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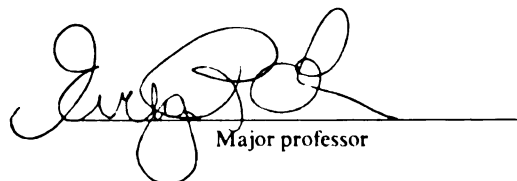
**THE ENCHANTED LOOM:
SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONSTRUCT THEIR
PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND IDENTITIES**

presented by

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has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

Ph.D. degree in School Psychology



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SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONSTRUCT THEIR PROFESSIONAL ROLES
AND IDENTITIES

By

Hanaa R. Gomaa

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Department of Counseling, Educational Psychology and Special Education

1998

ABSTRACT

THE ENCHANTED LOOM: SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONSTRUCT THEIR PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND IDENTITIES

By

Hanaa R. Gomaa

The purpose of this study is to address some of the gaps in our understanding of who school psychologists are and to describe some of the processes by which their professional roles and identities are constructed. The study is intended to expand and complement existing descriptions of the profession, which tend to be predominantly objective in nature and based on third-person definitions. The first part of this study presents the stories of six school psychologists. The stories of the six school psychologists, four women and two men, were collected using in-depth, interactive interviews. The second part of the study describes some of the tools and materials used by the school psychologists to construct their professional roles and identities. These tools were grouped into three descriptive categories: personal-biographical, organizational and social -historical dimensions.

This investigation showed that school psychologists played an active part in constructing their professional roles and identities. While each of the six psychologists recognized that the roles prescribed by their respective institutions were narrow and limiting, their own constructions of professional roles were

varied and complex. In the process of constructing their professional roles and identities, these psychologists took into consideration their unique individual backgrounds, conditions within their respective institutions as well as social and historical changes that have influenced the practice of school psychology in general. These tools and materials represented both the boundaries and possibilities within which the school psychologists' roles were defined.

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This study is dedicated to my mother, for her unconditional love and encouragement, and to my father, whose memory inspired me to finish this work.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work is a culmination of many experiences involving family, friends and colleagues. Some of the events that have shaped the development of this study are in the distant past, at a time when I was still searching for a research topic that would truly represent my voice. It was then that the guidance and encouragement I received through numerous conversations with faculty members and friends have helped me explore options that eventually lead to this project.

As the topic of this research began to take shape, I was fortunate enough to have been surrounded by committee members who have befriended my efforts and provided invaluable critiques and assistance. I am also indebted to the six school psychologists who have so graciously agreed to share their life stories with me. Most importantly, I am deeply grateful to my dissertation director, Dr. Evelyn Oka, for her unconditional support and exceptional guidance throughout all the phases of this project. Without the contributions of mentors and colleagues, and the support of my family members and friends, my own efforts to complete this project would have only gone so far.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

None of us are to be found in sets of tasks or lists of attributes; we can be known only in the unfolding of our unique stories within the context of everyday events.

Vivian Gussin Paley (1990, p.xii)

School psychologists are one of many professionals whose goal is to help support the learning and development of children. However, perhaps more than any other profession within the educational system, school psychology has been the subject of much criticism and misunderstanding (Bardon, 1994; Fagan & Wise, 1994). The original intent of school psychology, as advocated by its founder Lightner Witmer in the late 19th Century, was to provide psychological expertise that is capable of treating the many difficult cases that resist the ordinary methods of the school room (Witmer, 1897). Nonetheless, the prevailing understanding of school psychologists' roles and functions has often portrayed them as "gatekeepers" of special education (Fagan & Wise, 1994). Moreover, there are many current and historical accounts of discrepancies between school psychologists' perceptions of their roles and functions and those held by other educators (e.g. Hughes, 1979; Symonds, 1933).

Historical Background

Many of the criticisms and misunderstandings of school psychology are related to the field's historical ties to normative assessment and to special education in its traditional forms (Bardon, 1994). During the early part of this century, special education programs relied heavily on segregation practices to separate the "feeble-minded and backward pupils from average and bright pupils" (Wallin, 1914). Moreover, historically speaking, school psychologists were employed to facilitate the educational system's goals to efficiently educate the masses while dealing with the problems these goals presented (Fagan & Wise, 1994). The educational scene has changed much during the past two decades. With the passing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975, special education programs have shifted towards the mainstreaming of handicapped children and their placement in least restrictive environments. Moreover, many of the school problems that had previously warranted education in separate classes are now considered outside the scope of special education (Fagan & Wise, 1994). These changes have had a strong impact on the roles and functions of school psychologists. Currently, for example, there is a greater need for school psychologists who can provide problem-solving services to the entire school population rather than deal exclusively with special education problems per se. These changes have also have influenced the professional preparation and practices of many school psychologists. For example, many professional training programs in school psychology currently emphasize intervention and

consultation competencies in addition to psychometric competencies (Saigh & Oakland, 1989; Stoner, Shinn & Walker, 1991).

Statement of the Problem

Despite the increasing spectrum of the school psychologist's role within the school system, the profession continues to be narrowly perceived by students, teachers, administrators, parents and other educational staff (Fagan & Wise, 1994). One of the attendant problems of the narrow perception of school psychologists' roles and functions is their low visibility within the school system. It has also been suggested that low visibility and narrow definitions of the profession could be related to the small number of students who are attracted to the field in the first place (Fagan & Wise, 1994). This situation has lead some authors to argue for the urgent need to clarify the wider range of school psychologists' roles and functions:

so that consumers (e.g. parents, teachers, students) will have a better understanding of what school psychologists can do ... we still need greater visibility. As trainers we frequently have prospective students ask, "What exactly does a school psychologist do?" If we hope to increase the number of students, especially minority students, we must actively promote the field of school psychology (Fagan & Wise, 1994, p.287).

The Need for a New Approach to Role Clarification

The need to inform consumers of the larger spectrum of services provided by school psychologists requires an innovative approach to investigating current roles and functions. Present definitions of school psychology often focus on

general attributes related to the services they provide, the settings in which they practice or their demographic characteristics. These descriptions are most commonly written from an objective, third-person point of view. For example, a common definition portrays a school psychologist as “a professional psychological practitioner whose general purpose is to bring a psychological perspective to bear on the problems of educators and the clients educators serve” (Fagan & Wise, 1994, p.3).

While generalized portrayals of school psychologists have the advantage of providing an apparent order and homogeneity to our understanding of who school psychologists are and what they do, they do not adequately capture the diversity and complexity of a school psychologist’s role. Moreover, they neglect the psychologist’s perception of his or her daily work and fail to address the richness and complexity of how individual psychologists construct their professional roles and how their professional identities evolve within their work setting.

Available descriptions of school psychology also isolate the act of working, i.e. performing the roles and functions of a school psychologist, from the intentions of the actors and the contexts of their work. In doing so, they fail to explain why decisions are made and what sense they make to the people involved. Moreover, objective definitions of school psychology disregard the fact that professions are not merely roles that are passively “filled” by individuals; rather, they are human constructions that are situated in time, space

and subjective meaning. In summary, describing school psychology in abstract terms can leave one with an incomplete understanding of the nature of the profession, who real school psychologists are, and how they come to be the way they are.

In their discussion of the roles and functions of school psychologists, Fagan and Wise (1994) argued that the role of each individual psychologist could be viewed as a combination of three variables:

What the person brings to the job (e.g., personal characteristics and professional skills), job-site characteristics (e.g., job descriptions and teacher expectations), and various external forces (e.g., legislative developments, social changes, and research findings (p.97).

The first variable, what the person brings to the job, is the least studied in the literature on school psychology. Whereas legal and ethical issues in school psychological practice are the subject of many scholarly studies (e.g. Bersoff, 1981 and Reschly, 1979) there is an absence of research dealing with the personal background of individual school psychologists and the reasons behind their attraction to the profession in the first place.

The Importance of Studying the Human Context of School Psychology

The present research addresses some of the gaps in our understanding of who school psychologists are and what their professional roles involve. It is intended to expand and complement objective descriptions of the profession by focusing, instead on the subjective meaning and experiences of individual practitioners. In doing so, it can shed some light on the “human context” that

surrounds the practice of school psychology. In this study, “human context” refers to the perceptions, background experiences, intentions and visions of individuals with regards to their profession.

This study is based on the assumption that in addition to the generalized portrayals of school psychology that are represented in textbooks, there are also numerous personal “versions” of the profession that are constructed by each psychologist within the context of his or her unique life history and personal circumstances. The subtleties and nuances of these individual perceptions can be most effectively represented using the narrative tradition. Unlike abstract definitions, the narrative mode can capture the temporal development of one’s career experiences and professional identity. Examining the “stories” of individual psychologists in great depth can provide a detailed understanding of who school psychologists are and how they come to be. Broadening the perception of administrators, parents and teachers regarding the potential roles and functions of school psychology could promote a better allocation of the professional’s resources and competencies within the educational system. Finally, this study could promote the field of school psychology by increasing its visibility and, therefore, increasing the number and diversity of students who are attracted to its study.

Research Questions

This study was concerned with the following questions: (a) What are some of the personal backgrounds that individual school psychologists bring to their profession? (b) What are some of the visions, expectations and concerns that school psychologists bring to their profession? (c) How do school psychologists construct their professional identities? and (d) What are some of the tools and materials that school psychologists use in creating their professional roles and identities?

Theoretical Position

Two main bodies of theoretical work are relevant to the effort put forth into this research: career theory and psychological theories, primarily developmental and personality theories. Consideration of these theories, their potentials and limitations has influenced the substance and emphasis of this study and, therefore, is explicitly discussed.

Career Theories

This study can be viewed as relevant to theories about career choices, satisfaction and development. These theories have had their roots in the social sciences, primarily sociology and psychology. Career literature has dealt with diverse topics including the environment's impact on career development, the experiences associated with occupational careers, personality constructs associated with career decisions and career changes over the life span (Super,

1993; Holland, 1992). A common feature of career literature, however, has been its concern with objective rather than subjective career. Collin and Young (1986) have recognized that studies of career have neglected the individual subjective experience, that is, the actor's rather than the observer's construct, in the definitions of career change. More recently, these authors have called for alternative directions in the study of careers, questioning the positivist assumptions upon which traditional career theories have been based (Young & Collin, 1992). Alternatively, an interpretive approach to the study of careers, rooted in social constructivist theory has been proposed (Young & Collin, 1992), focusing primarily on the meaning that individuals attribute to their careers and career events in their lives.

Psychological Theories

The impetus of this study is also relevant to psychological theories concerned with personality and life span development. Personality theories such as Bandura's (1977) and Allport's (1937) are concerned with how people become what they are, how they develop and how they make decisions. Developmental theories, on the other hand, deal with the concept of life stages and the tasks with which people cope during these stages (e.g. Erickson, 1980 & Levinson, 1979). Psychological theory provides a great deal of insight about individuals and their interaction with their environment. However, the majority of the literature on traditional psychological theories has been conceived within positivist philosophy, which views the social world as composed of stable and

unambiguous facts that are open to investigation and prediction by the researcher (Gergen, 1985). Absent from these theories is the view that the social world is constructed through subjective and intersubjective meaning (Collin & Young, 1986).

Thus, while career and psychological theories provide alternative analytical perspectives for the present inquiry, they are limited by their positivist assumptions whereby the subjective meaning of the individual was not taken into account. Given the interest of this study in the meaning making process by which individuals make sense of their world, two theoretical positions have been chosen as a more appropriate foundation for this work: First, this study is rooted in “interpretive” sociological traditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). According to Pope (1982), interpretive sociologists oppose the idea that social sciences should produce lawlike sets of propositions. Instead, they believe that social sciences should provide a deeper understanding of individuals, their perceptions, and the meanings they attach to social life. From an interpretive perspective, the researcher’s job is focused on reconstructing the social world in terms that capture the actors’ definition (Jones, 1985). As such, rather than encapsulating the participants’ perceptions within preconceived, researcher-driven categories, the intent of this research is to describe how individual school psychologists understood and described their own roles and identities.

This research also draws heavily on a theoretical position that portrays reality as personally and socially constructed. From a social constructionist

orientation, reality is imagined and articulated into being by the self who knows and thinks among others, and who contemplates, in solitude, the personal content of what has been learned in conversation (Neumann & Peterson, 1997). This orientation recognizes the individual's active role in the creation of his or her social reality. While individual realities can overlap because they deal with the same phenomenon, they differ in the meanings attached to the phenomenon and the sense making in which the actors engage in order to keep their world integrated and whole (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Given this theoretical context, it is assumed that professional roles and identities are social realities subject to the unique and diverse interpretations of individual professionals. It is further assumed that no single, objective definition can accurately capture all aspects of a profession. Rather, there are heterogeneous, subjective experiences of work that are fluid and situated in social contexts (Gumport, 1993). Thus, the primary goal of this study is to capture the multiplicity of ways in which practitioners construct their professional roles and identities and to understand some of the processes whereby these roles and identities are created.

Studying the Lives of School Psychologists

Given the goals and interests of this study, the life history technique lent itself as an ideal tool for depicting the "lived experience as the actual members in everyday society grasp them" (Faraday & Plummer, 1979). According to Denzin

(1989), this technique involves gathering contextual biographical materials via the use of narrative interviewing strategies. These materials connect the experiences in the subject's life (e.g. education, marriage and employment) to life course stages (childhood, adolescent and adulthood), allowing the subjects to theorize about their own experiences. Analysis of the gathered material may, then, emphasize any of a number of relevant issues, including career issues and structural processes in the life course (Denzin, 1989). The application of life history techniques to this study is discussed in further detail in Chapter 3.

Methodological Issues in Interpretive Research

Whenever a researcher studies a phenomenon, a certain amount of distortion is inevitable as a result of the researcher's intrusion into that phenomenon. As a school psychologist, I am interested in transforming the overly negative and limited view of the profession that I have often encountered in the literature or in conversation with others. This raises questions regarding subjectivity and bias in conducting this type of research. From the point of view of conventional objectivist research:

Objectivity exists when inquiry is value-free. One might term this the "axiological" definition, based on the notion that is (sic) possible to allow the Nature to "speak for itself" without impact from the values of the inquirer or any of his or her cohorts." (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.300)

Alternatively, Scriven (1975), as cited in Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that in interpretive research "objective" meant "reliable, factual, confirmable or confirmed." Lincoln and Guba (1985) agreed that:

This definition removes the emphasis from the investigator (it is no longer his or her objectivity that is at stake) and places it where, as it seems to the naturalist, it ought more logically to be: on the data themselves (p.300; parentheses in original).

Thus, in interpretive research, objectivity emphasized the confirmability of the data itself rather than the characteristics of the researcher. For the purpose of this study, this emphasis necessitated that measures be taken in order to ensure that the data collected was trustworthy and confirmable. These measures are described in Chapter 3.

Another concern of interpretive research which uses a small number of participants deals with the applicability of the results and the extent to which the results of this research could be generalized to other psychologists or to the field of school psychology in general. The literature on interpretive research has addressed this concern by redefining the term “applicability.” As qualitative researchers have often argued, one cannot use quantitative standards in judging qualitative research; the issue of applicability is a case in point. Lincoln and Guba (1985) advised researchers who used qualitative methods to provide sufficient descriptive information of the context of their study so that those seeking to apply it to other contexts would have sufficient descriptive data to make similarity judgements possible. Thus, the responsibility of the original investigator, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) ended with providing sufficient descriptive data. In the meantime, it was the responsibility of those seeking the application of the results to establish the extent of the similarity

between the sending and receiving contexts, i.e. the context of the study and the setting to which applications were sought.

I believe that every investigation is a prelude to further inquiry. This is particularly the case in social science research given the complexity and the ever-evolving quality of human nature and of our social world. Rather than providing definitive answers, this investigation provides clues to further questions about the profession and invites further investigation into the profession taking into consideration the point of view of the actors. Instead of providing universal conclusions or grand theories, this inquiry speaks to the uniqueness of individuals and the diversity of their points of view.

Chapter 2

RATIONALE

I never visualized labor as separate men and women of different sorts and kinds. Right down to the time when I became interested in social science and began to train as a social investigator, labor was an abstraction, which seemed to denote an arithmetically calculable mass of human beings, each individual a repetition of the other, very much in the same way that the capital of my father's companies consisted, I imagined, of gold sovereigns identical with all other gold sovereigns in form, weight and color and also in value

(Beatrice Webb, 1926, as cited in Bogdan & Biklen, 1992, p.6)

Stories Invite a New Quality of Attention to the Client

Storytelling is fundamental to the human search for meaning (Bateson, 1989). Stories invite listeners to contemplate and reflect upon their content. By their openness to personal reminiscence and metaphorical and dramatic elements, stories engage the mind at an "iconic level" which Oliver Sacks (1985) described as a way of representing experiences that went beyond the computational level of abstraction and theories, adding that "computational representations (schemata, programs, algorithms, etc.) could never of themselves constitute 'iconic' representations, those representations which are the very thread and stuff of life" (p.147).

Sacks (1985) further believed that people in helping professions should seek to understand the human experience at a level that goes beyond the

theoretical and abstract levels they were taught to use. Based on his experience with his patients, he argued that in addition to the physical universe of discourse, which dealt with questions of quantitative and formal structure, there was a 'phenomenal' universe which dealt with those dramatic and personal qualities that constituted a 'world' (Sacks, 1987). For Sacks, the personal narratives and reminiscence of his patients were portals which transported him to their lived worlds, thus allowing him to achieve a deeper understanding of their experiences and reach valuable insights about their 'disorders.'

Like Oliver Sacks, psychiatrist Robert Cole (1989) recognized that his professional learning was based on developing a certain quality of attention that guided him towards a shift from theories and clinical classifications to *seeing* and *listening* to patients and their stories:

The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is their story" (Coles (1989) as cited in Buchmann & Floden, 1993, p.168).

As providers of educational services, school psychologists are constantly dealing with the stories of others. In the course of their daily work, they are called upon to attend to the problems and concerns brought forth by administrators, teachers, parents and students. A competent school psychologist can carefully listen to these stories and, eventually, translate them into actions that bring a resolution of the problems they represent.

The ability to fully attend to the stories of others involves more than a mastery of technical skills; it requires the ability to bring an ethic of caring and compassion into the professional-client relationship. According to Nel Noddings (1984), a fundamental aspect of caring occurs when “we see the other’s reality as a possibility for us.” In doing so, Noddings believed that:

We also have aroused in us the feeling, “I must do something.” When we see the other’s reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream. When I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other’s reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care (p.14).

Moreover, Pellegrino (1979) argued that we could never *feel* with another person when we pass judgment as superiors, but only when we see our own frailties as well as the other’s. Thus, before the professional can begin to feel the need of his client as a person seeking help, he or she “must develop a fuller insight into his own developing humanity” (Pellegrino, 1979, p.159). This insight is nurtured through one’s reflection upon the struggles, hopes and failures inherent within one’s own life story.

By struggling to represent and understand our own careers as stories we become aware of the same process that our clients go through as they try to explain their own experiences: a student struggling to express his frustration with mathematics, or a teacher trying to adjust to a child’s disruptive behavior. Additionally, by struggling to apprehend critical experiences within our own lives, we become better equipped to apprehend others’ realities and to feel what they feel as nearly as possible.

Narratives are a Tool for Clarifying the Assumptions that Underlie our Practice of School Psychology

In her book *Responsive Assessment* (1994), Mary Henning-Stout criticized the framework from which school psychology was currently being practiced. She argued that the lives of learners were much bigger than what the numbers on standardized test scores reflected. Henning-Stout described the extensive and “seemingly reflexive use of standardized testing” by school psychologists as an inadequate approach to assessment, calling upon educators, including school psychologists, to work towards a more responsive approach to assessment that: (1) linked assessment to classroom practices and (2) involved all those who were holding a stake in the student’s success in the assessment process.

