical subjectivity of the co-researchers, based on a collaborative encounter with experience. It is close to what Bateson (1972) calls Learning III. Dangers to validity include unaware projection (deceiving ourselves), and consensus collusion by the group.

Another form of participatory inquiry, action science, starts with the question of how to develop genuinely well-informed action. Action science, a development of Lewinian action research, focuses on creating the conditions for cooperative inquiry in organizations. Action science pays special attention to the role of power and leadership in organizations (Argyris, 1993; Argyris & Schon, 1996, Reason, 1994).

Action science points out that a major barrier to participation in organizations and groups stems from the fact that individuals' actions are based more on their theories-in-use than from their espoused theories. Another critical practice is replacing single-loop learning with double-loop learning: the latter says individuals can not only amend their action strategies, but can also change the governing variables behind those strategies (Bateson, 1972). Action science practitioners move participants from a defensive, win-lose theory by modeling the suppression of negative feelings and in its place emphasizing rationality.

While organizations have theories of action that can be explicitly espoused, case studies of organizations can identify theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Theories-in-use contain norms, strategies, assumptions, and values which can be constructed by observing patterns of organizational behavior. They are the images of organizations held in its member's minds and in the organizational environment. Organizational learning involves a change in organizational theories-in-use, which can include superstitious



learning and competence traps. This can be complicated by organizational size and structure.

There is a critically important kind of organizational second order learning through which members of an organization may discover and modify the learning system that conditions prevailing patterns of organizational inquiry. Bateson (1972) described this kind of learning as deuterolearning, learning to learn. The generation of new thoughts and action by a community of inquiry can detect and correct error. The danger is that when researchers see themselves as sources of resource based knowledge, the consequences can be rejection or dependency. Their expertise or expert intuition may be opaque to practitioners. Following Dewey, action science sees practitioners' inquiry in terms of what do they already know, and how they inquire and learn (Argyris & Schon, 1996).

A variant of action science, action inquiry, deals with the four territories of human experience: purpose, strategy, behavior, and the outside world, which correspond to framing, advocacy, illustration, and inquiry (Reason, 1994). This appears to require a high skill level and transformational leadership.

Stringer (1999) characterizes another participatory approach to inquiry in human services as community based action research. This approach has been used to enhance everyday work practices and resolving crises by reviewing goals and procedures, evaluating effectiveness, and planning activities and strategies. This approach, while seeking to change the social and personal dynamics of the research situation, is more consensual than confrontational. This reflects the differences between the participatory worldview and critical theory in that the emphasis is more on systems change than on

liberation per se, but ultimately the goal of researchers in both paradigms is to enhance the well being of people.

### *Participatory Action Research*

Participatory action research is an action research process that grew out of the democratic, social justice movements and political action liberation movements that emerged in developing countries of the majority world in the 1960's (Fals Borda, 1988, 2001; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991, Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The first reference to participatory action research, as distinct from the broader practice of participatory research or action research is attributed to Orlando Fals Borda (Hall, 1997).

Participatory action research emphasizes the political aspects of knowledge production, within the tradition of liberationist movements, in which people understand the role of knowledge as an instrument of power and control (Reason, 1991). Concerns for epistemology and methodology are secondary to this. Participatory action research starts in the lived experience of people, and how they understand their experience as reality. Participatory action research has two objectives:

“One aim is to produce knowledge and action directly useful to a group of people through research, adult education, and sociopolitical action. The second aim is to empower people at a second and deeper level through the process of constructing and using their own knowledge: They see through the ways in which the establishment monopolizes the production and use of knowledge for the benefit of its members” (Reason, 1991, p. 328).

Participatory action research is a collaboration that creates knowledge from the cultural traditions and lived experiences of common people. It is democratic in that it is based on their feelings and attitudes, which can be seen as altruistic, cooperative and communal (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991).

Participatory action research owes much to Freire's (2005) description of critical consciousness as understanding that leads to response/action. The orientation of participatory action research is as much in the areas of adult education and socio-political action as in its research orientation (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Its aims are to enable oppressed groups to acquire leverage through specific projects and to identify sociopolitical thought processes to which those groups can identify. When social change is required in organizations to address systemic problems, participatory action research has been successful in achieving satisfactory outcomes (Fals Borda, 2001).

The essence of participatory action research is to address the asymmetrical relationship of dependence implicit in dualistic subject/object epistemology (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). It looks to the unique cultural traditions of people based on mutual aid, the giving of care, the family, and other old social practices to generate knowledge that will both empower people and improve praxis and research. It has been used to address sharp class exploitation in Latin America and Asia and to promote collective socioeconomic initiatives in Africa which serve as an alternative to outside directed 'development'.

Patterns of domination also exist in the American social context (Gaventa, 1991, 1993; Hall, 1993). The advanced capitalist structure produces powerlessness and poverty

for many. Participatory action research in North America is linked with other social movements as a counter-hegemonic practice that gives voice to the powerless.

Giving voice can be seen in Habermasian terms as opening communicative space (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Social practices (communication, production, and social organization) relate to social structures (cultural, economic, and socio-political), which shape the social media (language/discourses, work, and power), which shape and are shaped by participants' knowledge (understandings, skills, and values), which in turn shape and are shaped by social practices in an intertwined and interrelated cycle.

Participatory action research is a social process, it is practical and collaborative, it is critical and emancipatory, it is reflexive, and it aims to transform both theory and practice. It reduces the artificial separation of rationality and democracy.

Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) add another dimension to the practice of participatory action research in terms of Habermas' description of communicative action and the public sphere. Participatory action research, not unlike the action research model originally described by Lewin (Bargal, 2006; Burnes, 2004) consists of a cycle of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. In participatory action research, the stages overlap and the original plans can become obsolete. This is so because research is a social process, and the practice of action research occurs in social interaction between people. Habermas' theory of communicative action states that the symbolic structured aim of communicative action calls for different methodologies for natural and social sciences and that it draws attention to economic and political relations (Sitton, 2003). Similarly, action research employs the research methodology most appropriate to study the problem under consideration, and its object is change.

Participatory action research occurs in public spheres; self constituted networks of communication among participants that arise in response to a crisis in practice caused by loss of legitimation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Public spheres are constituted for communicative action and public discourse; they are inclusive; they presuppose communicative freedom and generate communicative power. They frequently arise in connection with social movements. These local investigations lead to broader interests and social movements, and transformation of professional and civic practice. We fall back on the meta-practice of communicative action when it is not evident what should be done. Paraphrasing Fals Borda, we transform the world in order to investigate it. Thus, participatory action research transforms both theory and practice.

#### Action Research Studies of Stress and Burnout

The review of the literature shows that little work has been done to use action research to intervene in the workplace to address the problem of burnout (Halbesleben, Osburn, & Mumford, 2006). However action research, particularly community based participatory action research, has often been utilized in the human service field (Stringer, 1999, Wadsworth, 2001). Such research recognizes the interconnection of the researcher and human service practitioners. The facilitator observes, frames questions, and uses systems thinking to achieve transformation and make sustainable change in the organization.

I identified three examples in the literature of action research studies that specifically address stress and/or burnout in the workplace. In the first, a study of government workers in the United Kingdom, participatory action research was employed as a method of work reorganization to reduce job-related stressors (Bond & Bunce,

2001). The study explored how the way work is organized causes stress, and to what extent greater job control can serve as a mediator to reduce stress. The authors used quasi-experimental longitudinal statistical methods, with treatment and control groups selected for similar educational attainment, age, gender, and employment rankings. Participants' were assessed with the job satisfaction, physical symptoms, and sources of stress scales of the Occupational Stress Indicator (OSI) instrument to assess stress related outcomes, at the beginning of the study and again after 12 months.

The treatment group involved committees of workers who discussed and suggested job reorganization procedures that might improve job control (Bond & Bunce, 2001). The study found that significantly improved outcomes (decreased absences and improved mental health) resulted from the participatory action research intervention. However, the measured improvements in job satisfaction were not significant. The authors suggest that the lack of improvement in job satisfaction could be because participation in the study raised workers expectations for positive change that were beyond the scope of the study's method.

A second example from the literature involved a participatory action research study of workplace stress and burnout, also conducted in the United Kingdom, in a health and in a social services organization (Munn-Giddings, Hart, & Ramon, 2005). Staff was recruited in the two organizations to participate in five workshops for the purpose of generating data for a strategy document to be presented to each organization's senior managers. The authors viewed their roles as facilitators as including the role of catalyst and coordinators of the project. They planned and structured each workshop, and viewed their data as primarily consisting of suggestions from each group that went into a strategy

document to be presented to both organizations. The authors of this study, like Bond and Bunce (2005), cite a limitation of this study as not creating sufficient ownership by the participants. Although their data indicate that they succeeded in creating a more proactive approach among the participants to addressing workplace stressors, they conclude that their study would have benefited by educated participants being more reflective, and by giving them an active role in the implementation of their suggestions.

A third example from the literature involved a collaborative action research study of workplace stress and burnout in the United States (Halbesleben, Osburn, and Mumford, 2006). The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of the action research process for understanding the organizational phenomena of burnout, particularly for the reduction of burnout among civilians working in the Federal Fire Service. The approach used in this study was to make changes in the environment in which the employees work. The study took into account both the significant variety of stressors that lead to burnout and the fact that these stressors may be unique to a particular organization. They also found that sustainable improvement can be obtained by focusing on creating a long term collaborative environment, and suggest that this could be translated to other organizational workplace situations.

The researchers saw action research as appropriate because it addressed these particular organizational issues while advancing knowledge regarding what is effective in reducing burnout through participation among researchers, managers, and employees. They found that the lack of social support experienced by employees was a significant issue leading to emotional exhaustion and turnover intentions' even though employees expressed a high level of idealism, indicating that they loved their profession. They also

found that management training was effective in facilitating better social support and reducing role stress.

In action research conducted within the participatory worldview, participants are both practitioners and researchers who aim to transform practices, and practitioners of the meta-practice of action research. They understand practice in both its individual and social aspects, and both objectively and subjectively. They reimagine the role of theories in terms of collective understandings in communities of practice, outcomes in terms of historical consequences for participants and others.

The three studies discussed in this section above were facilitated by outside researchers from the academic world who were etic to the communities being studied. I did not find a study in the literature in which participatory action research by facilitation by an insider with an emic relationship to the community in which the research takes place. Insider action research improves the possibility that the facilitator and co-researchers co-create knowledge.

### Summary

The review of the literature shows how dissertation research addresses an unexplored niche in its specific focus on the human service workplace, in its application of assumptions made explicit in the participatory worldview, and in the use of insider action research. It is a democratic collaboration to produce knowledge that empowers people and improves praxis and research. The findings in this study indicate that this approach has potential in achieving long term change by employing the unique knowledge that human service workers have of human interactions and applying them to their own workplace and systems.



## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODS

#### Introduction

The purpose of the dissertation is to explore to what extent and in what ways the participatory action research approach can address the problem of burnout in the human service workplace. Operating within the worldview of the alternative inquiry paradigms, reality is uniquely interpreted and constructed. The axioms of the participatory worldview in particular, make it important to select methods that value and respect collaboration. Thus the dissertation employed the case study method using the ethnographic methods of observation, recording, interviews, and document review

#### The Research Question

This dissertation case study studies the use of action research to address job-related situational stressors that lead to burnout among human service professionals. The study was conducted with the support of the major collaborative human service groups in Fayette County, Pennsylvania, and the co-researchers included human service professionals who are employed by agencies that are members of these collaboratives.

The research question of this case study is, “In what ways and to what extent did this process of participatory action research enable human service professionals to examine, reflect and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace?” The case to be studied is a participatory action research process involving a group of human service practitioner/researchers who are studying the problem of burnout in their workplace. The dissertation research question seeks through observation, interviews, and document review, to examine the potential for this process to impact the problem.

The research question grew out of my positionality as a human service administrator, instructor, and researcher. As I observed practitioners exhibiting the symptoms of burnout in a variety of human service settings and that these symptoms were taken for granted in the workplace, I became convinced that the extent of burnout was related to situational stressors present in the workplace. When I discovered the principles of participatory action research, I saw it as providing an alternative approach to the dynamics of that workplace. Therefore, my own values and biases affect the study. In the following section, I will explore the biases inherent in my positionality so as to be aware of the effect of this bias on the credibility of my research.

#### *Researcher's Positionality*

Like many other action researchers (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire (2003), I was attracted to action research because of my previous community development efforts and political advocacy activities. I believe that there is a need to transform society along more participatory lines to achieve social justice. In particular, throughout my career as a human service practitioner and instructor, I have seen the absence of democratic and participatory principles in the structure of human services as I have advocated for “changing the system”.

I entered this research process as someone who has been actively involved with families served by human service systems in Fayette County for over thirty years. After twenty years in a variety of roles in human services from aide to director, in 2000 I started in my current position as an Instructor in Human Development and Family Studies at Penn State Fayette, preparing undergraduates for careers in human services.

As a result of this long career in a variety of human service settings, I have a strong rapport with the key stakeholders throughout my county. At the onset of the current study, I served as the chair of one of the collaborative entities involved, the Fayette County Human Service Council, which created an entry and a role for me to work collaboratively with stakeholders to address the problem. Therefore, my role in this research process is both as a facilitator and as a stakeholder.

The positionality of the researcher reflects the degree toward which they position themselves as insiders or outsiders (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Based on this criterion, my position on the continuum that extends from insider to outsider would lie somewhere between “insider researcher (studies own self/practice)” and “insider in collaboration with other insiders”. I am closer to the former position because I am studying the process of how and to what extent a participatory action research project can be implemented. However, I am also close to the latter insofar as being a co-researcher collaboratively dealing with job-related stressors and the process of burnout. I am a facilitator, a participant researcher, and a stakeholder. An advantage of this insider position is that there is the possibility of impacting the organizational culture of the human service workplace more quickly (Maguire, 1993).

Throughout my career as a human service practitioner, educator, and community leader I observed that my profession was not highly valued in my community. I also came to realize that perhaps as a result, once highly motivated people experience a sense of alienation in their work dealing with the well being of people, a phenomenon commonly attributed to “burnout”. This reinforced my belief that not only was the extent

of burnout was related to situational stressors present in the workplace, but also that many of these stressors originated outside the human service workplace.

When I entered my doctoral program, I became familiar with qualitative methods. I was empowered by learning of the ethnographic practice of reflexivity as a method of inquiry (Bateson, 1972; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Whyte, 1957). I discovered how I am both a participant and an observer of the cultural setting I am trying to understand. I also realized that beyond reflexivity is the question of representation. That is, how do I display the realities of my lived experience and observations and report it in such a way that it has interpretive validity, or makes sense, for my audience (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). In addition, I must employ my voice, the point of view from which I will report my findings. I bring a subjective, self-critical, and experiential conscious experiencing of the inquirer as the self, the 'human as instrument', to the research project, (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

I also learned the principles of action research (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Before I was a doctoral student, I spent two decades as a human service practitioner working on community strategic planning initiatives and interagency collaboratives trying to understand the social problems in my economically depressed community. My doctoral coursework in research methods led me to the realization that my work had unknowingly followed many of the principles of action research. I first used an action research approach for a study of social conditions in my community for a local non-profit organization (Rapano, 2006). This mixed methods study grew out of the response of the human service system to the depressed economic condition of the community. It involved multiple focus groups that identified issues and

concerns in a variety of settings, followed by a survey of a random sample of 1,000 households in the county.

One of the findings of that research project indicated that the dehumanization of human service workers in my community was a major barrier to the delivery and effectiveness of human services. Having employed the action research approach for the former study, I began to wonder if and how action research could be effective in addressing this problem. I was particularly interested in the participatory action research approach to investigate the problem, because I believe it is uniquely suited to studying a profession that is not valued in the community.

As I reviewed the literature for this study, I became aware that many of my experiences as a human services practitioner as well my philosophical beliefs about research could be articulated by the axioms of the emerging paradigm known as the participatory worldview (Heron & Reason, 1997). The participatory worldview examines all of our actions as relational and emphasizes the fostering human flourishing through the democratic and spiritual dimensions of life systems. This is the lens that I brought to this examination of a participatory process in the workplace.

At the onset of this study, I anticipated that the outcome of this participatory action research project would be that participating human service workers would empower themselves to seek a level of control and autonomy in the workplace, especially insofar as they are already trained in and interpersonal and group relations. I anticipated further that participatory action research was uniquely suited to seeking explanations for the prevalence of dehumanizing attitudes shared by many in human services. I expected to find that the participatory approach was suited to address the problem of burnout in the

human service community because it is rooted in the perceived powerlessness of human service professionals to effect change in the individuals whom they serve and the larger community. As will become evident, the findings suggest that the challenges are more complex.

### *Qualitative Methodology*

The choice of methodology called for in any research project is based on the research question (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Jordan, Gust, & Scheman, 2005; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002). The research question for this study, whether human service workers can think and reason evaluatively and become co-researchers who examine, reflect, and act on a problem, is well suited to qualitative methods.

I used qualitative methods to provide useful knowledge about the participatory action research process to address the problem of burnout in a local human service context. Qualitative inquiry searches for happenings, or descriptive variables, and experiential understanding, rather than causes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Research questions provide an orientation to interpretation of cases and phenomena through thick descriptions of multiple perspectives. Qualitative inquiry is holistic in that the activities it studies are unique and common. Qualitative inquiry is also subjective, producing new puzzles more often than solutions, and it takes time. It is also personal (Stake, 1995). Use of the qualitative methodology allows detailed, in-depth information and holistic analysis of the culture of the human service workplace.

The researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry. As such, the research methods were human activities, such as looking, listening, speaking, and reading (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study, the primary method that I used was observation of

the group process, and much of the data is transcripts from audio recordings of group meetings. As indicated by Patton (2002), direct quotations from the transcripts provide detailed descriptions of people's activities, behaviors, and actions constituted much of the data. The findings of the case study are drawn from thorough analysis of these qualitative data, with the hope that they may be transferable to other settings.

### *Case Study Method*

Stake (1995) defines case study research as, "...the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (1995, p. xi). The focus is on qualitative methods: holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic. Case interests in social sciences are typically people and programs, as in the case in this dissertation research. The case is a bounded, unique, integrated system. Case studies can be intrinsic, that is, we are interested in it or need to learn about it; or instrumental, to understand something. We choose a case to maximize what we can learn. Case study is non-interventive and empathic (Stake, 1995). The conceptual structure of a case involves research questions, hypotheses and goal statements about the issues. The case study of the participatory action research process examined in this research reflects this description. It began with a planning phase that extended for over a year, followed by a data gathering phase that took place over a 16 month period. In the process of conducting the study, many of my assumptions were tested.

The case researcher is involved in many roles (Stake, 1995). The case researcher may be a participant observer, an interviewer, an advocate who carries the message, a counselor and/or consultant, and/or an evaluator. The choice of roles is dictated by the

situation, and is negotiated with the site, respondents, and stakeholders (Stake, 1995). In this study, the case is the study of a research approach. Therefore, there was risk of the conflation of my role as a facilitator/participant/observer of the participatory action research process as well as its evaluator. Working the hyphens among these roles proved to have an effect on both the participatory action research process and the outcome of the research question.

## Research Design

### *Sampling*

To best assess the research question, I wanted participants who ‘owned’ the problem: human service practitioners who were concerned about burnout as a major barrier to the effective delivery of human services. Thus, I was purposive in developing a recruiting strategy to reach these practitioners.

The problem that I examine in this research was first identified in an earlier action research study to examine the role of human services in improving social conditions in the county which I conducted in 2004-05 (Rapano, 2006). A finding of that study was that the dehumanizing attitudes many experienced from the human service system was a barrier to people participating in their services. A Leadership Forum was held in June, 2006 to follow up on the recommendations from that study. Participants in the human service breakout group in that forum identified worker burnout as the main cause of the identified dehumanizing attitudes. These forum participants were the first group to be invited to participate in the current study.



While my sampling strategy aimed at maximum variability, participants self selected. The target was to select a group numbering 10 – 15 participants, a group size that I considered optimum for group discussion. To assure variability, after inviting forum participants to attend, I then sent our invitations sequentially to members of human service collaboratives, and those who were contacted were given the opportunity to self select.

I invited participants to participate by emailing them a letter and the informed consent form approved by my university Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the study. The informed consent form specified that they were being asked to participate in a participatory action research project to study the problems surrounding burnout, but also stated that I would be conducting a separate, simultaneous study of the group process itself.

The second group that I invited to participate was members of the county Human Service Council Research and Development Committee, many of whom had also been active on the earlier action research project. The third group from which I recruited was the parent group of the Research and Development Committee, the membership of the entire Human Service Council. Finally, I invited members of the county's Family Collaborative, another interagency group consisting primarily of human service workers and advocates. Each wave of recruiting resulted in three or four participants, until thirteen participants had self-selected, and I ended recruitment for the project.

Invitations to participate were sent out using various mailing lists to over 100 people and elicited positive responses from thirteen initial participants. Participants who responded included five agency directors, four agency deputy directors, two university

professors active in human service community, a continuing education trainer, and a public health nurse. Two of the participants, a director and a deputy director, were from the same agency. In hindsight, I became aware that the recruiting process was flawed because no direct service workers self-selected to participate in the project.

It is also important to note that ten of the thirteen participants were female and three male. Throughout this paper, I use the pronouns 'she' and 'her' to refer to all participants except me, to protect the confidentiality of the minority males. The role of gender in the human service workplace as well as in this project is explored elsewhere in this dissertation. Although minorities constitute 2% of the population of Fayette County (United States Census Bureau, 2002), and a higher percentage of human service practitioners, no minority practitioners self-selected to participate.

Because participants were forming a participatory action group, the final stage of the sampling strategy was to give participants a voice in the final constitution of the group. I expected that this would maximize the diversity of the group, and correct the imbalance in the groups' composition, as the group consisted predominantly of administrators and educators, with no direct service workers. However, in their first meeting, participants decided that a cross section of stakeholder groups was represented and that it was not necessary to recruit additional participants. While this may have accurately described the diversity of organizations represented, it was not true in terms of the diversity of levels of authority of the participants.

### *Group Observations*

Participant observation is the traditional tool of ethnography, a method that I employed within the case study. Ethnography is the description of people and their

culture, including behavior patterns and beliefs (Patton, 2002). I conducted participant observations in the context of the participatory action research group process. Thus, the culture that I investigated is the human service community in its local context. I collected data for the dissertation research on the first iteration of the participatory action research cycle of examining, reflecting, and acting.

I generated data through observing and reflecting on the emerging process, and analysis of group interactions. I included observations of those who are connected or disconnected to the process, and reflective or dynamic points in the process. I observed the process as it developed, from the first contact with participants, to the orientation of participants, and eventually to their development as co-researchers in participatory action research.

In my observation of the group process, I was an overt observer, and attempted to collect data unobtrusively. I observed the group process by becoming a participant observer, to be better able to have a holistic understanding of the context of interaction and understand nuances of meaning from the perspective of the observee. I observed the human and social environment as well as the physical environment.

Each meeting was audio recorded and transcribed. Each transcription began with a brief description of the setting and the location of participants within the setting. In keeping with the principles of qualitative research reporting, I described the setting, the activities, and the people at each meeting (Patton, 2002). Through observation and transcription of the group activities I gathered data that participants shared with each other about their workplace that they might have expressed differently in the one on one

context of a semi-structured interview. In the course of this case study, I observed and participated in 23 group meetings over a 16 month period.

Included in the data on my observation of the group process was the experience and knowledge gained by members of the group who co-facilitated focus groups. While the focus groups provided a wealth of data on the group's research question that is not reported on in this dissertation; what is reported is what they learned and how they reported it to the group. This increased the groups' understanding of the workplace and provides data for the case study research question about their ability to examine, reflect, and act on its problems.

### *Interviews*

A semi-structured interview guide was developed and revised within the context of the research question. Following Patton (2002), the questions were about experience and behavior, opinions and values, and feelings and knowledge. I paid particular attention to the meaning that participants are making out of their experiences. I employed the interview guide with an informal, conversational approach. This allowed each interview to be a dialogue on the emerging local knowledge that was being generated in the group meetings, and allowed the interviewee and me to further explore subjects of interest. This also gave me the freedom to provide feedback to the interviewee on my perceptions of the emerging group process, and allowed me to give the interviewee feedback on their role in the group process,

The interview guide consists of five opening questions about stress in the workplace. Although these questions relate more to the participatory action

research project than to the case study of the process, they provide important background information and provide recognition to the interviewee for reflecting on the process and planning the participatory action research project. These questions are:

1. How would you describe the negative consequences of burnout in your organization?
2. What structural causes of stress (e.g. large caseloads, low salaries, and unnecessary regulations) are barriers to improved practices in your workplace?
3. What do you see as effective methods of coping with workplace stress?
4. What ineffective methods of coping with workplace stress have you observed among workers in your organization?
5. What do you consider to be effective motivators in your organization?