According to Henning-Stout, in order to implement such changes, it was critical for educators to become aware of their own knowing and knowledge as a dynamic, socially constructed process. Such awareness could be cultivated through activities that lead to honest and ongoing evaluation of current practice:

The more practice we have at identifying and naming the assumptions underlying our practice, the more likely our ability to recognize when what we are doing is less than responsive. As anthropologist Barbara Meyerhoff (1978) has suggested, we bring about the most positive changes when we attend to making the familiar strange (Henning-Stout, 1994, p.270).

To understand the assumptions behind current practice, each individual practitioner should be willing to examine critically his or her own “story” as a

professional, including the attitudes, values and beliefs that he or she brings forth to the profession. We should also be willing, as a profession, to provide opportunities for practitioners to examine the different ways whereby their knowledge about school psychology was constructed. This study is one step towards providing an opportunity for representing and critically examining the knowledge base of professional school psychologists.

Personal Narratives are Windows to Practice that can Lead to Better Informed Organizational Decisions

School psychology in its traditional form is facing the challenge of diminishing economic resources. For example, in an attempt to reduce costs, some school districts are choosing to contract with practitioners to perform specialized services, such as testing, to determine special education eligibility, rather than hire full-time school psychologists to provide a wider range of services. These organizational decisions threaten to marginalize the status of school psychologists within the educational institution and impose narrow definitions of practice on the profession.

While administrative decisions such as outsourcing and downsizing may have the best interest of the educational institution in mind, they sometimes overlook the fact that the organization is not only an economic institution but also a site for developing one's identity as a professional (Gumpert, 1993).

Personal narratives restore the human dimension to institutional settings. They

deepen the organization's understanding of its individual employees by elevating the employees' personal struggles to the public arena. This awareness can possibly invite administrators to consider unintended outcomes of policies such as downsizing and drastic cuts, and perhaps inform practices that foster dialogue, vision, and compassion in the educational community (Gumport, 1993).

Describing the meaning of school psychology through the experiences of individual practitioners can also enlarge the overall perception of the profession. School psychologists are often narrowly perceived as gatekeepers and testers who merely facilitate accessibility to special education programs. Allowing individual professionals to describe in detail the nature of their roles not only enhances the public's understanding of the profession but also enables stakeholders to recognize the diverse ways in which school psychology could be of service to the educational system.

Personal Narratives are a Means Towards Understanding the History of an Evolving Profession

Evolution implies a transformation that builds upon earlier states in adaptation to existing demands. Evolution also implies a sense of history and continuity; whether the evolved entity is an organism or an organization, it bears, in addition to new characteristics, concerns and successes from its own past. According to Seymour Sarason (1972), such continuity is crucial for the

survival of any new system. As the field of school psychology faces new challenges and transitions, issues of history and continuity become increasingly important.

Over the past decades, school psychology has established itself as a profession that is concerned with the welfare of those who learn and work in the schools (Bardon, 1994). Recent changes in education, however, such as the emphasis on the inclusion of children with disabilities into regular education and the development of social and mental health programs in schools, have challenged school psychologists to re-examine their current roles and functions. A number of scholars believe that these reforms also posed a threat to the future of school psychology in its traditional form:

Traditional roles of psychologists in schools (e.g. assessment) may become less valued, and schools have begun to seek more narrow and specialized services from psychologists with a variety of backgrounds (Illback, 1995, p.1).

As a result of these developments, a number of professionals have proposed that school psychologists should expand their roles to meet the demands of a rapidly changing educational system and job market. Among the proposed solutions, for example, are demands for providing school psychologists working in school setting with prescription privileges, enabling them to prescribe medication to students and following up on their effects. This role would be accompanied by extensive training in psychopharmacology and pediatric psychology (Kubiszyn, 1994; Kratochwill, 1994). These proposed

changes would entail not only major modifications in the way the profession is practiced but also in the way practitioners define their professional identity.

However, before new roles are added to current school psychological practice, it is important to understand how existing roles are created and how they are maintained in the first place. The answer to this question is to be sought, not in statistical descriptions of the time school psychologists spend on various tasks, but in studying specific cases in great detail and then comparing them with other case studies in equally great detail, a process described by Frederick Erickson as a search for “concrete universals” (Erickson, 1986).

In summary, it is my hope that this study will encourage other practitioners to reflect upon their own professional experiences and inspire them to critically examine the sources of their professional practices, attitudes and beliefs. Most importantly, it is my hope that presenting the diverse points of view of capable and professional school psychologists would help to change the overly narrow image of school psychology that is held by some educators and institutions and perhaps, in doing so, also help change the way institutions view and relate to school psychologists. Moreover, by disseminating these stories, particularly among students of school psychology, I hope to illustrate the many ways that school psychologists could actively participate in the construction and expansion of their roles and functions within the educational institution. By focusing on the diversity of meanings, I could perhaps offer a broader vision that illustrates the possibilities inherent in this profession.

Chapter 3

METHODS

The literature describing the roles and functions of school psychologists has predominantly relied on quantitative studies. Most studies that have attempted to assess psychologists' perceptions have relied on forced-choice surveys that were researcher driven and non-interactive rather than interviews. Interpretive methods have been virtually absent from the literature on school psychology. The only qualitative study that used, among other ethnographic methods, interactive interviews with school psychologists, was conducted by Milofsky (1989), a sociologist at Bucknell University. The results of Milofsky's study were published in a book entitled *Testers and Testing* (1989) in which he strongly criticized the central role of testing in school psychology and argued that school psychologists were among the major perpetrators of irresponsible practices that hurt children, particularly minority children. At a time when the field of school psychology has come under more attack than ever, there was no attempt to investigate the point of view of the psychologists who practiced their profession under these conditions. In contrast, the current research focuses on

the meaning-perspective (Erickson, 1986) of individual school psychologists to document the individuality of their points of view as well as the diversity of their experiences and perceptions. In doing so, it goes beyond the apparent similarity of quantifiable behavior (e.g. the number of hours spent in testing, or the number of assessments completed per academic year) and explores, instead, the local meaning that actors give to their actions. In choosing this perspective, I was strongly influenced by the work of Frederick Erickson (1986) who assumed that humans created meaningful interpretations of the physical and behavioral objects that surrounded them in the environment and that individuals acted towards the objects that surrounded them in the light of their interpretations of meaningfulness.

This study used an interpretive approach (Denzin, 1989) in which lives were not viewed as verifiable concerns where there was a "real" life that lay somewhere in converging data collected from various sources. Rather, life stories were viewed as compositions that were constructed by the subjects in the telling of their own stories. Thus, in this study, the subject's words were taken as the beginning point of inquiry (Denzin, 1989, p.64).

Heron (1981) pointed out that the original and archetypal paradigm of human inquiry was two persons talking and asking questions of each other. In this study, dialogue was used as the primary mode of inquiry. Personal narratives were collected using interviews and conversations with individual psychologists using an adaptation of Seidman's (1991) in-depth interviewing

approach. At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience (Seidman, 1991).

In this approach, life history interviewing was used to elicit the participants' recollections of present and past life events. Central to this approach was viewing the interrelatedness of personal history with the meaning-making of present experiences. In other words, it was assumed that the way individuals constructed their present experiences was related to their unique personal biographies.

Theoretical Assumptions

A basic assumption in in-depth interviewing research is that the meaning people make of their experience affects the way they carry out that experience"

(Seidman, 1991, p.14)

Reality is Understood in the Form it is Subjectively Perceived

This study attempts to understand subjective experiences of work from the point of view of particular individuals in their particular work settings. One of the key assumptions behind using in-depth interviewing methods to achieve this goal was that the best way to understand the meaning of an experience or an event was to do so from the point of view of those who participated in that event. This assumption has its roots in the phenomenological tradition, influenced by philosophers like Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz (1967).

Phenomenologists believed that multiple ways of interpreting experiences were available to us through interacting with others, and that it was the meaning of those interactions that constituted our social reality.

Narrative Accounts are a Window to One's Subjective Knowledge

Second, it was assumed that narrative accounts of an experience reflected the person's consciousness. Vygotsky (1987), for instance, has argued that every word people use in telling their stories is a microcosm of their consciousness. In order to tell a story about an experience, one must reflect upon the event, recall and select relevant details and attach meaning and order to them. Some scholars have further argued that the very act of communicating reflected a tacit dimension of knowledge as well (Polanyi, 1966). Tacit knowledge, in this context referred to a knowledge which we are not immediately aware of but which nonetheless influenced the way we attended to and acted upon our world.

In conducting interpretive research, objective formats, such as forced-choice questionnaires and surveys, are believed to inhibit the participants' ability to select, interpret and attach their own meaning to their experiences and to use their own words to communicate those meanings. Based on this assumption, open ended questions and semi-structured interviews were used in this study as the primary tool for data collection.

Language is a Powerful Means for Communicating Subjective Knowledge

In this study, narrative accounts were communicated verbally. This was based on the assumption that language was a powerful and reliable means by

which people could symbolize and communicate what they knew. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that all human behavior, including gestures, clothes, and manner, had an expressive dimension. However, he further argued that language provided one of the most powerful expressive resources for relating our experiences. That was so because, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (1983), language possessed the capacity to present descriptions, explanations, and evaluations of almost infinite variety about any aspect of the world, including itself (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

Setting and Participants

Initially, one school district (Brookfield) was selected as the setting for this study. I contacted all school psychologists employed by this district by mail with letters of invitation (See Appendix A). Out of the 17 psychologists who were contacted, five responses were received: two psychologists indicated their willingness to participate while the remaining three declined due to the time consuming nature of the research. In an attempt to solicit more participants, a follow-up invitation was mailed (See Appendix B). One more psychologist agreed to participate following the second invitation.

In the meantime, I had also started contacting two other school districts in an attempt to add to the number of participants. In these additional districts, school psychological services were managed in a more centralized manner than was the case at the Brookfield school district. Thus in the additional settings,

school psychologists were housed at the districts' central administration buildings where supervisory personnel potentially exercised greater direction and control over the school psychologists' services. Furthermore, unlike the Brookfield school district, which serviced urban areas, the two additional districts serviced primarily rural, semi-rural and suburban areas. Altogether, a total of 15 psychologists were contacted in the two additional districts, of whom five were willing to participate. Since four of those five psychologists worked at the same district, Southvalley, I decided to interview only those four, dropping the other school district from the study.

Participant Characteristics

A total of seven school psychologists were interviewed for this study. Out of the seven interviews, six were selected for inclusion in the final analysis. The participant whose interview material was not used in this study had been employed by her respective school district a few months prior to the interviews. Although the responses shared by this participant were reflective and insightful, her relatively brief experience as a practicing school psychologist did not sustain in-depth analyses comparable to those applied to the other six interviews.

The six psychologists whose interviews were analyzed in this study ranged in age from their mid-thirties to mid-fifties. All six psychologists, four women and two men, were Caucasian. The participants' experience within their respective school districts ranged from three to twenty six years, including the number of years spent in other careers, such as teaching or social work, prior to

becoming school psychologists. The participants' experience as school psychologists within their respective school districts ranged from three to fifteen years.

Description of the School Districts

Brookfield

The Brookfield school district is a middle-sized urban setting with a large representation of ethnically diverse students. Out of a total of about 19,200 students served by the district, 47% are Caucasians. The remaining students represent the following ethnic groups:

34% African American

13% Hispanic

5% Asian

1% Native American

There are a total of 41 schools at the Brookfield school district: thirty four elementary schools, four middle schools and three high schools. The district employs a total of seventeen school psychologists. About 3.7% of its students receive special education services. Additionally, more than half its students (53%) are on the free or reduced lunch program.

In a recent effort to contain escalating costs, the administration and board of directors at the Brookfield school district had explored the feasibility of contracting with outside agencies and individuals to perform services previously

provided by school based professionals. Among the professionals most vulnerable to externalization were school psychologists.

According to a 1996 publication, the average caseload of Brookfield school psychologists was about seventy diagnostic evaluations per year. In addition to formal evaluations to determine eligibility for special education services, school psychologists have also functioned as members of site based student support teams. In this capacity, they conducted an undocumented number of individual consultations designed to help reduce the need for referral of students to more restrictive special education programs.

Southvalley

The Southvalley County Educational Office serves a total of eight Midwestern, suburban and rural districts. These districts serve 14,549 students who attend a total of thirty-five public schools: nineteen elementary schools, eight middle schools and eight high schools. The student population at the Southvalley schools is mostly Caucasian (97%). The remaining students represent the following ethnic groups:

0.4% African American

1 % Hispanic

0.5% Asian

0.4% Native American

Socioeconomically, 20% of its students are on the free and reduced lunch programs.

Special education programs at Southvalley County serve about 6% of its total student population, almost double the percentage of those served by the Brookfield special education programs. On the average, Southvalley school psychologists carry an annual caseload of eighty cases, in addition to an undocumented number of consultations.

Like the Brookfield school district, Southvalley had resorted to outsourcing for school psychological services during the previous two years. However, unlike the Brookfield school district, the use of contractual services was not due to budget cuts; rather, it was due to the temporary absence of three of the district's psychologists who were on medical leave.

The Interview Process

Psychologists who indicated their consent by signing and returning the consent form were contacted by phone to schedule the first interview session. The interview setting was determined based on its convenience for the participant. Interview settings included the psychologist's work area at a school building, an office at the central administration building, a conference room at the university campus, the psychologist's or my own residence.

Prior to the first interview, the terms for informed consent were reviewed with the participants. I also emphasized the fact that the participants could choose to respond to some questions "off the record," request that the tape recorder be turned off or decline to respond to any questions that made them feel

uncomfortable. I interviewed each participant over two sessions with each session lasting from forty-five minutes to ninety minutes. Although the interview questions were prepared in advance, I allowed the interviews to flow naturally as a conversation, referring to notes only occasionally to make sure all the important points were covered. In general, the first interview focused on descriptions of the current work setting and role definition while the second interview dealt with the participant's biography and other self-reflective questions. The reason behind this sequence was the assumption that during the first interview, the participants would be less acquainted with the researcher and the interview process; therefore, it would be more comfortable for them to answer less personal questions. By the second interview, however, I assumed that the participants' familiarity with me and with the general format of the interviews would enable them to answer more personal questions as well as questions that required them to recall more distant events.

The structure of the interviews was based on the assumption that our understanding of our work experience was embedded in a larger context that consisted of: (1) our perception of the work setting and its characteristics (e.g. district's financial resources, peer relationships), and (2) personal characteristics that were not directly related to the work setting and yet they influenced the way we perceived and interacted with our environment (e.g. family background and early school experience). Based on this assumption, the interview questions explored topics related to the participants' immediate experience at work as well

as biographical information. The interview questions were designed with three goals in mind: (1) to invite the participants to reconstruct their current experience of their work setting, (2) to allow them to place this experience in the context of significant life events, and (3) to enable the participants to reflect on the meaning and significance of vocation in their lives.

The interview questions were adapted from an instrument developed by Wieland (1994) to elicit educational biographies. According to Seidman (1991), in-depth interviewing was not designed to test hypotheses, gather answers to questions, or corroborate opinions. Rather, it was designed to ask participants to reconstruct their experiences and to explore their meaning. While Seidman (1991) argued that the questions most used in an in-depth interview should follow from what the participant has said, he recommended that interviewers develop an interview guide. The purpose of the interview guide would be to establish the focus of interview topics. An interview guide was, therefore, developed with possible questions and probes grouped into eleven focus points or categories (See Appendix C). During the first interview session, four focus points were explored: general work setting, resources within the work setting, the work setting in a historical context, and role clarification. During the second interview session, seven areas were explored: personal biography (e.g. family background, hobbies and interests), educational background (early school experiences, and post secondary studies), professional trajectories, early professional life, professional development, evolution of motives, and reflections

on career choices. The wording and format of the interview protocol were revised using a pilot session with one school psychologist who volunteered to be interviewed and provided feedback regarding the clarity and sequence of the interview questions.

Validity and Reliability in Interpretive Inquiry

Validity

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the conventional definition of the term “internal validity” is based on the assumption of a single, tangible reality that the investigation is intended to discover. Its ultimate test is the extent to which the findings correspond to that reality. In contrast, interpretive research is based on the assumption that our social reality consists of a multiple set of mental constructions. Within this paradigm, the requirement of internal validity is replaced by the term “truth value” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). In order to demonstrate truth value, therefore, the naturalist must demonstrate that he or she has represented those multiple constructions adequately.

In this study, I relied on in-depth interview as the primary mode of inquiry with the intention of eliciting information that only the informants had access to. Needless to say, one of my main concerns in choosing this method was the extent to which it would enable me to gain a valid sense of the informants’ experiences. However, to fully understand the *experience* of professional life from the participants’ perspective was beyond the grasp of this research. Schutz

(1967) for example, argued that to fully understand another person's experience would mean that we have entered into that person's stream of consciousness and experienced what he or she had. If we could indeed do that, we would *be* that other person. However, while it might not be possible to completely enter into another person's stream of consciousness, one could still understand *their* understanding of their experience:

Interviewing provides access to the context of people's behavior and thereby provides a way for researchers to understand the meaning of that behavior. (Seidman, 1991, p.4)

With that distinction in mind, I struggled with another issue, that of ensuring that I was indeed eliciting the participants' understanding of their experience. According to Erickson (1986), addressing this concern involved paying attention to the researcher's rapport with the participant:

A noncoercive, mutually rewarding relationship with key informants is essential if the researcher is to gain valid insights into the informant's point of view (p.142).

In this study, a number of steps were taken in order to establish trust and rapport with the participants (Erickson, 1986 and Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Erickson (1986) described one problem with trust as the tendency for informants to assume that the purpose of the participant was evaluative. I tried to address this problem by reinterpreting the purpose of the research a number of times to the same informant and in more than one format, i.e. in writing and orally prior to the interviews.

Another method for establishing trust (Erickson, 1986) involved including the informants as collaborators with the researcher. In this study, I sought participant collaboration in two ways: first, I tried to involve the participants in evaluating some of the tentative assumptions I had made as I was collecting the data. Secondly, all participants had the opportunity to review manuscripts of my portrayal of their stories. This process was not only a means for establishing credibility of the findings and interpretations, it was also a way to ensure that the participants' interests as far as confidentiality and anonymity were protected as much as possible. Although formal UCRIHS consent procedures were obtained at the outset of the study, due to the in depth nature of the interviews and the personal emphasis of some of the questions, I wanted to make sure that the participants felt comfortable with the way they were portrayed. I was also interested in the extent to which their opinions might have changed since the time the interviews were collected.

Following the participants' review of their manuscripts, we either met in person or spoke over the phone to discuss their feedback. It was encouraging to find that aside from some clarifications and minor editorial changes, all participants felt that the content of the biographies represented an accurate and thorough portrayal of their point of view. For instance, some of the descriptions used by the informants in their feedback were "the biography has reconfirmed feelings I had at an earlier time," "it (the biography) is a fine job capturing the essence of who I am," and "you've written the story of my life." Some

participants expressed an interest in sharing the manuscript with an intern or with their children. This feedback marked an important step towards establishing the authenticity of the information I collected. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985):

The investigator who has received the agreement of the respondent groups on the credibility of his or her work has established a strong beachhead towards convincing readers and critics of the authenticity of the work (p.315).

Reliability

Reliability is conventionally demonstrated by replication. Thus, if repetitions of essentially similar investigation processes yield essentially similar findings, then reliability of the inquiry is established. In interpretive inquiry, on the other hand, the researcher sees reliability as part of a larger set of factors that are associated with observed changes (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These factors include “changes that occur due to changes in the entity being studied ... or because of changes in the emergent design as insights grow and working hypotheses appear” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.299). As such, the substitute criteria for reliability in interpretive research is “dependability”, where the researcher “seeks means for taking into account factors of instability and factors of phenomenal or design induced change” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.299).

Validity and reliability are interrelated; so are credibility and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The authors, however, argued that it was inadequate to assume that once credibility was demonstrated, confirmability and dependability were also ensured. In this investigation, the close monitoring and

critical review of the findings and interpretations by the chairperson of the dissertation committee were used in order to investigate the dependability and confirmability of the inquiry process and its findings. Thus, the findings and interpretations presented in this study were periodically checked by the chairperson and examined to evaluate the quality of interpretation, determine the appropriateness of category labels and look for alternative analytic approaches. Assessment was also made of the appropriateness of inquiry decisions and methodological issues. Following each examination of the investigation's findings, a meeting was held to discuss and negotiate feedback. Based on these discussions, adjustments and revisions were made to the final report.

Studying and Interpreting the Data

To reliably represent the participants' recollections, each interview was tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed for analysis. After examining the interview materials both on tape and in print, I compiled a profile of each psychologist using, primarily, the participants' own words (e.g. Ismailka, 1994 and Bateson, 1989). The purpose of these profiles or vignettes was to enable the reader to form a mental picture of the participants, including their personal characteristics, the paths whereby they entered the profession and the personal lenses from which their opinions were expressed. According to Mishler (1986) ,

as cited in Seidman (1991), such profiles would also allow the researcher to share with her audience what has been learned from the interviews.

Seidman (1991), however, believed that not all interviews sustained being displayed in the form of a complete profile. Accordingly, the profiles I constructed varied in length and focus depending on the content of the respective interviews. In the end, however, sharing the data in this format allowed me report some of the participants' thoughts at the time of the interview.

Thematic Organization

After the profiles were completed, I examined them for further critical analysis. This stage of the data analysis and presentation, presented in the Discussions section, reflected my own interpretation more than any other part of the participants' profiles. I looked for common patterns among the participants' thoughts as well as for indications of unique and individual understandings of their work experiences. Simultaneously, I also examined the literature dealing with the ecology of human development as a step towards organizing the emerging patterns into a coherent framework. I was particularly interested in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological perspective in which he viewed human development as situated within nested contexts, which represent the individual's overall environment. This ecological perspective influenced my decision to organize the process of role definition into three categories: personal/

biographical, organizational, and social/historical. This framework enabled me to see the interaction of role definition and identity construction with individual experiences, and relevant social and organizational forces.

Chapter 4

SIX SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS TELL THEIR STORIES

This chapter is a collection of the life stories of six school psychologists. According to Denzin (1989) “we create the persons we write about, just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices” (p.82). The presentation of these stories is, therefore, a collaborative effort in that they were co-produced with the researcher re-interpreting the stories of the storytellers. The purpose of these stories is to explore the diversity of the experiences of school psychologists and the various ways in which they described these experiences. These stories are also intended to describe some of the values, hopes and concerns of professional school psychologists. Each of the six life stories was organized into various categories, such as “early family life,” “education,” and “professional trajectories.” These categories represent the researcher’s own selection and interpretation. The life stories themselves, however, in the way they were lived and experienced by the storytellers, defy encapsulation within any categories or sequencing in any particular order, for in Denzin’s (1989) own words, “there is no way to stuff a real live person between the two covers of a text” (p.83). Therefore, the researcher’s interpretations of the

life stories presented here serve as ideas that are candidates for other readers to entertain "not necessarily as truth ... but as positions about the nature and meaning of phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries" (Peshkin, 1985, p.280).

Mark Hughes

Early Family Life

Mark Hughes, age 40, grew up in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. According to Mark, the community where he grew up was “pretty much a white, middle class, bedroom community ... with a very good school system and infrastructure.” Mark was raised in a closely knit family consisting of both parents and three younger siblings, two brothers and a sister. Mark’s father was a fine arts educator and had a strong interest in the arts in general and in music in particular. From an early age, Mark was exposed to a wide range of cultural and artistic experiences; they traveled a lot as a family, visited museums, enjoyed the outdoors as well as the performing arts.

According to Mark, among the important influences this lifestyle had on him was that it increased his tolerance for cultural diversity:

My family had friends from many different backgrounds and I spent a lot of time around musicians growing up, and in our family there’s very much a level of acceptance and tolerance of people of many different backgrounds ... different socioeconomic strata and so forth and consequently I feel that I grew up without many prejudices. When I could see around me people ... my friends and the families of my friends who had more biases, it was hard for me to accept or to understand ... not having been acculturated in that situation myself. It was like record albums of black jazz musicians laying around the house and literature, and we would go out to the theatre ... we were just always involved with diversity, so for me it was a natural thing.

Education

Mark’s exposure to cultural diversity was also reinforced at school. He attended a school district that had an ethnically diverse teaching staff. Overall,

Mark was quite successful academically. He recalled that his school days were enjoyable and “pretty easy,” describing himself as a “high average ... B+, A-student” who always got his work done and never had disciplinary or behavior problems. Mark was also involved in a number of extracurricular activities; he worked all the way through high school and then started to play music himself.

In contrast, Mark’s transition to college was less enjoyable: I went to Fairfield University because my father wanted me to. That’s where he went to school and he felt it was a fine school and it is a fine school, but at the time most of my friends had gone away to school and I was commuting and I did not enjoy it, there was no social life, I was living at home part of the time. It just was not for me a very enjoyable experience, and I really didn’t have a good handle on what I wanted to do at the time either, I felt that I could go in many different directions: I was interested in music and at that point in time I was performing a lot and my head was kind of in the clouds a bit.

Despite his parents’ disapproval, Mark dropped out of college for a while to play popular music in bars. He decided to “test his freedom” and moved out of his parents’ house to pursue his interest in music. A year later, however, Mark decided to return to college. He was able to complete the requirements necessary to attend Great Lakes University. There, he obtained a Bachelor’s degree with a double major in social science and secondary education, minoring in music education.

At the end of his undergraduate program, however, Mark was “somewhat disappointed” with his preparation as a teacher:

You have to understand too that most of my undergraduate preparation was not in the college of education, it was in social science so I had a core of professional education classes and some of the music courses I needed for my minor, but most of my coursework was ... psychology, anthropology, a lot of history classes. The professional education courses

I had there I didn't find to be that helpful to me. I remember a methods class in social science, we had ten week terms at that point so just when you were getting a handle on things the term ends, it seemed to fly by and we covered so much content that it just didn't make a lot of sense, and ... then I got into my student teaching, (sighed), which seemed to come very rapidly and that was not very long, it was like one term and you're in and out of there.

Overall, by the end of his semester as a student teacher experience, Mark felt uncertain about his teaching skills and believed he was "unprepared to be a teacher." Mark never became close to his supervising teacher and felt, generally that he did not have as much mentoring as he liked in order to be able to teach.

This uncertainty may have been one reason that Mark decided to pursue his interest in music instead of teaching. Thus, he went on a second "escapade," travelling with a musical band for two and a half years. Nonetheless Mark was still determined to make his career in education rather than in music:

Actually, as I was completing my undergraduate degree, I had anticipated graduate school and I did what I needed to do to ... get my ducks in a row for graduate school, knowing that I'd probably be going back and that sort of would lead us into how I got into school psychology.

School Psychology: Professional Trajectories

First Encounter and Early Impressions

Mark's first encounter with school psychology took place during his undergraduate years. Ironically, while it was an unsuccessful mentoring relationship that had contributed to his dissatisfaction with his preparation as a teacher, Mark's interest in school psychology began through a positive "mentoring relationship." This relationship seemed to occur "purely by coincidence." As an undergraduate student:

I came to live with several of my friends who had a house in South Bedford ... the owner of this house, Dr. Beaman, was a school psychologist and *he* was how I found out about school psychology ... I would go over to pay the rent ... and we would just chat about things. He was interested in what I was doing and I'd talk to him about that and in what my sister [who was studying to be a teacher] was doing. So gradually we established a relationship ... a mentoring type of relationship and he helped me to learn what was involved in being a school psychologist and actually was the person who wrote my recommendation for my program, he sponsored me.

Although Mark's early understanding of a school psychologist's work emphasized the role of a diagnostician, it was the focus on understanding children's learning that sparked his interest in the profession:

Dr. Beaman was kind of a traditionalist as far as psychometrics go and he was of the old school, not so much a consultant as an evaluator. So I learned a lot about that and I thought that was pretty interesting. I also found out about how you work more in depth with individual students to try to diagnose the needs they have.

Mark was also "very intrigued" by the amount of collaboration that took place between school psychologists and teachers. Subsequently, he decided to go back to graduate school in order to pursue a degree in school psychology.

Early Training in School Psychology

Initially, Mark found the program in school psychology challenging to the point that it made him feel "intimidated." He even referred to feelings of "self-doubt" as to whether he was going to be able to complete the program:

I was around some very high powered individuals there, some really intelligent people ... I *want* to do it but it seems like everybody else has such a better handle on this, particularly people who have been working for a number of years and had experience.

The turning point for Mark occurred “near the very end of his program,” when he began his field training. It was then that he developed a more thorough understanding of his responsibilities and, consequently, became more confident in his ability to function as a school psychologist:

I think my practicum and then my internship really were the most important experiences in terms of preparation, when I could actually get into a milieu and apply some of these skills and see how they are related to the big picture as far as the operation of the school and what the school psychologist role meant to that environment. Up to that point, as I said, everything was theoretical and based in book learning or third party information and I tend to be a kind of experiential learner. I retain a lot of the knowledge from that kind of learning as opposed to reading about something ... but when I got out into the school environment, of course I’d done some student teaching and that was helpful but interacting as a problem solver and seeing how that impacted things, that’s when it began to coalesce for me, and I’d have to say up until the point when I did my practicum ... which was very near the end of my graduate program, I didn’t know where I was going with all of that.

Once more, the presence of a “wise mentor” was to play an important role in shaping Mark’s development as a professional school psychologist:

I think I had a very wise mentor in the school district where I worked and he knew how much latitude to give me and we worked pretty closely together and I had grown a lot at that point too ... I spent almost a whole year doing internship and that was just a wonderful experience that largely shaped me as a professional. Working along side 5 or 6 well experienced school psychologists and a fantastic mentor it really shaped me as a professional and I very rapidly moved away from the academic attitude ... and stayed in the professional world and *probably* grew more in that school year in terms of my skills and abilities than all the time I’ve been in college.

Meanwhile, Mark’s interest in music continued to play an important role in his life, not only as a hobby, but also as a “counterbalance” that enabled him to endure the initial challenges of graduate school:

Music was a really important part of my college experience, I played in the University Jazz Band the whole time I was both an undergraduate and graduate student and I had the reinforcement that was derived from being a part of (the band) ... that sort of counterbalanced the effort that I had to put into studying. It's really hard to explain how that kept me motivated but it was a really important part of my entire experience in school. I guess I had more affiliation with people through the band than I had through the department (at School Psychology). I had some friends but people went their own way, there wasn't a core group of people that went through together. In fact I graduated with one other person out of the School Psychology program, knew a lot of people but ... many of them were coming from out of town ... So I had these friendships in the band and people were pretty focused on their goals, music ... it just kept me going.

In addition to providing a counterbalance to academic life and reinforcing a sense of belonging to his school, Mark also believed that music had an important "liberating" effect on him:

Well it's interesting ... the creative process involved in being a musician or an artist, I think it liberates you in other ways too, and it gave me exposure to a segment of life that many people don't have exposure to through the arts. I don't know, it just kind of made me complete.

Even after having been a school psychologist for almost 11 years, Mark's interest in music, especially jazz, has continued to inspire his growth as a professional:

I know that being involved in music as a collaborative process, particularly in a band setting and there's a lot of give and take and flexibility and sharing that goes on, I think that being a consultant, a school psychology consultant, there are many parallels there in terms of being a flexible person, being cooperative, being willing to take risks. Playing jazz, you take a lot of risks, you put yourself on the limb ... there's a sense of an *esprit de corps* there, where there's a common goal and I think that's really the same in education ... they seem diametrically opposed, (laughed), and in many ways they are, but also in the way you learn to interact and the freedom that brings forth in terms of your soul and you're out looking ... maybe it's just me ... there were aspects of myself that lent me to succeed in both areas, and again I don't know if those were aspects

of my personality or that I was shaped ... probably there were both things happening there.

Early Professional Life

The First Job

Soon after completing his internship, Mark began to interview for school psychology positions. His first job was in a rural area, which was far removed from his childhood upbringing as a “city kid.” Nevertheless, there were a number of aspects about that district which made it “a very good base to start a career” in school psychology:

(It) turned out to be a fabulous place to *cut my teeth* as a professional. They had a lot of freedom and responsibility and just about anything I could manage to do they appreciated ... they were ready for somebody who was forward thinking, who was more of a modernist and interested in doing more than just testing and I was able to do that. I was willing to do that ... it was a very supportive family-oriented sort of atmosphere.

There were other aspects about that rural community, however, that Mark found inconvenient. One of its biggest disadvantages, according to Mark, was its geographic isolation from larger cities and, hence, from opportunities for “continuing education,” and “access to more learning.” Moreover, being in an isolated rural community, Mark’s ability to pursue his interest in music became limited:

I had great interest in music and during the time I was commuting to large cities to play in a band ... not infrequently, several times a month, so I still had connections in metropolitan areas, plus my family was still (near the city,) my friends at that point ... so I didn’t figure on staying in (this rural) county for a long time.

Early Struggles and Difficulties

Geographic isolation was one aspect of the struggles that Mark faced during his first years as a school psychologist. As it turned out, Mark also felt professionally isolated in that he was the only school psychologist for the county. Although there was a “cooperative relationship” between the county where Mark was and an adjacent county, the he missed the “daily support ... the mutual support you get around other psychologists.” As a result, when dealing with conflict, such as:

Dealing with adversarial people, whether it's teachers or parents, I was functioning totally on my own at that point ... I didn't have many people to bounce these things off of.

According to Mark, the “family oriented ... supportive” atmosphere of this rural district was no substitute for the understanding and feedback he could have gotten from other school psychologists on a daily basis:

Everybody was very supportive of me but they couldn't totally understand what I was dealing with as another school psychologist would, so knowing how to problem solve and wondering am I doing the right thing here, not having much of an experiential base to work from ... (it) took me a while to get the report writing over, and just organizing myself for the job at that point in time I was working long hours, I was working like 14 hour days trying to keep up. It was happening, I was making it work but probably just the isolation that first year. I wouldn't necessarily recommend that a person who doesn't have any prior experience in schools go that route ... it's pretty difficult, and you have to be pretty confident in yourself and not be afraid to ask for help ... know where to get the help.

After four years in the rural district, Mark succeeded in obtaining a position as a school psychologist in the Brookfield School district.

Current Work Setting

General Characteristics

When I interviewed Mark, he had been working with the Brookfield School District for almost seven years. He was responsible for a total of five elementary school buildings. He described the Brookfield School District as a middle city's district with an enrollment between 18 and 19 thousand students. One of the defining characteristics of the Brookfield school district was its demographically diverse student population:

We serve a very ethnically and socioeconomically diverse group of citizens and we have a very broad range of services that we offer to our community and I think we compare favorably to most school districts nationwide our size and being an urban or middle city school district.

Mark praised the "outstanding array of support services" provided by the Brookfield school district, indicating that it addressed "just about any kind of need that a special education child has or could have." These programs included:

Preprimary and home bound services for very young infants and toddlers, all the way up to center based programs for autistic impaired, severely mentally impaired, trainable impaired and multiply impaired students. We have an excellent POHI (Physically and Otherwise Health Impaired) program at Springfield Elementary School ... it's like a magnet program from around the school district ... we have self contained programs for severely emotionally impaired students, we have high needs programs for educably mentally impaired students, but we also have inclusive classroom programs that allow children that are more minimally handicapped to participate fully with general education peers, so we *really* have a broad continuum of programs available.

In addition to support programs and classrooms, Mark felt proud that he was part of a district that was “well-fitted with technology” and that employed a “full range of support specialists,” including:

School psychologists, social workers, teacher consultants, speech and language pathologists, special teacher consultants for POHI, VI (visually impaired), HI (hearing impaired) students, occupational therapists, PT (physical therapists), we have a full time audiologist that we employ, which is a *real* luxury ... we have school nurses who are incredibly supportive of our programs and have rescued us many times with information and linkages to clinical personnel. So I’m pretty proud to say that we can serve a lot of needs in the school (district).

Resources and Support Services

Given his positive view of the district’s resources, it was not surprising that Mark considered them a valuable source of support to his professional role. For one thing, these resources allowed Mark to choose from a broad range of intervention options when making recommendations regarding the children he assessed:

I guess I don’t have as many reservations about programming issues, for instance, because I know just about anything I encounter we’re gonna be able to deal with and if we ... if we can’t we have linkages to the intermediate school district, to the university programs and hospitals around the area that can support or supplement what we do so I feel that we are at a great advantage in this *locale* specifically in the Brookfield School District in that we don’t have to be too conservative with recommendations for programming because we have all that available.

Mark contrasted these advantages to the limited resources in the district where he had previously worked. Of particular interest here is how the psychologist’s role as a resource to the children and families he serves can be tied

to the availability and accessibility of support services in the district where he works:

I worked in a very small intermediate school district where children would have to travel miles by school bus if they needed a special program. It was always difficult to recommend that knowing the hardship it would create for the family or for the child, but that's not the case here.

Unfortunately, the future seemed uncertain with regards to the availability of these resources. According to Mark, recent budget cuts posed a threat to the district's ability to provide such a broad range of support services and qualified staff:

We've lost staff, they've continually reduced support staff. They've reduced administrative staff, so we're asked to do more with less all the time ... (support staff including) psychologists, you name it. There's been reductions in all areas, as our *enrollment* has reduced. Well, that's another area, the student population count is steadily declining and with the advent of charter schools and schools of choice, last year we took a big hit, we lost, darn, near 10% of our student enrollment, so it's been hard to justify in some cases maintaining the level of staffing that we've had as we've lost funding and student count.

While some of the reductions undertaken by the school district did not affect Mark's role directly, they still served to "diminish morale." For example, Mark described how the district's Special Education Instructional Resource Center was among the most esteemed services that were eventually subject to financial reductions. For years, the Center had acted as a clearinghouse of information for special education programs and was run by knowledgeable and well-qualified staff. Due to budget cuts, however, the Center had to be merged with a General Education Resource Center and a number of its highly qualified

staff were subsequently eliminated. According to Mark, while this “loss” was felt more strongly by teachers than by school psychologists, it was still discouraging to know that “some of the things that distinguished us are gradually going by the wayside:”

That was one of the things that made us competitive, you know, having resources of that quality and having to give them up puts us further behind in terms of drawing quality teaching staff and retaining teaching staff and students.

Meanwhile, Mark noted, the district managed to maintain a “good budget for materials and ... logistical things,” including secretarial support and test materials for school psychologists. An exception to this was the limited work space available for school psychologists to work with students:

We’re kind of over - crowded in a lot of our buildings and it’s hard to find a good *sterile* space (laughed) ... and just in the five buildings I have it really varies: I have a couple of wonderful ... the perfect, ultimate testing area and other buildings you have to fight with other team staff to get space.