The majority of my questions provide data for the case study of the process of the participatory action research project. These questions are:

6. What have you learned about your work environment/burnout/etc since starting this participatory action research project?
7. How effective do you consider the discussions in the participatory action research project meetings to addressing the problems we have discussed?
8. Do you think that project members value the opinions you have expressed in the participatory action research project meetings?
9. Do you think that your participation in the participatory action research project is contributing to addressing the problems related to stress and burnout in the workplace?

10. What particular aspects of this PAR project do you have feel have been most helpful (interesting/uncomfortable/unproductive/etc.)?
11. Have you had any 'ah-ha' moments, when something new really struck you? Tell me about that.
12. If you could change the participatory action research process, or wish that anything had been done differently, what changes would you suggest?
13. Has your participation in this project raised your consciousness of actions that you could take to improve the quality or effectiveness of the services your organization provides?
14. If another group of human service workers were going to start a PAR project, what advice might you give them
15. Is there anything that I haven't asked you about that you think I should know?

Respondents provided me with insights that they might not express in the group, or that I might not have been able to observe. These insights later proved invaluable in organizing the data into categories and themes.

In keeping with the principle of purposive sampling (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Patton, 2002), I refined the interview recruitment strategy as the process unfolded. Interviews were conducted in two stages. The first interviews were conducted in December 2007 and January 2008, based on the overly optimistic assumption that would be the end of the first iteration of my dissertation research. These four interviews were held first with participants that I selected as the most data-rich cases, those who best articulated ideas of the group.

Although the first four interviewees were purposively chosen, because of the changing dynamics of the case over the first six months of the project and to improve the thickness of the data, I subsequently interviewed six other participants in February and March 2008, at which time the ten participants remaining in the study had been interviewed.

### *Document Review*

Documents reviewed in this study included approximately 80 pages of summaries and or minutes of group meeting created from over 200 pages of group meeting transcripts. Midway through the project, I switched from writing summaries of meetings, to be presented at each subsequent meeting for member checks, to writing minutes of the meetings. Minutes were not only more in line with the organizational culture of human services, but were reflected the switch to the more action oriented phase of the project. In addition, I analyzed approximately 50 pages of interview transcripts. I also reviewed email communications, and notes on conversations and other correspondence, all of which were maintained in a research log.

I began to analyze the data as I transcribed the audiotapes of research group meetings and interviews. Perhaps this was a more meaningful experience to me because of the technical difficulties that I encountered: I am a relatively slow typist, and almost until the end of the project I was working with inexpensive audio cassette recorders, which often required me to replay sections of the proceedings to assure accuracy. Thus I had time for reflection on the observations and on the data, and almost from the outset began to consider the emergence and interactions of categories. Although I did not record

the time spent preparing each transcription, a conservative estimate would be six hours for each transcription, and an additional one to two hours to prepare summaries of minutes of the transcriptions.

I focused my review of documents for the formal analysis that began at the end of the data collection stage of the research. I reviewed the summaries or minutes of for the duration of the project, all 23 meetings. I used the transcripts for background information to provide thick, rich data. To assure maximum credibility, legitimacy, and variation, in the ensuing data analysis, I triangulated these documents with data from emails, conversations, and other communication with participants that took place outside the group meetings that was recorded in a research log. I then triangulated data from the document review with data from interviews and observations to determine the credibility of the emerging themes of the study.

### Data Analysis

Analysis means both to take apart and to give meaning (Stake, 1995). My analysis of the data did not start at the end of the data gathering. I began to analyze the data into categories as I transcribed the audiotapes of research group meetings and interviews. By the conclusion of each transcription, I had spent more time reflecting on the meeting content than in my participation in the meeting. Analysis of group data continued with the preparation of meeting summaries and minutes from the transcripts for member checks, which was always completed before the next meeting. Similarly, analysis of documents started as individual documents were copied into the research log.



After enough data had been collected in the participatory action research process, the focus of the research project shifted from data gathering to data analysis. Ongoing analysis also included feedback from my dissertation adviser, which often occurred at critical points and always involved major reflection on the course of the research.

### *Coding of Data*

The case researcher is an interpreter, because in a case study knowledge is constructed rather than discovered (Stake, 1995). The case researcher may perceive three realities: external, experiential, or integrated. The aim of research is not to discover the first, external reality, the sensory experience of stimuli. It is to describe a clearer, experiential reality, which is my interpretation of stimuli and our daily reality, and to provide a more sophisticated integrated reality, including integrated interpretations and rational reality.

All of the above calls for coded data. The case study narrative in the following chapter is organized in such a way that it has the elements of a story and tells a story, but it is not a story (Yin, 2003). It is a chronological development of the case. Coding involves classifying what things fit together, or converge; then reflecting on how these classifications diverge, or fall into recurring patterns that emerge from the data (data reduction). After identifying the key patterns in the data, I coded each section with the pattern it represents by assigning a color code to each theme, then manually highlighting, cutting and pasting sections data into the appropriate issue file. I attached a separate code to each 'piece' of data to indicate its source, for example, "T – 1" for the first transcript and "I – 1" for the first interview.

### *Identification of Key Themes*

Inductive analysis of the coded data led to a recognition of patterns from which key themes emerged that elucidate the telling of the story represented by this case study (Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). Reading, rereading, and reflecting on the data led to deeper understanding as I looked for corroborating incidents and discomfoting ones. Some patterns were known in advance and some emerged unexpectedly. I went back and forth between the data and the categories of issues identified by co-researchers to identify patterns (data reconstruction). I looked for substantive significance of the findings, by identifying their consistency with the evidence, their consistency with other knowledge, and the intended use of the findings. The process of analysis involved employing my skills and judgment, as the quality of analysis involves pattern recognition. I found patterns in the aggregations of data or correspondences that became the key themes for this study.

The key themes that I identified were the marginalization of the status of the human service profession; the tensions of emic/etic relationships, referring both to insider outsider status as well as “us and them” thinking; alienation, both in the Marxist sense of being alienated from the products of one’s work as well in the ethical sense of being alienated from one’s values; and scarcity mentality, which can be seen as focusing on what is missing in one's life rather than focusing on breaking out of material and intellectual poverty. These were the themes upon which the coding of the data proceeded.

There were dozens of categories and patterns from which key themes emerged. Many of these can be related to the key themes as sub themes. An attempt to list the sub

themes and their relationship to the key themes suggested patterns and interactions among the key themes. To determine what is significant in the data involved inductive analysis of the patterns represented in the classification schema.

This inductive analysis was subjective to the extent that it was based not only on data from the project, but also on my experience of the issues confronting workers in the human service system. I organized and reduced these categories and patterns into six areas that are related to each of the key themes. These areas are systemic issues, psychosocial issues, actions taken, barriers to change, the role of facilitation, and theoretical inputs. I was enabled to further interpret the meaning that the key themes had for participants in the study through reflections on these areas.

#### *Assurance of Quality*

The methods discussed in this section are intended to assure the quality of data and the warrant for the findings of this case study. Criteria to assure validity in qualitative research include credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility is the correspondence between the way respondents describe their experience and the way the researcher writes it up (Merton, 1998). I took several steps to ensure the credibility of the data. I wrote summaries and minutes of meetings that I shared with participants at the beginning of each subsequent meeting for member checks.

As transcripts of observations and interviews and documents were coded, the color codes reflected patterns in the data, while the source codes, “T – 1” for the first transcript and “I – 1” for the first interview, enabled me to return again and again to the coded data and see what congruencies occurred among the data sources. In this way I was

able to triangulate the data on the complementary aspects of the categories and use them to refine these categories into themes.

Transferability refers to the extent that findings from the study can be applied in other contexts (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To assure transferability, I documented the process and results of the proposed study in such a way that it will be a guide to those in other settings who wish to explore this approach. The main method to assure transferability is providing rich detail, which allows the reader to determine for his or herself how the findings might transfer to a different context. This is particularly important to this study because of the prevalence of the problem and the need for action to address it. Dependability is related to the reliability of the data collected (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Dependability can be assured insofar as the data are confirmable and authentic. Confirmability comes by assuring that the data in this study are traceable. Traceability means that the logic of data analysis and synthesis can be clearly explained. To assure that data be traceable, all data related to the study is maintained in an ongoing research log of which I maintain a hard copy and a computer file. Finally, authenticity is demonstrated through efforts to portray the views, perspectives, and beliefs fairly (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merten, 1998; Patton, 2002; & Stringer, 1999).

I took several steps to analyze the data to assure the dependability of the study. The first step of data analysis is content analysis, the development of classifications or coding scheme, for the collected data (Patton, 2002). This process began with an overview of the critical incidents in the participatory action research process. I mapped critical incidents as chronological stages of the process: recruitment, initiation of the participatory action group, formation of a support group, emergence of an awareness of

the participants of their role as co-researchers initiating and reviewing systemic changes; and reflection on the group project.

Reflection on the group project concluded with an interactive discussion with participants to reflect on the group's experience of the project. I analyzed the data from the interactive discussion to correlate the responses with the critical incidents in the group process identified above. Organized in this way, I saw several new perspectives on the research project. I developed a list of categories that mirrored and enveloped the group's reflections in light of the critical incidents in the project.

As I took the steps to assure data quality described in the preceding section, I found that participants did not act in the ways that I predicted. I was often surprised by the decisions that participants in the project made. Participants did not focus on becoming empowered, or on gaining control and autonomy of their workplace. As will be seen, they focused on taking more pragmatic steps to achieve the goals of the participatory action research project and to address the situational causes of burnout in the workplace.

These steps will be discussed in the next chapter, *Interpreting Findings*. In this discussion of research methods, my concern is whether this analysis captures the meaning that the interaction of the key themes and the sub themes had for participants in the study, and how and to what extent reflection on these areas contributed to their taking responsibility for change. More importantly for the theoretical objectives of this study, I want to assure that I am adequately representing the nature of this change in their consciousness, whether this change was emerged from the activities in which they participated, and how this change emerged in practice.

I demonstrate the authenticity of the study through efforts to portray the views, perspectives, and beliefs of participants fairly. Here I followed Denzin & Lincoln (2005), who describe a triple crisis of representation, legitimation, and praxis in the development of qualitative inquiry. The first crisis, the representational crisis, is based on the realization that qualitative researchers can not directly capture lived experience. The experience is created in the researcher's text. Thus it is based on critical, interpretive, and rhetorical approaches to social theory. The second crisis is the crisis of legitimation. This crisis represents how the qualitative researcher approaches the issues of validity, generalizability, and reliability. The third crisis is praxis. How can the interpretive text of the qualitative researcher effect change in the world?

Viewing the study through the lens of this triple crisis, I examine to what extent informed reconstructions coalesce around consensus (Guba & Lincoln, 2005) to address a specific problem in a community of human service workers. I determine to what extent participants in the study address the effectiveness of and barriers to a participatory effort to change the workplace through a process of engagement.

To avoid the crisis of representation, I documented the case in the project narrative in the following chapter using quotations of participants to provide a chronological description of the development of the participatory action research process. Writing is a key and often-neglected part of action research, and the researcher should be visible in his/her text (Fricke, 2006).

I addressed the crisis of legitimation in the steps that I took to assure the dependability of the study. These steps included content analysis, the development of classifications and the coding scheme, an outline of the critical incidents, and an

interactive discussion with participants at the end of the data gathering stage of the study. To assure generalizability and reliability, member checks were tiered and built in at every stage of the project. Summaries or minutes derived from the transcripts of each meeting were provided to participants before the following meeting as an email attachment, and then as a hard copy at the meeting. In addition, member checks were conducted during participant interviews early in the process and at the interactive discussion held late in the process.

The intervention examined in this case study is the participatory action research approach. Reason (2006) notes the most relevant crisis to assurance of data quality in participatory action research is the crisis of praxis. Addressing the crisis of praxis is at the heart of the research question of this study. In the course of the discussion chapter, I point out how the participatory action process examined in this study led to participants' finding power and voice, and developing a community of practice in a local, small scale effort to address specific problems and situations in their workplace. Theory was informed by praxis and vice-versa, as action research transforms both (Frick, 2006).

Action research started out as applied social science, with the researcher or facilitator making the decisions such as selecting the research problem and research design (Burnes, 2004). To this day, in much action research, power has never devolved to professional practitioners. Whitehead and McNiff, (2006) have argued since the 1970's that practitioners are capable of developing their own theories by asking, "What can I do to improve what I am doing?"

Habermas' theory of the symbolic structured aim of communicative action calls for different methodologies for natural and social sciences, and draws attention to

economic and political relations (Sitton, 2003). Participants gain power by developing a deeper understanding of these dynamics that affect their workplace. The researcher's aim is not to create theory for the practitioner to articulate, but to co-generate knowledge that leads to improved praxis. As will be seen in the following chapters, this is best demonstrated by the fact that participants continued their research initiative after the conclusion of the dissertation study. By doing so co-researchers put themselves in a position where they assumed a risk in articulating the need for social change.

### *Ethical Issues*

There are several ethical issues to consider. First, because the audience is of this study is the action research community, it is important to address the ethical dilemma of a university student as the facilitator of the research project. Tension generally exists in community based participatory research initiated by the university, insofar as there are major differences between the life worlds of the university and the human service workplace. These differences create ethical dilemmas for a university student who is the ethical facilitator of the research project.

For example, the university expects its student researchers to be grounded in theory and to examine one aspect of a theory to make a new contribution to it. The university student has to meet academic requirements and conduct rigorous research, with research protocols to protect human subjects in place before the research is conducted. Most university institutional review boards operate in the postpositivist paradigm. Ethical procedures required by institutional review boards are based on conventional positivist research in which the researcher is distanced from the subject (Boser, 2007).



However, action research follows an epistemological approach that strives to reduce that distance, positing that knowledge will grow out of multiple perspectives. As such, these approved protocols may limit flexible design. Further, even though approval of my research protocols was granted by the university's institutional review board, I was aware that the institutional review board approval might not fully protect respondents or the researcher. While guided by the procedures of the institutional review board, I also understood the responsibility to think through the ethics of the research in advance.

Another ethical issue inherent in participatory action research is that, since it involves taking action in the world of praxis, researchers must be aware that in organizations there is a difference between espoused theories and theories in use (Argyris, 1993). This is true both in the university and the human service workplace. While both workplaces espouse knowledge and good practice, this may be affected by theories in use. This implies that there is some risk to the participatory researcher.

The participatory action researcher can learn theories in use in the organizational context in which she conducts research through observation over a period of time. During that time, she may not fully understand that the values of the organizational context may differ from hers. For example, values inherent in action research, such as democracy and social justice may come in conflict with the theories in the organizational context.

To further complicate the ethical situation, participants often represent a variety of stakeholder locations and interests. Power imbalances among these stakeholder groups may present a risk to some, especially those who work at different levels within the same organization (Boser, 2006). In addition, if the student researcher is already a part of the

community she is studying, there are additional ethical risks from the role conflicts inherent in insider research.

It is not enough to say that ethical issues in action research are minimized because it takes place as part of a participatory, democratic process. Following a model developed by Boser (2006), the following steps were taken to protect those involved in the project. I minimized the risk attendant to this study by establishing guidelines and group norms in the informed consent form. I discussed power relationships among stakeholder groups during the first meeting of the group and before the research project began and emphasized that I could assure their confidentiality only to the extent that each member honors it.

However, participants in the research did not have a voice in the establishment of these guidelines, which were integrated into each component of research design. Implicit in my establishing protocols to minimize participants' risks was the understanding that they were not able to revisit these protocols throughout the course of the project.

More traditional ethical concerns were also addressed in the design of this study. An informed consent form was developed which stated the purpose of the study, to explore whether a participatory action research in a local human service workplace can be an effective approach to the prevalence of dehumanizing attitudes shared by many in human service that are characterized as burnout.

I obtained consent of all participants to observe and collect data not only at the beginning of the study but also throughout the project. Participants were reminded that while the intent of project participants is to address the problem of burnout in the workplace, the purpose of the dissertation was to study the effectiveness of the

participatory action process. I was clear that this would be done simultaneously with the participatory action research project by analysis of the interviews and document review that would not be a part of the project itself.

I asked potential participants who expressed an interest in participation two questions that affected their involvement. The first question explored their availability in terms of commitment of time to investigate the participatory action research project research questions. A second question explored their comfort level with discussing organizational issues with colleagues who are from different agencies and who have different levels of authority. This allowed informed voluntary participation at the beginning of the process. This built trust and developed a sense of engagement and ownership of the research.

There were some minimal risks to participants in that confidentiality of all participants could not be guaranteed. Thus, the informed consent form for the study states, "I can only guarantee confidentiality to the extent that the least compliant member of the group respects it. Therefore, do not share anything that you feel could put you at risk. You need to use judgment in sharing information with the group, especially in that it will consist of people with different levels of authority from different agencies."

Additional ethical issues regarding relationships between the community and the university surfaced later in the study. They are addressed in a section of the Discussion chapter, Ethical Issues in Relations between the University and the Community, below.

## Summary

This chapter addresses the research methods employed to address the research question, “In what ways and to what extent did this process of participatory action research enable human service professionals to examine, reflect and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace?” The data collection methods were observation of the group process, interviews, and document review. Data analysis was exhaustive, taking into consideration the words and underlying perception of participants throughout the course of the research process. I identified critical incidents in the course of the research, and inductive analysis of these incidents helped to guide the reflective process necessary to identify the key themes that guided the analysis.

The coding process of the data analysis was detailed and allowed patterns to emerge that point to the meaning the co-researchers made of events as their understanding developed. The story of the evolution of the critical consciousness achieved through the participatory process emerges from the data. The findings of this process, discussed in the next chapters, will demonstrate how critical thinking grew as researchers took the cycle of planning/research/action/reflection of participatory action research into the human service workplace.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PAR PROJECT NARRATIVE

#### Introduction

This dissertation is a case study of the process of a participatory action research project. Participatory action research utilizes the involvement of organization members to effect social change (Whitehead & McNiff, 2006). The purpose of this case study is to explore whether a participatory action project in a local human service workplace can be an effective approach to address the prevalence of dehumanizing attitudes shared by many in human service that are characterized as burnout.

In this chapter, I will present a narrative description of the participatory action research process in chronologically ordered sections that represent the development of the process. I have identified these stages as initial directions, premature conclusions, insights from interviews, restructuring the process, planning and conducting community based action research, reflecting on new understandings, and the aftermath and impact of the project. I will also examine the critical incidents and major findings of the project at each chronological stage of the project. I will review the actions taken by the participatory action research group and by me as its facilitator. Finally, I will report on the aftermath of the project

#### Overview of the Study

##### *Critical Incidents*

As part of the content analysis described in the Research Methods chapter, I mapped critical incidents at chronological stages of the process: recruitment, initiation of

the participatory action group, formation of a support group, emergence of an awareness of the participants of their role as co-researchers initiating and reviewing systemic changes; and reflection on the group project. I identified critical incidents within each stage of the project. The following is an outline of the critical incidents map.

In the first stage of the chronological development of the project, initial directions, there were three critical incidents. The first was that the sampling strategy inadvertently over-recruited administrators and supervisors. The second critical incident was the difficulty in scheduling group meetings, resulting in loss of members and chronic absenteeism of other members. The third critical incident at this stage, in hindsight, was the insufficient emphasis on the participatory action research process. However, a critical incident at the end of this initial stage included the development of a safe, communicative space and cohesion among group members taking the risk of sharing their frustrations and using the meetings as a support group with buy in from everybody in this group. This critical incident resulted in the first major action taken by participants in the project, the formation of a support group.

In the second chronological stage, premature conclusions, critical incidents included the development of a better understanding of what burnout is, and how to treat the symptoms of burnout in their lives. In this stage the participants had created a support group. No major actions were taken that involved anyone outside of the group.

In the next chronological stage of the process, restructuring the process, an important critical incident was resistance to change by participants, and the changing role of the facilitator from a laissez-faire style to a more active leadership role. Gradually the resistance to change eroded in the face of the increased awareness that human service

professions are devalued and will continue to be devalued until society redefines it as a priority. The resulting critical incident was a renewed motivation to the project which led to the acceptance of a more interactive role in the community. These critical incidents resulted in the second major action taken in the research project, the debate over alternate research designs.

Over a period of several months, this chronological stage was followed by the third stage of planning and conducting community based action research. This stage was initiated by me in my role as the group facilitator. It did not originate with the participants, although they gradually acknowledged that they chose to intervene in the human service system by doing research and implementing actions in the human service workplace. In the process of doing so, the critical incident that is at the core of this case study was reached: participants in the process became co-researchers in the participatory action research project. Major actions taken by the group at this time included the development and implementation of focus groups and questionnaires.

In the fourth chronological stage, reflecting on new understandings, the first critical incident was that the group realized that, as a result of their research initiatives, other people in the human service system are interested in this issue now because someone is paying attention to it. Effectively, the group raised the level of consciousness in the human service community by exploring the parameters of problems in the human service workplace, and what gets measured gets attention. The group saw evidence that people can change by changing their attitudes, by having hope instead of despair, and that we need to put the humanness back in human services. The group proposed an empowerment model not only for clients but for the human service workforce. The major

action resulting from the reflection on new understandings was the planning of new iterations of the participatory action research process.

At the conclusion of the data gathering stage of the case study, co-researchers expressed regret that they had not had a focus group with administrators, in which we could have discussed issues such as retention and improvement of supervision. Co-researchers planned a three pronged approach, with focus groups for administrator's and supervisors' as well as direct service workers. The group believes this intervention is possible because they believe in the system in which they work, and that they can be an entity which can be a very strong and powerful new initiative for change. A related critical incident involved a more sophisticated understanding of the systemic barriers to workplace change. For example, some administrators don't think critically; they react emotionally, and some are guilty of workplace bullying. The experience of the participatory action group indicates that participatory activities can change such attitudes.

### *Major Findings*

The major findings of the study can be grouped into four areas: First, how the structural influences named in the first chapter, such as devaluing the worker's contribution and lack of autonomy, the crisis in the human service workplace, the tension between the expertise model and the empowerment model of service provision, and the postpositivist paradigm governing human service disciplines, affected the research project. Second, how and to what extent the participatory action research project developed strategies to address and change conditions that lead to stress and burnout in the workplace. Third, changes in participants in the project, how they empowered themselves and discovered their power and voice. And fourth, what it means to be a



participatory action researcher, surfacing learnings about facilitation in the participatory action research process, about relationships, power, and ethics in a postpositivist world university, agency, and community.

As indicated above, over 16 months this project had a series of chronological stages. The following table is a matrix of the major findings with the actions taken in the course of the chronological development of the project.

Table 1: *Matrix of Major Findings and Actions Taken*

<b>Major Findings:</b>	<i>Structural influences</i>	<i>Strategies to change the workplace</i>	<i>Learnings about facilitation</i>	<i>Changes in participants</i>
<b>Actions taken:</b>				
<i>Support group</i>	Only those with autonomy self selected	Being supportive	Teaching PAR approach	Trust and safety leading to personal change
<i>Considering research designs</i>	Methodological confusion	Starting new support groups or conducting research	Advocating participatory methods	Understanding research approaches
<i>Focus groups</i>	Impact of worker autonomy	Establish communicative space	Use participants strengths	Implementing and analyzing research
<i>Questionnaires / Presentations</i>	Inappropriate supervision	Dissemination of results	Provide research orientation	Increased awareness of co-researchers
<i>New iterations</i>	Increasing power and voice in community	Expanded community of practice	Ability to be flexible and to let go	Applying learning to new situations

Much of the current chapter is better understood in the context of the interactions in this matrix. The creation of a support group is discussed in the sections on initial directions and premature conclusions. Research design is dealt with in the section on restructuring the problem. The employment of focus groups, questionnaires, and presentations is discussed in the sections on community based research. Finally, new iterations of the project are addressed in the section on the aftermath of the project.

### Initial Directions

#### *Creation of the Research Group*

As I described in the Research Methods Chapter above, there was a lengthy period of participant recruitment, ending in the self selection of thirteen participants.

During the planning of the case study and the participatory action research process, I had assumed that self selection would be a matter of the individual's willingness to participate. Only those with the autonomy in their jobs to self select were able to do so, although this didn't become evident until later. A different sampling method was employed when focus groups were held. This method involved agencies in the recruiting process, and these empowered their employees to participate. Only in this way did I become aware that because of issues of power and authority in organizations, not all that were willing to participate were able to do so.

The first meeting of the participatory action research project was held on September 6, 2007. As planned, I took on the role of facilitator, convening the meetings of the group. Each member of the group agreed to commit to a process of attending eight meetings over the course of four months. This meeting of the group was held in a board room on the ground floor of a centrally located community agency. Participants sat at one end of a long board table, in a room lighted by windows along the length of a wall the looking out at the other buildings of the multi-building campus of the agency. Although many of the participants at the initial meeting knew each other, not everyone knew all. As people arrived at the first meeting, they introduced themselves to those they didn't know. Several minutes after the planned starting time, I opened the meeting, and after thanking everyone for coming, I asked them to formally introduce themselves, and proceeded to discuss the purpose of the study, as described in the informed consent form. I repeated the disclosure, also in the informed consent form all had signed, that I had a dual role, to assist them to become co-researchers in a participatory action group that addresses burnout in their workplace, and to observe and write a case study of the process.

I also reiterated the risks to participation that existed within the group, both that we represented different agencies and also that we were of different levels of authority within our organizations. I emphasized that confidentiality could only be assured to the extent that each member honored it. I added that we could recruit additional participants as the research process continued. We discussed who might be considered appropriate candidates for participation, and a few names of persons without relationships to the existing members of the group were discussed. One participant suggested that we identify and invite someone who had disclosed that they were burnt out, but the group consensus was “let’s get our act together first”. As will be discussed later, this decision was related to issues of power. No new members were ever invited to join the group.

#### *A Therapeutic Support Group*

Near the end of the first meeting, one participant asked what research question the group would address. I replied that research question would emerge as we reflected on the problem of burnout in our workplace and determined what actions we would like to take. The group decided that they would approach the selection of a research question at the next meeting after reflecting on and examining what burnout meant to them.

Upon reflection, I now view this reply as a lost opportunity to bring focus to the group process that may have led to some drift from the original research design. This was an opportunity to teach the group about the cyclical nature of participatory action research. Instead, the group did not revisit this issue of establishing a research question again until we had completed the end of the originally planned four month period, and a research question for the participatory action research process was not adopted until we

moved into the restructuring of the process, described in another section of this chapter below.

The second meeting of the group was held on September 20, 2007 in one of the member's organization conference room on the second floor of an old public building just a few blocks away from our original meeting place. This was a more informal setting, in a room with folding tables arranged in a rectangle, with coffee and refreshments provided by the member who was our host. This setting proved so comfortable that most of the meetings for the remainder of the year were held there. Several days prior to the meeting I emailed each participant a summary of the previous meeting, and reviewed with them at the beginning of the meeting as a member check on their accuracy. This process was repeated for all future meetings

As suggested at the previous meeting, the group commenced with a discussion of what burnout meant to them. It was during this discussion that several of the themes more formally identified in the next chapter first emerged. As participants reflected on their experience in the workplace, they described in various ways how they felt alienated from their work. This alienation manifested itself through psychological symptom such as anger, depression, or changes in affect that often demanded the emotional resources of others. This alienation was also experienced in organizational behaviors, with staff staying behind closed doors, excessive negativity, lack of motivation and intent to quit. Those who chose to fight against this alienation spoke of their struggle in terms of martyrdom, giving up their organizational perquisites and even threatening their careers to do what is right.

This loss of personal connection to their work was resisted by those who spoke of their passion and commitment to search for solutions. A participant noted that, “people who are truly burned out... have lost what you guys have been talking about, ...the passion that keeps us from going over the edge, (so) that we just don’t give a crap anymore”, prompting the response, “who takes care of us, because we are so busy taking care of everyone else?”

The discussion shifted to participants’ feelings of personal and professional inadequacy. Participants noted that assistance is often needed to start the process of empowerment needed to develop an attitude of self-belief, leading to a discussion about what is missing in one’s life and work that leads to feelings of inadequacy, a material and intellectual scarcity mentality and where support to overcome these feelings could be found.

Participants were appalled by the lack of organizational and community support for their work, in light of their passion and the sacrifices that they made of their own emotional wellness and of their family life. They expressed their awareness of the marginalization of their profession, and how it suggests human service worker’s lack of power and implied lower social standing. This marginalization is related to their economic disadvantage and high workloads, which are a result of underfunding of human service programs. Participants also discussed that the lack of organizational support that was a part of the marginalization.

One participant suggested that we identify and invite someone who had disclosed that they were burnt out, but the group consensus was “let’s get our act together first”. As

will be discussed later, this decision was related to issues of power. No new members were ever invited to join the group.

This led to a discussion of the role of supervisors and administrators. The question was raised, “Do we even know about supervision and leadership style, and how important it is?” One participant spoke of forming an administrative team and the importance of collegial support. Others were not experiencing that collegial support. They expressed feelings of isolation, and noted that these feeling had been exacerbated with the onset of electronic communications.

The third meeting of the participatory action research group was held on October 23, 2007. A participant made a suggestion that was to have fateful consequences for the direction of the group: “Why can’t we use this group ourselves for our personal stress management and burnout prevention?” As the facilitator, I might have seen this suggestion as a drift from the participatory action research cycle of planning, action, and reflection. But my immediate reaction was to see the beginning of a safe Habermasian communicative space. From this point on, the group was a place of trust and safety for its members that supported personal change and coping with stress.

One of the members had attended a stress management training that designed by a group of employees in a high stress business. This training was based on the premise that much workplace stress was related to the nature of worker/organizational communication. An administrator in the group spoke of catching people doing the right thing, and the importance of positive communication within agencies. A key to making this occur is for each member of the organization taking on responsibility for the common good, as opposed to being focused on the lack of resources and diminishment thinking.

An analogy was made to how children learn to play well in the sandbox. They can fight over the available toys, or learn to share, which involves the ability to communicate their needs to each other.

One of the organizations represented at the table discussed a strategic plan initiated by the leadership of the administrator with the participation of all in the agency over the period of a year. The plan is reviewed every six months, and has become a part of the culture of the organization. Other participants reported less successful experiences with strategic planning. One participant pointed out the success of a strategic planning process correlates to the level of organizational commitment, or to Margaret Mead's aphorism that change never comes except from a small group of like-minded individuals.

The fourth meeting of the participatory action research group was held on November 7, 2007. A participant summed up the discussion to this point:

“The more I listen to all of us about this process; three things stand out to me. It's a systems issue, it's an organizational issue, and it's an individual issue. We're talking about is it really burnout that's happening to our folks and why they're leaving.... How can we individually start planting seeds? How can our individual organizations start having conversations, and how can we as a group of committed human service professionals start creating a change in the system....I've been thinking about it since we last met, and the only thing I have control over is me.... It starts at the individual level. I believe I have to take a risk and share with my colleagues.”

A dialogue ensued about self-care, boundaries, guilt, how to deal with guilt, the emotional, moral, and spiritual kinds of guilt, innocence, and acceptance that continued

for the most of the rest of the meeting. A participant couched it in terms of the physiological consequences of the ongoing stress caused by these conflicting values and its effect on the quality of life. Others pointed out that many in the business professions have been aware of these issues for years, and have taken steps to reduce and/or deal the stress of their workers.

### *Toward a Supportive Workplace*

The fifth meeting of the group on November 20, 2007 addressed the level of support available in the workplace. A discussion of employee evaluations and measuring outcomes led participants to discuss how you can measure outcomes of what is being done now when they might not manifest themselves for years to come. One suggestion was,

“I think one strategy is measuring our individual and organizational gifts, and the gifts of our system. And that would be going from our assets, from our gifts, and recognizing and respecting each person’s personality, in each organization and each system.”

At this point, participants were convinced that action was necessary to positively address the culture of the human service workplace. Although the group had not yet taken any steps to examine the way stress and burnout was experienced by those with different levels of authority in their organizations, it believed that it was ready to prescribe workplace changes. However, we did not discuss the possibility of developing or piloting such an approach in local organization.

By the time of the sixth meeting of the group on December 4, 2007, there was a consensus that we were nearing the end of the planning stage. Planning involves



analyzing the situation correctly, identifying all possible alternatives, and choosing the most appropriate one (Burnes, 2004). These steps are to be followed by acting, observing, and reflecting (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005). The initial commitment that had been made to attend eight meetings was nearing the end, and participants in the research group thought that they had made a reasonably thorough analysis and were ready to move into action. I believed that as the facilitator I had successfully encouraged the group to transition from participants to co-researchers.

When the group had established a safe and productive environment within which to reflect and build a community of practice (Day, Orr, Sankaran, & Norris, 2006), this appeared to be a positive outcome that could be seen to reflect positively on the research question. What was less apparent at the time was how the focus of the group had shifted from an emphasis on research to an emphasis on support. I did not take the opportunities that presented themselves to lead the group back to the adoption of a research question and the planning of a research process.

In the seventh meeting of the participatory action research group on December 18, 2007, there was more dialogue about how to improve communication in the workplace. A participant suggested we replace problem solving with solution building strategies. Deliberation on such strategies suggested to participants the use of outside facilitators, which had proved effective in some instances when an organization shows a commitment to change. Another shared that she had been hired by her agency as an insider change agent/consultant. Among the tools employed by a change agent or consultant are facilitating listening and communication. A third participant opined that the practice of bringing in outside 'experts' to effect change has been a disadvantage to local agencies,

because they fail to develop their own emerging leadership. Members of the group began to articulate that they had the skills and lived knowledge to affect change.

The group then explored the relationship of styles of listening and communication in the workplace and their relationship to the skills they employed in therapeutic situations with their clients. Several members of the group suggested that we were ready to offer a pilot training at a local agency to discuss active listening skills and to facilitate improved communication. The other participants agreed, saying that we have been discussing it extensively and that it was time to take action. The meeting ended with a plan to spend the next meeting discussing the specifics of this pilot training. As will be seen in the next section, that discussion never occurred.

By the time the eighth meeting occurred on January 16, 2008, almost a month after the seventh meeting because of the Christmas and New Year holidays, there appeared to be many changes in participant's thinking about the project. During the period from December 2007 to March, 2008, while changes in the research process were underway but the restructuring of the research process was not completed, I conducted ten individual interviews with participants. In the course of the interviews, different participants emphasized different themes that emerged during the group discussions that were important to them. This one on one dialogue with participants may have had the effect of allowing them to review and reflect on the totality of their participation in the project to date.

Perhaps the tone of this meeting was affected by the change of location, as we returned to the setting of our first meeting because of a schedule conflict at our usual location. Another consideration was that all participants had made a commitment when

they signed their Informed Consent Forms to participate in the project to attend eight meetings, and there was a sense that, if not the whole research project, at least the initial phase of it was ending.

The participants at this meeting discarded the idea of offering a pilot training at a local agency on active listening skills and improved communication. Instead, there was interest in replicating their experience as a group by facilitating the creation of new support groups, based on principles they had adopted in the course of their meetings: creating a safe place to share the experience of working in a stressful workplace, and developing positive strategies to improve communications within that workplace while providing support for administrators, supervisors, and front line staff. The new groups would concentrate on looking for long term therapeutic solutions rather than on solving problems which arose from the structure of the workplace. Participants believed that eventually the whole local human service system would benefit from the ripples of change that these groups would generate.

The group again decided to not recruit new members. Rather, it chose explore and support the creation of new support groups by approaching local collaborative entities and recruiting participants from among their members. Because members of the group were also members of these entities, it was anticipated that these groups would be formed around the participatory action research model as it was understood at that point by our group. Participants in each new group would employ the knowledge generated in our group, and grow new islands of safety in our system where people can deal with and take action to address the stressors in their workplace and in their lives.

After this meeting, I conducted an initial category analysis of the first seven transcripts, developing a list of categories that were represented in our discussion, collapsing/renaming the categories as I went along. The major categories in order of their frequency of occurrence were: actions, systems change, problem identification, process, values, communication, outcomes, and resources. This preliminary analysis suggested that participants were more concerned at this stage of the project, broadly speaking, with actions and systems change. Conspicuously absent from this analysis was the adoption by group of a research question and discussion of any method of research.

At the eighth meeting on January 16, 2007, the last to which participants had committed, I had begun the participatory action research group reached a decision about the continuation of the project. All participants but two decided to continue with the research project. One of the two was planning to leave the area in the near future. The other participant who left the project was one of two from the same agency, who felt that she could better support the project in her administrative role from outside the group.

Thus, this stage of the project concluded with the premature conclusion that the solutions to the problems that lead to burnout in the human service workplace was to create replicable support groups throughout the human service system. To accomplish this goal, the group expressed openness to experimenting with meeting in different locations, inviting guests to meetings, and considering whether to expand its membership or facilitate a new group.

Had the process continued as originally planned, the group would have taken the actions it planned, and one or more therapeutic support groups would have been formed. The result would have addressed the main goal of the research group, taking action to

address the problem of burnout in the human service workplace. However, it would not have addressed the case study research question of how and to what extent a group of human service professionals could undertake participatory action research.

At this point in the process, the group's self-identification as participatory action researchers was not strong. I had missed more than one opportunity to teach and advocate for the participatory action research approach or to articulate my belief in the participatory worldview. The combination of my strong belief in the participatory worldview and my inexperience in the role of action researcher facilitator in hindsight caused me to adopt a laissez-faire style of facilitation, based on a naïve assumption that because action research can be a messy process, that almost anything that participants adopted that would address positive workplace change would qualify as participatory action research. In terms of my positionality, I had veered so strongly into by insider role that I deprived myself of the very autonomy that I was trying to model.

## Restructuring the Process

### *Considering Alternatives*

If the dissertation research question had been to reflect whether a cross agency support group could mitigate the problem of stress and burnout in the workplace, this dissertation could have evaluated the project as an intervention. More data could have been collected through interviews after a three month interval to provide findings.

Although this was not the research question for this dissertation, the project activities during the first part of the project from September 2007 through January 2008 strongly suggest the feasibility of such an approach.

However, the purpose of the dissertation study was to examine the research question: “In what ways and to what extent did this process of participatory action research enable human service professionals to examine, reflect and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace?” This research question involves the study the process of a participatory action research project, and not the study of a therapeutic support group. At this point, a choice had to be made whether to change the research question or to change the direction of the groups’ focus. I thought that it was more important to continue the participatory action research project than to stop at this preliminary stage.

The four meetings that occurred from January 30 through April 27, 2008 were a period during which the group reflected on and argued over my attempts to refocus the project. One alternative was to not only continue to develop a therapeutic support group, but to adopt this as a positive outcome which could be spread throughout the human service system through the creation of new support groups in any agency or organization that could be persuaded to allow it. The other alternative was to restructure the group more along the lines of a participatory action research project, studying burnout by collecting the data from the workplace and by planning and systematizing changes in the human service system, showing that participants can plan, implement and reflect on the results of an effective research project.

These alternatives were clearly differentiated for me by my dissertation advisor, who made me aware that I had lost some focus on the research question. In fact, it could be said that I had “gone native”, adopting the values and behaviors of the other members of the group as my own, which can be seen as a result of the close emic relationships that I shared with them. However, it can also be seen as a negative case indicator, a limitation

of the willingness of participants to become co-researchers in a participatory action research process.

I took it upon myself, through my role as the facilitator of the group, to urge the participants to adopt the second alternative. I was convinced, both by my study of existing theory, and by my personal goals that grew out of my positionality, that the participatory action research process could prove more effective in changing praxis in the human service workplace. Through reflection that grew out of my discussions with my dissertation advisor, I became more self-conscious of my views and beliefs. To employ the analogy of original sin from the participatory action research literature (Moore, 2007), I could no longer be clothed with the innocence of ignorance of the participatory action research process or of the participatory worldview.

As part of its decision at the January 16th meeting to continue beyond the originally planned eight sessions, the group had decided that it wanted to meet in a more informal setting conducive to networking and socialization. The meeting on January 30th was the first of several meetings to be held in a different location, a local restaurant, which were to be scheduled on the same day and time every two weeks to continue the project.

Even though we have completed the eight group meetings to which participants initially consented, there was a consensus that the group is valued by its member as a safe space for communication, listening, valuing and supporting each other. I indicated that if we all agree, we would move forward to develop a plan of inquiry that leads to empowerment and action.

The plan was met with indifference by some participants and with hostility by others. Those who objected to the planned restructuring were those who wanted to continue the former process of system change by the intentional creation and monitoring of new support groups. However, the public setting seemed to inhibit any serious discussion of these concerns.

In an attempt to harmonize the dynamics of support and research, I suggested that the group could have a dual role: the first is one in which we have created a communicative space, based on relationships of trust which we have established. The second role is as a participatory action research project trying to figure out how to “verify” what we have learned about burnout to change our human service system.

The next meeting was held on February 15, 2008 at the same restaurant. This time I opened the meeting with a discussion of several options for restructuring the research process. One member of the group continued to strongly object to any restructuring of the process. I pointed out that in the first eight meetings, the concerns most frequently discussed were action steps and systems change. I argued that these concerns could better be addressed if participants chose to intentionally become co-researchers, rather than as members of a support group.

Some possible research methods discussed included keeping personal logs of the occasions that we employ learning from the project in the workplace; facilitating focus groups; preparing interview protocols for future interviews; and/or developing logic models. Other activities, such as making presentations to administrators, and doing trainings on the principles of participatory action research, were also discussed. Of these, the activity for which there was consensus, to hold a meeting with program



administrators, was not a research activity. This premature jump to the action stage of the action research cycle delayed the necessary restructuring of the process.

One participant, who was an agency director, suggested that we get involved in other community activities focusing on, among other organizational concerns, physical wellness. The group decided to invite a representative from a local health advocacy organization to our next meeting to learn about their new interagency initiative for workplace wellness.

The participatory action group's eleventh meeting was at the same location two weeks later, on February 29, 2008. A representative from a local health advocacy organization whose project encompasses both physical and mental health to come and talk with us was contacted by a member of the group. This was the only meeting throughout the entire process that was attended by someone who was not an original member of the group. This meeting and its aftermath provide much insight into the emic relationships of co-researchers in the research process.

Our guest inadvertently reinforced the need for inquiry before action. She cited one local agency that has embraced a wellness program as a way to show that they value their staff. At every meeting they have an agenda item on what's good/what's new, and there is a \$100 bonus for perfect annual attendance. They initiated a three minute stretch every afternoon. Another agency formed a wellness committee and in cooperation with their health insurance provider, developed a process to reward participants with gift cards for every wellness activities in which they participated. None of their employees have taken advantage of the offer.

She noted that to have a long lasting impact on organizations, you have to first get buy in from the top of the organization, and then subsequently from all levels. I read part of a letter that I had been asked to draft at the last research group meeting to invite administrators to a meeting to get their buy-in to the project. Although the group agreed that the proposed letter was complementary to the research initiative as we understood it, no action was taken on implementing the invitation, as time was running out and people were leaving for other commitments.

### *The Process of Becoming Co-Researchers*

Because of additional scheduling difficulties, the twelfth meeting was not held until March 28, 2008. It was another luncheon meeting, but it was held at a different restaurant that allowed more privacy. A particular effort was made to accommodate everyone's schedule, and five members of the group, including me, attended. Because the group had agreed to adopt a dual role, both as participants who have created a communicative space based on relationships of trust and as co-researchers in a participatory action research project trying to study burnout to effect change in our human service system, the first item on the agenda and on all subsequent agendas was a 'check-in', to allow members to share what has been happening to them since the last meeting. This initial check-in was 40 minutes, as members reflected on their exhaustion and frustration (and some satisfaction) with work issues, family matters, and health and medical issues.

In the interim between meetings, I received an institutional review board renewal application that provided the opportunity to review the project's research design. I presented a draft of the application to the group to review. I suggested that in keeping

with the process of participatory action research, and especially in light of the contributions made by our guest speaker at the previous meeting that a change could be made in the recruitment strategy: additional participants would be identified by the current group of co-researchers.

A guiding principle was to assure that a cross section of stakeholder groups is represented. Participants would have included front-line workers, supervisors, and administrators that are motivated to examine, reflect and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace. Although a roughly equal number of front line staff, supervisors, and administrators were recruited to participate in the project, most participants who agreed to participate were administrators or supervisors, and five of the eleven were agency directors. I estimated that if each member of the group suggests about three people to recruit, that we would probably recruit about 10 new participants.

However, the group reiterated the decision that it made earlier that we not add any new co-researchers to our group. Participants expressed that it would have an adverse effect of the relationships of trust they had established. However, in a reflection of the suggestion in January to create multiple support groups, it was suggested that we create a new group or groups to study our research question, to study how the people in another group move forward with creating the trust and relationships that would empower them to further spread the research initiative. The proposed groups would be focus groups, not support groups, and the purpose would be to gather data.

The discussions around this issue illustrated the difference between the roles of participants and of co-researchers. This shift was a key to improving the awareness of research group participants the process of participatory action research. Participants

became aware that they could redefine their role as they became co-researchers who dialogue and inquire into their own workplace stressors and how to best cope with them; and who also investigate the effectiveness of exploring initiatives based on their findings to the larger human service system. This clarification laid the groundwork for the restructuring of the process that was occurring. However, events showed that in the short term the effect was to create much confusion, and some members of the research group reconsidered their commitment to the project.

Two meetings were scheduled at the same restaurant in April, but only two other participants/co researchers joined me at each of the meetings. This continued the decline in participations that started in January. However, with the help of these two committed participants, the fifteenth meeting of the project was scheduled for May 12, 2008. At their suggestion, we returned to the conference room of the agency where the group had met from September through January, and this contributed to the improved comfort level of the group.

Five participants attended the May 12 meeting, two asked to be excused, and one participant indicated that she could no longer participate in the group because of an increased work load. However, from this point until the end of the project, attendance at the meetings remained stable. Although one to three participants missed each of the subsequent meetings, it was for other commitments, and they expressed regret for their absences.

I developed an ambitious agenda for this meeting, based on a plan to re-engage the group in the participatory action research process. I explicitly asked the group to act as co-researchers for their project, and to develop a research question to guide their

efforts. At the suggestion of my dissertation advisor, I presented a research design that involved an intermediate step before moving into problem solving: to be informed by what we learned, what we know. Instead of jumping from what we think about the problem to problem solving, we could institute a research activity to determine do we know what we know, so that we could name what is anecdotal vs. what information we have substantiated. For example, we could study how workers understand burnout in their workplace. What are their wishes? If they could change one thing, what would they change? What would it be useful for us to know?

Co-researchers responded to the suggested research initiatives with a discussion about whether facilitating a focus group or conducting a survey was the best research method to examine burnout in the workplace. A co-researcher identified several questions that could be part of a survey to measure burnout in the workplace. Another objected, saying that a survey does not allow people to talk about their own experience. She added that because people are so stressed, they may not fill out a survey. The person who suggested the survey stated that in her workplace, if people were given the opportunity to fill out an anonymous survey, they may, but they wouldn't come and voice concern to strangers. They would think it would get back to administration and "it's going to bite me in the butt." She added that if you presented her group with one open ended question about what they could change in their workplace, "... they would say something like I think we should have daily housekeeping instead of once weekly housekeeping. They wouldn't think about some kind of intellectual, organizational kind of effect thing."

The idea of conducting a survey was rejected. As one co-researcher said, "For how powerful our group was in collecting data, a survey is a step down. The only way we

truly gathered information about burnout and its impact was our willingness to share and put it out there. Are we really going to get that from a survey?" She added,

"... they don't know what burnout is conceptually. On a survey, people hear that concept of burnout every day, but do they really know what it means?"

Another suggested that,

"... because of the sharing we had the lived experience of the impact on each of us, and that our burnout was somewhat lessened by having this forum to talk about things like the cause of stress and so forth. We reached that conclusion by direct experience. That's not anecdotal, that's real, and I don't think if that we survey people during their busy work day that they're going to come up with that solution as effectively as we did. They're not likely to say I would like to change my workplace by having a place to talk things out in a safe place."

The group's decision to reject the quantitative survey method in favor of qualitative participatory methods marked the end of the methodological confusion that had marked this stage of the research process.

By examining data from another group of human service professionals, the group proposed to discover if there was a common understanding about what burnout is, both at the organizational level and at the personal level, by examining the baggage that people bring into the workplace. A co-researcher suggested that the research question could be, "Does another group have the same stress in common as we have?" They wanted to find

out what the common threads of burnout are, and what perceptions other workers have about burnout, before conducting interventions on the system.