Social Support Networks

Among the people he worked with, Mark considered his Special Education teammates, such as social workers, speech and language therapists and special education teachers, an important source of support. According to Mark, he and his teammate functioned as an “interlocking chain” in that he could always count on them for support.

Depending on the school building, Mark felt that administrators could be very supportive as well. Examples of their support included:

Encouraging teachers to listen to what we have to say, they themselves listening to what we have to say, dealing with issues like discipline and ... more effective ways of problem solving, getting parents on line for us, bringing parents into the school, helping to locate them sometimes (laughed), making those connections.

As for other school psychologists there was no built-in time for them to meet with one another on a regular basis. However, they still managed to get together periodically and, according to Mark, they formed "quite a cohesive group." Although informal, Mark felt that that type of networking was important:

I would say that the psychologists are very supportive of each other, we do a lot to sort of bolster (one another) ... because no one can relate to a psychologist like other psychologists can, so it's helpful being in an office where there are 7 or 8 other school psychologists to assist you.

Roles, Functions and Related Issues

Role Definition

Mark saw himself performing multiple roles:

When people ask me I tell them that ... that's the way I see my role as a facilitator, as a supporter, as a problem solver, a clearinghouse for information, and I think people that know me that work with me over the years understand now that that's the way I carry out my role, but many people depending on how much contact they have with school psychologists and their career may only view the psychologist as a psychometrician, somebody that administers a test.

According to Mark, the school psychologist was also in a unique position to make sure that others, including other school psychologists, observed standards of professional practice, a role which he referred to as the "whistle blower:"

I think we're like the conscience of the school district sometimes, we're this third party observer that's looking ... what's going on ... in a sense, holding the mirror up. I think we should assume that role to an extent by virtue of our training and the knowledge base that we embrace, our awareness of best practices and so forth.

In doing so, the school psychologist's responsibility went beyond advocating for a particular client and involved upholding a general code of moral conduct that applied to everyone he came in contact with:

I don't really have a problem putting myself on the line. If I see a kid being wronged in some way, *or* a teacher, *whoever* it is ... I guess I have a pretty strong sense of justice and I've always been the sort of person who cheered for the underdog. I guess that's maybe part of why I do what I do. It bothers me to see people suffer, so I'm kind of a fixer I guess in some way.

Being the conscience of the school, however, had its own risks. According to Mark, it could potentially lead to conflict with others. In essence, the psychologist trod a fine line between the rules of protocol and the rules of ethical conduct:

Sometimes you step over the line because you see other people being unethical and you may violate rules of protocol and you just have to say wait a minute ... and I'll tell you, I will not be cooped. There's this whole thing about being a team player, doing what's good for the organization and that's baloney. When the needs of the children are put behind the needs of the organization or someone's ego, that's where I stop, and I guess I've been doing this for a while now and I've encountered some situations like that and I've been able to kind of hold my ground on it and I've gotten myself in a little bit of trouble over it but I've always come out ahead in terms of how I thought about myself and (how) other people viewed me.

Overall, Mark summarized his role as "primarily a problem solver," further explaining that:

The focus (of problem solving) is on maximizing the potential of students and of the system, for me, and when we encounter roadblocks to the maximization of those potentials, then I may be called in to help solve or *resolve* the issues. How do we get around the constraints that we face, whether they be internal to the student or a systemic problem, whatever it may be. My job is to sort of come and analyze what's happening with the interactions there.

Mark believed that flexibility and diversity were not only characteristics of his role in his local district, but that they were necessary skills for all school psychologists in general. given the nature of the challenges the profession was facing:

I could do this job for 20 more years and I don't think I'll have a *total handle* on everything there is to know about doing it, there's just so much diversity in the role and you could do so many different things, you're only limited really by your imagination and by the needs and priorities of the place that you work, so it's for a person who's creative and who is a risk taker.

Mark also believed that those who wished to maintain their professional role in the future would only be able to do so if they were able to respond to the needs of their respective settings:

I think that's where we're heading in this profession ... the one-dimensional role that we used to be defined by no longer is viable. I think people who are clinging to that are gonna find themselves maybe unemployed and really unhappy. We have to make ourselves indispensable and in order to do that you have to be opportunistic and find a niche. It's like finding a need and meeting the need where you're at. There's plenty of needs out there.

Perceived Ideal Role

According to Mark, the number of school buildings assigned to a school psychologist was an important element in his construction of an ideal role:

If I were to fabricate an ideal job for myself I would work in one school and one school only. I would take one elementary building and become a student support specialist in that building, which could include all the things we've talked about: assessment, indirect and direct consultation, counseling support, support to parents, a little bit of research maybe although that's not a primary interest of mine ... so all the things that I've been trained to do and that I've learned to do, but to keep it in one place where I can be more effective as a change agent, I think that would be most ideal. If I were in one place all the time and didn't have all this time spent going to meetings in different places it would allow me to do those kinds of things.

In fact, Mark seemed frustrated and confused by the fact that school psychologists were not provided with the accommodations that allowed them to function up to their potential:

Now the thing that sort of boggles my mind is that here are the people who are most comprehensively trained problem solvers in a school system and the premium is put on what salaries and benefits cost rather than how much bang for the buck can you get out of a person, what's the breadth of support that the person can provide to your school district. School psychologists can do an awful lot if they're used in the way that they're capable of being of support and, you know, typically that gets ignored and the bottom line is always what the salary adds up to and, you know, what we cost the district to employ rather than what can we offer.

In Mark's opinion, the resources necessary for achieving the ideal role were time and money:

If there's one thing I wish I could make more of it would be time, followed by money. Money is a constant point of contention ... if there could be more school psychologists in a school district, we'd have a smaller ratio of students to deal with, and be more intensely involved in student support and teacher support, that would help ease that somewhat.

Unfortunately, Mark was not optimistic about the likelihood of future changes that would allow school psychologists to function within the parameters of an ideal role especially in the face of "downsizing."

Stressors

Even for a dedicated psychologist like Mark Hughes, dealing with problems on an ongoing basis could be stressful and exhausting. Describing the stresses of his profession, he noted:

My life is all about problems, I mean problem solving, so sometimes you encounter some problems that are pretty complex ... (laughed) ... and you don't know what to do with them ...

One way Mark dealt with the stresses of his profession was by separating himself from his job when he was away from work :

Well ... what's very important is when I'm away from work, whether it's psychologically or physically away from work, not to be reminded of work. One practice that I've adopted that's been real helpful for me is not to socialize very much with the people I work with when I'm away from work. That's just one way I'm able to inoculate myself somewhat to the stress is ... is to have separate space ... and believe me I work with wonderful people ... and I am their friend and I could feel very comfortable doing something fun with them, but I don't really have any close friends that I do stuff with from work, so that's one thing.

By separating personal and professional activities Mark was able to create a balanced lifestyle that allowed him to "recharge and regenerate" himself:

(By) having an avocation or a hobby that's not really related and I travel a lot and having the summers off is nice, you get a break and get to do something different if you choose to. I know a lot of people who do things related to the job too, but for me having balance in my life is really important. When I'm *at* work I do give myself 100% to the job, I don't have any problem putting in extra time. It's never bothered me, some people view it as a six or seven hour a day job and they do the minimum necessary to meet the demands, but I enjoy my work and I like being there when I'm there usually, so I'll give 110%, but when I'm not there I give 0% to it.

Although Mark made a conscious effort to separate work from personal life, the two areas were not totally isolated from one another. Mark viewing

himself as a lifetime learner and was, therefore, able to maintain a continuity between his professional and non-professional identities:

The other thing that's been of real help to me is to continue to expand and improve my skill and knowledge base so I feel more competent in doing what I do, so continuing education is important too, although I said when I'm away from the job I'm away from the job, sometimes when I'm away from the job I'm learning about the job too ... (smiled) ... that's one way I handle stress is to get better at what I do and feel more confident that I could solve the problems that face me.

Reflections

Memorable Experiences and Turning Points

At various points in the interview, Mark indicated that his primary clients were the parents of the students he worked with. It was through his work with parents that Mark experienced some of the most transforming experiences in his career:

The most important transforming experiences for me have been working with parents ... particularly, we've dealt with difficult circumstances with kids having a lot of difficulty or parents finding out that the kids have a lot of difficulty for the first time, dealing with the grief reactions and being able to work through all of that and then get to the helping state of ... now we're gonna do something ... take some action to help remedy the situation ... and seeing people grow through that.

What was most transforming about these incidents was the psychologist's ability to step into the parents' shoes in order to help them deal with their ordeals:

There have been some memorable ones ... In fact ... cases where you would expect a parent not to be really dealing with a deep grief reaction and they do, or finding out about their child having a handicap ... and that's always an eye opener to try to understand from the parent's perspective what's going on, why are they feeling and thinking what they're thinking and feeling, trying to be with them to step into their

shoes. For me those situations when we've been able to overcome the impediments to success for the child, sometimes that takes a long time, years even. I've been involved with, *literally*, over the course of 2 or 3 years processes where we've actually finally gotten to the point of taking some corrective action but it's taken that long for the parent to come to terms with the difficulty their child's having or with their own problems and correcting their own problems then attending to the needs of their child and to me that's very gratifying when we're finally able to overcome and ... really turn ourselves towards the right direction for the child ... of course every time a kid smiles at me or you see a child succeed you can't help but be moved somewhat by that because that's what you're all about, is seeing success happen.

Success

In Mark's opinion, the purpose of being a school psychologist was to liberate others from any limitations that could prevent them from functioning up to their potential. Inasmuch as he was able to achieve that purpose, Mark considered himself successful:

I'm successful when I liberate people from whatever is binding them, whatever is impeding their success, whether it's as parent or as a teacher trying to deliver curriculum or a student trying to learn, so basically solving problems, we're talking solving academic or behavioral problems and limiting people from achieving their goals. So when I help people reach the goals they set for themselves or for their children then ... then I feel very good, I feel like I've succeeded, that's why I do what I do, it's not because I want to be seen as some kind of superhero ... but to maximize the potential of the system or the people in it.

Mark assessed his success by observing the effects of his efforts on the people he worked with as well as through others' direct feedback concerning his work:

The most meaningful thing (is) when I see people achieve a level of satisfaction with the process in the school or within family and knowing that I had maybe an instrumental role and helping that to happen and ... it never hurts to have people thank you for that either (laughed) you don't expect it necessarily but ... I don't care how many people may shun you,

all it takes is one to tell you that something that was very meaningful for them and to express gratitude and all that other stuff fades away.

Gratitude and positive remarks were highly valued by Mark, provided they came from people whose opinions mattered to him. Those occasions, according to Mark, often “comes out of the blue:”

An example of this was just yesterday a school psychologist from a neighboring district called me because she needed some information basically related to a conference and she said ‘by the way, I’ve worked with some of the students you’ve evaluated and I read your reports, I think you have really good reports, they really help me understand who this child is.’ And I’ve gotten a lot of knots (?) from my bosses for being too ... too wordy, write reports that are too long, people aren’t gonna read them. So when I hear that from people who have vested interest in that report that reinforces my effort ... particularly other people who do what I do ... and that kind of feedback, or parents expressing gratitude for pointing them in a particular direction toward resources or helping their child or just giving me that kind of positive feedback ... That’s for me a big payoff ... a big paycheck.

Despite the district’s recent cuts in support personnel, including school psychologists, Mark felt that his efforts made a difference for those whom he considered to be his constituents:

I don’t do too badly at this stage of my career in terms of the monetary end of things but I’d sacrifice pay to work in an environment where I felt that I was making a difference, and I continue to think that I do in Brookfield, even though times are tough and getting tougher there, but I still feel like we’re doing good work and that my efforts were valued by the people who I care the most about, whose opinions I regard highly ... the parents, the teachers, administrators at the school level, not so much the people who have another political agenda but people who I consider my constituents, and that’s mainly the parents and the teachers and first of all the parents. I’ve got to please them before everybody else, I feel that they’re the ones that are employing me.

Advice to Students of School Psychology

Mark had two pieces of advice for novice school psychologists. His first advice emphasized the merits of extensive hands on experience in the schools:

Get as much experience as you can in a school environment doing whatever, I don't care if you're just a volunteer, a paraprofessional, or if you can get some teaching experience, I think it's very helpful to have some teaching experience, there's a credibility that's built in through that with other educators, other teachers and you also can empathize, I think more easily with the stresses that teachers have to deal with having been there yourself, I think that's really important, and I know a lot of school psychologists coming into school psychology out of psychology programs and so forth, have a very strong theoretical background. I think it's very important to have had some practical experience in an educational setting *with* the population you plan to deal with. And there really are differences between high school and elementary school, preschool, so if you can do that I think that's pretty important.

Mark also urged students not to compromise their belief in what's best for the child for the sake of popularity:

One thing I tell my practicum students is that you shouldn't be in this to win a popularity contest because if you do the right thing sometimes you're gonna be the most unpopular person in the school and you have to accept that, you're gonna make decisions that are gonna bump somebody out. However, that's fortunately kind of the minority of the time, mostly what you try to do is to bring people together so that's like a win-win situation but sometimes you just have to do what's ethically right and what you know is right for a kid is not gonna make people happy, some people, and I can wake up and look at myself in the mirror, know that I did what should have been done and feel ok about that and not worry about whether somebody thinks I'm a jerk sometimes you just have to agree to disagree and stand by your morals and principles and do what you know is right. That's a moral victory and you can be very satisfied that you made an appropriate choice or decision and people will try to shoot you down for it, that's because their priorities are misplaced largely.

Looking Back

Having turned 40 years of age, Mark felt that he had reached a new phase in his life:

A mid-life crisis kind of creeps in and my step children are now in college and I'm entering a new phase of my life and looking ahead as much as behind and saying where am I heading here.

Occasionally, Mark has had second thoughts about his career path:

That's when I'm ten reports behind and my boss is saying how come you're overdue. I thought about that a lot too ... and I really can't see, other than playing music, if I had the opportunity to exploit that I'm sure I would. But I had no aspirations to be an administrator in a school at all, occasionally I think I would enjoy being a teacher and most often that's when I'm in a classroom and observing and seeing the sheer enjoyment that these people get out of teaching, what comes *back* to them."

At times, he considered retraining to become a guidance counselor:

I've thought about maybe branching off and getting into guidance and counseling or social work or something related to this field but not outside the school ... I love working in the school, it's a great place to be if you like kids, I feel very comfortable.

Overall, however, Mark considered himself privileged to be in his current profession:

I think that we ... this is a privilege to do this job and we're given a lot of responsibility for kids' lives for ... the really meaningful experiences that they will have that will shape them and I ... I don't take it lightly.

Martha Smith

Early Family Life

Martha, who is in her early fifties, grew up in a large city in the Western part of the United States. Martha described the community where she grew up as “isolating:”

It’s like the old towns in the US like Boston, they’re all brick and one’s just like the next one, and they didn’t seem isolated at the time but I guess they were isolating because you didn’t see older people and you didn’t see younger people ... it’s like, mom, dad, kids here, mom, dad, kids there.

While Martha’s father held a blue-collar job in a newspaper office, her mother stayed home to raise 5 children, three boys and two girls. During her childhood, Martha didn’t get to spend much time with her father because he worked afternoon shifts and was gone by the time she returned from school. Martha received little attention from her mother as well. With the responsibility of looking after five young children who were close in age, Mrs. Smith had little time to spend with each child. In fact, from an early age, Martha assumed the responsibility of looking after two of her younger brothers. As a compensation for the little attention she received at home, Mrs. Smith encouraged Martha to spend time with her maternal grandparents:

I spent a lot of time with my grandmother ... when I was growing up they lived about five miles from us, so sometimes on the weekends I would go and stay with my grandparents and I think my mom encouraged that just because she could see that I wasn’t getting any individual attention at home ... so then the grandparents, while you’re the apple of their eye they don’t ... physically move (smiled) ... they were slow by that time because I

guess they were between 60 and 70 at that time, so there were many nice parts to it but there were downsides too.

Martha also visited with the family of an aunt and uncle in another State.

During those visits, Martha experienced a family atmosphere that was much different from her own family:

Sometimes in the summer I would go with an aunt and uncle ... because I had cousins who were the same age and they had the same number of kids, but I think there was a lightness that was in the home, for example, after supper people would do the dishes together and then play cards or ... you could *be* together and there was just a lightness about it that wasn't present in my own home.

Education

Martha went to Catholic schools all the way through high school. She described her school experience as "joyless:"

Well, I'm sure the class sizes were 35 or 40, so I guess these women were being asked to teach children ... an impossible number of children. So the emphasis was on order, quiet ... sit down, shut up.

Martha was an avid reader but she was not interested in the subjects she was taught at school:

I liked to read, the library was across the street (from the school) so again that was a mile away from home and we didn't get driven places, if you wanted to go some place you walked or caught a bus ... so I loved to read and I would go and get all the female biographies like Clare Barton, and it seems like I was seeking that early: how women fit into society, into the culture ... but I can't remember being excited by anything at school. It was just what you had to do, you had to sit there and you had to memorize. I didn't feel particularly good at memorizing things.

Some events Martha witnessed at school left a lasting impression on her.

For example, during 8th grade, she frequently saw an African American friend of hers being hit by the nuns; Martha described this incident as being particularly

hard for her to see. The strict school environment heightened Martha's sensitivity to the needs of other children:

I can remember one day I've got bad allergies and my ears must have been particularly blocked and so I didn't hear what the nun was saying. She was just mad at me, so I think I'm always kind of sensitive to the kids who come to school with their ears blocked shut or with other health issues.

By the time she transferred to the Catholic High School for girls, Martha was already becoming aware of her own freedom. Furthermore, there was an atmosphere of defiance among those school-girls which, according to Martha, her first experience that she had a choice to "more flagrantly disobey:"

I was getting aware of the freedom I had, so (I) started doing some slight misbehaving and telling lies about where I'd been and staying out later and seeing girls misbehave. Four doors down from the school there was a bakery so these girls would go there in the morning and there'd be ... huh ... (laughed) fifty of them standing around there smoking ... they'd be eating doughnuts and smoking and stuff, it was just ... wow ... there's another way to be (chuckled), it was mind-blowing.

Although she grew up in a neighborhood where a few people went to college, Martha's parents, especially her father, encouraged her to pursue a college education. Looking back, Martha thought that that was "remarkable" given that her father had to drop out of school after 8th grade in order to help support his own family.

By the time she was in high school, Martha had already made some decisions about her career preferences:

I guess we routinely took math and I took chemistry and I had summer jobs typing, doing clerical work and in high school I could see that some of my friends were going and interviewing for clerical kinds of secretarial jobs and I felt like ... ugh ... I don't want that (chuckled), and I had aunts

who were nurses and I hated chemistry so I thought ... ugh, I don't want that either.

Eventually, one of Martha's aunts encouraged her to attend St. Joseph college, located several miles away from her home:

Transportation was a big problem because as a freshman I had 8 o'clock classes so I had to leave the house at 6:30 (am) and to take three buses to get to this college ... but I loved it after I got out there, I really did love it because all the teachers I had to this point ... they were pretty much drudgery and this is hard work, but these women at the teaching college seemed to love their work and they were excited about the material and one I had as a freshman, a philosophy teacher, she wrote on the note one day that she couldn't come to class because she was in Alabama marching for the civil rights movement, I thought 'oh, wow,' so it was pretty exciting.

St. Joseph College was also known for a program that focused on the education of deaf children:

That was when our government was encouraging people to become educators of the deaf, so there were financial incentives and it was just of interest to me, so that's the area of education that I picked, I think around sophomore year (I picked a major).