Co-researchers wanted to know what the common thread of everybody's picture is. The group has discussed different understandings and different ideas for weeks to reach some common understandings. Now the participatory action group wanted to confirm its findings by comparing them with those of other human service professionals. Then they would be ready to go out into the community and take action.

This marked another shift in the group's thinking. Co-researchers had moved beyond discussing what burnout is, to consider changes in the workplace to keep the stressors from causing burnout from happening in the first place.

Co-researchers articulated that barriers and regulations from funding sources, as well as by the categorical arrangement of human service organizations limit the range of decisions that human service workers make. As co-researchers better understand the barriers that prevent practitioners from communicating across organization lines, they began to appreciate the gravity of the task of addressing the situational stressors in the human service workplace that cause burnout. They would seek solutions to the problems by examining the lived knowledge of other participants in the human service system, thus creating an atmosphere where the system becomes more responsive to people's concerns.

## Community Based Participatory Action Research

### *Designing Focus Groups*

As discussed above, the group had completed its re-structuring from a support group aimed at helping individual participants cope with and solve the problems in their

workplace to a participatory action research group concerned with bringing about systemic change. Six co-researchers including me attended the sixteenth meeting of the participatory action group on Tuesday, May 27. I summarized the previous meeting, focusing on our discussion of research methods and our search for a research question. Throughout the meeting, the co-researchers continued to concentrate on methods. They discussed how to facilitate a focus group and questioned whether it should consist of front-line workers, supervisors, or administrators, and decided on a focus group representing front-line workers, to maximize the information that the research group of supervisors and administrators had developed.

It was proposed that focus group meetings would be approximately an hour and a half. Co-researchers suggested several open-ended, semi-structured questions to provide structure for the focus group. In place of transcriptions of focus group meetings we would have detailed descriptions of the focus group by having the co-facilitator not only to listen to their words but also to observe their body language and provide them with feedback.

We discussed how to recruit members for the focus group. The focus groups would be held at key agencies and organizations in the county human service system, to allow the maximum possible variation. The organizational location of focus group members would be purposively sampled, and participants would self-select. In keeping with our discussions of how to encourage participation and trust in the new group that it should consist of persons from one staff level only. One option that we discussed was creating a group of “gatekeepers”, secretaries and other front line staff who are the first point of contact of the public with our organizations. The consensus was to recruit a focus



group consisting of front-line workers: receptionists, secretaries, case workers, people other than secretaries, who could provide a perspective not represented among the present co-researchers.

It was suggested that to protect members of the focus group, they would be provided with the opportunity for informed consent form and asked to maintain confidentiality. While permission would be asked to audiotape the focus group meetings, they would not be transcribed, because of negative experiences where administrators saw written reports of previous meetings and retaliated against participants.

Agency administrators would be contacted and informed of the focus group and its purpose. There was some concern that administrators not know who was participating on the focus group, but if their staffs were to attend a focus group that lasted an hour and a half, administrators would have to consent to their participation. However, administrators were not to select or assign staff to participate in the focus group. They could be asked to help to disseminate information about a focus group of front-line workers to their staff, but focus group participants would self select. Participants could also be recruited by email using the county Human Service Council address list.

By the end of the meeting the participatory action research group had come to a consensus on the strategy and was on the verge of taking action. They had accepted that while they have developed one understanding of the problem, that a viable effective solution of the problem could not be achieved without the involvement of others in the human service system. The group had decided to examine how these others are coping, and whether there was a consistent understanding of the phenomena of burnout and its effects on local human service provision. Recruiting a new group of participants would or

would not substantiate that. Co-researchers were open to the possibility that the focus group results might have a different perspective than the groups' perspective.

### *Implementing Focus Groups*

Before the seventeenth meeting of the participatory action research meeting on June 11, I emailed the co-researchers with a suggestion. I proposed that since our overriding purpose in conducting this investigation was to examine the perspectives of others in the system rather than to create a new research group, that only one meeting was necessary, and that multiple focus groups, representing different niches, could be held. Advantages included both maximizing information and reducing the amount of time required for data collection, multiple focus groups could be held in a short time, groups could be done in two weeks. Also, it would be less of an issue for employers to release their staff to attend one two hour session than a series of several sessions; and we could combine both recruitment strategies that had been discussed: recruitment within agencies, and through email. The participatory action research group would then meet after the focus groups to reflect on the focus group findings and review the data.

A few of the co-researchers enthusiastically supported the focus group proposal, and others agreed to go along. The proposal was quickly adopted by consensus. I then suggested that we identify focus groups which could be held, and which co-researchers would co-facilitate which groups. I suggested that the focus groups could all be done between now and the research group's next meeting.

The participatory action research group was then ready to plan the focus groups. I proposed the research question from a previous discussion: "What common understandings of burnout are shared by front line workers?" A co-researcher pointed

out that the question assumes there is a common understanding of, burnout, and we don't know that until we do the focus groups. She said the question could be, "Does burnout exist in the Fayette County human service system and if so, to what extent?" Another co-researcher pointed out that the original purpose of the focus groups was to collect data to distinguish which of our findings could be substantiated and what is anecdotal. The research question that was finally adopted contained elements of both questions: "Does burnout exist in the Fayette County human service system? If yes, what does it look like for you"?

Having adopted a research question, the group then turned its attention to the open-ended questions they would use during the focus groups. I passed out a list that incorporated all the questions that members sent in by email. Several co-researchers noted that it was too many questions to cover in one session, and that we needed to review and combine some of them. It was emphasized again that these questions are just starting points to start the actual discussion. What is going to be more important is to ask the questions to see what they will share with us. It was agreed that should ask similar questions in each focus group so that we have data on the same questions. After careful deliberation, the group decided to use the following open-ended questions as interview guides:

1. What does "burnout" mean to you?
2. Is stress and burnout the same or different for you?
3. Can you share with me what causes you burnout?
4. How do the behaviors or attitudes of others affect you?
5. How do you take care of yourself?

6. What thing or things keep you going to work every day?
7. How does your organization respond to employee burnout?
8. Is there anything else you can teach us about what burnout means to you?

The group then discussed recruitment of participants for the focus groups. I suggested that agencies send a list of email addresses of their front line staff, and we could send them a letter describing the purpose of the focus groups with an informed consent form. A co-researcher pointed out that agencies couldn't give out email addresses until staff say they are interested. Thus, the group decided that I would contact administrators of the agencies where we proposed to hold focus groups, asking them to distribute this information to their staff, letting them know there is a research group going on and asking them for their permission for their staff to participate. That way, the burden is on them if they want to participate and no pressure would be put on staff to participate. We did not want agencies to say to their staff "I want you to participate"; only that they enable their staff to do so.

A co-researcher raised the question of whether we could offer a stipend or lunch for the focus groups. I replied that this would be helpful, but no funds were available, and that I anticipated people would be willing to participate without incentives. It was asked what we would do if we don't get a response from participants. I replied that we would then seek alternative organizations from which to recruit. Another suggested that we contact the major categorical agencies in the county. After some discussion, I agreed to contact those five agencies directly and ask them to suggest dates and locations, and send an invitation by email to members of the county's Human Service Council. I

was comfortable doing this because of the advantage I had from my insider relationships with colleagues in the human service system.

### *The Role of Focus Group Facilitators*

Each focus group had two co-facilitators, one other co-researcher and me. Having co-facilitators would allow us to better observe the dynamics of the group. While I led the focus group using the open-ended questions to guide the discussion, the other co-facilitator would be the ethnographic researcher, observing the group process and taking notes. To minimize risk, the group stipulated that there be no members of the co-facilitator's agency on the focus group which they facilitated. This prohibited one co-researcher from co-facilitating a group from an agency of which she was a board member. Members of the research group would make transparent to the members of the focus groups that our purpose was research, not to mediate or have any other similar role.

The implementation of the focus groups illustrated the ability of the co-researchers in the participatory action group to examine and take action on the problem of burnout. Findings from the focus groups provided data to address the participatory action research group's research question, "Does burnout exist in the Fayette County human service system? If yes, what does it look like for you"?

It was in working one on one with my co-researchers as co-facilitators of the focus groups that I became aware of the extent to which they had adopted the role of co-researchers in the participatory action research process. Although I attended each focus group and had compiled minutes of each, I found it unnecessary to share these minutes with the group. I felt that it was much more appropriate and empowering that their

perceptions of the focus groups, not mine, become the record of and the data on the focus groups.

I did not do a separate analysis of the rich and detailed data from the focus groups based on my notes or perspectives, although each of the five focus groups reveal as much about the experience of burnout and its consequences in the workplace as any meeting of the participatory action research group. What is more relevant for the purposes of this dissertation research was the extent to which my co-researchers assumed this role.

### *Reports on Focus Groups*

With the assistance of co-researchers, five focus groups were conducted over a three week period from June 27 to July 14, 2008, in less time than it took longer to schedule during the summer vacation the eighteenth meeting of the participatory action group, which was held on August 8. At that meeting each co-researcher who had facilitated a focus group attended and gave a report on their focus group.

I opened the discussion stating that in many ways, much of what focus group participants shared was as deep and meaningful as what the research group had been sharing with each other, even though focus groups met only met one time. I added that the experience of participating in the focus groups had a deep impact for most participants, something to which that we had not given due consideration. More to the point for the current dissertation case study, their experiences with the focus groups did begin to perceivably change the attitudes of those who co-facilitated them, such as their way of looking at things, and their concepts, in a positive way. This was important both because of what it revealed about the dissertation case study research question.

A co-facilitator reported on the first focus group. She described participants' perceptions of burnout, and how it affected them and their coworkers. She reported that she learned that one of the frustrations of participants was they're putting out fires instead of making a long term change in the client's life adds to their stress. They felt that at times that they are enablers. She added that anytime we wanted to talk to the focus groups' participants again, they would be more than happy to participate, because they felt that just expressing themselves on the issues we chose to discuss was helpful.

This co-facilitator, who is an administrator in another organization, noted that participants were critical of the administration of their agency; and that there was a consensus that a lack of respect for staff existed. She cited as an example that their organization instituted a policy that everyone was to get up and move around at 3:00. This was an outcome of the healthy lifestyles program that the guest of the participatory action group had discussed in February. While getting up and walking around the campus may seem like a good way to relieve stress, the problem was that the approach that had been taken didn't take into account that they were also seeing clients at the same time. She implied that a more participatory approach to management at the focus group agency would be an improvement in that workplace.

The co-facilitator who reported on the second focus group, who is also an administrator, said she was surprised to see that there were really good relationships among the coworkers there, and that there was low turnover because employees they get respect from their administrators. But she described the main situational stress in their workplace was that the workers feared for their lives. One woman reported she doesn't

even shop at the local mall. She has a fear of going out because their youthful clients know her, and they are armed.

The co-facilitator of this focus group added her reflection on how the idealism of human service workers gets dampened. Participants at this focus group said that new workers that came into their organization think that they're going to change the world. They had a lot of respect for these new workers, so they just listen to them, tell the new workers their ideas, and they let them get experience in the field. Unfortunately, the new workers have traumatic experiences in the field. It is the positive regard of the agency's administration for their staff that kept the loss of idealism from becoming burnout.

The co-facilitator who reported on the third focus group reported that the participants also had very good things to say about management. Their organization had an intentional plan in place to respond to employee burnout. Their trainings were invigorating; such as a recent stress training with humorists. They also get to go to trainings of their own choosing, which they reported using as a coping mechanism when they're feeling down. And their agency has an open door policy, they can go to the office anytime to talk about either personal things or work related things. The co-facilitator concluded the report on this focus group by saying they were really a good group of talkers and listeners, who also said their participation in the focus group was a positive experience for them.

The fourth focus group was the only group that was recruited through email rather than through agency auspices. Although over a hundred people were invited, only two people participated in the group. This indicates that the method of recruiting participants in cooperation with the agencies whose employees are asked to participate is a better



recruitment method than direct mail. The success of this method suggests an alternate recruitment strategy to the email communication strategy employed for the participatory action research group.

The co-respondent who reported on the fifth focus group reported that the session lasted two and a half hours. I was both the longest and the most impassioned of the focus groups. Trust was an issue; the participants were concerned about who we would be talking to after the session. They did not feel they had administrative support. There was high turnover and intent to quit. Ironically, these same administrators were supportive of our conducting the focus group, and hoped that our group's initiative would improve their agency's employee retention.

At this point, I reiterated to the co-researchers that I took some notes from the recordings of the focus groups, but the co-facilitators who reported really captured what went on in these groups. Therefore, I didn't pass my notes out, because they just repeated what was reported. I noted that through the focus groups we've identified the idealism and passion of human service workers: people being invested in their jobs and empowering their clients, in spite of the scarcity mentality induced by the strain of dealing with various categorical funding streams.

The co-researchers who facilitated and reported on focus groups gained experience and knowledge both in what they learned and how they reported it to the group. This increased the group's understanding of the workplace and increased their ability to examine, reflect, and act on its problems. They demonstrated that they had acquired a research orientation, observing, analyzing, and reporting on the focus group in which they had participated. I and the other co-researchers were seeing things with new

eyes. From our experience in facilitating and analyzing focus groups, we became aware that events in the human service system did not proceed in a linear manner. Rather, we began to observe how consequences of changes in leadership style and communication affected the level of stress in the culture of an organization.

#### *What was Learned from the Focus Groups*

Co-researchers learned much from the focus groups. They found that much can be learned by conducting research, and that many of their beliefs about the hegemonic grip of the post-positivist model were challenged. I believe that they were inspired by learning that listening to practitioners from the several agencies involved in the focus group gave them credible findings that provided keys to their search for methods to change the human service system.

One of these findings was that the level of burnout in the agencies which participated in the focus groups was closely related to the level of autonomy of workers in those agencies. Those agencies with a culture that empowered their workers showed less burnout and provided better coping skills to their workers, while those that operated in a more authoritarian hierarchical style exhibited more burnout and less employee job satisfaction.

Co-researchers also learned through their inquiry that finding their power and voice could contribute to systemic change. Participants in each of the focus groups articulated that the experience was a positive one for them and that they would like to see the process continue. The focus groups contributed to the creation of communicative space within their agencies, which may have many as yet unknown positive consequences.

Co-researchers also became aware of the privileges of the power that they possessed because of their level of authority within their organizations. They became more aware that many in the system lacked the privileges that they had, and that there may be more advantages to a strategy of participation rather than control.

As mentioned above, the focus groups also unexpectedly showed the limitations of the method of sampling that this study employed. The focus group that had only two participants was the one where the recruitment method was the most similar to that of the dissertation study, which was to invite participation via a written invitation to a large group of human service practitioners. The focus groups with more participants were the ones where their organizations cooperated in the recruitment process.

This may be true because human service organizations have a stake in reducing burnout and worker turnover. However, it may also be that their cooperation was won because the request came from one of their own, an inside action researcher who was both a human service practitioner and an academic. This raises new questions about power and action research that I will address more fully later in the dissertation. Would the cooperation extended by these agencies to me if I had been an academic researcher unknown to them instead of an insider? Would the creation of multiple focus groups have occurred if that were the case?

An unanswered question was raised in several of the focus groups was could we schedule additional meetings with them. They were told that the focus groups were only information gathering for future workplace change initiatives. Focus group participants were curious about where the research project goes from here, and several wanted to continue to be involved at some level.

Clearly, issues of power were at work here. Co-researchers were concerned about the danger of getting too involved with the inner workings of any organization. That could create the kind of resistance that caused local administrators to shut down a networking group that existed ten years ago because of fear of what was being said there by workers. Although most of the co-researchers were administrators themselves, they did not feel that they had the power to tackle the structural issues inherent in the hierarchical organization of the human service professions.

The group concluded that, "... we've got the snapshot that we wanted of what's going on in the county," and decided that we had reached saturation on collecting focus group data. The two co-researchers who had not yet co-facilitated a group expressed only mild regret at the decision. There was never any discussion of holding a second focus group with those who had participated in one, to follow up on the issues that surfaced with the agencies involved.

Finally, this discussion of the focus groups suggests another finding about the co-researchers. A strength of human service practitioners is that they can draw on their 'people skills' in a variety of situations. Most of the co-researchers did not have previous experience in facilitating focus groups, yet they did well in this role. They demonstrated that the empathy that they show in dealing with their clients can also be applied in working with human service workers. This is not always the case in the life world of the human service professions, where practitioners do not always show empathy with their co-workers. In fact, to the extent that human service agencies display some level of dysfunction, this is demonstrated less often than might be expected.

### *Planning Additional Research*

At this point in the process, co-researchers were highly motivated to address issues that the focus groups had raised. One co-researcher suggested,

“Every human service worker makes a change in peoples’ lives.

The persons who go through the cross systems training, they hear that, at the beginning and at the end, about how important they are, about how they make the world a better place every day, because they are willing to give of themselves for others. Maybe that’s a piece that we can build on is that cross systems training. It’s going to be in September, and we can build on that theme (of celebrating human service workers), even if it’s the last day. Come on, the county office has money, what is it that we can give them to celebrate them.”

Another added,

“...the (local Human Service) Council is doing a professional day in September; in fact they’re meeting this afternoon, for a Worker Appreciation Day. People in human services are hearing this from other people in human services, but where’s the appreciation from the community? It reflects the general attitude... that they are all enablers, that it’s not a priority, that they are band aids on the problem, and on and on and on. They are not realizing that they are throwing these people onto the front lines of the problems in our country, and not giving them nearly the support or respect that they deserve.”

The meeting ended with a plan to address this list of actionable items, to consider and develop strategies for, and planned to have a follow-up meeting in two weeks.

The nineteenth meeting of the participatory action research group was held on August 25, at a new time and location. The group chose to return to lunch meetings, but one without the disadvantages and interruptions of a restaurant. The group met in the dining room of a religious order that ran a faith-based nonprofit human service organization in a rural area about six miles out of town. The building was in an old wood frame house that had once housed a family grocery, and was now employed as a food bank by the organization. Co-researchers ordered from a local restaurant's take out menu or brought their own lunches. This arrangement was so satisfactory that all subsequent meetings were held at this location.

The planning of actions based upon the findings of the summer focus groups continued. After considerable discussion, four actions were proposed:

1. A research initiative to support administrators through the Family Collaborative executive group
2. Development of supervisory training to address their workplace stressors and enable them to be more effective in their communications with their supervisees
3. Float initiatives at the upcoming Professional Development Day and Cross Systems Training in September to see what human service workers might support and value
4. The development of alternative types of strength-based evaluations, and the implementation of positive reinforcers

The meeting ended with an unexpected question about the relationship of the dissertation research and the participatory research project. A co-researcher expressed a

concern about, "... how far do we have to go with this? I know we are all committed, but do we have to have recommendations and then end, or do we have to go through this and have the training?" This question was disturbing to me, and could be seen as a negative case indicator. I took it as a positive sign of the effectiveness of the participatory action research group that it was answered by another co-researcher. She responded: "The group's still committed to making a change in the system because I don't think anyone would be here if they weren't committed to making a change in the system. So how can we help you get finished with the Ph.D. while as a group continue to be change agents to Fayette County..." The consensus that the outcome of our participatory action research project to date is that the group was committed to being actors in the system to make a change, and all of the co-researchers said they wanted to be a part of the ongoing process.

### New Actions and Reflections

#### *Reaching Out*

The agenda for the twentieth meeting of the participatory action group on September 8, 2008 was to work on a plan of action. Co-researchers decided it was time for them to go public and let agencies know what our group has been doing, what we sense is going on in the County, and that we are looking to systemic approaches to the problem. The first step would be to reach out to people at the upcoming meetings in September as part of the three pronged approach to meet separately with administrators, supervisors, and front line staff. A co-researcher reminded us that there is a regular business breakfast meeting of administrators through the county's Family Collaborative, and offered to place our research initiative of support administrators on that group's

agenda. Another co-researcher volunteered to get us on the agenda at a Cross-Systems training. We would apprise them of our research, and ask them what part of what we have done that would be of value in their workplace. Another co-researcher proposed,

“... We tell them who we are and that we set out on this journey to help with this dissertation. But what happened as we did that co-research is that we began to find out things about ourselves, and our styles, and we also began to find out things about the people that we worked with. And that came out of the results of our interviews and our focus groups. So a summary handout or something like that, that’s where we are, because we’ve done this research and we found out about others and our organizations. And we’ve come to the conclusion last time that we want this group, and this group has committed to wanting systemic change on burnout and the stressors that go with it. So now we’re putting it out to them as to where should we go with this, and what kind of things do you, whether you’re a front line or whether you’re an administrator or whoever you are, in the cross training or wherever, because usually it’s your new workers, to learn the resources of the county. But if training comes from them and their suggestions, and if they say this is what you need, from what we found out, I think this is what we might be a little bit more successful.”

Co-researchers volunteered to get our research project on the agenda of three events that were coming up in the next month: the Family Collaborative Cross Systems training, the Family Collaborative Executive Breakfast, and the Human Service Council



Professional Wellness Day. Although co-researchers would be at each event, I was asked to be the spokesperson for the research project, presenting a brief introduction of our research project, and posing some questions about what participants need to be successful at their jobs. We prepared a short questionnaire for each event, to determine the patterns that occurred in all three settings their responses. We expected to see patterns such as: if administrators do a good job of communicating to their subordinates, such as if people are frustrated with their supervisors or with management, and what things bring them to work. Additionally, at an administrative breakfast, agency administrators were asked to reflect upon what is it that they need for their agency, other than funding, to fulfill the mission of their agency.

A co-researcher reported that she is on a state curriculum committee that is developing a packaged training for leadership development. It includes topics on stressors, effective communication, and training and evaluation of supervisors. Another co-researcher asked if that packaged training teaches one certain philosophy instead of training people to deal with a variety of situations. A third co-researcher suggested there might be pieces of the curriculum we could take and tweak and pull apart. The person that was working on the state curriculum committee agreed, and added that they're looking for partnerships. The curriculum can be adapted to local needs. Co-researchers requested they be informed as the curriculum is developed. A consensus was reached that it would not be difficult for us to put together an outline of a supervisory training.

By the end of this meeting, the research group had decided to take action on three of the four proposed action items that had been suggested at the previous meeting. First, the research group would conduct its initial approach to administrators through the

administrative breakfast. Second, the research group would explore the adaptation and provision of supervisory training being developed by the statewide curriculum committee on which we had representation. And third, co-researchers would participate in both the upcoming interagency Professional Wellness Day and the Cross Systems Training in September, with a brief introduction to our research project and a questionnaire to see what human service workers might support and value. The fourth recommended action, the development of alternative types of strength-based evaluations, and the implementation of positive reinforcers to support workers was tabled, pending the results of the first three initiatives.

#### *Findings from New Research Initiatives*

The proposed actions, research initiatives and presentations were completed before the twenty first meeting of the participatory action research group on October 6, 2008. In the process of developing and implementing these activities, co-researchers had entered in to a new stage of their research project. Co-researchers systematically expressed power and voice in the community, taking additional steps to the development of a community of practice

At this meeting, co-researchers shared reports of the activities that had been conducted during the previous month. The first was the breakfast with agency administrators. There was a good response from the administrators present to our presentation. They discussed how problems faced by larger and smaller agencies differed. Administrators agreed that initiating supervisory training in their organizations would be helpful. One administrator volunteered that there was a lot of burnout in her agency, and invited us to meet with her staff and discuss our findings.

The cross systems training event was not well attended, and only three participants returned the questionnaires. On these questionnaires there were many comments about frustration, supervision and the need for supervisory training, and communication.

The Professional Wellness Day is an annual event conducted by the Human Service Council. It grew out of the earlier research on social conditions in Fayette County (Rapano, 2006) in response to the finding that the insensitivity of human service workers, which was attributed to burnout, was a major barrier to people seeking and using human services. It was better attended than the interagency cross systems training, and fourteen questionnaires were returned. Fortuitously, participants were primed for the lunch time presentation by our research group by the two morning sessions, one on a holistic approach to time management, the other on professional boundaries and how they can be affected by burnout.

The responses to the questionnaires from this group indicated the need for supervisory training, improved communications, and commitment to employee retention. One interesting result was that in response to a question about coping mechanisms, several respondents mentioned spirituality, which supports the data from one of the focus groups. Other open ended comments from the questionnaires could be interpreted as a cry for action. The administrator who had invited our research group to do a presentation to her staff at the administrative breakfast repeated her invitation.