Martha graduated in the late sixties, then flew to the Midwest to work as a teacher for deaf children:

My first job was in Oakridge because I graduated from school with this deaf education (major) and the woman from an oral deaf school in the city of Oakridge, she flew to (St. Joseph College) get applicants and she flew us up to Oakridge and she treated us wonderfully for a weekend trying to get us to sign contracts and it was a lot of money and there were 3 of us that flew up there.

Martha worked at the school in Oakridge for 3 years after which she decided to get a Master's degree in Educational Psychology:

I guess just from the three years of being in Oakridge I had ... met people who had gone to Westport University and ... thought that I would like

that. I knew someone who was an administrator in Oakridge and he had gone to WU and he talked to me a little bit about Educational Psychology I did a little more problem solving to choose the second time I went to school.

Martha taught as a substitute teacher while she studied at Westport University. She completed her degree in a little less than two years and went on to teach deaf children at the Brookfield School District. Martha taught at the preschool level for several years, after which she began to teach middle school. It was then that she developed an interest in school psychology.

School Psychology: First Encounter and Early Impressions

Martha's interest in school psychology began when she met one of the school psychologists who worked in her district:

I liked her very much, very bright, very competent woman, and she was the one who encouraged me to think about returning to school and how much she liked school psychology.

Subsequently, Martha went on a year of sabbatical from teaching and obtained a second Master's degree in school psychology. Martha said that her Master's program focused primarily on issues of assessment and diagnosis:

Because deaf students had been so misdiagnosed, professionals put a lot of emphasis on the assessment process because deaf people had been called mentally retarded, so there was a heavy emphasis on assessment and that's pretty much how I saw the role (of a school psychologist) when I was in school. Of course I also saw work with consultation or group counseling for parents or children but I pretty much saw it as assessment.

Early Professional Life

After she finished her Master's degree, Martha returned to the Brookfield school district, this time as a school psychologist. During the early stages of her career Martha faced the challenge of adjusting to a new professional identity:

I came back to the same school district so that was familiar to me, I was very worried about *role* and what does this role mean now ... to switch the identity from teacher to school psychologist now and I'm like "what is this?" (laughed).

Moreover, as a school psychologist, Martha faced the challenge of working with a broader range of handicaps and disabilities:

I came back to Riverview School, and that was where the deaf children were so then when you work with deaf children then the administrator gives you the physically handicapped children and *that* really scared me because it felt like a big responsibility to try to do those assessments on children whose hands might not work, that was a *lot* of stress, and then with the physically handicapped children you have the physical therapist and the occupational therapist who can have so much ownership of these children they have all this experience under their belts and here I come with *no* experience with physically handicapped children and it had just been kind of dumped on me.

Martha recalled her early struggles to work within a multidisciplinary team setting:

The work with the other disciplines was a real problem for me because as a classroom teacher it was like I'm the bottom line and I'm responsible and then (as a school psychologist) you're in the building where there could be the speech therapist, OT, PT, you know, 4 other specialists looking at this child and then myself and I had no experience being a team player, I was raised I guess to be more competitive and then to give up some of that and work as a team, that was really difficult for me.

Over the years, however, Martha made an effort to improve her ability to work with others in a non-competitive manner:

I think I probably tried to look for other people that seemed to do it well. People who had their own discipline ... have that be intact and yet be open to hearing from other disciplines, because you also find people who have their own discipline but they can be so weak that it's like, 'Ah, just take it,' and that didn't feel right to me, so I think I've tried to learn from people that seemed to find that balance of their own discipline, and then respecting other disciplines and trying to be more of a team ... and I've probably tried to work on myself to see that that was just a weakness in me that I wasn't a team player, and to see that I had something to contribute even if I didn't have complete responsibility and complete control over (the situation).

Current Work Setting

General Characteristics

At the time of this interview, Martha had been working with the Brookfield School District for 26 years, about half of which she spent working as a school psychologist. Presently, she worked with a central diagnostic team that was responsible for assessing infants and children aged 6 years and younger. According to Martha, the team functioned as a "catchall" for young children with cognitive, behavioral, physical or academic concerns.

In addition to the school psychologist, the team included social workers, speech and language specialists, and physical and occupational therapists. Each year, Martha completed an average of 70 to 75 assessments. Martha's assessment routines emphasized "seeing the total child" rather than focusing only on the cognitive aspects:

I like to spend a lot of time in the classrooms trying to get a feel for what their day is like in the classroom, and they really only come for a half day because they're that young. So I'll spend time just getting a feel of what's it like getting to be a little kid in this room, and I talk to parents, see how the child is at home, how the child is at school. I can do any number of standard assessments ...I try to work with the other support people and

try to get their ideas and so we can see the total child rather than, 'you're the psychologist so it's just the cognitive skills,' but see the total child.

By virtue of her background in teaching deaf children, Martha sometimes provided more information and resources to the parents of children who had an extensive history of hearing impairment.

Martha was responsible for a total of seven elementary buildings in the district. Among those buildings, there was one particular school that Martha preferred:

The administrator (in that building) who has just a real zest for her job, believes the children can succeed and believes in supporting her staff to help them help the children get to the best they can be.

As an example of her support, that administrator once organized a stress management workshop for her staff at the end of one school year. Besides administrative support, Martha also found support in the fact that a number of staff members in that building, including herself, had attended a professional training program together:

speech science, so people working with More of the staff in that building have been trained together, we've been taught together, like last year we had a university course in audiology and the same children I work with ... (we learned) some techniques that are very useful for young children who in many ways do not make progress with traditional methods ... so there's probably about six of us who had the same course and work at the school that I like so much. When a child has misbehavior it seems like some professionals make the child the problem; this is more about what could ... why could he be doing this, what is he learning through his misbehavior?

By attending the training program, Martha was able to master a set of techniques referred to as "guided interaction," where the adult manually guided

the child's hand while teaching him a new activity. Martha observed that the training course had changed the way she worked with children, adding that she used the techniques she learned every day with children in their classrooms.

Resources and Support Networks

Among the people she worked with, Martha perceived the occupational therapists as most supportive of her role:

Occupational therapists would probably support my work and know the difficulty and the intricacies of my work more than another discipline I don't know (why), maybe their education, maybe their training, maybe their background has some similarities (with school psychology.)

Next to occupational therapists, Martha found that parents were in some ways supportive of her role, "they seem appreciative of efforts and that's nice."

On the other hand, Martha shared some aspects about the district that she perceived as unsupportive:

I feel pretty invisible as far as the central administration, where the money decisions are made and where the personnel decisions are made, and I feel in some ways that young children are invisible to them.

Roles and Functions

Martha believed that the district saw her role primarily as a diagnostician. She, on the other hand, defined her role as a child and family advocate. Thus, her function was to "help young children and help parents however I can support them." She saw her current role as continuous with her previous role as a teacher:

To me now it feels like more of a continuum, I mean I *am* a teacher, (with) a different focus from a classroom teacher ... I teach parents, I teach children still as a school psychologist.

In fact, it was her ability to educate parents about their children's strengths and needs that Martha found to be a most valuable aspect of her work:

I like to meet with parents, try to explain the work I've done with the children and talk about an area that the child is having success with and an area that they need help with. (I find that to be most valuable) because I feel that (sometimes) when parents have that knowledge they can advocate for the best programs for their child.

Stressors

Among the frustrations of being a school psychologist was the difficulty establishing trusting relationships with others. Martha attributed that difficulty to shortage of time:

I guess it partly comes back to the time issue that there's not enough time to develop trusting relationship so that whatever is being communicated about a child ... that there's trust so you'll be listened to and you'll be respected for your opinion. Say there's five people around the table, that there's adequate time to do that and energy and that it's not just dump quickly because the teacher has to go meet the class. That's frustrating when you want to communicate and you feel the communication's blocked for some reason.

The other stressful aspect of her work was inadequate work-space, which Martha described as a requirement for maximizing children's performance:

(One stress is not) having adequate facilities to maximize children's learning. When the assessments are done, (I need) to have adequate space rather than a nasty closet. That's a stress for me.

Rather than focusing on the negative, however, Martha dealt with stress by emphasizing the positive aspects of her work:

I try to be grateful for my work because many of the families we work with are poor and it's an opportunity to be reminded of what we have ... of the gifts we have ... that helps me. Just sharing problems with people that are trying to do a good job, and sometimes just kind of trying to draw

back and think about how I'd like to be treated in a stressful situation, the support, the stroking ... and try to give that to the person who's having a hard time.

Reflections

Impact of Life Experiences on Professional Identity

For Martha, becoming a grandmother was an important turning point in her career. Besides making working with children seem "important and more joyful," having grandchildren also changed her priorities regarding children's needs:

With grandmothering your priorities change and ... for me as a grandmother, whether the child can do arithmetic is important but there's other things that might be more pressing ... I know how I want my grandchildren treated and that's how I want these children treated ... so I think that's part of it, the kind of world I want for my grandchildren I want for the children I work with, and ... in some ways there's more optimism.

Advice to Students of School Psychology

Martha wished to alert students of school psychology that their ability to deal with others and work in a team setting was as important as the technical skills they learned at school:

I think that the social aspects of school ... that the discipline work will come and that will be fine, but in many ways the social relationships are really a challenge ... relationships with others ... and there's just gonna be lessons that they learn ... some the easy way and some the hard way, and just know that there's gonna be those lessons and that we have to hopefully change and grow from what the schools have to teach us.

Looking Back

Since becoming a school psychologist, Martha said that she has never missed her teaching job. There were times, however, when she asked herself whether school psychology was the right career choice for her:

There's days when I ask myself, usually when you have to sit at a staff meeting, I'm to the point in my life where I don't want to be at meetings where people talk to you. I like short kind of brainstorming, what can we do about ... but when they just talk at you ... life's too short for that. Those are the kinds of things that I feel, oh ... and in some ways I feel that schools are too conservative for me, you know, that I like a more free approach to things.

Despite her doubts, Martha stayed in this profession because she felt that she had contributions to make and that her work was "rewarding enough."

Although she realized that there were many more career choices than she believed she had as a high school student, overall, Martha believed that she made a good decision by becoming a school psychologist.

Kevin Bradley

Early Family Life

Kevin is the oldest of three children born to Mr. and Mrs. Bradley.

Kevin's father worked for a large manufacturing company. His mother worked as a substitute teacher while her children were growing up. The Bradleys lived in the upper middle class suburbs of a large MidWestern city.

Kevin grew up in a deeply religious family:

My parents provided a context from which everything else was laid, their values and their perspective was well explained to me and we lived a lifestyle according to that and I would say neither my father nor my mother had a more or greater influence. I think they each had their own influence on me, a lot of (those) values that they espoused had to do with their religious beliefs, certainly believing that there is a greater purpose than making money or having all that you can have was espoused, that there were greater values to be found in life, and that those would include being good to other people and living a Godly life, one that God would be proud of or happy about and living a life of perhaps humility, remaining humble to the fact that we're all human beings. Certainly those are values instilled in me, not settling conflict by physical means, trying to negotiate and mediate and compromise with people, family being a priority, looking out for your family, protecting one another, try not to take advantage of people who could be taken advantage of.

Kevin later added that his parents had also modeled a strong work ethic and a conservative approach to financial management. Both of these values were, in turn, transmitted by his grandparents by virtue of their experience during the Great Depression.

Education

Kevin explained that he remained detached from the competitive nature of the school district he attended:

I went to very large schools in the city of Glenwood, and generally very competitive schools. Everyone went to Glenwood schools, but the thing of it was that there were those kids who were favored and encouraged or reinforced because they were on a track that they were going to college and there was another group ... really most of my life I kind of hovered between the two, I really didn't value or favor one or the other, I didn't like making the choice between one or the other so I didn't (laughed). And to the degree that I ever felt that teachers or counselors or anyone really knew me or had concerns about me, I didn't find that to be all that true for the most part and to the degree that an education is really where people either define their lives in some way or just becomes a little part of a long life of doing a lot of nothing, I felt that perhaps education would be more meaningful, or could be more meaningful if it was done in a different way or (if people) tried to put more of themselves into relating to their students and making them feel more a part of a community.

Kevin described himself as an "average, middle of the road" student who tended to be socially "shy and introverted." During first grade, he recalled an event that stood out in his mind:

There was a day when there was a substitute out there and she had people reading out loud, and I wasn't all that good a reader as I recall but I struggled diligently with phonics, sounding things out and I thought, perhaps internally, that I was really a bad reader because I didn't read fluently but the substitute teacher praised me up and down in front of the class, because she liked the way I read and that's the first time anyone had said that to me and it stuck with me till today and at that time I really didn't know what it meant or that it was meaningful at all except that it felt good.

Looking back many years later, Kevin reflected on why that event was important to him:

What was important about that event was that somebody recognized I was doing something right whereas otherwise as long as you did what you were supposed to and follow the crowd, generally it wasn't an experience ... that I was recognized as being special or unique and individual.

Kevin also added that this early experience had taught him that “my effort mattered more than how I compared to someone else.” As will be seen later on, this lesson would become an important medium through which Kevin construed his role as a school psychologist.

During High school, Kevin worked at a grocery store where he was exposed to people from backgrounds that differed from his own:

I certainly learned a lot about a lot of people at the job I had ... (I) was exposed to different people, different lifestyles, different values, I worked in a grocery store and the people I worked with generally came from different backgrounds than myself, socioeconomically and culturally.

Kevin continued to work until he graduated from High school. After graduation, neither Kevin nor his parents thought it was a good idea to go to college in the same town where he grew up. Therefore, he applied to a college that was a couple of hours away from his hometown. Kevin vividly recalled the day his father dropped him off to college for the first time:

Well, my dad dropped me off at the dorm I was gonna live in, shook my hand and said, ‘don’t forget why you’re here,’ (laughed), that’s what he said, and I think those were wise words because certainly going to college and you’re on your own and able to do whatever you want whenever you want and I did see people around me that I think did forget why they were there and didn’t necessarily accomplish what they came for, dropped out or got kicked out, I never forgot why I was there.

Initially, Kevin went to college with the intention of becoming a personnel manager. This choice was based on the results of a test he took during high school, which assessed his vocational interests. Kevin stated that had he pursued this choice he “probably would have done real well and would have been real successful at it.”

After studying business administration for a while, Kevin became less interested in pursuing it as a major, "the more I got into it, the less interested I was," he said, "I found it was really important for me to be doing something that had meaning to me." Reflecting back at that choice, Kevin realized that:

I probably would have struggled to find meaning as a personnel manager in the same manner I'm struggling to find meaning in what I do as a school psychologist. Perhaps it's less about what you do and more about how you do whatever you do.

Eventually, Kevin decided to major in social work. He cheerfully recalled the details of how he made that decision:

A friend of mine and I we were sitting around thinking, 'jeez, we're business majors and that wasn't cutting it for us,' I don't remember it wasn't no one person or nothing but we were just looking at the course catalog to be honest with you and we were reading the different things and we were like, 'social work, hmm ... *social ... work ...* meaning they pay you to be social, work is social ... that sounds like us,' (laughed) 'let's check that out,' so we went and checked it out and talked to some people, so I ended up majoring in ... got my bachelor's degree in social work with a second major because I met the requirements for a degree in psychology too.

Kevin also obtained a master's degree in social work and worked for several years with a Community Mental Health agency. However, for a number of reasons, Kevin had always wanted to work in a school setting. He explained that one reason behind this inclination was that it would allow him more time to spend with his family:

I knew I wanted to have a family, get married and I knew one thing that was lacking in my life was lack of a real committed relationship on the part of my father and myself because my father worked hard and worked long and I thought perhaps one thing in my family that I might make different would be the degree of relationship that I have with my son, and

so one way I knew I might be able to do that would be to work in a job that allowed me more time or more opportunity to be able to do that.

Kevin also believed that working in a school setting would enable him to “be a little bit more balanced in terms of allowing work to be a part of your life rather than it consuming you.” Moreover, by working in a school setting, Kevin hoped to be exposed to a greater range of issues and clientele than he would at a mental health setting.

Reflecting upon these reasons later on, Kevin explained that he was also attracted to work in public schools because of his interest in understanding issues of equal opportunities in public education:

I’d been lead to believe that one great thing about our democracy was that all people had opportunities to achieve their dreams through the public schools. However, as I matured and began more aware, I began to question schools. Thus, I wanted to be a part of understanding this issue as well as working toward making this ideal more of a reality.

School Psychology: First Encounter and Early Impressions

Kevin carefully planned his academic program in such a way so that he would be qualified to work in public schools. It was then that he came across courses in school psychology and discovered the “commonalties as well as some differences” between school psychology and social work. By that time, Kevin was convinced that he was not going to be happy working “as an MSW social worker forever.” Although he got a job soon after he graduated from the MSW program, he knew he “wanted to keep going to school, just didn’t know exactly

what ... The Education Specialist (program in school psychology) seemed like a nice kind of compromise."

Kevin's first impressions of school psychology encouraged him to further pursue it as a career:

I thought (school psychology) was something I'd be good at, I thought that it provided perhaps more opportunities than school social work, not only in terms of job wise but also in terms of the degree to which decisions are made and problems are solved.

Kevin believed that school psychology surpassed the field of school social work in terms of preparation and tools for assessing children's needs:

School psychology provided a greater range of tools and perspectives theoretically and practically ... I think a lot of things can be accomplished in either profession and especially as two professions together, but school psychology does provide you with just greater opportunities and more tools ... also knowledge of psychological theories. The measurement and evaluation theories are I think important and valuable in terms of looking at how it is those numbers are developed and what it is they mean and what it is they don't mean that people seem to think that they do. I think that in addition, other kinds of perspectives on child development from developmental psychology are very valuable and important and not necessarily a big part of a social work curriculum.

Meanwhile, reflecting back on this comparison, Kevin also pointed out that his training in social work had "laid a great foundation" upon which he was able to further pursue the profession of school psychology. Kevin believed that his training in social work had equipped him with an ecological, systems based perspective and provided him with skills for family therapy, all of which were "compatible with the expanding roles and functions of school psychology." Finally, compared to school social work, Kevin believed that the title of school psychology carried a greater amount of prestige:

One thing to recognize is that the title school psychology instills a greater degree of value from some people's perspectives than does a school social worker who's looked at as 'you're someone who talks to kids, plays with them,' or whatever it is, 'you got any puppets or what?' so that's important too, it has a lot to do with perceptions.

Early Professional Life

Kevin had been working as a social worker in the Brookfield school district for a few years when he completed his Specialist degree in School Psychology. He continued to work in the same district as a school psychologist. As a result of his prior knowledge of the school district, Kevin was familiar with the politics and dynamics of his work setting. Nonetheless, he felt that the transition from social work to school psychology involved some internal struggles which were precipitated by "the ambiguity of psychological constructs and diagnoses:"

For me the stress was my own personal struggle as to whether or not I was gonna be good at this ... internally I had a certain degree of confidence, but in terms of how things are talked about whether this kid *has* this or doesn't *have* this. Or is this the right decision or the wrong decision, can you defend your decision ... the important part was to do what I could do or do the best I could.

Although Kevin received positive feedback from his colleagues, he explained that these compliments never became an end in themselves:

It's just been really embarrassing to the degree that I receive as much positive reinforcement as I do from a lot of people from a lot of places for the way I do my job and it's meaningful, it feels good, but on the other hand, it wasn't what I was looking for to begin with and so I have to be careful because it could go away tomorrow and I'm still doing what I do. It doesn't really matter and so while the exterior, what other people say and do is important, it's not why I'm doing (what I'm doing) ... the internal struggle is much more important for me and that as long as I'm doing that and that's what feels right and good to me ... I feel like I'm

working in a direction that's a positive one rather than negative. I'm not driven by my own need to be in control or to feel powerful or to have other people think that I know something that they don't.