The group received an update from the co-researcher who served on the statewide curriculum committee of her organization. She shared some information with us on the supervisory training being developed. The curriculum echoed many of the issues we had

identified. There is a potential to reach out to many supervisors through such training. She suggested that we could have input into this initiative, putting the focus on appreciating people. She offered to discuss our interest in the training with her director, and ask him how we can support it.

In addition to the data from these three events, another important development was reported by a co-researcher at this meeting. A co-researcher reported that changes were occurring at an agency several months after a focus group was conducted there. Several of these changes were related to the topics discussed at the focus group. These included more support of caseworkers by clerical staff; an attempt to provide staff with more space; and a more focused approach to crisis management. It appeared that some of the changes emerged from the dialogue the focus group started there. This information demonstrated to co-researchers that there were tangible outcomes to their intervention in the community and that they were able to change conditions in the workplace that lead to stress and burnout.

### Awareness of Structural Influences

#### *The Agency In-service Training*

The twenty second meeting of the participatory action research group was held on October 20, 2008. I had informed the group by email prior to the meeting that the data gathering for the dissertation research question was drawing to an end, as the group had completed the first iteration of the participatory action research cycle. I requested that we have an interactive discussion, a reflection piece of what we've done, what we've accomplished, and how we see our whole project. However, before that discussion

commenced, there was a long discussion of an action I had taken after the previous meeting.

I reported that I had responded in the affirmative to the invitation from the director of the agency that had asked us to present the findings of the research group to date, during a morning in-service training for her staff. I saw this as an opportunity for co-researchers to address the structural concerns of a local agency. A concerned co-researcher asked what the purpose was of the in-service training. I answered that it was an answer to their request to gather information, and to identify and diagnose stressors in the program. There was some concern that drawing attention to the stressors in that organization would put staff who participated in the proposed in-service at risk, and that it would also damage the working relationships of co-researchers with that agency.

No other member of the group was able or willing to participate on the designated date. This event served as a negative case sample which I had not expected this late in the project. During the planning of this case study, I had anticipated imagined that once co-researchers had increased their awareness of the problems in the workplace, that they would be empowered with a critical consciousness that would consistently and rationally lead to systemic change. I had not sufficiently taken into account the role of the power inherent in the status quo.

However, the consensus of the research group was that we are not qualified to diagnose and address problems in this workplace, and that this could “blow up in our face”. This demonstrated that the group was aware of the risks to them and their organizations of the consequences of the proposed intervention. While co-researchers felt comfortable conducting inquiry with the other (e.g. focus group participants who they did

not know); they were less comfortable conducting inquiry and interventions on those whom they worked with on an ongoing basis. Several co-researchers expressed that this was a risk to them. Ethically, I had no choice but to honor the decision of the group. It was decided that I should present only an informational session on burnout, and seek clarification from the director on the expected outcome of the in-service. This decision echoed the one made after the focus groups when there was no attempt to reach out to the agencies involved to address problems that their employees had raised.

Between meetings I conducted the in-service training on burnout that had raised the concerns of several co-researchers at the previous meeting. At the next meeting, I shared my preliminary summary of findings and evaluation results from the event. A co-researcher noted that the evaluations showed that there was a fear of retaliation, and staff was not comfortable in stating their opinions in front of other staff who were de facto supervisors. The findings indicated that their concerns were not unfounded. Before the in-service began I had given participants at the training an informed consent form, and told them that as we have learned, that confidentiality could only be guaranteed to the extent that every member of the group honored confidentiality. I noted that the tension that was there at the beginning of the in-service lessened as the in-service progressed.

Another co-researcher noted that the evaluation comments from the in-service showed a sense of hopelessness. In any event, there was no negative reaction to the in-service as was feared. I stated that some seeds of change were planted, but that there would be no further interaction with the agency without the consent of our group. A co-researcher volunteered to informally approach the director of that agency to see what her reaction was to the in-service.

### *Reflecting on the Participatory Action Research Process*

The interactive discussion that I had requested was an initial step in the analysis of the dissertation research. I anticipated that the participatory action research group would then be transitioning into a new phase of its process, one in which it would continue into a new iteration of planning, action, and reflection. I conducted the interactive discussion with the group to get their feedback on the participatory action research process. I used five questions to guide the discussion. The purpose of this discussion was to ascertain what the group had learned from their participation.

The first question in the interactive discussion was, “In the course of our project, 16 months, what’s changed?” In this, the longest of the interactive discussions, researchers spoke of the relationships they had developed with each other, learning how to reduce stress in their personal and professional lives. They were more conscious of working in a system that is based on the deficit model that builds on people’s negatives, rather than building on their strengths and the knowledge. They cited their findings from the focus groups and questionnaires and noted that at many places, morale is poor and there is a lack of appropriate supervision. They were very concerned that for the most part, people are not trained to be supervisors, but are promoted because they did a good job in a direct service position. There is widespread workplace bullying by administrators and supervisors. A very concrete kind of training is needed to address these issues.

One co-researcher summarized her experience of the accomplishments of the project in this way:

“I see this group as in a microscope how fragmented our whole system is.

But as this group spent more time together, with cohesion, with

communication, with questioning, with feedback, this became a stronger group. So what's changed from my perspective is that we came in as individuals. We chose to work on the same situation, we chose to take a risk to share the frustrations, to use this as a support group, but we also chose to be a bigger part of the system by being active members to do some research. Because we absolutely believe in the system in which we work. So to me we've gone from this embryo state to this entity which can be very strong and powerful as a new initiative which can cause new ripple effects in small agencies.”

There was much discussion about how the co-researchers had changed. They reported changing their attitudes, seeing the bigger picture, and having hope instead of despair. One said,

“We have taken on some roles ourselves and we have taken back some of roles to our agencies and we have implemented some of the strategies we talked about. And so, we started in this micro level, now we are in this macro level, where we are starting to spill out into the bigger system, which speaks volumes for this group. “

The group concluded they were not quite sure how that's going to occur yet. But they were more attuned to becoming agents of change in the human service system.

The second question in the interactive discussion was, “What have we, as the as the participatory action group, done to make a difference?” Co-researchers identified the issues,



“...we’ve dragged those out of the closet. This wasn’t much talked about a year ago in our community, was it?”

The co-researchers discussed the research they had conducted, and its initial impact on their human service workplace. As a result, they knew and understood things that they had not understood previously. Their consciousness had changed:

“We went out and listened.... We’ve offered some strategies, we’ve offered some small solutions that people have tested out and used. People are interested in this now because they’re thinking someone’s paying attention to these issues.”

The third question in the discussion was, “What has worked well?” One co-researcher approached this question in terms of “buy-ins”:

“On the micro level, we’ve gotten a buy in from everybody in this group. And on the macro level, I think we’re starting to get buy in, too. Everyone is very welcoming to our conversation. People have said, “I’m so glad you asked me.” And can we do this again.”

Another spoke in terms of developing a communicative space, “giving people a venue to disclose their concepts and ideas....”

There was a discussion about addressing the marginalization of human service workers:

“redefining what human service means,,, because human service in this county are devalued and will continue to be devalued until we redefine it as a priority, and not look at it as a touch/feely type job, because we’re working with people’s lives. It’s striking that we need to do this in this

area when such a huge volume of employment is in human services, and it's the lowest paying job."

Another co-researcher unknowingly provided a Marxian analysis of the condition of human service workers:

"Change is only going to come when the workers, the downtrodden, become aware of their problems. We need to rally in our community when the county commissioners call (these human) service workers worthless. Every administrator who's ever been sitting in that office for the last 20 years has been asked to go out with a caseworker. They've all refused. Every time negotiations come, it's deplorable how (this county agency) been treated in our county by the administrators. They're the bastard child. They hate negotiating with (this county agency), it costs them money. For the longest time they've been cleaning their own building, they've been maintaining their own vehicles. It's their job to take care of our children. If they don't take care, they have a lawsuit and guess who gets sued: the caseworkers. (Another county agency) is the wonderful child, they get whatever they want. They offer a \$60 million dollar managed care company, they oversee every managed care contract, they make money for the county, and their board is politically linked."

The fourth question was, "What could we as a group have done differently?" One co-researcher wished that we could have had more discussion about leadership styles, and

how you identify your own leadership styles, your greatest gifts? Another member of the group expressed regret about what that the group had not yet accomplished:

“Something we could have done differently is hold a focus group with the administrators. It would have been a different perspective to them, even as regards to retention and improvement, even if it was only a handful of administrators. But I think that meeting in a separate setting, thorough semi-structured questions, with at least five or six of them. I think we should have had three focus groups of supervisors to see what their perspective was, because they’re stuck between administrators and their staff, who is their allegiance to? You know we keep talking about the three pronged approach, we should have done an administrators group and a couple of supervisors’ groups, and then see what the correlation was among them, and their stress level, and how they experienced stress differently.”

The fifth and final question in the interactive discussion was, “What advice would we give another group?” There was a consensus that the project should grow beyond the dissertation research. The participatory action research project should be an ongoing research, collecting more data, conducting more planning, action, and reflection. This led co-researchers to voice their concern about “whose project is it?” As one put it,

“Whose project is it speaks to power. Eventually our group took over our project, we made it our own.”

I reiterated that it’s important to separate my dissertation research from participatory action group research. Later, I came to realize how the direction of the

participatory action research project was driven by the requirements of the dissertation. This led me to a reflection of the extent of the power that I wielded throughout the course of the project both as the facilitator and as the case study researcher, observing, recording and studying the process, following procedures approved by my university's institutional review board at every step. As the dissertation data gathering phase of the research concludes, how the participatory action research project proceeds now is up to each co-researcher. At the conclusion of the discussion, I noted that our group's research is far from over. I thanked everyone for seeing the dissertation research through. It was a much longer commitment than anyone anticipated.

### *Final Initiatives*

The twenty third meeting of the participatory action group was the last meeting for which data was collected for the purposes of this dissertation research. It was held on November 4, 2008. Co-researchers reviewed the summary of the interactive discussion that we had at the last meeting. I reported that I had compared what we had discussed in the interactive discussion with the summary of the interviews we did at the beginning of the year. During the interviews the interviewees were uncertain that any progress had been made, whereas during our interactive discussion we were much more specific about the positive results of our research. I added that I would be happy to have additional feedback on these questions at any time.

At the previous meeting the research group had also discussed a focus group for administrators or supervisors. A co-researcher suggested that it would be more an educational event than a focus group, as we are not doing it to collect more data. I pointed out that even though data collection for the dissertation was drawing to a close;

the data collection for the participatory action research would continue. We discussed having a meeting of administrators in Spring 2009 to focus on the impact that burnout has on staff retention and efficiency.

The suggestion was that we build on the positive response to our initiatives at the administrative breakfast. The first item of business would be to make administrators aware that there is a problem affecting their staff. They may be supportive, but they are not always in tune with their staff. Another co-researcher noted that change may need to begin with the second or third level of agency administration, although that depends on the size of the agency.

A co-researcher cited a Leadership Academy at a local organization as an example of a proactive approach to training. She described it as consisting of six training modules that could be adapted to the specific needs of an agency. This program could be replicated, and she suggested that we approach the director of the agency about tapping into their expertise with the Leadership Academy as a center of excellence and an example creative. Another co-researcher asked if we should ask the director if he would be interested in meeting with our group.

A co-researcher then asked if we should invite an 'outsider' to 'our' group. I replied that this had always been a decision of the participatory action research group. In fact, at several points in the project, including the first meeting, the meeting in February 2008 when we had a guest presenter, and again at the time of the renewal of the Institutional Review Board research protocols.

There was agreement that we have already addressed the dissertation research question as to whether a group of human service professionals can be effective in

addressing the problem of burnout. Now, based on what we know, we need to decide how best to proceed. Co-researchers once again discussed that it might be time to invite new people to participate in our group, and considered the implications to the confidentiality under which our group operates to our taking on a more public profile. Co-researchers had already done so in a more limited way with their participation in focus groups and the organizational presentations in September.

Another co-researcher asked what our role would be if we were no longer co-researchers in the dissertation research. Should we hand over our research to those who would use it and implement our results? I responded that the participatory action research project has always been separate from the dissertation research. It would have been more accurate to say that the participatory action research project and the case study existed side by side, although the former could continue independently of the latter. Another co-researcher responded that,

“... as participants in participatory action research, that we are the implementers. Through our research, we are both the experts and advocates, we have the knowledge to change the system in which we work. Ours is a different style of research than the traditional one in which impersonal researchers send out their results to be published. We are the group that not only has knowledge, but also have developed a relationship with each other, have bonded with each other. We are committed to the process only to the extent that we feel we can make a difference and change the system.”

The research group concluded that a step toward developing a public profile for the project is to meet with the director of the agency with the Leadership Academy and share information from our findings as a first step toward a larger meeting with administrators to discuss this leadership training initiative. A co-researcher agreed to contact him to come to the next meeting of our group. Because of his schedule, we can make our next meeting at a time and place convenient to him. She will find out his availability and send the dates to me, and I will forward it to the rest of the group. Then we will proceed with what works best for all of us.

The participatory action group could then adapt and replicate this supervisor training with resources we already have within our system. If an organization wants training on stress and burnout, we have already demonstrated that we have the resources to do that. We don't have to reinvent the wheel, if something that is being done that is effective, we don't need to duplicate it. The group would like this action to take place as soon as possible.

### *Aftermath*

Over a year has passed since the end of the data gathering phase of the dissertation research and this writing. In this time, there have been several developments in the continuation of the action research process to address burnout in the community, and it has become possible to see this process as one of several iterations of participatory action research in the development of a community of learning that is continuing to address issues affecting the human service workplace and the larger community.

Several of the co-researchers from the dissertation research have now become members of the Research and Development Committee of the membership collaborative,

the county Human Service Council. I have assumed the role of the chair of that committee, while both co-researchers from the participatory action research project studied in the dissertation and other practitioners and academics have become part of a new initiative. We have established a campus/community Research Institute under the auspices of the Human Service Council. The vision for the Research Institute is to be a collaborative entity within the Fayette County Human Service Council which will create a county invested in the recursive evaluation of its strength, weaknesses, and opportunities of Fayette County. Its mission is to maximize the resources of universities and communities while enhancing the social conditions of those who live and work in Fayette County.

Some of the momentum of the participatory action research group has been lost in the transition, but in the long run this will allow practitioners in the growing community of practice to bring greater resources to bear on the problems in the human service workplace and contribute to the sustainability of the participatory initiatives.

As can be seen from the vision statement of the Research Institute above, the roots of this initiative include not only the research project which was the subject of the dissertation case study research, but also from the earlier research on social conditions in the county which identified the problems in the human service workplace which the dissertation case study case study examined.

Upon reflection, these initiatives can be seen as three distinct but interrelated action research cycles. The first cycle was the action research study of social conditions, which both identified problems in the community which the human service system attempts to address, and also was the first study in the community to use participatory



methods to address. As can be seen in the section on Sampling in the Research Methods chapter, participants in the former study were the first to be invited to participate in the dissertation research.

The participatory action research project studied in the dissertation case study became the second cycle in this action research spiral. It brought participatory methods to bear on the one of the most critical problems identified in the former study, taking actions to address structural problems in the human service workplace and raising the consciousness of human service practitioners to alternate research approaches outside the postpositivist hegemony in which the community, its human service disciplines, and academic researchers grappled.

The third cycle, still in its planning stage, is the newly formed Research Institute. The Research Institute is poised to address a wide array of social concerns by taking on research projects and evaluation of programs at the cutting edge of human service provision in the county. Whatever the outcomes of the Research Institute, it is already clear that it will expand the community of practice that came into existence in the course of the first two cycles. And most important from the perspective of the current study is that it is another positive indicator that the process of participatory action research can enable human service professionals to examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace

### Summary

This chapter is a chronological narrative description of the development of the participatory action research project. The project was initiated both as a response to an

identified community need, and as a subject of a methodological case study of the participatory action research project. The narrative of this chronological narrative description is structured around the critical incidents that occurred and the actions taken in the course of the project. It documents the answer to the research question showing both the positive and negative extent of to which human service practitioners can become participatory action researchers addressing a problem in the human service system.

The narrative shows that the case study and the subject of the case study, the participatory action group, were conflated on more than one occasion. The group and its facilitator were frequently “off topic”, leading to the development of a therapeutic support group and other “premature conclusions”. However, the project (and the case study of the project) got back on track as participants bought into the project as it went through an entire iteration of planning, action, and reflection; and when the project began its investigative data gathering phase, participants became co-researchers and agents of change.

A major unexpected finding of this study was surfacing learnings about facilitation and changes in participants in the participatory action research process: relationships, power, and ethics in the postpositivist worlds of the university, agency, and community. These learnings speak directly to what it means to be an action researcher.

When the data gathering for this research concluded, the co-researchers reflected that they are all part of a network of agencies and services that work closely and collaboratively together. They have experienced many successes in collaboration, even though their agencies are competing for the same dollars. Participating in and facilitating such collaborative efforts can address and alleviate the self-imposed barriers caused by

the structural influences of the human service system. They were more aware of how to exercise their power and voice to address these barriers. Yet they were also unwilling to address these barriers when they sensed that they did not have enough power to make the risk worthwhile.

Co-researchers have a better understanding of the negative stereotype that it is in our self-interest to perpetuate the social problems in the community. There is a lack of public knowledge about what we do, and until we raise the public awareness of that, this will continue to be a cause of stress for human service workers. They have learned that it is necessary to demand respect from the community to address the marginalization afflicting the human service system.

However, before that can be accomplished, human service workers must learn to respect themselves and each other, to get past all the alienation and negativity that so many have experienced. And human service systems need to get their own house in order by improving worker/organizational communication, assisting administrators and supervisors of human service agencies to use the same principles of empowerment with their staff as they do with the recipients of their services.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTERPRETING FINDINGS

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented the findings of the research in a chronological, ethnographic case study report. In this chapter I more deeply examine the meaning of what happened. Through reflective thinking I identify interactions among key themes and sub themes in the findings. In qualitative research, the researcher makes a claim about the substantive significance of the study's findings (Patton, 2002). The argument for substantive significance involves an examination of the coherence and significance of the findings and the extent to which they provide a deepened understanding of the case that is being studied, including the extent to which the findings contribute to solutions of the problem being examined.

In this chapter, I analyze the themes that emerged from the data. Each of the themes represents human service workers and their interactions with the human service workplace. The themes are passion/commitment, support, worker/organizational communication, emic/etic relationships, scarcity mentality, marginalization, and alienation. I then identify sub themes and explore interactions among the themes to look for the substantive significance to co-researchers that emerges from the process. I explore the experience of the participatory action co-researchers and the meaning the participatory action research for them, and the effectiveness of participatory action research approach as a change initiative.

I will first examine the emergence of themes, subthemes, and interactions in the study's data. I will then consider each theme individually, and examine to what extent

participation in the study created a critical consciousness that, in terms of the research question, "... enable human service professionals to examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace". There are many attempts by practitioners to reform human services. I argue that the participatory action research process conducted in this study identified and articulated local knowledge that contributes to the creation of a more 'human' human service system.

### Emergence of Key Themes

A brief review of the Research Methods chapter shows that the analysis began with an overview of the stages and critical incidents in the research process which led to recognition of patterns and categories from which key themes emerged (Patton, 2002, Stake, 1995). To reiterate, the key themes that I identified were the marginalization of the status of the human service profession; the existence of emic/etic relationships, referring both to insider outsider status as well as "us and them" thinking; alienation, both in the Marxist sense of being alienated from the products of one's work as well in the ethical sense of being alienated from one's values; scarcity mentality, which can be seen as focusing on what is missing in one's life rather than focusing on breaking out of material and intellectual poverty; passion and commitment, the courage and then boldness when we see a cause larger than our own life; worker/organizational communication, including problems arising due to organizational dysfunction; and support systems, those coping mechanisms that exist in one's life and in their work/organizational life.

The themes represent a spectrum of practitioner/workplace interactions. Listing the themes from the most positive to the most negative, they are passion/commitment, support, worker/organizational communication, emic/etic relationships, scarcity mentality, marginalization, and alienation. There is an inverse relationship between the positive and negative sides of the spectrum: passion/commitment is almost completely opposite alienation; support addresses the worse effects of marginalization, worker/organizational communication counteracts poverty mentality, and at the center of the list, emic/etic relationships are related to all of the others.

#### *Occurrence of Themes*

The theme of emic/etic relationships predominated in the interactions in the first months of the project. As the group established relationships of trust, the themes of alienation and scarcity mentality began to dominate, with increasing emphasis on support systems by the end of the first eight meetings of the project. After the group decided to extend its activities, there was a period of restructuring for about four months where the predominant themes were emic/etic relationships, but there was much discussion of support, scarcity mentality, and worker organizational relationships.

Following these first two stages of the project, there were three months where the main topic was research design. This discussion seemed to preclude much discussion of alienation and marginalization. This reflects that as the group was moving beyond the relationship building/problem identification stage to a more solution seeking approach, it was moving from a negative to a more positive consciousness in its approach to workplace issues.

Near the end of the first year of the project, as the participatory action research group entered into its community based participatory action research phase, there was renewed consideration of each of the themes as the group discussed the data from its focus groups, questionnaires and presentations.

The following chart represents the occurrence of key themes throughout the development of the project.

Table 2  
*Occurrence of Themes at Successive Stages of the Project*

<i>Themes*</i>	Mar	Ali	Pas	Emi	Sca	Sup	Com
<i>Stages of Project:</i>							
Initial directions	Medium	High	Medium	High	High	High	Medium
Premature conclusions	High	High	High	High	High	High	Some
Insights from interviews	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	Low	High	High
Restructuring the process	Low	Low	Low	High	Medium	High	High
Community based research	High	High	High	Medium	High	Medium	High
New understandings	High	Low	High	Low	High	High	High
Reflections and Actions	High	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium	High	High

- \*Abbreviations  
 Mar = Marginalization  
 Ali = Alienation  
 Pas = Passion/commitment  
 Emi = Emic/etic relationships  
 Sca = Poverty mentality  
 Sup = Support  
 Com = Worker/organizational communication

*Sub Theme and Interactions*

Many patterns and categories from which key themes emerged are related to these themes as sub themes. A grouping of themes and sub themes is listed in the following table:

Table 3  
*Key Themes and Sub Themes*

Key Themes	Sub Themes
Passion/Commitment	Psychological Organizational Values and morals Participatory process
Support	From organization From colleagues In PAR group Personal wellness Planned initiatives
Worker/Organizational Communication	Staff communication Supervisor communication/training Administrator communications/support Organizational concerns and initiatives Communication skills Communicative space
Emic/Etic Relationships	Among Co-researchers Insider/Outsider role of facilitator Focus groups and presentations Planned actions Organizational
Scarcity Mentality	Individual resources/feelings of inadequacy Organizational financial resources Assistance mentality Lack of time Interpersonal relations
Marginalization	Lack of support from public entities Systemic: inequitable compensation, understaffing Organizational: jobs not secure, professionalism not recognized Community: Media, public, service-recipients Theoretical: Non-hegemonic PAR approach, potential for abuse
Alienation	Psychosocial: anger, guilt, self-destructive behaviors, dysfunctional relationships and attitudes Organizational: disengagement, cynicism, intent to retire Values and morals

The next step in the analysis was to look for interactions among the key themes. To determine what is significant in the data involves an inductive analysis of the patterns represented in the classification schema. Based on my own knowledge of the project and my experience of the issues confronting workers in the human service system, and



working with the list of sub themes (Table 3 above), I identified six major areas that go across the key themes identified in the preceding Project Narrative chapter. In order of the frequency with which these areas appear in the data, the major areas are systemic issues, psychosocial issues, actions taken, barriers to change, the role of facilitation, and theoretical inputs. I then created a matrix of these areas with each of the themes, in order to further interpret their relationship to themes in each of the six major areas.