Current Work Setting

General Characteristics

Kevin noted the higher incidence of certain problems within the

Brookfield community:

We do have a higher incidence of single parent homes, low income poverty level homes, higher incidence of drug involvement ... We have a higher incidence of teen pregnancy, higher incidence of school or out of school violence, weapons, things of this nature ... it's not that it's extreme, it's just as I said, geographically we happen to have more of that within our domain than any other school district has in the intermediate area.

At the present time, Kevin was responsible for six school buildings, in addition to other referrals from other special programs in the district, such as programs for the severely handicapped and pre-primary impaired children. Among the six buildings he was responsible for, Kevin favored one elementary building. He particularly appreciated the quality of the school's administration as well as the degree of commitment demonstrated by its teachers:

It's a building that functions well because it has an intact responsible administrator, that being the building principal, who is a good manager, he may at times do things differently than I would do them but he always does a good job of taking responsibility for the building. The issues between special education and regular education aren't as big an issue in this building, they have more to do with individual children and meeting their needs within the building. He's very responsible and responsive to discipline issues ... It's really the building principal that makes the difference for me and my job in my opinion ... and I don't know if other people are aware of it but I think it makes a big difference in how other people do their jobs too, there's a system of accountability there and it's not about politics as much as it is everybody doing their job and doing what's right for a particular situation. And there's also a lot of good

humor and fun and appreciation and respect for each other as adults in that environment that I don't experience as much in other buildings.

Also of importance to Kevin was "the degree to which the teachers are good teachers and care about the building and are committed to making it a good building for kids."

As a school psychologist, Kevin spent a great deal of his time interacting with adults according to "the hierarchy of the system:"

The way that I've defined my role involves a great deal of time spent talking with adults ... specifically a great deal of time talking to building principals, about whatever issues there might be specific to exact evaluation or more generally about particular issues in a classroom or within a particular grade or within the building context ... I work with the principals, I make sure we're on the same wavelength as far as how things ought to be done or what the perspectives are. I work with teachers relative to their exact needs as direct care providers, and I consult with parents to the degree that they can be a part of the solution making process if there's a problem to be worked on. After parents I guess colleagues within special education, I probably spend a lot of time talking with them too, they might be even higher on the list than I put them and then kids are probably down at the bottom as far as if you wanted to look at how much time I spend with different people and how much importance I rate the amount of time I spend with people.

When I asked Kevin about his caseload, he explained that the number varied depending on "how you define how many cases, if it's a formal case it's one number, if it's a case in the more general sense of every kid that's come across my desk, you know ... it's a very much larger number." As far as formal assessments were concerned, his caseload ranged from 80 to 90 cases each year. Adding the consultations, this number went up to approximately 200 referrals each year:

There's probably over 200 kids a year that we end up *talking about* but out of that 200 maybe a little less than half are actually evaluated, the other half we actually don't do anything with or we monitor them or maybe we come up with a little intervention plan or do something like meetings with parents or teachers.

Sometimes, the school psychologist's caseload is affected by the types of intervention or preventive programs implemented at the school level. Kevin described one such prereferral intervention program that his district had recently implemented. Part of the program involved meetings between classroom teachers and a support team "where we are supposed to come up with intervention plans and deal with things in a more proactive manner prior to the special education evaluation." Unfortunately, from Kevin's point of view, the system did not seem to be functioning up to expectation:

There's a lot of negative reinforcers inherent in the current system ... the system says 'yes, we want this to work,' yet when referrals drop, more evaluations are added to the school psychologist's job description and teachers who are successful with a problem get pegged to take on more problems than the less competent or successful ones.

Moreover, Kevin added that the commitment of stakeholders, such as teachers, had a great deal to do with the program's success:

There's no real interest on anyone's part to do that because there's no added resources to be able to do that and philosophically there are people who do want to do it and they can and there are those who just want a kid evaluated for special education. It's just that's what they want. They are not interested in having anyone tell them that they can do something different.

Resources

In the course of his daily work, Kevin found that his relationships with the people he worked with were a major source of support. Most importantly, his

immediate supervisor, who was described as a “good administrator” was ranked as the first and “most important resource:”

To the degree that she allows me the autonomy and respect to be able to do the job that I know how to do and not interfere with that and to support me in being able to do what I can and when I can and to not expect more from me than what is reasonable, I think that that is a resource for me, to the extent that I have other things outside of work that sometimes affect what I do, she’s compassionate about that and certainly respectful of the fact that I’m a human being and there’s more to life than just the job ... to the degree that she wants or asks questions in a way just like that principal I was mentioning earlier: to what degree is this to the best interest of the kid, how does this make sense from that perspective, that’s a good thing and that’s a resource for me because it keeps me focused on what we’re trying to accomplish here.

Aside from his supervisor, Kevin felt that other administrators in the organization were out of touch with his work and less likely to appreciate his role:

I know that people above (my supervisor’s) level are very unlikely to know what it is I do or why I do it or whether it’s important or not, I’m just a person who costs them a certain dollar figure a year and if the laws were different they wouldn’t have to pay for me. They don’t view me or people in my position as a resource, which is really interesting and somewhat troubling to me.

Other sources of support included Kevin’s colleagues within the special education program who shared similar philosophical and theoretical beliefs.

Within each building, Kevin has also been able to develop a network of friendships, which he perceived as a resource:

To the extent that there are people that I know and can be personable with and enjoy spending time with them whether it’s working on business or talking about life in general outside of school ... really, my main resource is relationships that I’ve developed with other people, my boss, my friends and the people that I work with that I can get along with.

Transitions in the Work Setting

Over the years, Kevin observed a decline in his district's financial resources due to the loss of students to charter schools and other independent or private schools. Aside from a decline in its financial resources, however, Kevin noted that the Brookfield school district has changed very little over time. He believed that unless pressured to change by "situations or forces outside the school district," such as economic and political forces, school districts in general tended to maintain a "status quo". Furthermore, Kevin argued that the large size of the Brookfield school district could be one reason behind its being slow to "respond to the challenges of its time."

Roles and Functions: Related Issues

Role Definition

Kevin was not opposed to being viewed by others as a gatekeeper; in fact, he believed that meaningful and valuable services could still be disseminated through the process of gatekeeping. Among other things, being in a gatekeeper's position allowed Kevin the opportunity to help his school district "use their resources to the best of their ability and to put their money forth for special education kids who should be entitled to it." More importantly, he emphasized that it was the "process" of what he did rather than the "product" that really mattered in his role:

I think that I can say that I define the role much more as a process rather than a product ... the process of working with people, consulting with them, paying attention to all the different variables involved between the

different relationships, that is what intrigues me, that is what keeps the job interesting for me and makes me feel like it's a good job.

Kevin believed that the process of evaluation in itself could be an effective intervention by "helping people to understand where our responsibilities lie, what we have control over and what we don't have control over, what we can do and what we can't do." That process, according to Kevin could leads to effective treatment plan sand helped define "what it is that an educational institution can accomplish." It was this understanding that enabled Kevin to come to terms with others' perception of his role as a gatekeeper:

To the extent that I'm a gatekeeper, I still do a lot of extensive intervention by doing the process of evaluation or by consulting on kids that may need evaluations or whatever. And so to that extent I kind of *prefer* that role to some degree, which originally I thought I wouldn't because I was more interested in perhaps doing more obvious kinds of interventions, synonymous with maybe doing some groups or actually doing work in classrooms or whatever, and now I see the need as being so great for people to do the kind of work that I'm doing in the *process* of how I do an evaluation.

Ultimately, Kevin's definition of gatekeeping encompassed more than many people would assume to be part of this role; his definition of gatekeeping involved:

Performing an assessment that involves a lot of multisystemic ecological variables that might account for a particular child's difficulty, it might point to a more meaningful intervention other than a dump job at special education.

Thus, referring to test scores, which are presumably a major part of the traditional definition of gatekeeping, Kevin explained that:

The numbers are numbers, what the numbers mean is a whole another set of issues and to the extent that I define my role as a gatekeeper, there are

people who I've known who function as school psychologists who use reasons like 'severe discrepancy,' or this child is eligible because there is a severe discrepancy. That is a small piece of what a good decision should involve, and because a kid isn't doing what you expect them to be doing doesn't always imply that they have a specific psychological process that prevents them from being successful in school, there are a lot of other variables that could equally account for why a child is having difficulties in school ... test scores are very important and the data is all very important, but it's how a professional uses that information and interprets that information that makes the decision; and it's also important that that decision be based on a recommendation based on all of my perceptions and that formally a committee of people that are multidisciplinary in nature make a decision as a whole, vs. making a decision based on one piece.

On the other hand, Kevin felt that there was pressure on people in his position to make certain decisions that might not be in the best interests of the child or the school district. These pressures could sometimes place the school psychologist in an "unpopular" position:

The inherent nature of the system though is that there is a lot of pressure formally or informally exerted on people in the gatekeeper's position such as myself to put those kids in special education because no one else is gonna help them ... there are huge ethical and moral dilemmas that persist ... and drive us to be the best that we can be and try not to make decisions based on the degree of popularity or the degree to which this is the best possible solution vs. the right thing to do.

Thus, to the extent that Kevin's role involved moral dilemmas, it was not separable from a larger internal struggle that was part of his overall personal growth:

The degree to which I struggle as a human being to be a conscious, aware person, about how my behavior and my feelings and my thoughts affect other people, that's what I do for a living. I happen to give some tests sometimes, I happen to interview people, look at drawings, do other kinds of things, but the bottom line is that I just happen to be another person that's concerned about a situation and might have something to offer in terms of a potential solution process.

Ideal Role

Over the years, the gap between Kevin's actual and desired role has narrowed. As a "young ... radical student," Kevin explained that he was much attracted to new models of school psychological practice which encouraged psychologists to move away from the use of standardized testing and from functioning merely as gatekeepers. However:

To the extent that I've been doing this job now, I think it would be a big mistake for that to happen (to move completely away from standardized testing) ... I think the issues this system is trying to solve are not gonna be solved by introducing another system of assessment or evaluation because the issues really aren't that, it's about how people make decisions and how people define what is right or good or 'in the best interest of', no matter how we do those assessments, I don't know that that's gonna change ... and to the extent that our skills are unique, or that school psychologists are gonna maintain themselves in a role or in a position of having some meaningful contribution, I'm very leery about getting away completely from the gatekeeper role and / or the standardized test person because I think it's how it's done not what's done (huh, laughed).

As he had explained earlier, Kevin believed that even within the presumably limited role of a gatekeeper, there was much that a school psychologist could do in terms of meaningful and valuable services to the school district as well as to the student population. As such, Kevin was satisfied with his current role definition:

I'm real comfortable with everything that I'm doing and the thing about it is, while the district says that you're a gatekeeper and we're gonna have you doing a huge amount of evaluations because we can't afford to pay enough of you to do all this, I don't mind that because I think I do the job that I'm asked to do well and while I'm not perfect, I'm satisfied with the kind of things that I do.

If there was one thing Kevin wished was different about his job, however, it would be the number of buildings he was responsible for:

There are times that I wish I had less buildings to go to so that I have more of an opportunity to develop more solid interpersonal relationships with the people in the buildings that I work at. But that becomes less of an issue over time at least for me because I have had changes in buildings over the years like last year I lost two and gained two different ones, but to the extent that some of the buildings I work in have been mine for a while, it's just taken longer because I go to so many different places to be able to do that.

Stressors

Decision Making

Conflict sometimes arose in the course of a school psychologist's work because of differences of opinion regarding children's needs. Kevin believed that limited district resources and personal philosophies played an important role in generating this type of conflict. For instance, a school psychologist might recommend an intervention program that would be in the best interests of the child but would cost the school more money than another, less suitable program. In other instances, parties might disagree about whether a child could function without special education services or the extent to which special education services were warranted:

Let's say a kid has a learning disability that involves language based skills, reading and writing more specifically, there are sometimes conflicts about the degree or the time that a child is gonna spend in special education because of their LD, and the degree to which the child is ... included within the general education program, and to some degree it's a matter of personal philosophies.

Kevin traced this type of conflict to whether or not people believed that special education was necessarily an effective solution to a student's problems:

There are some people within general education or special education who tend to see special education as a system that provides support and help to children to a maximum degree and to the degree that a kid could get as much of that as they can, that's what's right or that's what the ultimate good is. There are other people, like myself, who tend to be less inclined to believe that's true, and are more interested in wanting kids to be included and to have expectations accommodated or changed in some regard within the general education program to provide those kids with a special education versus just being pulled out and taken away from the general curriculum ... one of the major struggles I deal with is that I'm trying to get people to do more than they probably can with less and people are frustrated with that because there isn't a lot of support for them to be able to do that

Vague Diagnostic Criteria

According to Kevin, childhood autism was a disorder that could be very difficult to diagnose:

Someone might call a kid who might have some mild autism features autistic on the South end and someone else in another part of the city might not call that kid autistic. There is a lot of complex issues about who has autism and who doesn't at either end of the spectrum those kids who are high functioning, so to speak, autism and those kids that are very low functioning, mentally impaired and may or may not also have autism. So at either end of that spectrum you get a lot of differences of opinion even among professionals because professionals haven't been able to define or come up with a good quantifiable objective set of criteria on which to make those decisions, so to that extent there is and has every year and has for last few years I've done these, evolved some degree of conflict of perspective or opinion about some of those borderline cases and whether or not a kid is mentally impaired and or autistic, or whether a kid is autistic or some other mildly impaired label with auditory comprehension problems or emotionally impaired or maybe not eligible for anything at all, just eccentric or unique personality wise. Those conflicts usually involve outside evaluations.

Kevin approached such conflicts by clarifying his obligations and functioning within their limits. Interestingly, Kevin's definition of his obligations took into consideration the uncertainties inherent in the decision making process:

Generally speaking, my job is to provide recommendations to committees and to school districts on which they provide a job with the most appropriate education. What the actual decision is for a particular child I don't have a real strong personal investment in those because I don't personally *know* what's right or wrong except for myself and maybe my own child, so ... I just say what I think, and other people are able to do the same thing and then we all kind of make a decision based on that. We kind of make the best decision we can.

Kevin illustrated the situation with a recent case:

There's a case right now we'll be going back to IEPC on, I was less inclined to call autistic, the *parents* were less inclined to call him autistic, but an outside evaluator was of the opinion that that would be the best label to describe his educational needs. My reports will only reflect a lot of the same issues, it's just the bottom line, where we draw the line, whether we say yes or no was a little bit different for each of us, and so how that gets resolved, I don't know, but I'm not opposed, and I think ultimately I defer to some degree, unless it's a blatant thing that I can't agree with, but if it's a situation like this where I see a lot of these characteristics, I don't disagree with that and parents find that to be acceptable, I feel that parents have the right to drive that situation to the maximum degree that they should be able to because it's their child, but as a professional I'm also obligated to provide every detail on which my decision was founded and that other evaluator has the same obligation.

Reflections

Experiences that Had an Impact on Professional Identity

Kevin found it difficult to isolate experiences that had a strong impact on his practice of school psychology because "a lot of times it's not just one experience, it's a culmination of a lot of different experiences over time that have

taught me the lessons that I've learned." Nonetheless, two elements had their impact on Kevin's professional identity, the first being the moral values instilled by his family:

My socialization as a child was of meaning in terms of instilling a certain amount of values and ethics and morals that carry through no matter what I do, whether I'm a bum on the street, or a school psychologist. Those things will always be there and would be very difficult to change, certainly not anything I would want to change.

The second influence came from his formal training as a social worker and the way it complemented his training in school psychology:

Probably the biggest and the most important part that I don't think is anywhere in the school psychology curriculum but should be is something that I'll refer to as a multisystemic ecological perspective. Psychology being more of a hard science has more foundations from an empirical standpoint from there being connections between variables in some fashion or another. To the degree that within the multisystemic ecological perspective things are not as quantifiable or empirically measurable, however you and me as reasonable caring persons who grew up in families ourselves and watched communities around us do what they do I don't think that we would disagree on the fact that there are a lot of things that go on that are important that aren't necessarily measurable, and to the degree that social work as a profession hanging out there and saying that, and saying that there are a lot of things, there are a lot of complex variables here.

This "multisystemic perspective" had its impact on how Kevin approached the cases he dealt with:

As I understood psychology it didn't take into account the bigger picture that I was looking at as a human being and needed to appreciate in order to do what I wanted to do, so that main concept of multisystemic perspective, that ecological perspective that these tests might be important but there's a lot of other things to consider. For example, that's why I think I do my job well because I can take a kid who gets a 71 IQ and has difficulty in academic achievement and may have behavior difficulties and whatever and I can look at much more beyond those numbers to try and recognize and understand what's going on, and what might be

meaningful in that child's life ... part of our decision is: is the child mentally impaired or not? but a bigger part of our problem is understanding what it is we want to or can accomplish with that particular student and using a label is only a method to try and accomplish something and before I use a label I want to know what it is I'm trying to accomplish and to that degree I think I might have *some* degree of understanding or appreciation than the average person who just gives the test.

Success

Kevin described his self-evaluation of his success as a constantly evolving process. Among the strategies he used to assess his job performance was seeking feedback from others:

One thing I do is talk a lot with other people about what they think and try to elicit other people's perspectives based on the same amount of information and also having people listen to what I think or have them question anything I'm doing or thinking.

Meanwhile, Kevin pointed out, personal criteria were also central to his self- assessment:

The other part of it is when I go home and sleep at night, that's a positive sign. To the degree that my mental health in general ... that I'm content and happy and feeling that I did the best I could while I don't know whether it's the right or wrong decision I know that I did the best and I did everything that I knew how to do and that anyone in my position by that criteria would have done, that's all I ask for, that's all I can do.

Advice to School Psychology Students

Kevin's advice to students of school psychology involved not only gaining a wide variety of experiences but also deepening their knowledge of themselves, especially their personal criteria of right and wrong:

I think one thing that I thought was really important (to the school psychology student) was to encourage the person to gain as much exposure and experience as you can in as wide a variety of experiences as

you can, to take as much as you can from the opportunities that you're given, don't ever turn an opportunity away, even if it seems difficult or out of your league, you can be sensitive or appreciative of that but at the same time, you know, you can let people know that you'll do the best you can. I think that's what people always want, that's what anyone would ever expect, and that if you hold yourself to a high standard, you'll probably do a good job, but it has to do with self knowledge and it has to do with knowing that you're being the best that you can be rather than anyone else telling you that you're being the best that you can be. Those are important things to recognize and ... from my perspective, you get better and better at what you're doing if you live from that philosophy because you're always trying to impress yourself vs. anyone else, you're always trying to do more ... and so listen to your heart and never do something because someone else wants you to or expects you to unless it feels right to you, and if you're not sure about something, tell them you're not sure just get as much experience and listen, listen to what people are telling you.

Indeed, Kevin believed that learning about one's profession was not separate from learning about life in general:

Professors are very knowledgeable people, their knowledge is limited as well, the person on welfare who is surviving at the level that they're able to survive is a knowledgeable person, and they have information that is of value. You may not agree with their values ... you may or you may not, and you may not like their lifestyle or whatever, but I think that there is information there that might be meaningful in understanding, not just school psychology but in understanding how any profession, be it school psychology or nursing or a physician or a lawyer, it's how professions fit within the greater meaning of life.