Table 4  
*Matrix of Themes and Substantive Areas*

	<i>Systemic</i>	<i>Psycho-social</i>	<i>Actions</i>	<i>Barriers</i>	<i>Facilitation</i>	<i>Theoretical</i>
<i>Passion/commitment</i>	Organizational mission	Finding purpose Workaholism	Building consensus	Non-productive confrontation	Openness to new ideas	Sustainability
<i>Support</i>	Professional ethics Personal wellness	Coping skills	Positive reinforcement Planned initiatives	Negative reinforcement	Trust and dialogue	Experiential knowledge
<i>Worker / organizational communication</i>	Organizational culture	Fear	Training	Funding sources	Communicative space	Discipline specific
<i>Etic/etic relationships</i>	Intangible support from colleagues	Risks to initiatives	Professional recognition	Hierarchical relationships	Community and academic support	Positionality of researcher
<i>Scarcity mentality</i>	Feelings of inadequacy	Personal resources	Empowerment of individuals	Inadequate resources Time	Trust and dialogue	Organizational theory
<i>Marginalization</i>	Lack of public support	Negative attitudes to profession	Telling your story	Lack of consensus on value of profession	Speaking truth to power	Legitimizing the PAR approach
<i>Alienation</i>	Low morale	Self-destructive behaviors	Intent to quit Antagonizing others	Objectification	Lack of participation	Assistencialism

While the matrix is not inclusive, it represents the major intersections of the areas that concern co-researchers in the project and the themes of the research. This construction is subjective, but it is supported by a close reading of the data. I will spell out some of the relationships from this table in the following sections of this chapter. I will first describe each key theme and provide brief indications of its occurrence in the

case study. I will then explore the relationships of the themes with the areas that concern co-researchers in the project. In this way, I can examine the effect of participation in the process of becoming participatory action researchers.

## Themes

### *Passion/Commitment*

The theme of passion/commitment is the one that was most basically identified with peoples' choice of human services as a career. People are attracted to the field of human services for its intrinsic rewards. They want to be a part of a helping profession, because of their beliefs and values about helping others with needs, or in many cases because of the help that they have received from others in addressing their own needs.

Passion and commitment predisposes workers to believe in their organization's mission, and leads to commitment to help people in their organization's target population. In the psychosocial area, they find purpose in their work. This sometimes manifests itself as 'workaholism'; there were several co-researchers in the project who professed both. In the area of action, passion/commitment led participants to consensus upon which coordination and collaboration can be built. A barrier that can be caused by passion/commitment is nonproductive confrontation. As facilitator, I experienced the passion and commitment of participants who disagreed with me over issues such as the goal of the project of the selection of research initiatives.

An important theoretical outcome of passion/commitment is its contribution to the participatory worldview, through an awareness or personal knowing that allows a claim to truth and the critical subjectivity that enables one to detach oneself from pre-existing

frameworks and choose premises that contribute to human flourishing in the democratic and spiritual dimensions. Participants reflected on the changes that they knowingly and unknowingly made in people's lives in the ways they related with them. This passion to help others is widespread according to a participant, who said:

“...there are a lot of people in every one of our organizations that have passion. And if we buy into that passion, into that mission, into that vision, into that philosophy, it's going to keep growing, because people want to be a part of something new, people want to be a part of the energy, people want to be a part of something creative. And we can do that.”

Even a participant who frequently expressed cynicism and emotional exhaustion throughout the project added that she had a passion for her work, indicating that “...by serving others I've served the greater good”. One participant discussed reaching out to others in our human service system by building on their compassion and competence. She noted that with our varying backgrounds, we could start a ripple effect of teaching and advocacy that would change our system.

In the course of their participation in the project, co-researchers rediscovered the passion and commitment which they brought to the table, and found that it is shared by others. By participating with a group of persons who shared similar backgrounds and experience, they found that their passion to help others and their commitment to their profession was reinforced. This may have been a factor in their ongoing resistance to adding new members to the group.

Co-researchers learned much about the passion and commitment of human service practitioners with different levels of authority by co-facilitating focus groups of direct

service workers. Many participants in the focus groups displayed a high level of passion/commitment to their work as helping professionals. Some reported that they internalized the needs of their organization, even at the expense of their own personal needs. On the other hand, co-facilitators of the focus groups noted that many participants were people that demonstrated the classic symptoms of burnout. Their burnout was related to how passionate they were about their profession and how frustrated they are about barriers in their workplace. Yet even those participants who were burned out were still vested in their communities, they displayed passion for helping people in their communities, even when they hated their jobs. They discussed these issues when they socialized with each other outside the workplace. These findings from the focus groups mirrored the data from the first meetings of the participatory action research group, when the groups' focus was on understanding the effect of the problem of burnout.

Commitment to the participatory process became a group norm during its first meetings. There was consensus that everyone is making a contribution. No one needed to be encouraged to talk, everybody had something to offer. Interviewees early in the process noted that the meetings have set the stage for change. A measure of the groups' passion and commitment was that they continued to be cooperative and professional throughout the process, even when they strongly disagreed. The disagreements were usually over what actions to take to change the workplace. Most thought that we must proceed with caution but without squelching the initiative and passion of each other as co-researchers.

Thus, a consensus to work collaboratively emerged, as the free exchange of ideas occurred in the safe constituted space of the group. This commitment to the group

process extended beyond the data collection stage of the research. The participant/co-researchers institutionalized the project by moving it into the Research and Development Committee of the membership collaborative to which most co-researchers already belonged, the county Human Service Council. It is anticipated that location within such an advocacy organization will contribute to the sustainability of the project.

### *Support*

The key theme of support describes the interactions with others that helps or hinders workers' ability to maintain passion and commitment in the face of the realities of the workplace. A source of support for practitioners is their education and preparation to work in the field. Their preparation provides them with coping skills that enable them to deal with the inevitable stressor of their jobs. Support is also received from their identification with their profession and its professional ethics. In the research process, as participants internalized the norms of the group, they honored each other's confidences and encouraged each other to take action to address the problems in their workplace in a positive, proactive way.

The theme of support was the one most commonly discussed during the case study's interviews. They particularly discussed the sense of support they had gained by participation in the research project. Participants made clear that they had personal wellness strategies already in place that helped them cope with workplace stress, such as daily debriefing with one's spouse, the use of humor, and spirituality. They became aware through their examination of the workplace in the course of the project that support was not always available from human service organizations. They saw that organizations that fostered communication, professional autonomy counseling, peer relationships, and/

or formal counseling provided a valued form of support. Just as personality based coping mechanisms vary from individual to individual, so does collegial and organization support of the worker also vary.

Co-researchers noted the types of support provided by their organizations. Some organizations offered picnic days and holidays, which consisted of a short training followed by socialization, another noted giving Christmas gifts to staff. One organization worked to create a caring atmosphere by making the work environment aesthetically pleasing. Particularly effective supports were not necessarily planned ones. One interviewee said, "I got a letter from a volunteer thanking me. You don't often get that. I cried." Another reported, "We got recognition from regional and national organizations."

Not all organizational initiatives to provide support to their workers were well received. One organization instituted wellness initiatives, like stretch breaks during the workday and smoking cessation initiatives, but was surprised to see these initiative resisted by overworked staff. Resistance to organizational initiatives is highest when workers don't have a voice in making these decisions in a participatory manner. A major concern of the group was to find a way to support administrators to be secure enough to encourage participatory discussions about the workplace among their workers.

The group saw the participatory research project itself as a source of support. In many ways the project served as a support group for its participants. As one member noted,

"I crave these meetings, they are very therapeutic... I've learned I'm not alone; I have peers facing the same kind of pressures... We all respect and listen to each other."

In the course of the interviews, one participant noted,

“I don’t know if it was a safe group because of who responded, or whether it was people who responded who would appreciate a safe group.”

A large number of comments show how the support and safety allowed by the group could lead to action. One participant observed that people need to vent before they’re ready to act. Another indicated,

“I feel less burned out after our meetings, and want to translate this into action for others... Our support group raised the consciousness of our members and has the potential to change the system... The group is more of a team, reflecting and learning. On some days it’s a support group, on other days it’s a research group.”

Participants recognized and verbalized their need for support. One said passionately,

“I believe in the system, I believe in the organization, I believe in myself, but it’s almost like they’re horses on a merry-go-round... and periodically, I get to a point where I want to say, ‘stop the merry-go-round for three days and let me catch up, and let me balance this out so that I don’t become a self-absorbed person in myself care but I’m always looking at the common good.”

An outcome of the participatory process was that co-researchers became more aware that support can be found from their clients regardless of the organizational culture. One participant explained:

“There are clients who have told juvenile probation, drug and alcohol, children and youth, employees of the housing projects, and wherever, thank you. You have made my life better. We’ve become so focused on the negativity of the stress on the organizations for not meeting expectations that we don’t hear those little nuggets of when people say thank you. We don’t hear those because we’re not used to those. For me, I think that when I get to the point that I get so emotionally overwhelmed that I can’t share anymore, ... I can’t feel it because I need a place to dump. I believe our clients are appreciative, they do thank us. We may not always hear them because we’re so overwhelmed with stuff.”

Another source of support named by participants in both the participatory action research group and in the community based participatory action research they initiated was spirituality. Spirituality is considered as a key to human flourishing in the literature (Heron & Reason, 1997). One participant said if they didn’t have their faith and their spirituality that they wouldn’t go to work every day. Many workers outside of faith based organizations are uncomfortable expressing this source of support because it is considered subjective, even though it is based on experiential knowledge, and the lived experience of human service workers that exists in the face of the objectively based post-positivist paradigm which their professions have adopted.

#### *Worker/Organizational Communication*

Throughout the course of the project, there was ongoing concern and discussion about worker/organizational communication. Participants noted that each organization has its own culture, which varies within each organization over time. This s better



understood through the theory that an organization is not an entity as much as it is a series of relationships (Argyris & Schon, 1996; Morgan, 1997). As such, organizational culture can be affected by staff communication, supervisory communication and the need for supervisory training, the degree of administrative communication, organizational concerns, research initiatives, and the opening of communicative space.

Co-researchers explored to what extent communication was impacted by the organizational culture. They became aware how systemic issues, such as the fragmentation of the human service system, affect their life world. As noted in the first chapter, the human service system is both hierarchical and fragmented into 'silos' by the system of categorical funding. In the course of participating in the participatory action research group, co-researchers became aware that the support that they received in their workplace was inadequate. In the course of the research project, co-researchers learned experientially how a relationship of trust and a safe communicative space enabled them to plan and develop initiatives while maintaining a high level of support for themselves and others in their human service system. One administrator said uneasily,

“...I’ve found... I’ve become more of an advocate for our workers than for our clients, because of all the changes they have to deal with. The only thing is I worry... (is that it is) hard to be a nurturer, which I’ve become, and still, be the authority figure. That is such a fine line. I’m sure there are times when I need to be more firm. But it’s hard to do that when you’re trying to advocate for them with the people you report to.”

Her dilemma reflects the tension that exists between their espoused theories and their theories-in-use.

From a systemic perspective, the norms of the organization's culture often restrict the worker's ability to meet the needs of those whom they serve. Attempts to circumvent these norms to benefit the client may lead to retaliation from administrators concerned with preserving their authority. Further, many organizations use negative reinforcers to maintain the level of productivity that is required by funding sources. Thus the psychosocial aspect of fear becomes an ongoing factor in organizational dynamics. The participatory approach employed in this study was effective in identifying ways to create alternate organizational norms.

Participants also stated concerns about occasions their organization acted in disregard of its avowed mission statements, or when their organizations failed to be accountable to their program's funding sources. This was of particular concern to the group because most of the organizations they represent were supported by community stakeholders and funded and/or regulated by governmental entities.

Participants understood that there is a difference between what is said and what happens in organizations, that there is a difference between the "espoused theories" of organizations, what they say, to their "theories-in-use", what they do (Argyris and Schon, 1996). These differences come from the defenses all have learned, fear of negative reinforcement adds to these defenses. Not only are there differences between "espoused theories" and "theories-in-use", but we are also skilled at covering up those differences. This became evident as the research project opened up communicative space and relations of trust. Change will not occur until these organizational norms are brought out into the open and challenged. This led to the oft-repeated recommendation of the group

that administrators and supervisors in the organization could benefit from training and education.

Additional concerns were shared with me about their organizations by participants in interviews. These were not shared with the rest of the group. They included problems with administration, especially those where administrators try to micromanage from the top. Interviewees observed a lack of respect by administrators to those whom they supervised. Some interviewees discussed punitive administrative styles that can lead employees to leave the organization and to organizational dysfunction. As one interviewee described it, “We have lost the humanness in human services.” An extreme example was cited of an incident where a disgruntled client brought a gun to the workplace, and it was treated more as a liability issue than as a safety issue.

A participant summarized the role of the administrator in worker/organizational communications:

“A hopeful piece for me is that we have one organization whose staff reports that their relationship is good with the administration. That tells me that the administrators set the tone of their agency. If the administrator or the deputy administrator is approachable, has an open door policy, is not punitive, that tells me how powerful the tone is that the administration sets. When I look at the administrators of all of the organizations, knowing that they are all good people, my next concern is what’s happening to our administrators, how we attend to them as well, how do we take care of the administrators who work so hard for funding or to administer the program, that their attitude may not be as positive as they may want it to be, or they

come across as short sometimes because of needs based budgets. How do we tend to the administrators as well, because they're the forgotten people in this? ...One place we were at, we were told that an administrator sent out an email saying don't approach me during budget time."

Co-researchers made several suggestions to improve organizational communications. For example, "Move away from 'management by incremental crisis mode', (that is) from passive to pro-active management." One way suggested to accomplish this was, "Each unit meets frequently, and meetings are scheduled by supervisors rather than administrators, to allow as much autonomy as possible." Several interviewees suggested we need to reengage those who want to stay. One said, "We have staff days to let people know what's going on.... We immediately tell people when something pertinent has happened, even if we have to walk around and tell them."

A key to enhance worker/organizational communication is to make practitioners feel appreciated. As one co-researcher described it,

"When you are talking about being appreciative, I think of all of these organizations that we are talking about, I don't think anybody has gone into them, idealistically or not, for the money, because none of these organizations pays well. But I think it's the attitude of the administration, it's the pat on the back, which is very simple but if you're so burnt out yourself as an administrator, or emotionally flat, then you're not going to pat people on the back, you're going to go through your day, and if that's all you have...."

The most commonly suggested actions to address worker/organizational communication issues was to train administrators and supervisors in the same holistic,

empowering approach to their staff as they do to their clients that the organization serves. A barrier to providing such training is the lack of resources, as it is not often a priority of the organization's funding source. Through their research, co-researchers found another plan of action: acknowledging that workers are the experts in their disciplines, and are capable of suggesting and advocating for specific interventions to improve their organizational culture.

### *Emic/Etic Relationships*

There are emic/etic dilemmas throughout this case study. In the literature, the roots of the dilemma are the distinction between the emic, which refers to the insider context of individuals, groups, or cultures; and the etic, the grand theories that are employed in inquiry, outsider, theories that often had little relevance or meaning in the emic context (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). I use the term emic/etic relationships to refer both to insider/outsider status as well as "us and them" thinking in the case study and the human service workplace. In the matrix of themes and substantive areas, the theme emic/etic relationships indicates the areas of the tangible and intangible support received from colleagues, relationships within and outside of the participatory action group, relationships and support for those who participated in focus groups, and participants' relationship to the insider positionality of the facilitator.

Participants in this project experienced many emic and etic relationships, but the nature of these relationships was not linear. The power and authority inherent in these relationships was multidirectional. While most participants had positions of authority in their organizations and a relatively high degree of autonomy in their jobs, the roles of most were restrained by those in their organizations with more authority and by etic

relationships with their funding sources. At the same time they exercised authority over others with even less autonomy than they had.

These relationships carried over into the roles that participants brought into the research project. There were many examples of 'power over' thinking. One example is the ongoing plan to initiate change in the system through interventions with other administrators and supervisors.

Further, many of these relationships changed during the course of the project. After the focus groups, project participants acknowledged that direct service workers at lower levels of authority and less autonomy in their organizations had to deal with the results of many of the same workplace stressors they did. And participants were conditioned by their experiences outside the project to think of relations of power as a zero sum game. That is, there was a concern that as their insights were applied in the workplace, that the resulting increased autonomy of lower level workers would reduce their own autonomy.

The systemic issue for emic and etic relationships is that the intangible support from like-minded colleagues strengthens institutional ties (emic relationships); while there is the awareness of real risks to those who take initiatives or who speak truth to power in the psychosocial area (etic relationships). In their discussions, co-researchers identified a major action that can be taken to improve relationships, creating mutual professional recognition and respect. But there are etic barriers to this action, for example hierarchical relationships within the organization and responsibilities to outside stakeholders. The key to action in this area is to create more communicative space, to make the etic emic by the use of power and voice. An example is to take the relationship

between the academic and the human service communities in the production of knowledge. As the academic community increasingly adopts participatory methods, it will become more aware of the importance of the local production of knowledge by practitioners.

Another substantive area of note was co-researchers' relationship to the facilitator within and outside the participatory action group. The emic positionality of the researcher was a major feature of this study. All of the co-researchers were known to me and knew me, and I had worked closely with most of them for years. At the first meeting of the group, participants said, "We're here to help you get your Ph.D." This was a great ice breaker for the group, although I experienced what gradually became a perceived need to "work the hyphens" (Weis & Fine, 2000) of my several and sometime conflicting roles.

In my discussion of researcher positionality, I noted the analogy of original sin (Moore, 2007): the researcher's self-consciousness about her/his views and beliefs can lead to feelings of estrangement from colleagues, the discovery that one is no longer clothed with the innocence of ignorance. While I still benefit from the insider role as a participant in the human service system, I also had an etic relationship with the group, in that I now also represent the academic community, representing outsider research.

Specifically, on several occasions some members of the group viewed the role of the university as obstructive and inappropriate interference. The best example of this occurred when after three months of increasingly acting as a therapeutic support group providing coping support to each other, my dissertation advisor reminded me that my project was the study of participatory action research project, and not the study of a support group. I had the option of changing the research question to reflect the groups'

focus, but I chose to continue the case study of the participatory action research project. I made my decision based on my acceptance of the axioms of the participatory worldview and on my choice to be a participatory action researcher.

Although I conveyed the reasons for participatory inquiry to the group, I added that I reached my decision after consulting with my dissertation advisor. In this way acted in an etic, academic role. Further, the protocols of my research were established before the group met, and they had no input into the design of the case study. I was no longer clothed with the innocence of ignorance. Because of my emic relationship with the members of the group, members chose to place the blame for what they perceived as my etic role on the dissertation advisor.

The emic relationship that I had with other co-researchers was only affected by the interventions above to the extent that they advised me, “Do whatever you have to do to finish the dissertation”. Co-researchers valued the development of emic relationships they experienced in the project. As mentioned above, the group quickly formed relationships of trust and safety.

There were many comments about the emic and etic relationships among group participants. One interviewee pointed out, “It’s not the usual suspects; we have representation from diverse organizations that I really respect.” Another noted that, “We are effective because we are a diverse group with different perspectives”. As a result, “We have addressed a diversity of problems from the perspectives of our different fields.” However, an interviewee noted a negative to the emic relationships of those in the group: “We feel empowered to go out and make changes, but since we’ve decided to keep it within our group I’m concerned that it stops here.”



### *Scarcity Mentality*

The theme of scarcity mentality can be described in terms of feelings of inadequacy. A basis of scarcity mentality is focusing on what others have that you don't have, rather than focusing on what you do have. Scarcity mentality is related to comparison with the other. Often workers, especially those who have experienced disadvantages in their life, do not feel that they are "as good as" their colleagues, and devalue their own experience. Areas related to scarcity mentality include individual resources, organizational financial resources, "assistance mentality" in the community, lack of time, poor interpersonal relationships, and feelings of inadequacy as researchers.

Scarcity mentality refers not only to economic scarcity and lack of resources, but also to the sense of professional inadequacy to which they lead. One example that had an ongoing impact throughout the research process was the ongoing difficulty in scheduling the group meetings. This was a result both of lack of time and resources as well as perceived lack of time and resources.

The economic circumstances of the Fayette County contribute to a range of attitudes and implicit beliefs that I identify with the theme of scarcity mentality. Scarcity mentality is systemic in the county, whose economic downturn and resulting outmigration have continued for generations. One co-researcher commented,

"We are serving the poorest of the poor, the frailest of the frail...we are entrenched in generations of the system. You know, they just can't break the cycle".

In comparisons with other counties in Pennsylvania, economic statistics indicate that Fayette County is an economically depressed area with multiple negative socio-

economic indicators. The majority of the population of the county is descendants of immigrants brought in to live in company towns to mine coal in abominably dangerous conditions during the peak of its prosperity early in the Twentieth Century, when local leaders bragged of the number of millionaires per capita. Today they are immeasurably better off in terms of material well being, but the large economic disparities in the population continue.

Co-researchers noted that for large parts of the population there is no culture of empowerment. Many agencies have policies that commit them to their clients' self-belief and empowerment to combat the negative effects of scarcity mentality. Human service practitioners work to identify the strengths needed to break out of this material and intellectual scarcity mentality to an attitude of self-belief.

In the psychosocial area, providing personal resources is the key to addressing scarcity mentality and contributing to empowerment, while in the action area the key to. The barriers to actions to provide clients with the personal resources that they need to overcome their scarcity mentality is the lack of time and inadequate resources of human service organizations and practitioners. Such barriers are linked to the larger workloads and lower pay that are related to the crisis in human services.

Several co-researchers related examples of the negative outcomes of scarcity mentality for clients with whom they had formed a helping relationship, only to ultimately face negative outcomes attributed to their large caseloads which did not allow them to devote enough time and energy to the individual. A consequence of scarcity mentality was a sense of guilt for the worker. One participant summed it up:

“...we beat ourselves up because we couldn’t stay with that person as much as we’d want to because there is always somebody else.... And then we have to prioritize our time to make our time fit and to be the most productive.... There’s only so much we can do and we have to pick our battles.... I have to learn not to come back and berate myself for not seeing this, for not anticipating that, or not being able to do this, because there’s still another life I have after work”.

The lack of resources became an even bigger concern to participants when the increasing severity of social problems with which they were contending was taken into consideration. As one experienced administrator noted,

“...the people we are serving are more complex than they were ten years ago; they are more involved with multiple systems”

There is a real economic basis to scarcity mentality. Human service workers are paid less than those in comparable county positions, even though they get paid to protect society from its biggest problems. In one neighboring county, equivalent human service workers earn \$10,000 more in salaries, in another there’s an \$18,000 difference. Local elected officials, such as county commissioners and township supervisors, are primarily concerned with an inadequate tax base and limiting human service funding to avoid tax increases.

Workers have to determine what is the most pressing problem and who is at most risk, because funding is always an issue. An endemic problem is the lack of agency vehicles for workers who do home visits. Another common problem is the lack of clerical

support, in spite of the extensive documentation that has to be done. In spite of large caseloads, workers are required to type their own notes.

Co-researchers noted that there is a relationship between scarcity mentality and social class, which affects some human services' attempts to provide support:

“For me, the people that I’ve had the most difficult time with is the people who identify themselves as the elitists in the community, those who I think have the misperceptions of what we do, who have the money, who don’t have to tap into drug and alcohol. They have the same problems; they’re just not coming to you. They go to Morgantown or Pittsburgh. So to me, our clients, the only difference is that they’ve been diagnosed with an illness, they have the same thing as some of the folks I’ve worked with who haven’t been diagnosed yet.”

Another added,

“The fact in defining the community is not just the elite. You also have this very strong group of folks, who are just above the poverty level, maybe working two or three jobs, and they’re not using services, and they resent the folks that are getting services ... most of our services are means tested, and not as in other countries available to everybody. The programs that people like are Social Security and the entitlement programs that treat everybody the same. So the means tests make them resent the people who are getting help and the people who are providing the help, the bleeding heart social workers, the enablers.”

In the course of the research project, co-researchers became conscious that scarcity mentality was a mental construct that could be addressed by a facilitating a relationship of trust and collegial dialogue. Those workers who are valued are more comfortable with their own skills and resources, are better able to escape scarcity mentality, because they do not have to validate themselves by comparing themselves to others. A prerequisite to rejecting scarcity mentality is the adoption of a theoretical framework of organizations that views the individual worker as the organization's most valued resource.

### *Marginalization*

The theme of marginalization is an apt one to describe relative lack of status of the human service profession. Historically, the need for human services has become part of the "culture wars" in American society, as some view human service workers as at best "bleeding heart", or even more negatively as "enablers". Systemically, marginalization results in the lack of support experienced by so many human service systems, with the psychosocial result of dealing with the consequences of negative attitudes to the profession.

A major theme that ran throughout the project was a sense of marginalization. Human service workers were marginalized by their employers, by the human service system as a whole, by the community, and by those whom they served. Sub themes for marginalization include marginalization by the community and the public, systemic marginalization, and lack of organizational support. The group suggested that marginalization by the community and the public could be addressed by public advocacy: telling your own story in the community and in the media. In this sense, advocacy

consists of winning the hearts and minds of the community. Increased consciousness of marginalization may empower marginalized workers to speak truth to power.