Looking Back

Kevin did not experience doubts about whether he was in the right profession. He felt quite content with what he was doing and felt very fortunate to be in this profession:

I very succinctly came to the conclusion that I can't think of anything else that I'd rather be doing or could be doing other than perhaps winning the lottery and living in Bermuda ... (smiled) in a hut drinking Mai'Tai's or something ... I don't know, but to the extent that I would change anything

... no, I mean, gosh things are really good. From a career standpoint I have a very solid positive reputation, and I'm not trying to win any popularity contest, but at the same time I think I gain a certain degree of respect in making the decisions and doing the things that I do ... that seems like a good way to live your life. I don't know that many people can live their life like that, I'm lucky to be able to say that I do some things and I think I do them the best I can and they may not always be the right thing, but I try to make the best decision for me in my own mind that I can comfortably live with and reflect upon with good conscience.

Louise Thompson

Early Family Life

Louise, who is in her mid fifties, grew up in a MidWestern rural community in a household that included both parents and a younger brother. In the 1950's, during the recession Louise's father lost his job at a hardware plant and was never employed by the same company again. With no welfare program or food stamps at the time, the Thompsons struggled very hard to provide for their family:

There was always issues of where the next meal was coming from ... things were real tough (smiled) okay? I laugh now but at the time it probably wasn't funny, I grew up in a tar-paper shack, with no indoor plumbing, no running water, which was a little unusual ...*very* unusual I should say for the time that I grew up in as well as for the type of community in which I lived.

Consequently, Louise had to work harder than many children of her age for the most basic needs:

When we raised vegetables it wasn't because we wanted to see the pretty plants or the flowers, you raised things to eat. I learned how to cook, I learned how to knit, I learned how to sew, freeze food, cultivate, raise animals, not because it was a hobby as it was for so many of my friends and their families, but because it was a necessity. As a result of that I learned budgeting, I learned to take care of the few things I had.

Education

Besides survival skills, Louise also realized early on that her only way out of poverty was through education. Back then, however, a young woman wanting to go on to college was, according to Louise, "against the grain of the extended family." In addition, Louise added that during the sixties when she

graduated from high school, about half of her graduation class were either engaged or married right after their senior year.

In addition to financial limitations, there were other obstacles that Louise had to overcome in order to pursue a college education. Some of her relatives, for example, were opposed to her decision to go to college. Louise recalled a relative who believed that she did not have the right to go to college because “a woman’s only job was to stay home and have children,” and because if she worked she would be taking a job away from a man. However, rather than becoming discouraged by these obstacles, Louise became more determined to pursue her dreams:

I look back on that now and realize that he was probably teasing in his own sarcastic way, but as a young girl at 8 or 9 ...10 with a book in my hand all the time I did not understand that. So when someone told me I can’t do something, that’s when I said, ‘you can’t tell me what to do.’ And from probably third or fourth grade every time there was a family reunion he would make these kinds of comments and I would simply store that information and say, ‘nobody’s telling me I can’t go to school.’

Fortunately for Louise, there were people in her life who strongly believed in her and supported her efforts. First among her supporters was her mother, whom Louise described as a hard working woman who “tried to provide a home without the resources.” From a very early age, Louise’s mother encouraged her daughter’s interest in reading and the arts:

I didn’t *have* books, we couldn’t afford them but we got to the library, and there was always time for homework because she stayed home and did not have a job outside, there was always somebody there to help with the homework. She loved music ...I don’t know to this day how we got money for a flute but I played flute in the second grade and the arts were important to her, to this day she’s an avid reader.

Another person who became a very important source of inspiration and support to Louise was Martha Schroeder, a 6th grade Literature teacher who became familiar with Louise's background:

Mrs. Schroeder, she was always there. She could read me like a book and she knew that when I came to school and I didn't have a smile on my face she thought there was something wrong. From the time I had her as a 6th grader right up through college and through my early years of marriage she always wrote, she offered money ... I read a letter from her three weeks ago, she's dead by now a long time ago, but I was opening up an old box that had my old report cards and ran across her letter to me and she had offered her retirement savings to put me through school, even after all those years to think that someone would do that ... now, when she was teaching there was no social security, it was whatever she had in the bank account.

Throughout her school years, Louise was a hard working, successful student and an avid reader:

Mother still tells stories about how many times she made me go to bed at 11 o'clock ... I would still be sitting up with the books at 10, 11 o'clock at night even as a second or a third grader. I loved to read, and there was a *whole world* out there in books that was much nicer than my home life because books in libraries were free, and the librarian and I got to be pretty close because I always came in when mom and dad did grocery shopping once or twice a month and she always broke the rules in the number of books she allowed me to take out. Kids my age at that time they could only take out one or two books because they couldn't take care of them or they didn't return them, but I always took out 5, 6, 7 or 8 books, next week they were back. I *loved* to read.

Louise's interest in music continued from through High School. She excelled in playing the flute and became a member of her school's concert band. In addition, she was actively involved in a number of clubs and organizations, including 4H, Future Teachers of America and The Latin Club, where she often ended up "on either the board of directors or in some leadership role."

When Louise graduated from High School, there was no doubt in her mind that she wanted to go to college. Given her family's financial situation, however, she almost did not make it:

One week before college was to start, I went to Northbrook University. we had to come up with \$185 for dorm payment and didn't have it and my parents were in the process of telling me I couldn't go to school when out of the clear blue sky a check came in the mail from the credit union, some account (laughed) it's funny now but at the time it wasn't, I went through the first semester with a dollar, eighty one in my bank account when I started school and had that dollar, eighty one in my bank account when I finished that semester (laughed).

Louise was able to remain in college thanks to her hard work and excellent academic standing. She had graduated sixth in her High School class and, as a result, more scholarship opportunities were available to her.

As a freshman, Louise "fell in love with history," then she took an introductory psychology class, "the rat lab," as she called it. That class was to be the starting point which would eventually lead to her present career in school psychology:

Apparently somebody was impressed with how I worked with rats (laughed) because as a sophomore they took I think the 4 or 5 that they thought were the best students ... they offered us a student assistantship at the Center for the Severely Disabled ... and *that's* where it all started ... from a rat lab.

At the age of 18, Louise became responsible for training the attendants and the staff at the Center in how to teach inpatients. After working at the Center for five years as an assistant, Louise was offered a full time position. Her work at the Center eventually lead to her certification as a social worker;

although she did not have a degree in social work, Louise was “grandfathered in.”:

By that time I had been married for 3 years and thinking about having a family and then transferred to a community mental health program as a consultant. I was a social worker who helped arrange things for clients and their families, again the mentally disabled or the mentally handicapped, and I did a lot of travelling, and I was there almost ten years and continued to work throughout that time. Again, every year or every year and a half I would move up into a job that would have more responsibility and by the time I left I had had some administrative experience helping supervise the activity programs for the adult handicapped.

School Psychology: First Encounter and Early Impressions

After 10 years of working in the mental health field, Louise and her husband felt it was time to make some important career changes. They both realized that their jobs were competing with time with their children. In addition, the mental health program where Louise had worked “was undergoing a lot of turmoil:”

Things weren’t going smoothly at all either on the job or at home with the two small boys ... So I wasn’t happy anywhere and sat down one night and had a very serious talk with my husband. He was working so many hours that he became ill. He was doing what he could, and I said, ‘wouldn’t it be better if I’m this unhappy at work to try and get us on the same schedule?’

The idea of studying to become a school psychologist occurred when a school psychology intern, Sean Welch, joined Louise’s team at the mental health program.

I didn’t know anything about school psychology, had never heard about it but I really respected Sean a lot and his skills. I didn’t even know he was a school psychologist. I just knew him as somebody working as a student with us ... a psychologist. And he was working with us because he

wanted to be a fully licensed psychologist. We got along really well because he tended to be fairly behavioral in his outlook and the way he structured his plans and that's my background, and so the way we operated, the way we worked out student or client plans it worked really well, and when he started telling me about his program it seemed like philosophically I wouldn't have a hard time fitting there. I had grown a long way past the rat lab, I wasn't that behavioral or experimental in my outlook (laughed), that was 15 years earlier (laughed).

Louise scheduled an interview with the advisor of the school psychology program at North Brook University. One week later, she quit her job and went to school full time to become a school psychologist:

The decision to stay in human services was not a difficult one. It's what I knew, it's what I felt confident with and I'd had feedback from previous administrators and supervisors that I was good at working with people.

Early Training in School Psychology

Louise had been out of school for 17 years when she began to study for school psychology. The program at NorthBrook turned out to be a big challenge for her:

I thought I worked hard in college, I thought I worked hard in High School. *Nothing* prepared me for going back to school after 17 years ... and I will never forget my statistics class. Last time I'd had a statistics class was in 1968, and the professor walks in and says, 'those of you who haven't had a stats. class in the last 2 or 3 years I think this now will be a real good time to drop this class,' ... and I was going 'now how do I tell this guy it's been 17 years?' so I didn't tell (laughed) and that was all it took. And I said, " he just told me I couldn't do this,' and I was in over my head ... I studied for that class 20 hours a week, just that class.

Once again, Louise's determination, hard work and sense of humor helped her make it through:

One day I raised my hand and said to the professor, 'listen, we've got to approach this with some humor. I don't know what you're talking about, so *you're* gonna have to slow down and either explain this over

and over and over again so that I get it or tell me to shut up and tell me just to apply the formulas and get through it,' so he told me to shut up, apply the formulas and get through it and I got an A.

The other major driving force for Louise during her school psychology program was the chairperson of the program then, Professor Donna Nicholson:

If you didn't drive as hard as she was pushing, you might as well hang it up. She was a testing machine (chuckled), we had to know every conceivable test out there along with the validity, reliability data, everything, and every time we administered the test, she had it rescored and if you calculated something wrong, you lost a lot of points in her class (laughed) and we lived in mortal fear of having to retake her class, because in that particular class you couldn't get anything less than a B-.

In addition to a demanding faculty, Louise's own perfectionism was an added pressure:

Over the years I have just gotten more compulsive and more perfectionist and that trait has never left and it's caused a lot of pain because I could never be satisfied with a B or a C. I always had to have an A, but that's tough when you got little kids and everybody pulling on you and you need hours.

Louise successfully graduated from the program with a Master's degree in school psychology. Soon after graduation, she interviewed for a school psychologist position with the rural Southvalley School District. As it was, Louise's social work background was to become an advantage which not only helped her earn the position but also prepared her for the changes that were taking place in the field of special education at that time:

I was hired for this job for one primary reason and that was because at the time there was a lot of conflict between school psychology and school social work. I never understood all that history, but there was some definite territorial boundary, there was not a strong team here, it was done by discipline and the thing that made them very interested in hiring me was my social work background. Even without the degree it was the

experience because I had already worked for 15 years nearly as part of a multidisciplinary team concept. For the schools it was brand new, in mental health and department of mental health the concept of multidisciplinary approaches is *not* new, it's not new in hospitals. But we tended to be behind so I came in with a working knowledge.

Early Professional Life

Louise recalled that her early days as a school psychologist were
intimidating:

Oh, I was absolutely scared to death. I was so afraid of making a mistake. On the plus side, I was in my mid 30's so I didn't look or act like a young person just coming out of school at 22, I'd already had a lot of experience under my belt so I came in with a degree of confidence that maybe others might not have if they'd been younger but that wasn't what was inside.

When she took the job, it was made clear to her that her role was to be limited to
testing:

came here and was told, literally, that 'your job is testing,'... testing primarily and evaluation and report writing, but I believe the agency pretty much saw us as testers. In fact I know that because I sat in several meetings where reference (was made) as to how we can make our 'testers' more efficient We still *remain* in that model, but back then 10 years ago, you *didn't* cross that line. School psychologists did *not* work with therapy, did *not* work with social workers for social skills training groups or anything like that. We tested, we consulted with teachers, we presented our findings at IEPC's and that was that.

Louise was disappointed with her limited job description:

I didn't think I'd last 10 years here. I went home that first night and I said to my husband, 'I don't know ' My education at Northbrook prepared me for a *much* more versatile role than I was permitted to exercise here. I had an active therapy caseload during my internship. Part of my graduate work was done with their student center right on campus and when I got here it was a whole different world I felt like I was stepping into."

Current Work Setting

Transitions in Work Conditions

According to Louise, the district had gradually changed over her past 10 years of employment:

The amount of collaboration I do with social workers now would not have been encouraged ten years ago, some of the changes that have happened depend upon the relationship you have with your social worker. If I'm at a school and something happens with that student I usually know enough about that student that if there's a crisis and we can't get a hold of the social worker and I happen to be the one on the scene, it's now understood, 'yeah, Louise can handle it.' So there's that kind of networking. We also have social workers who are overburdened themselves, and now are beginning to draw on us for support within their own area. So there is some crossing, we just don't advertise it a lot ... it's informal ... it's nothing that's written on paper.

However, Louise mentioned that some administrators still believed that school psychologists were not qualified to be therapists. Having functioned for ten years within a narrow role, Louise believed that some of her initial skills as a school psychologist had diminished because "they weren't used the way they could be."

Resources and Support Services

Louise typically worked in a team setting involving a speech therapist, a school social worker and other service providers on an as-needed basis. Among the people she worked with, she saw her team members as the most important source of support. Louise indicated that "if any of my social workers or speech therapists were to be cut loose from the team I'd be lost, I really value them a lot."

The support Louise received from her team was varied:

Sometimes, it's just coming in and closing the door and saying, 'listen to me, I've got to scream for a minute,' (laughed), it's just asking advice about cases. It's being able to listen, and it is the art of being able to disagree on cases and I value my team members because even when we *disagree*, there isn't this, 'well, what do *you* know about this ... you're only the psychologist, *I'm* the social worker,' I don't get that from my people. And there isn't as much territory *protection* as there might have been ten years ago.

Within the buildings where she worked, Louise found that secretaries were also an important resource:

Probably ... the closest people I have in the building are the secretaries, it's not even the teachers. If I get in there, the first thing I do is check in with the secretary and I say, 'hey, what's going on this week, is there anything I should know about?' and they'll spit it out and I go on my way, and *many* times they have saved me because if a parent is calling they'll let me know, saying so and so is on the line, she's upset about this or that.

Besides secretaries, some teachers and administrators also helped endorse Louise's efforts in the buildings where she worked:

Within every school, there is always those one or two very special teachers that seem to give a 110%. Occasionally I'll run into an administrator that sees the need and they sometimes see me more as a peer. I'm thinking of the administrators (who) are often more open to discussing the politics of the school district than they perhaps might with their own teachers. But there's usually a very good teacher that is also somewhere in that building.

Overall, there appeared to be a "unique" sense of camaraderie among her colleagues, including school psychologists who worked for the Southvalley school district:

What I like about working here is the fact that if I have a problem, I can call (other school psychologists) and I know that whatever they're doing, at the earliest possible moment they'll get back to me. We don't *call* each other that much so when one of us makes that phone call (laughed) we get

back to them really quickly. I think that this agency is a little unique, I've worked for several and I think that people here really care about each other.

Roles and Functions: Related Issues

Role definition

At the time of the interview, Louise was responsible for six school buildings ranging from elementary to high school. She had had the advantage of having worked anywhere from 3 up to 10 years in those buildings. As a result, Louise had become well acquainted with the staff working in those schools and the schools' staff, in turn, were well acquainted with her. Louise estimated her caseload to be around 75 to 80 assessments per year, adding that the bulk of her time was spent in assessment-related activities. Over the years, however, Louise had become interested in "extra projects" aimed at improving the efficiency of the system.

Louise defined her current role in terms that implied diversity and flexibility:

When I've had family members ask me what I do, I'll tell them I'm a jack of all trades, I do a little bit of negotiating, a whole lot of consulting, I do testing and evaluations and you know, you get caught up in counseling, you do a little bit of everything to try to provide that student with the most successful learning environment that you can When someone asks me what do you do, it's really hard for me to say. Now, I tell them to be clear I work with students who have learning problems, and try to match up their skills with the classroom and try to make positive changes that way.

Implicit in her response, was also the idea that her role involved looking at the system as a whole rather than working with its individual units. In her

current role, Louise was “no longer just trying to seek out changes within the immediate classroom, it’s pulling together all the supports.”

Perceived Ideal Role

Louise perceived her ideal role to involve doing less direct assessment and more of what she referred to as “productive consultation,” which involved “brainstorming on behalf of the student.” In addition:

I would like more time to look at the system as a whole. I believe school psychologists are the best people around to look at education for any particular student, because we have access to how that school works, how those teachers function and I think assessment is a very important *part* of what we do, but I think that we can change it, ok? so I’d like to do three things and have *less* actual direct testing, more consultation and more interaction with the teacher in the classroom even than what I do now, and more of the systems approach to making things better.

When I asked Louise about what was needed to reach that ideal role she replied: “a four-letter word called time.” She believed that the competing demands of the psychologist’s expanding role have often lead to sacrificing personal time:

At any given night, you’re gonna come find people here at 7 o’clock at night. People are coming in at all times during the Summer, things the public doesn’t even know about and *that’s* how this work gets done ... extra time ... and people typically don’t know that because they equate you with having a teacher’s schedule, and so there are a lot of people out here who think, when 3 - 3:30 rolls around, we’re gone, and that’s not the case because at the end of the school day, often our day is just beginning ... because that’s when parent contacts are made, that’s when IEPC’s are held, that’s when team staffings are held, that’s when staffings regarding students are held, all after school, so it’s a challenge.

At the present time, however, facing those challenges was more rewarding than remaining in a traditional role that was slowly disappearing.

Louise found personal satisfaction, among other things, in being involved with special committees that focused on improving the system:

(I feel that) I provide a valuable service in two areas: if it's working with a student and the evaluation that we have performed which looks at learning styles, classroom environment and skills and family dynamics, when *that* is all pulled together and is genuinely used as a basis for an educational program, I feel really good, like I've had some impact. The second scenario occurs when I'm involved in a pilot program, and we've tried *very* hard to make some major changes in our system, in the course of a year or two years and someone comes back and says, I think this could really work, let's try them in one of my other schools, ok? that's the two things.

Stress

According to Louise, stress was not only an issue for individual school psychologists, it was also a concern for the profession as a whole:

I think we're seeing our profession stressed, 3 or 4 years ago, MASP did a demographic study of the average age of the school psychologists in this state and at that time it was 43. The average longevity of the school psychologist was 15 years. Now if you take just those two statistics, if that's even accurate now, we have people who are entering the profession later, it is probably a second career for a number of us, and we're not lasting: we're entering later, the longevity is shorter. Now I'm 46, I've been here 10 years, if the average longevity is 15, it's going to suggest that in my early 50's I'm gonna be retiring and that's probably fairly accurate ... if the changes continue and people don't look at how we're managing our careers and how do we reduce stress, I think we're gonna see people leaving earlier and earlier. We're seeing that in the teaching profession already.

As a result, Louise believed that there was an urgent need to discuss ways of helping professionals deal with and manage their stresses:

We have a number of colleagues here and I'm sure when you talk to them and you ask about stress you're gonna find a number of us have physical problems that have been identified as a direct result of generalized anxiety ... We've had a number of people very sick here, in fact the two psychologists that retired both in the last year to a year and a half, have

had bouts of cancer, and we've had one with severe Crone's disease, and *everybody* seems to be on blood pressure medication, and I just wonder, what is it that we can do to manage that.

Throughout the interviews, Louise pointed out three sources of conflict and stress in her work. One source of conflict had to do with the way the special education system was set up and the limitations it sometimes imposed on making decisions about the students' needs:

Sometimes when you're locked into the special education diagnoses and you've got to, if you're gonna provide services, pick up one of those (diagnoses), and you have a student that you're saying, 'listen, there is something that is *real* different here,' and they really need the services, but the numbers don't cut it, and there's no special education diagnosis for miscellaneous, and it's the least satisfactory part of my job, besides testing, is when you get those children who are categorically a slower learner, and they're not supposedly handicapped and they're failing every class that they have, they ask us to test them and we're saying 'they're not handicapped,' and the school says, 'oh, well, we can't do anything about it,' and they fail and they fail and they fail. And it's an issue of: is a slow learner handicapped by our educational system? and that's one that we've talked about quite a bit.