Participant recognized that their organizations bought in to the prevailing marginalization of the human service profession. As one co-researcher reported,

“Our human service organizations don’t appreciate their most valuable resource, which is their staff.... When I hear county commissioners slam human service professionals, that’s very disheartening.... And that attitude resonates with the rest of the community.... The newspapers seem to have an animus toward human service workers, too.”

Participatory action researchers reacted to the marginalization described by those in the focus groups because this reflected their own marginalization. Thus the researchers were motivated to look for ways to provide their colleagues with organizational and systemic support. As one co-researcher said, “There’s just not a whole lot you can do with these jobs, but there is something you can do when there’s a good audit or something. When we have a good audit or evaluation, I tell people to take a half a day off. It’s little things like that. I feel no way qualified to advise people that’s what you should do, but those are areas I think where some of what happens in organizations can be helped.” Another offered, “We send \$50 gift cards to staff when we have a good audit.”

Participants said the state is increasingly coming up with more and more regulations and standards that the agencies have to live up to, but without any substantial increases in funding. At one focus group they wished that the people that made the regulations actually had the experience of working in their jobs. Another focus group said

that their organization just balances the funding of one program with another, and everybody was pretty frustrated with the system.

The only support from the community, and it is mixed, is from service recipients: “I think it’s what keeps them going to work is that the majority of our clients appreciate us.” However, there were major concerns about the lack of respect from clients and from the broader public. A co-researcher pointed out,

“What’s the purpose? It’s something for the poor.... They think we’re all enablers.”

In family service organizations, there is a lack of respect both from teens and from their parents. Participants in a focus group pointed out that they are there to help parents straighten out their child; but parents feel it’s the agency’s job to straighten out their child, and so workers get a lot of verbal abuse from the parents. That attitude is shared by judges, and as a result the workers are not able to do their jobs. Participants noted that over the last couple of years the whole attitude of the courts has changed, that they’re toothless now:

“We stopped doing drug tests, because what’s the use of doing drug tests when there are no consequences to the youth if they test positive. We feel it’s their job to hold the line in the community, but we are not getting a lot of support from the courts.

Marginalization can lead to even more serious consequences for the worker:

“They can’t respond to any of it, because when you only have one side of the story, the paper reports on all these lawsuits, these people get sued every day, the judge can’t get sued, they get sued, they’re on the case. It’s

the community's perception, that's why to change the perception of (the agency), I have to do it. Those workers can't do it."

Nevertheless, at least to some extent, it appeared that this marginalization was not a major impediment to the passion and commitment of the members of this group. Someone asked, "When we all retire, what do you think we are going to do?" Everyone that answered said that they were going to volunteer. One person went even farther:

"I don't think that (learning to deal with negative public perceptions) is what we want to be about. I don't want to be about just dealing with life, just surviving. I want to make a difference. I want to be out there passionately, and with hope... recapturing some of that hope that I had when I first started out, you know, when I thought I was going to save the world. And then I found out...that it's pretty hard to save myself."

A turning point in the project occurred when a participant passionately stated, "I think the community has some responsibility here. These people's job's needs to be celebrated like firefighters were after 9/11. There is no difference. Their lives are in jeopardy, there's low pay, and they're saving children."

The group identified the appropriate action to take to begin to change the marginalization of their profession was to tell their story to the public, and when necessary, to tell truth to power.

There is one other aspect of marginalization that project participants were aware of that did not directly relate to the human service workplace. A parallel phenomenon is the marginalization of qualitative methods of inquiry in general and the participatory



action research approach in particular. Co-researchers expressed theoretical concerns about the marginalization they experienced by the use of an alternative research approach: it's not what they learned in research methods class! However, the findings of the current research indicate what can be achieved within a community of practice, to address complexity of society in a local context. In other words, they are concerned mainly with the practical outcomes of the research approach.

### *Alienation*

The theme of alienation is almost the opposite of passion/commitment. A systemic outcome of the theme of alienation is low morale; psychosocial outcomes are self-destructive behaviors. Actions taken by the alienated worker can range from intent to quit to antagonizing others (clients, co-workers, and administrators) in the workplace. Barriers to workplace outcomes related to alienation include objectification of others, the dehumanization spoken of throughout this study. Facilitation is relatively ineffective because the alienated worker either will not participate or will actively undermine the goals of facilitation. A theoretical reference for this is Freire's assistencialism, which views the alienated worker as a part of a social service that is not about the helping relationship but rather is about social control.

One participant insisted that she loved her work, but because of continuous staff reductions in her agency over the years she was now doing the jobs of four employees. As a result, she was working evenings and weekends and did not spend enough time with her family. She reported attending conferences offered by her agency that addressed stress management and the importance of separating work life and home life, but

indicated that the ideas from these conferences didn't carry over into the real world of her organization.

Another member added she was not the same person now as when she started working in the field. She felt that she had become less trustful, more cynical and emotionally exhausted. A third member shared that she experienced feelings of cynicism and hopelessness about our county and the whole country:

“You talk to nurses, you talk to teachers, and they are all feeling the same thing.... I've seen so much, I have no tolerance or patience with pettiness.... Another indicator is the number of people in their 50's who talk about retiring. What keeps some people going is that they need health insurance.... That's what's keeping me here, until Medicare clicks in.”

Co-researchers discussed alienation in terms of behaviors that they saw in their co-workers. These included: smoking, overeating, lack of patience, workers with anger management problems such as yelling, throwing things, back-stabbing, and inappropriate language, and those that they thought were in need of counseling because of their inability to get along with your co-workers or their clients. In the early stages of the study, one participant even wondered if participants were more active in the participatory action research meetings when she was not present.

Participants reported that their experience at work is not like what they learned from textbooks. One stated,

“We come up with treatment plans and write all this stuff down and nobody really looks at it, it just has to be there for the inspectors that come around to inspect your paperwork. We never get caught up.”

Co-researchers said their home life can affect their work life negatively, but also that having someone at work to talk to relieved stress.

People want to be a part of something new and creative. This does not occur when the leaders of the organization are suspicious of any changes they don't initiate, thus restricting them to linear, win-lose thinking. One extreme example was provided by a participant who described a former administrator as being a 'passion killer', whose philosophy was, "...the only way you can get people to change is to put them through gut wrenching pain."

In a couple of the focus groups, participants talked about the fear for their life when they go out, even when they go out with a police officer and they know there are weapons in the home or it's a violent situation, they still have to knock on the door while the policemen stand behind them with their weapons drawn to return fire. One of the pieces they do have in place is a debriefing model, which provides counseling resources to workers who experience personal trauma as a result of their work. While in a high profile case they do have a place to refer them that's confidential where they can confide in someone. Some of them have used it, but they fear what administration would think if they took advantage of the debriefing program.

There are interrelationships among the perceptions of material and emotional poverty and how they contribute to alienation, in that the participants find loss of control over their work environment and their the ability to exercise the passion to be a helper. The impact was summarized by one as, "... we define ourselves by our work". Another participant provided an example of what she called 'emotional disconnect', saying,

“When my children were younger, and one of them was sick... I would be so engrossed with what I am doing that I would forget to call.”

This alienation even extends to apathy about the electoral process (this discussion took place after an off-year election), because of the fact that most people don't vote in local elections. One said,

“... It's like that self-fulfilling prophecy, I can't make a difference. How do we get people so that they don't have a defeatist attitude, so they believe they can change themselves first, and ... how their behavior within an organization can change the organization and change the system?”

There was no immediate answer to the question as to how we could learn effective strategies of organizational change that would promote effective changes in our own organizations and systems; but the questioner was on the right track in seeing the relationship between attitude and change.

### Summary

In this chapter, I set out to explore in more depth what meaning the participatory action approach held for the co-researchers in this project and examine potential outcomes for the human service workplace in order to approach an understanding of the contribution that participatory action research can make to solving problems such as the creation of a more 'human' human service system.

Starting with the key themes identified in the research analysis, I worked back and forth with the data to identify sub themes for each theme, and examined the interactions among the sub themes. In this way, I addressed the strength and power of participatory

action approach, to show how small group of committed people can create change within their own system. In order to create change there must be trust, support and openness to difference and negation for all parties involved.

To summarize the dynamics briefly, the findings indicate that most workers enter the human service field with passion and commitment, only to have these challenged by the marginalization of their profession and the influence of the organizational culture to affect aspects of worker and organizational communication. These systematic issues are exacerbated by the scarcity mentality which they share with those they help; but they are alleviated by the support that they receive, both from their organizations and from their colleagues, families, and their values. Many workers without adequate support systems become alienated, which is exhibited in the constellations of symptoms which are categorized as burnout.

I began this study because of my own interest in why the human services are not highly valued in my community, and why so many of my colleagues and students who start out so passionately become alienated from those they entered the field to serve. The findings from my case study of the participatory action approach show not only that my concerns are shared by many in the field, but that an analysis of their perspectives shows that they view the issues in terms of marginalization, alienation, passion, relationships and support, within the context of the needs of the community and the strengths and limitations of the system in which they work. What emerged for them during the process was a critical consciousness that led to informed actions, and the knowledge that they now have the ability to work collaboratively to bring about change in their own workplace and in the larger human service system.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION

#### Introduction

This dissertation is a case study of the use of a participatory action research approach to deal with an intractable problem in the workplace. In this study, this approach is applied to an innovative intervention to examine the problem of burnout in the human service workplace. The research question is, “In what ways and to what extent can a process of participatory action research enable human service professionals to examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace?”

In this chapter, I first provide an overview of the study, examining critical points in its development, and then examine the participatory action research project and its interaction with the culture of the community. I then examine the relationship of the findings to the literature about the participatory worldview and action research, and how it provides credibility to those theories in praxis by the initiation of a community of practice. I especially find significance of the study, both from praxis and theory, in participants’ experience about what power looks like to them, how the critical consciousness that grows out of the participatory action research process empowers them and their coworkers in their role of professional practitioners and in finding their power and voice. I will discuss the limitations of the study, including issues surrounding facilitation and how paradigm changes appear to be stalled at the local level. From this discussion I will find lessons for future researchers.

As the previous chapters indicate, this is a data rich study. There is not a similar case in the literature where participants, facilitated by an insider action researcher, have

attempted to use the participatory action research approach to create changes in the workplace to alleviate the stressors in the system that lead to worker burnout. In Yin's (2003) description of case study research, this richness of the data and the atypical nature of the research design of the approach are among the characteristics of a good case.

The findings of this case study are congruent with what is predicted in the literature. However, I did not anticipate the form many of the project outcomes would take. One of the ways qualitative inquiry differs from quantitative methodology is its openness to emergent design. Research design emerges and develops in naturalistic inquiry as events unfold (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This emergent design requires a tolerance for ambiguity as qualitative inquiry is open and pragmatic, ultimately requiring inductive analysis (Patton, 2002). In this study, the research design changed in many ways as the participatory action research process unfolded. For example, in the initial research design, it was anticipated that the first iteration of the research could be concluded after eight bi-weekly meetings. The process eventually extended over 23 meetings over a 16 month period.

That there were many findings that I did not anticipate can be seen in the difference between my expectations that workers would be empowered and take steps to make structural change their workplace as they developed critical consciousness, and the more complex matrix of relationships that I discovered that describe the interactions of power in the workplace. Among those relationships are the often conflicting roles of the facilitator conducting insider participatory action research. Nevertheless, at the end of the process, there were considerable indications there are many ways that to a considerable

extent a process of participatory action research can enable human service professionals to examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace.

## Overview of the Study

### *Development of the Participatory Process*

The following is a brief review of the development of the participatory process, as described more fully in the Project Narrative Chapter above. The first stage of the project began in September, 2007. In the course of the first few meetings of the group, participants developed a support group, articulating and sharing their experiences with burnout. This was both a therapeutic and an educational experience for them as they discussed their own individual and agency worlds. It became evident that there were more similarities than differences in between their work environment and that and their fellow participants.

This support group was therapeutic to participants as they shared their experience with burnout. It is noteworthy that several participants believe that this therapeutic stage was a necessary stage before the group could move on and adopt an action research emphasis. As participants began to better understand each other's work environments, they became aware of each other's needs, and how they could take action and create synergies to address those concerns. However, there was insufficient information presented to participants about participatory action research practice during this stage of the group process, and little discussion about the theory underlying the study. Nevertheless, the close relationships that developed during this period were the basis of future group planning, action, and reflection.



The first half of 2008 saw a restructuring of the project as participants transitioned to their role as co-researchers in a participatory action research process. There was a change in patterns of attendance with the changing course of the project. For three months early in 2008, several participants were inactive. However, they came back when they realized that they could still find the support of shared relationships even as the group's focus shifted to research. Participants identified research questions to investigate what was important for them to know in order to understand human service systems. They developed a broad view of what constituted the problem of burnout as they began to see the human service system as a whole.

In Summer 2008, there was a research stage where additional investigative methods were adopted as the group planned research initiatives, and participants took on a research role. After considerable discussion, the group adopted the research question, "Does burnout exist in the Fayette County human service system? If yes, what does it look like for you"? They developed open-ended interview questions, and prepared to co-facilitate the focus groups.

Almost every co-researcher co-facilitated a focus group. The group took advantage of two upcoming cross-training events and developed open ended questionnaires for participants at the events. Their purpose was to investigate to what extent the perspectives of non-supervisory direct service workers differed from those of the supervisory, administrative, and academic members that constituted the participatory action research group. Participation in the focus groups was limited to direct service, non-supervisory workers. The questionnaires were conducted at trainings and collaborative events attended by human service professionals the month after the focus groups ended.

The research stage concluded with an interactive discussion to reflect on the group's experience of the project.

The focus groups and questionnaires added to the credibility of the initial findings of the participatory action research group about the meaning and consequences of burnout in the human service system. I observed group members facilitate focus groups and develop questionnaires to gain knowledge and understanding of the situational stressors which cause burnout. My observations of their research activities as focus group facilitators was more relevant to the research question of the case study than to their own reports of the focus groups that they presented to participatory action research group. But their reports on the focus groups add to the thick, rich description of the process and the quantity of data help assure the confirmability of the study, while their ongoing member checks of meeting minutes and summaries I produced add authenticity.

But the best argument for the credibility of the study is that at the end of the data gathering phase of case study, co-researchers in the participatory action research group decided to continue their engagement with each other as part of the county's Human Service Council Research and Development Committee. Not only do they plan to implement a three pronged approach to reach out to administrators, supervisors, and direct service workers in the human service system that they planned; but they also will bring the participatory action research approach to the Human Service Council and thus to the larger human service system.

#### *Ethical Issues Involving Participatory Action Research and the Community*

There are practical problems doing participatory action research in the workplace. A problem that had much impact on this case study is the commitment of time that

participation in action research requires from already overworked employees (Palshaugen, 2006). This was evident from the first meeting of the project with the difficulty of finding appropriate times to schedule meetings. I discussed this in the analysis in terms of the scarcity mentality that it demonstrates. Kristiansen and Bloch-Poulsen, (2006) argue that action research programs can increase pressure on employees. Their description of this phenomenon increased my concern that an unanticipated outcome of the study would be adding to the stress of participants as they studied reducing stress in the workplace.

In the course of the study, I observed that additional pressure comes from individual or group requests for more involvement in the research project, increasing the participant's workload and invading spare time with projects. Dilemmas for the individual participant include saying 'yes' or to say 'no' to new tasks; to helping colleagues versus being burned out; and making shared decisions. All of these actions are time consuming and contribute to negative stress such as overload, absent mindedness, and fatigue, but also to positive stress such as work satisfaction, engagement, and increased professionalism. The results of the current study suggest that, overall, participation in the project resulted in more positive than negative stress when the process was understood by participants and progress was being made in achieving their goals.

I was also concerned that the local knowledge thus generated could be employed by the human service system to more efficiently achieve the outcome of more social control. This may be particularly true as the funding for human service programs filters through the office of the county commissioners, administrators who can select which programs can be initiated in the county and reject those that lead to a loss of local control.

Just as in the discussion of positive and negative stress in participatory research, this implies a single sum game where human service workers were the ‘winners’ and ‘losers’. In theory the growth of critical consciousness leads to the empowerment of all stakeholders in the system. Nevertheless, care must be taken to examine the relationships of power in the system and to avoid the potential risk of the research leading to increased social control, lest the good intentions of the human sciences once more be diverted to reinforcing the social status quo.

There is a fine line between being a critical constructive insider and a critical-destructive outsider (Moore, 2007). Co-researchers came to understand this distinction as they designed and initiated focus groups. There was some concern in the agencies at which research was conducted that the participatory action research group might affect the culture of their organizations in unpredictable ways. Members of the group who took on the etic role of research facilitators for direct service worker focus groups were uncomfortable to take on the next step of initiating culture change in other organizations in the human service system. The local human service system, which lacks a local administrative entity, has a group norm shared by most agencies that change in the human service system grows out of emic relationships in collaboratively based interagency organizations.

I have noted that is important for the inside action researcher to ‘work the hyphen’ between the self and other in insider action research (Weis & Fine, 2000). This involves being aware of my personal roles and my relationship to others. There is violence implicit in how the inside action researcher views or ignores others in finding our own subjective experience (Weis & Fine, 2000). To avoid this requires critical consciousness in how the

researcher represents the other responsibly, to transform public consciousness and 'common sense'.

I addressed this implicit violence by empowering project participants to plan and implement research, addressing them in meetings and correspondents as 'co-researchers' rather than as 'participants'. At the same time, I supported them in the decision to retain the support that they received from their relationships with each other that was part of the group process, even though this effectively barred us from recruiting any new members to the group. The consensus of the group was that the changes that will occur in the human service workplace will be incremental rather than coming about by any sudden top down policy shift.

Finally, there were potential risks to participant's confidentiality in that Fayette is a relatively small county in which many in human services workers are acquainted with each other. While I observed no participant at risk and no risks were reported by the participants as a result of their participation in the research process, one participant whose supervisor was also a participant did withdraw from the project after completing her initial commitment.

*Ethical Issues in Relations between the University and the Community in Participatory Action Research*

Action research is more likely to be anchored in a local research community; it is not solidly anchored in academic organizations (Palshaugen, 2006). Although there are precedents for action research dissertations in my university, the hegemony of the post-positivist paradigm has not been seriously challenged. This study was anchored in both the academy and the community, and the hegemony of the postpositivist paradigm

created some dilemmas. For example, those participants with some training in traditional positivist research methods initially thought that the action research approach was not ‘real’ research. Much of my effort as facilitator was to convince both the community and the university of the relevance of the participatory action research approach. This will be of some value to future action researchers. The efforts involved in the promotion of the action research approach created stress for me as the participatory action research facilitator, and on the members of the research group who anticipated a less ‘messy’ and open ended process.

These issues were exacerbated because I did not anticipate the extent of the burnout related psychosocial needs of participants in the process, including myself, and the strong desire to meet those needs through the creation of a safe communicative space. These needs resulted in the creation of a workaholics’ support group. In order to comply with the research protocols approved by the university before the initiation of the research, I had to choose between changing the research protocols and research question and continue to participate in and study the support group, or to refocus my efforts on participatory action research. I chose the latter. I was driven by the need to both address the larger systemic problems in the local human service workplace and to use the research project to gain experience and academic credibility for action research. Discussions with my dissertation advisor helped to clarify my thinking on this issue.

However, in my efforts to communicate this to participants, I framed my decision as ‘feedback received from the chair of the dissertation committee’. I did not work hard to disabuse my fellow researchers of the idea that I was employing my power as the group facilitator in order to meet the academic requirements of the dissertation. I did not

explain it to the group as the fact that I was working the hyphens caused by my dual emic/etic insider/outsider relationship to the research. A consequence of not clearly explaining this later led me to understand what Weis and Fine (2000) meant when they said the inside action researcher must be aware of who they are afraid will see their analysis.

To be effective, the inside action researcher must have academic credibility in the academic community. Ethically, this must be accomplished without losing sight of social responsibilities, especially toward co-researchers and the community. As a participatory action researcher, my goal was to create social change. Movements for social change take place in many settings and in varying contexts. This entangled me in the relationships of power that governs the human service system.

There was tension between the social change goal of participatory action research and my academic researcher and community leader roles. Throughout the study I experienced some confusion over these competing roles, and at times I conflated my roles of the facilitator as facilitator of a participatory action research project and as the author of a dissertation case study and a member of the human service practitioner community.

Achieving a more ethical level of behavior involves a consensus building approach in a safe communicative space that takes time but is more sustainable. A sign that this was achieved during the project is the reaction to an intervention into a local agency proposed by the facilitator. In a unanimous disagreement with the facilitator, co-researchers were able to reach an informed decision near the end of the study assessing and acting on the nature of the risks they were taking.

## Relationship between Findings and Theoretical Framework

### *Congruence of Findings with the Participatory Worldview*

The participatory worldview is the research paradigm which holds that values are as basic to the research enterprise as ontology, epistemology, and methodology. The participatory worldview poses the axiological question about values, what is intrinsically worthwhile. The ontological, epistemological, and methodological questions deal with truth, while the axiological question of values deals with being, and with what is to be valued because of what is good. The participatory worldview deals with the democratic and spiritual dimensions of life systems in all of their complexity and in regional contexts (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). The conceptual location for the proposed study is in the participatory worldview. If participatory action research approach is successful in enabling human service practitioners to take action on the systemic causes of burnout in the human service workplace, it is a strong argument for the effectiveness of the participatory worldview.

Through the participatory action research approach, co-researchers in the project taught themselves and each other about personal resources, finding purpose, coping, and self-awareness. These are not cognitive concepts that can be taught in a traditional manner. Rather, they are resources learned in an interpersonal context that can transform the worker and the human service workplace. This knowledge contains within it the potential for social change.

The group wrestled with the systemic issues in which the stress and burnout literature, social work literature, and organization management literature converge. Guidance in addressing these problems can be found in the literature. However, the



literature provides the etic advice of experts in the several disciplines. Co-researchers in this project were seeking their own solutions to problems that existed in their lived world, and to which they, and their fellow human service workers, had deep experiential knowledge.

As I discussed in the Literature Review chapter, action research is grounded in the practical experience of the inquirer-knower-thinker (Eikeland, 2001). Action research resurrects the practical context of classical philosophy in which the philosophical concepts of science and research emerged, in which every inquiry should be directed at how it is possible to live well. The role of the researcher is not only focusing on the solution of a problem and on human development (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). Action research takes into consideration Foucault's discussion of power in relationships and Habermas' theory of communicative action (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003), and action researchers embrace messes; that is, multi-dimensional intractable problems that cannot be addressed by single discipline knowledge systems. Quality in this study exists to the extent that the participatory action research process focuses on systems change, human development, communicative action, and power. These processes will be discussed in the following sections.

### *Quality in Action Research*

The literature shows that many different things have been done and said in the name of participatory action research. Following Reason (1991, 2001), I argue that participatory action research emphasizes the political aspects of knowledge production, in the tradition of the liberationist movements, as knowledge is an instrument of power and control.

Therefore, quality in action research is demonstrated when the inquiry forges a more direct link between knowledge, personal, and social action to contribute directly to the flourishing of persons, communities, and the ecosystems of which they are a part. This draws attention to the moral dimension of action research, in which inquiry is in the pursuit of worthwhile purposes. This also resonates with Denzin & Lincoln's (2005) "seventh moment" in qualitative research, the "...critical conversation about race gender, nation-states, globalization, freedom and community;" Heron's (2001) "primacy of the practical;" and Lewin's adage (1951) "There is nothing so practical as a good theory."

Participatory action research occurs in public spheres; self constituted networks of communication among participants that arise in response to a crisis in practice caused by loss of legitimation (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Habermas' theory of communicative action draws attention to economic and political relations within those public spheres. Because they are inclusive; they presuppose communicative freedom and generate communicative power. These local investigations lead to broader interests and social movements, and transformation of professional and civic practice. We fall back on the meta-practice of communicative action when it is not evident what should be done. Paraphrasing Fals Borda, we transform the world in order to investigate it.

This study examined the intractable problem of burnout in the human service workplace. Participants in the study learned to take the step between knowledge and personal action. In this way, they are demonstrating that participatory action research provides space for a meta-practice of communicative action that can transform both theory and practice in the human service workplace.

This process was described in Reason's (2006) address to the World Congress of Action Research. He argued that forming a communicative space is a form of action, and that the most important thing we can do in certain situations is to develop better forms of communication and dialogue to develop a participative and democratic process. This was a major theme of the project. Reason added,

“Good action research does not arrive fully-fledged in a clear research design separate from the stream of life, but evolves over time as communities of inquiry develop within communities of practice ...and to do this in an educative manner that increases participants' capacity to engage in inquiring lives” (Reason, 2006, p.5).

This study illustrates Reason's argument in praxis. The research process evolved over time, in a period of 16 months rather than the four months that I originally anticipated; it developed into a community of inquiry that extended into the community of practice, and the findings show that it did so in an educative manner that showed participants applying the principles of critical inquiry to their practice and to their lives. The co-researchers in this study extended their critical thinking by taking the participatory action research cycle of planning, research, action, and reflection into the workplace.

Issues such as quality and credibility of research are based in large part on the audience of the research and its intended purposes (Patton, 2002). Credibility is a heuristic device with attention to voice, critical reflexivity, reciprocity, and sharing the perquisites of privilege. The audience of this methodological study will be both the action research community, as the study examines the efficacy of that critical change approach

to address a specific problem in the human service workplace. Insofar as the purpose of the study is to determine if participatory action research can foster human service workers to effect change in this community, quality and credibility of research will be based on the outcomes of the participatory action approach.

### *Communities of Practice*

Participatory action research is a democratic collaboration that creates knowledge from the cultural traditions and lived experiences of common people (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Since knowledge is political, in the sense that people want their own ways to be accepted (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006); theories need to be tested against their knowledge base. Research is systemic inquiry made public. Action requires a kind of power of knowledge strong enough to match the power of the actors of the basic enterprises of capitalism to contribute to practical change (Palshaugen, 2006).

Action research can be initiated in communities of practice, which provide a safe and productive environment in which to reflect, and offer researcher and participants a chance to adopt action research principles and activities in their own research. In this study participants created a safe and productive environment, which only in time developed into a community of practice with research and action initiatives. Praxis preceded theory. In the course of the project, co-researchers discussed and applied their ability to achieve bottom-up changes in their human service system.

After the initial analysis was conducted, it became evident that findings about the choice of research methods and the selection of actions to be taken were connected to the group's plans to take action to address the problem in the workplace, which was the

beginning of the creation of communities of practice. The dissertation research was only the first iteration of a participatory action research project.

Participants agreed that once started, it should be an ongoing research with more cycles of planning, action, and reflection. Additional iterations of the research process could prove valuable in assessing the efficacy of participatory action research. I anticipate that in future iterations of this participatory action research process, communities of practice will develop relationships to the local human service system, as co-researchers continue the spiral of planning, action, and research.

Thus, the answer to whether participants did “become co-researchers who can examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace” can be answered by whether they successfully initiated a community of practice. The findings shed light on the process of how the participants became co-researchers in a participatory action research group, sometimes in overlapping stages, over a period of time. Co-researchers were highly motivated to address the issues identified through their research. They began planning new initiatives to support administrators, supervisors, and front line staff; and strategies to implement these initiatives. Thus, the group moved toward becoming a community of practice that is continuing the process of examining, reflecting, and acting on the problems in their workplace.

### Significance of Findings

In the Project Narrative chapter above, I identified four major findings of the study. First, structural influences such as devaluing the worker’s contribution and lack of autonomy, the crisis in the human service workplace, the tension between the expertise

model and the empowerment model of service provision, and the postpositivist paradigm governing human service disciplines, affected the research project. Second, how and to what extent the participatory action research project developed strategies to address and change conditions that lead to stress and burnout in the workplace. Third, changes in participants in the project, how they empowered themselves and discovered their power and voice. And fourth, what it means to be a participatory action researcher, surfacing learnings about facilitation in the participatory action research process, about relationships, power, and ethics in a postpositivist world university, agency, and community. These findings are examined more fully in the following sections.

### *Finding Power and Voice*

Early in the study, I envisioned that participants would empower themselves to seek greater autonomy in their workplace. Participation would free them to use their training, skills, and interpersonal and group relations to their benefit. An initial goal for the participatory action research process was to address the problem of burnout by allowing human service workers to enhance their autonomy and find their voice, and establish long term commitment to participatory action research methods of planning, action, and reflection with voice and power, in short, to change the way we do business.

A reflective evaluation of the role of power in the human service system indicates that the challenges are much more complex. In this section, I look more closely at how the process of reflection on the process of burnout changed and empowered the participants in the project, and how they found power and voice through their role as participatory action researchers. Co-researchers spoke of the strength and cohesion of their group, the lessons learned that they applied to their work and personal life, their

identification of problem areas and their development of critical ways of thinking to deal with them.

In the interactive discussion with co-researchers at the end of the process, the group reflected on their project. From their experience in the research project, they learned that both people and systems can change, and that change comes after they become aware of the problems.

Participation in the project and the development of critical consciousness alone were not sufficient to increase all participants' autonomy. In some cases, change would require a transformation of power relationships in the workplace. There is a relationship between worker autonomy and the nature of the resources, support, and communication in the culture of each specific workplace. A precondition for change to occur is engagement with agency administrators, supervisors, and direct service workers, with public officials, clients, funding sources, and other stakeholders, and with the community.

In the depressed economy of the local area in which this study was conducted, the lack of resources contributes to the scarcity mentality which many human service workers share with those they help. These pressures may be alleviated by the support that workers receive from their organizations and from their colleagues, families, and their value systems. However, many workers are without adequate support systems, and develop inadequate or self-defeating coping mechanisms that lead to alienation. After examining and reflecting on the stressors in their workplace, participants determined which actions were the most appropriate to address the clusters of adaptive behaviors in reaction to stressors known as burnout.

The research problem and the research design of this study were intended to put the ownership of research into the hands of those who own the problem. The self-selection strategy in the recruitment process started with each participant's sense of perceived need. Participants in the participatory action research project had a voice in decisions about data collection. They were in control of the number, length, and scheduling of meetings. As the communicative space, relationships of trust, and research skills of the co-researchers grew throughout the research process, and participants took on tasks relating to planning and implementing research, and taking steps to initiate change in their workplace.

In this way, co-researchers in the participatory action research project developed the critical consciousness that can lead to change. This small group of practitioners not only created a communicative space, they also took steps to enhance their research skills, co-facilitating a focus group and analyzing and reporting on the results to the research group, and developing and implementing questionnaires in several venues. The best evidence for the development of critical consciousness is the consensus of the group to continue their research and action initiatives after the end of the first iteration of the participatory action research process.

The findings indicate that most workers enter the human service field with passion and commitment, only to have these challenged by the marginalization of their profession, the lack of support from the community and society at large, and the influence of the bureaucratic organizational culture in the human service workplace that negatively affects aspects of worker and organizational communication. These systematic



issues are exacerbated inadequate resources available to provide effective, empowering services.

As noted in the previous chapter, one of the realizations that emerged from the discussion of marginalization is that human service in the county is devalued and will continue to be devalued until society redefines it as a priority. And this change will not take place until human service workers develop critical consciousness at the macro level and assume the ownership of the problem.

As participants began to develop critical consciousness through participation in the research process, they became more confident in using their voice to address systems issues in their own organizations that contribute to the problem of burnout. However, in organizations in which there is a lack of resources, negative support, and poor communication, systemic issues must be addressed before substantive change can occur. The development of power and voice that grows out of critical consciousness is an important prerequisite to change.

### *Worker Empowerment*

Based on the criterion of quality in action research discussed above, one outcome in this project is the extent that the process made participants were empowered to make a difference in their workplace. Based on this criterion, I contend that the findings indicate that that the project did make a difference for participants and their workplaces. This contention is strengthened if I can show that the findings have credibility.

The findings of the study show that the group dynamics created at the beginning of the research led to increasing trust and dialogue, creating a communicative space that impacted each participant's lifeworld. As suggested by Habermas (1984), in the public

sphere, the stages of the development of the communicative space overlapped. Because research is a social process, the practice of action research occurs in social interaction between people. As discussed above, this led to a reorganization of the project as participants adopted research roles.

Co-researchers applied their new knowledge to change their own life worlds and those of their organizations. Although it remains to be seen to what extent they have empowered themselves to change the larger human service system in which they work, this will be determined when the participatory action researchers complete and reflect on their planned “three pronged approach” consisting of initiatives to administrators, supervisors, and front-line workers in the human service workplace.

An important outcome of this study is that through their participation in the participatory action research process, members of the group adopted a changed, more sophisticated approach, developing critical thinking that enables them to look at the problem in different ways. As the research process unfolds, participants develop a new understanding of systemic issues and their psychosocial consequences to the individual. As participants become co-researchers, they reflect on these findings and develop strategies for actions to address the problem. This corresponds to the action research cycle of examining, reflecting, and acting.

### Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

#### *How Structural Influences Limited Participation of Direct Service Workers*

The current study is a case study of the efficacy of a participatory action research project to address a problem in the human service workplace. As a dissertation research

project, this study was bounded in terms of time, resources, facilitation, and support from stakeholders. One major limitation of the project that needs to be examined more closely is the lack of involvement of non-supervisory direct service workers.

Most human service workers are direct service workers, those who directly serve clients. They play no administrative or supervisory role, and much less job autonomy. They did not participate in the case study. This was unintentional. As described in the Methods chapter, the recruitment strategy was based on self selection and aimed at representation from all levels of human service practitioners; it resulted in a group that was predominantly administrators. In hindsight, I realized that only these individuals had the discretion to commit time to the research. Already overworked direct service workers had less discretion to change their schedules to participate. The willingness of direct service workers to participate was demonstrated by their participation in focus groups later in the project, although they were only able to do so after arrangements had been made with their administrators.

In the section on Worker Empowerment above, I describe how the participatory action research project benefitted participations. Because direct service workers were unable to participate in the project, they did not directly share those benefits. Early in the project, participants with some level of authority in their organizations spoke of benefits going to direct service workers as ‘ripples of change’ affected their workplace. From the perspective of the direct service worker who had no role in initiating change, the organizational changes would come from those with more authority than they, and they would not have a voice in implementing these changes.

Perhaps this went unnoticed by the participants for so long because they internalized the norm discussed in the section on Ethical Issues Involving Participatory Action Research and the Community above that change in the human service system grows out of emic relationships in collaboratively based interagency organizations. Thus, the problem of the lack of power and voice of direct service workers is a systemic issue. Their relative lack of autonomy not only precluded them from participation in this study, but also from discussions affecting their workplace in collaboratively based interagency organizations that set the norms for the workplace.

It is important to understand the costs to participants for their involvement in participatory action research in the community. However, a larger issue might be to ask what the relative value is of the introduction of participants to participatory theory and approaches and the creation and articulation of local, lived knowledge. I observed a synergy created in the process of the participatory action research through which the benefits of the positive stressors of work satisfaction, engagement, and increased professionalism outweigh the costs because they aided the development of critical consciousness. Thus the benefits of participation in the project outweighed the risks.

Increased consciousness is an expected outcome of participatory research. Co-researchers learned that their position and feelings were not always compatible with the dominant ideology and power of the organization to which they belonged. This became more problematic when the organization in question supported the research. In this study, I was supported not only by the participants but also the major collaborative entities in the local human service system; and I planned to bring change to this culture's dominant ideology and power arrangements. Thus, there was some risk to individual participants in

the project. However, participants showed that they were aware of the risks to them in their decision not to intervene in an organization with which several of them had ongoing collaborative relationships.

Further, organizational colleagues who did not participate in the research may be indifferent to its results. It is possible that while the academy and the action research community will appreciate the theoretical insights generated by the research. This was not the case in this study, as participants continue as so-researchers to study and act on the problem. Nevertheless, additional iterations of the research in a local community of practice need to be done before sustainable change in the human service system can be achieved. This has led to expanded involvement that is continuing.

#### *Issues Surrounding Facilitation*

A limitation of the current research was the relative inexperience of the facilitator. Stronger facilitation skills may have allowed the focus of the project to waver at points, and could lead participants to the steps of the action research cycle more quickly. This can be an important lesson for future projects. Yet facilitation skills need to be developed experientially. The lack of an existing community of practice at the onset of the research created barriers for the project. However, any such barriers were reduced over time as both the facilitator and the participants worked out the steps of the process.

A dilemma specific to doing insider action research within my workplace is that it caused me to examine my own subjectivity and biases (Moore, 2007). As my critical consciousness of the realities of the human service workplace grew, I became more motivated to advocate for systemic change. Through questioning the assumption and norms of the human service system, I became convinced that I would have to more

proactive for system change. This caused me to conduct a training initiative in a local agency which most members of the group thought to be outside the scope of their research project. However, in, the insider can establish her/his own autonomy and identity. This positive outcome emerged for me as the project progressed.

Moore (2007) describes this dilemma with an analogy to original sin to: as the researcher becomes more self-conscious about her/his views and beliefs, it can lead to feelings of estrangement from colleagues, the discovery that one is naked, no longer clothed with the innocence of ignorance. If the dislocation is too apparent, one may be forced to give up her/his insider status to choose exit and voice. The tension between my roles initially made it difficult to consistently employ my voice, but I worked through the dilemma with the help of my co-researchers and my academic advisor to successfully execute both roles.

Further, I experienced that working the hyphen can be crucial to rupturing complacency and developing one's reflexivity as a researcher (Humphrey, 2007). It is better to be aware of the hyphen before others in one's life worlds become aware of it, especially if there is conflict between/among them. In this case, I was simultaneously engaged in my role as a university student undertaking dissertation research and as co-researcher in a participatory action research project, working with fellow human service practitioners striving to create positive change in the workplace. My experience in this study was that as I developed my awareness of the hyphen, it reduced the conflict that was inherent between the university and the community as the project progressed.

I was not always successful in balancing my dual roles. For example, early in the group process a suggestion was made to approach the local human service membership

organization to facilitate a support group for administrators. In an example of failure to work the hyphens, I did not encourage the group to follow up on that suggestion. I perceived a conflict between my emic relationships both as facilitator of the participatory action research group and as recent former chairperson of the local human service council. Attempting to not conflate my roles, I did not support consideration of this very practical action, and as later events indicated, may have disrupted the action research cycle.

However, as the research continued, I learned to ‘work the hyphen’ and to ‘represent the other’ as we worked toward a ‘common sense’. The resolution of the tension between participants’ need to use the group for personal stress management and my need to determine if the group could initiate action to make positive changes in the workplace was only achieved after a restructuring process of several months. The resolution of tension was achieved by combining the group need for support in coping with our personal stressors while actively taking on the role of co-researchers.

A continuing limitation with this kind of workplace research is the impact of power relationships among stakeholders. The issue was raised in the course of our discussions that there was at least one previous attempt in the county of a group of direct service workers to create a group to deal with workplace stressors. At the time, some administrators felt threatened by the group and disbanded it. By its nature participatory action research will affect the power structure in a system. Thus to maintain the process of change efforts have to be sustainable.

A barrier discussed above is that a major stakeholder group in the human service workplace, direct service workers, was unable to participate. A related limitation was the

lack of diversity of those who did participate in the research group. This is related to the ability of practitioners with some level of autonomy in their organizations to participate. There was no racial diversity, even though minorities constitute 5 to 10% of human service professionals in the community. The group was mostly female. While this is representative of the fact that the human service workplace is predominantly female, it creates the dilemma of representing concepts related to gender without also contributing to the pervasive sexism and racism that pervades our culture (Weis & Fine, 2000). For example, is it sexism to say that gender has contributed to the marginalization of the profession?

A further limitation of the study is the relative lack of public support for human services. How can the researcher narrate the stories in the data without contributing to the hegemonic and victim-blaming popular discourse? There is a 'triple representation problem', involving ourselves as researchers, the narrators who may be social critics or spokespersons for the status quo, or 'the others' who are discussed by the narrators, e.g. police or 'cold hearted social workers'.

In the course of the project, the dilemmas that occurred in my emic insider role required further reflection on ethical issues. In addition to being the research facilitator, I was a member of the population being studied, a practitioner/educator in the human service workplace. In the culture of that workplace, to facilitate practice, consensus was usually achieved to reconcile the needs of program stakeholders. The decision to achieve consensus before any action could be taken put more pressure on participants to conform to group decisions.



An example of this emerged early in the project. After the first several meetings, I became concerned that participants rubber-stamped my activities as facilitator without any serious discussion or reflection (Humphrey, 2007). There was, at least initially, a tendency for participants in the study and other stakeholders in the community to go along with the research process because it was based on my ‘expertise’ and that of the academic institution I represent. This increased my power in the group. However, as the research process unfolded, participants found their voice and began asking “whose project is this?”, and participants began to increasingly exercise power in the group.

The above named limitations placed boundaries on the study that may have limited what could have been learned. Awareness of the nature of these limitations may be valuable for future research. Greater resources, awareness, cultural sensitivity and public support are good things to have, but one cannot wait for a conjunction of these favorable dynamics before beginning the process of inquiry.

#### *Trapped between Two Paradigms*

The participatory action research process conducted in the course of this study provided participant practitioners with an experiential understanding of the tenets of the participatory worldview. Participants questioned what is valued and who determines what is valued. They saw that all too often such decisions are left to administrators, human resource workers, consultants, and academicians. The findings provided support to the theory that human service workers themselves have the practical knowledge to best make the determination of what is needed to successfully accomplish the mission of their organization. In the participatory worldview, such reflective praxis leads creates a climate

that leads to human flourishing; the practical knowing that enhances personal, social, and ecological knowledge that leads to action to transform the world (Guba & Lincoln, 2005).

In the literature review, I noted that as the human sciences adopted the postpositivist paradigm as their worldview (Fals Borda, 1988; Freire, 2005; Popple & Leighninger, 1998; Sitton, 2003; Stringer, 1999), it enhanced the roles of 'client' and 'expert' and became a means of social control, dehumanizing clients and making human service workers technicians. As most human service workers are trained within the hegemonic paradigm, they unconsciously accept its assumptions (Kuhn, 1996). This was a major issue, especially in the period of methodological confusion before the adoption of community based participatory action research methods halfway through the study. Even then, uncritical acceptance of the role of 'expert' resulted in negative behaviors and emotions on the part of the facilitator and co-researchers, including fear, self-destructive behaviors, negative attitudes toward the human service profession, feelings of risk, and workaholism. Each of these is a symptom of burnout.

The 'Paradigm Wars' are still going on in the university and in the human service professions. The lived experience of academics researchers, doctoral students in particular, may be that pockets exist where the wars are alive and well. This study explores the experience of a doctoral student studying the effectiveness of participatory action research to address burnout in the human service workplace. The environment of the university and human service disciplines creates unique tensions for the qualitative academic researcher attempting to improve praxis, especially one with dual roles as both a doctoral student in the university and an insider in the human service community.

### *Lessons for Future Researchers*

This research project studied a specific participatory approach, participatory action research, to determine its effectiveness in enabling practitioners to become researchers who could examine, reflect, and act on the problem of burnout in their workplace. The study suggests that other participatory approaches could be valuable and should be explored.

The community based action research approach also appears well suited to addressing workplace situational stressors. This approach would focus more on everyday work practices and reviewing goals and procedures, evaluating effectiveness, and planning activities and strategies in the workplace. Such research would seek to change the social and personal dynamics of the workplace in more consensual than confrontational, and could focus on systems change more than on creating a new consciousness among practitioners.

Alternately, another participatory approach, action science, could be used as the focus of future research on organizational change in the human service workplace. A case study of organizations can focus on the norms, strategies, assumptions, and values which can be constructed by observing patterns of organizational behavior and that constitute theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Identifying theories-in-use can focus the images of organizations held in its member's minds and in the organizational environment and lead to organizational learning.

In addition to the studying the workplace stressors that lead to burnout in the human service workplace, additional participatory action research projects could be conducted to address other concerns about the life world of individuals in helping

professions. Such projects could be developed in other “service” sectors, including healthcare, government, education, clergy, retail sales, and many others. They would be very practical studies.

Another suggestion for future research, suggested during a research group meeting by a co-researcher in the current project, is to study the effect that personality plays in coping mechanisms. There needs to be more research on the role of personality plays in how we deal with stress. This research could be a natural outgrowth of the participatory approach to the problem. Tools such as the Myers Briggs Inventory, the MPI, and enneagrams could be useful in such a research initiative. Participants in the current study discussed the effect on personality in several situations that they have dealt with. The effect of personality in human service work is magnified by stressors created by the motivation of caring that most human service employees bring to their work, and the negative consequences that the funding pressures have on people whose main goal in choosing their career is caring.

An action planned in the current research that is still pending is to hold a focus group with administrators. From their perspective, there are problems with retention that affect the quality of their agency’s services. A focus group meeting in a separate setting with at least five or six administrators, with semi-structured questions, could lead to specific research and evaluation projects, and ultimately action to change and improve the human service system.

Similarly, there could be focus groups of supervisors to explore how to fill the need identified for additional training for these mid-level professionals. This is key to implementing the three pronged approach discussed in the current research, dealing with

the interactions among administrators, supervisors, and direct service workers. This could contribute to an understanding of how each sector of the human service workforce experiences stress differently, and what actions can be taken to reduce the stressors in organizations. The success of such pending research could shed more light on the research question of the current study.

There is the possibility for future iterations of this participatory action research project of stakeholder support from many leaders in the human service system for research to study this problem. Such support could have been pursued for financial resources to underwrite the project. For example, funds could be used to provide refreshments and meals for participants. Other incentives for participants and honorariums for facilitators could prove to be beneficial.

### Final Reflections

The context of the study in a semi-rural economically disadvantaged community, in which the problem of human service worker burnout has been identified as widespread, makes this an appropriate case to examine the participatory action research process. My positionality as an insider, with a bias toward social change and social justice, is congruent with that of other participants in the participatory action research process. We have chosen to enter the human service profession to create changes which support human flourishing, only to encounter both overwork and structural barriers that severely limit the profession.

The problem of overwork posed an ethical issue that is inherent in the research, Taking time to participate in a project becomes an additional drain on the resources of

participants. At first I was concerned that participating in the project would take time from their other responsibilities, causing more workplace stress. Completing this research increased my work load and contributed to my workplace stress.

But we learned how to prioritize our schedules to allow us to participate as best as we were able. Participants in the project repeatedly reported how much they had looked forward to each meeting, and expressed sincere regret when their schedules prohibited them from attending

The human service professionals who were recruited to participate initially developed relationships of trust and formed a support group that examined their own burnout and the effect it had on their professional roles in their organizations. However, in a relatively short period, within the safe communicative space that they created, they began to reflect on the problem of burnout, its causes and its impacts on the way that they did human service. As the study continued, they became co-researchers, developing a method of inquiry that enabled them to take action to address the problem.

This process provides a greater understanding of the choices that practitioners make and how they can initiate cycles of change in the systems in which they work. The consciousness of discovering the systemic levels of the problem appears to have the potential of continuing systemic change beyond the individuals involved in the project to the human service profession as a whole. An important outcome was the extent to which the process addressed the causes and consequences of burnout as participants became inquirers and changed their way of thinking and behaving, and to the extent that these changes positively affected in their workplace and the human service system.

Patton (2002) suggests that the examination of convergence and divergence of the data is not a linear or an infallible process. It reflects the skill and experience of the qualitative researcher. There were concerns about how the data from the research would be used, and theory generated in the study is relevant to understanding the changing nature of understanding of co-researchers as the project unfolded.

The data included information such as the growing recognition of the problem among stakeholders in the human service system and the overall lack of planning and action to address the problem. Thoughtful examination of this data addresses the boundaries of the issues in the study. The research group felt that it is important for agencies to take a pro-active approach to burnout; to break down barriers, turf issues, develop new strategies, engagement; to develop seamless entry and seamless ongoing communication about the problem in the human service system, while allowing for the fact that interventions into the dynamics of an organization should only be done with administrative support.

A major theoretical contribution of this research is increased adoption and legitimacy of the participatory action research approach in the human service workplace, as well as in other people professions. As communities of practice multiply, there will be both increased contributions to theory from practitioner researchers, as well as increased use of theory to guide praxis in the workplace.

Ultimately, participation contributed to a sense of autonomy and professionalism, of understanding and owning the problem in their workplace, and taking steps to solve it. The nature of their profession requires human service workers to be problem solvers. The creation of critical consciousness allowed human service workers to see the true nature of

the problems affecting them and their workplace, and the participatory action research process taught them to use their skills to take action that would ultimately serve them, their organization, their clients, and the communities that they serve.



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