Even when a student met the criteria required in order to qualify for a given special education program, there were times when that program did not need their specific needs. When the school psychologist tried to match students to programs based on their need rather than on their diagnostic category, that sometimes lead to conflict with the school:

I do have one district ... where they have categorical programs in each building. The Emotionally Impaired students are primarily assigned to school X the Learning Disabled students to school Y, and the Mentally Impaired students to school Z, so you do get some shifting there that can be very difficult and there are times when we get called on the carpet for advocating trying to match the student with available programs when perhaps at that moment the school is saying we're going by diagnosis ... that can cause some real problems.

In order to deal with such conflicts, Louise had to clarify who her client was:

I'm thinking of cases where I work with a student and I see that perhaps a different program would best meet their needs, and it's not in the current building. You have mom here who's saying, I don't care what you do here but you're not moving my son out of this High School, I don't care what you have to do, how much it's gonna cost you. At that moment, who is it do I advocate for? do I advocate for the student and his needs? do I advocate for the mother in saying yes you have the right to keep your child as close to you as you can? or do I advocate for the school because I know that this program here can provide better education for less dollars than it would take to provide them with the aid? At that time, I guess I really try to address what the student's needs are, and at that time the student will become my client.

Another source of stress in Louise's job had to do with the absence of appropriate workspace. Louise believed that school psychologists often had to work with their clients in less than optimal locations within the school building:

How many storerooms have you worked in? How many furnace rooms have you been relegated to? I'm in a janitor's closet, and I thought to myself one day I don't even have a telephone, and they stick me down there in the basement, and there are times when you get tossed out of your room in favor of somebody else.

Having adequate workspace was not only a matter of convenience, it also affected the psychologist's ability to network with other school staff and to become a resource to others as opposed to someone who only did testing. For example, when the school psychologist had her own office space, it was easier for parents, students and teachers to locate her and seek out her assistance. Likewise, it was easier for the school psychologist to plan ahead and schedule

meetings with parents and other staff members if they knew that an appropriate space would be available whenever they needed it:

My favorite school now is a smaller elementary (building) and I think I like it because I can sit in the room where I work and teachers seek me out to ask questions. It's not just questions any longer about reading tests and things like that. They're actually asking questions about programs ... do you have any suggestions for how we can work with Johnny to improve his spelling, those kinds of things, it's not just testing.

A third source of stress in a school psychologist's work, according to Louise, could generally be described as a time issue. In fact, she described her major source of stress as "not so much about losing one's job as it is about how to handle all the requirements of the job in the amount of time that you have." As with inadequate workspace, Louise believed that limited time could interfere with the psychologist's ability to establish a reliable network of relationships with others:

When you're trying to cover anywhere from 4 to 7 buildings in a week, you don't establish those close relationships, it's very hard. You're there one day a week ... you're typically not on the invitation list if they're having a baby shower or whatever is going on, and sometimes you are the last person to know when there's a major policy change coming down. It depends upon who you have in that building that is willing to share things.

Another duty that was often compromised by insufficient time was report writing. In Louise's case, her ability to stay up to date with her report writing was also complicated by illness:

I was about 50 reports behind at one point because I was not well last Spring and I couldn't handle being so behind, I had to do something. I told (my supervisor) I have to do something or you're gonna lose me ... (laughed) ... and I think you'll hear the same thing (from other psychologists).

This stressful situation, however, resulted in creative problem solving:

I brought that issue with our supervisor here and brainstorming one day we worked out a plan, because I was complaining about the demands of paperwork vs. the amount of time, and one of the things I was talking about is a lot of the half days a week for paper work but I don't make it the same day, for example, the first day of the month it might be Monday morning, the second week of the month, Tuesday morning, and then Thursday morning and then I flip it, do the Monday afternoons, Tuesday ... and this way it hits all schools fairly equally during the school year, and I set aside that 4 hours and do nothing but paperwork and I found that when I could reduce the paper work stress, the other stressors didn't seem as bad.

Reflections

Personal and Professional Identity

Professional identity is inextricably tied to one's biography. In Louise's case, significant childhood experiences left their mark on the way she saw herself practicing school psychology :

You know, maybe being poor was not what I would have wanted to grow up like, but I'll tell you something', I'd like to think I'm a good listener. I think there's a lot of compassion for students, it doesn't take very long to figure out who the have's and the have not's are that I work with, and because of my background and how it hurt so much, I leave the psychology jargon at the office. I save it for the courts if I have to. I leave it out of the reports and I don't use the words with families or students. In fact, I think that's been the biggest thing for me. It's not difficult typically for me to relate to the families I work with because anything they're going through ...*I've been there*. There isn't anything that hasn't happened in families, just about that I haven't experienced ... I learned a long time ago that fancy clothes make a lot of my families feel uncomfortable, so I dress fairly plainly unless there is a power statement to be made, and I could do that for necessity only. I just think that I'm well placed in some of the schools that I work with.

From an early age, Louise had to struggle hard in order to earn what most people considered to be basic needs. She also had to stand up against others' opinions and criticisms in order to attain her goals. As a professional who worked in a team setting, however, Louise said that she had to learn to become less confrontative in order to succeed in a team setting:

I've become less confrontational as I've gotten more confidence in my abilities. I don't feel that it has to be a one upsmanship on who has control of a certain issue. That was real hard for somebody like me and still I struggle with that because when I'm part of a team sometimes it's hard for me to let someone else be in charge (laughed) ... I think I've gotten less formal, I've learned to take risks. Brainstorming, that was something that was very hard for me because when you start brainstorming ideas you're putting ideas out there for someone to maybe criticize ... and that's one thing that I'm known at the office for, is the brainstormer of the group.

Louise believed that more recent family events have also had a significant impact on her sensitivity towards her clients. Some time back, Louise found out that someone close to her had been a victim of child abuse. What had the greatest impact on Louise was the fact that despite her close relationship with that person, she had "missed the signs" of their trauma. As a result, Louise was haunted by one question: "if I've missed it with (someone this close,) what have I missed with the children that I've worked with?" The subtleties of these events have a strong impact on Louise's sensitivity towards the families she worked with in general and towards issues of child abuse in particular:

I have compassion for the stresses of families that produce child abuse. These weren't bad people, but they were also stressed I think by the times that they grew up in because they grew up in the depression when it was very poor ...*very* poor. You can read (about child abuse) in a textbook, you

can talk about it in class at a university, you can talk to teachers about it, you can talk about the signs, but you know what? How do you spot it when the obvious signs weren't obvious? That's where my growing came this year ... (it's) been very difficult.

Success

How does a psychologist like Louise Thompson evaluate her success?

According to Louise, the criteria for evaluating her work was based to a large extent on her expanded role as a consultant rather than on the traditional role of a diagnostician:

I think if you're looking at statistics as one criteria: if you've got your MET reports written, and you completed x number of cases, that's an *external* way of saying you've done what you're supposed to do ... you've met the requirements. Internally ... that doesn't do it for me, I like the special committees I'm on, where you can sit down and brainstorm new ideas and if one of those new ideas takes off and I try it, that to me is what I like to do ... *that's* why I'm still in this profession, if I had to sit here and test, test, test, go to IEPC's and write reports, I would not have lasted.

Advice to Students of School Psychology

Based on her experience and background, Louise offered some advice to those who wished to pursue school psychology as a career:

I would not recommend doing it the way I did. I truly, except for those brief discussions with psychology interns at NorthBrook, I had not a clue about what I was getting into. Have you ever heard of the phrase 'Gone from the frying pan into the fire?' As far as I was concerned when I went from NorthBrook to the school system, that's exactly how I felt. I would think that students who are interested in going into school psychology sometime during that first year when their schooling is still specific but there's more general requirements, they need to get out there and follow a school psychologist around for a week. Not a day, I mean, I've had people follow me around for two hours. That doesn't tell the story. They need to go out there and *talk* to somebody who's been in the field, *not* a professor (as a way of helping them decide) where they are best placed.

Looking Back

When I asked Louise if there were times when she had doubts about staying in this profession, she answered with a smile, "Oh, probably about once a week." She attributed those doubts to the stressful nature of her work:

There's always too much coming. There's never a day when you kick back and say 'Uh, I can write a report ... hey I may even be caught up,' (laughed). There's *never* a time, there's always somebody pulling at you.

Despite the stresses, however, Louise encountered enough rewards that made her decide to stay:

Every so often ... there will be something that happens either with a colleague, an experience they've had, or with one of your own students where you've made a real difference, or ... you get the benefit of the job. School psychology in the current contract, your nine month or ten month contract permits me to watch my son play baseball, permits me to take on sports boosters, permits me to do community service that I could not otherwise do.

Lauri Anderson

Early Family Life

Lauri grew up in a family where both parents were educators. She had one younger brother and was surrounded by a close network of extended family. As a little girl, Lauri recalled spending more time with her father than many of her peers:

My mother had (a chronic illness) and so she couldn't do a lot of things that most moms do and so my dad would take me places and do things with me and whenever I had lessons or swimming lessons or going places, he would just take me ... so I think I spent more time with my father than a lot of kids do.

Mrs. Anderson's struggle with her illness left a strong impression on

Lauri:

I think that what I feel most about my family is that (my mother) is the person who *because* of (her illness) had to struggle with adversity in her life and always seemed to come out on top, which was a good role model. She never stopped ... and ... even in first grade the doctor said you have to stay home, really, and she kept saying no, I don't think I can do that. They told her she shouldn't go to college because it would be too much for her ... and she said no.

Education

According to Lauri, her early school years were positive and rewarding. She described herself as "one of the top students" who never had to work very hard to do a good job. Lauri's transition to junior high school, on the other hand, seemed more difficult:

Junior high I remember as being more traumatic, but that wasn't because of the school work, it was more of the social (demands), trying to find a

place to fit and wanting to be in the group that was popular and really fitting.

By the time she reached high school, Lauri had found her “niche” and formed a group of friends that she felt comfortable with. After completing her high school degree, Lauri attended a local University where she studied science.

Later on, however, she decided to switch majors and study education:

I think I wanted, honestly, to go into a major that I didn’t have to struggle so much with. Science I had to work harder at, and the more language oriented, theoretical classes were easier, and I also was questioning whether I wanted to spend my life in a lab, because I’m really, I’m a people person rather than a lab person.

Lauri graduated with a bachelor’s degree with double majors in elementary education and child development:

I did student teaching, and I liked that. I didn’t like the child development teaching so much, I mean in the preschool, and I honestly didn’t like the preschool system (at the university). It seemed that everybody talked to everybody like they were little kids, so... (laughed) ... I didn’t want to grow up doing that either.

School psychology: First encounter and Early Impressions

Lauri was exposed to school psychology at an early age. When she was eleven years old, Lauri spent several weeks with a relative who worked as a school psychologist. The decision to pursue school psychology as a career, however, occurred much later:

When I finished my teaching degree and I had liked my student teaching and then I did substitute teaching in (an urban school district) and I started thinking, ‘well maybe this isn’t my thing either’ ... (laughed). I like kids one at a time, I don’t like them in huge groups, right? So what can I

do so I can see the kids and spend time with them, but not necessarily be in a classroom, so that's when I started thinking seriously about school psychology.

Early Training in School Psychology:

During her internship in school psychology, Lauri recalled feeling "lost" and "very stressed." While part of these difficulties were due to her being a new student, Lauri attributed a great deal of these feelings to the type of mentoring she received during her internship:

I was so new and I wasn't sure what I was doing and (my internship supervisor) and I didn't ... click, so I felt like I couldn't ask a lot of questions and he kind of left me on my own, he had his routine, and that was what I was to do and I didn't feel real comfortable expanding on that or asking questions.

Following her internship and graduation, Lauri volunteered at a center for the severely handicapped in anticipation for applying for a position that required skills in working with the disabled:

At The Bridgeport Center for Severely Impaired Children, I did volunteer work, and that I remember being stressful, mostly though because when you walk into Bridgeport Center the students are so different from normal that that was very nerve wracking.

Early Professional Life: Struggles and Difficulties

Lauri was hired by the Southvalley school district a few months after graduation. According to her, one of the hardest things about her new job was trying to meet the expectations of those she worked with:

When I first started working I had a principal tell me that I must be doing something wrong because ... I had evaluated a student and he had a *very*

high IQ, probably 124 or something like that, and the social worker and I said that he still qualified under Emotionally Impaired, and the principal said that you must have done something wrong because kids that bright don't have emotional problems, so that was a good start ... (laughed). It was overwhelming trying to meet the expectations of so many different groups of people: the parents and the teachers and the principals.

Another difficulty Lauri encountered during her early days as a school psychologist was the feeling of being an outsider compared to the school based staff:

I remember feeling like I didn't really have a place ... you know, you walk into a building and you don't feel like you're really belonging in that building yet. You're an outsider. I think that was the hardest thing ... even now when you change districts it takes a while before you feel like when you walk in the room the teachers expect you to be there and they come up and they say hello and they're happy to see you.

Lauri felt that her isolation was partly due to her position as an itinerant staff. She believed that had she been a regular staff member, such as a classroom teacher, she would have been more readily accepted by the other staff members:

Because then you're there every day and they know you're gonna be there every day and you're ... one of them. Somebody coming from the Southvalley County office is different. And it still is, even the districts that I work in that I've been in for a while, you're not quite ... You're not really one of their staff.

Current Work Setting

General Description

When these interviews were conducted, Lauri had been working with the Southvalley County for 15 years. She was responsible for 3 buildings housed in mostly rural areas. Within those buildings, Lauri was responsible for six

different programs, including those dealing with preschool children. Each year, Lauri's caseload ranged from 95 to 105 cases.

Transitions in the Work Setting

Over the past 15 years, Lauri observed that the county's central office had become more responsive to the needs of the local school districts:

Before, we'd go in, we'd do whatever and that's just what we did. You know, you didn't ask (the school districts what they needed). And really the Southvalley County office dictated what you were going to do, I mean, like a speech therapist will just come in and say, 'well I just don't see kindergartners,' period. But now I think the County is more toward asking the district what do you want and what do you need and trying to match what they think they want and need to what they're getting.

Although the changes have not directly affected Lauri's work, she believed that they set limits on how the county used its resources. This situation caused some frustration "the resources that we have that we think should go in one direction go in another direction because that's what the local district wants."

In addition to district wide changes, Lauri felt that the role of school psychologists in her districts was gradually expanding to involve consultation. Although the districts theoretically supported such a change, no accommodations were made to facilitate the new role:

I think the school psychologists are trying to go more towards consultation which is encouraged but not encouraged. I mean, it's encouraged because it's what the districts want more is somebody to do more consultation and work with at risk kids to keep them out of special education, but at the same time your assignment hasn't changed too to accommodate that, so ... you get stuck still in just trying to get the evaluations done because that's still how your whole assignment is set up.

Lauri believed that administrative support was critical to facilitating the desired changes in the psychologist's role:

I think we need administrative support and spending more time in consultation and just being part of that school because to get the teachers to trust you really have to *be* there and not just be busy running around doing things, you need to sit in the lunch room and eat, you need to be available to catch in the hallway and say you know, what do you think about this so you look like you're part of that system.

Resources

According to Lauri, the Southvalley County invested a lot of time and money on the continuing education of its staff:

One thing that our district does *very* well is time to update your skills, conferences and ... our district is wonderful about that ... giving us time and money and resources so that we can stay up with what's going on.

Lauri worked with a multidisciplinary team consisting of a speech and language therapist, social worker, occupational and physical therapists. The team members seemed to be an important source of support for Lauri:

They listen when I get really frustrated. They're a group I can go to when I'm confused and say I'm not sure what's going on, what do you think? they're very supportive and I don't feel like they're ever judging me ... both personally and professionally.

Lauri also relied on other school psychologists for support. A few years earlier, the school psychologists in Lauri's districts used to meet on a weekly basis. Those meetings were viewed as a very helpful resource both professionally and on a personal level:

You could go to the school psychologist who had the school before you ... I could say, this is what's happening does it sound like normal or how is this teacher or how should I work with this principal or, can you believe what he said, that was very helpful.

Roles and Functions: Related Issues

Role Definition

According to Lauri, an important role played by school psychologists involved being a "buffer" between the school and parents. This role reportedly occurred in about one-fifth to a quarter of the cases Lauri dealt with:

Several times a parent will come in who is just very angry at a teacher. Part of my job is to listen to them, let them talk about what they're feeling and why they're angry and let them vent their anger and help them calm down so by the time they meet with the principal everybody is more rational.

Lauri believed that working as a school psychologist also allowed her the unique opportunity to examine problems from a broad perspective:

I don't have my little niche ... I don't ... just (look) at speech or just at math or just at reading. I try to get a broad picture of the child and look at the whole thing. If I'm talking to a teacher I can look at ... maybe this is something at home, or this is what's happened in the past and it could impact on what's going on here. So it's kind of trying to put everything together and to help people with understanding the whole (picture.)

Perceived Ideal Role:

Lauri believed that, ideally, the role of a school psychologist involved working in few, possibly one school building. This arrangement, she argued, would allow the practitioner to expand her services beyond evaluation:

My ideal (role) is what one of my practicum students does for her job. She has an elementary (building) ... and that's her job, she's there not just for testing but she's there for counseling, she's there for interacting with the teachers, she's there for consultations, because her main job is just the elementary school all week long. She does work with academics, she can do everything in that school.

Unfortunately, the tension between the ideal and actual role of a school psychologist was not only a matter of limited time. Lauri believed that despite the demand to move away from standardized testing, the special education system continued to demand that school psychologists function primarily as gatekeepers:

As far as special education and testing, it seems to be *growing* to me rather than reducing, they're still using special education the same way, there's still the same criteria to get in or out.

Stressors

Lauri talked about the importance of establishing trust with the people she worked with, especially classroom teachers. However, one of the difficulties she experienced in her work was the fact that her assignment to different school buildings had varied so often over the years that it was difficult to establish a trusting relationship with the regular staff within each building:

When you change districts it takes a while before you feel that when you walk in the room the teachers expect you to be there and they come up and they say hello and they're happy to see you ... I think that if you *really* want to do a good job you can't change (schools) every year because they never fit, there's never that trust and you can't do as good a job if they don't trust you.

Lauri addressed this particular situation gradually and by taking small steps that helped staff members become accustomed to her presence. She focused on increasing her visibility within the buildings she was responsible for. In the beginning, Lauri said, that process was difficult to achieve:

The hardest thing I think was walking into the lunch room, and so after I walked into the lunch room, and you sit there and you don't really feel like you belong there and everybody is quiet as soon as you walk in and you know that they're not sure that they should trust you and their conversation is different because you're sitting there, then I would go back into my room and take a breather and write reports or something.

Lauri also described the stress of the growing demands of her job because of the increasing complexity in the types of problems she encountered, "the families' needs keep getting more and more, I think the kids are more stressed so the needs of the families are greater and we can't do much about it."

Lauri's approach to dealing with these stresses involved setting reasonable expectations for herself and keeping track of her accomplishments:

I try to do the best that I can and then if I can't do everything I tell myself, 'you know, you just can't do it all,' you do what you can do and then you have to let it go ... I try to keep (track of) the positive things. Last year I had 110 kids on my list, now obviously I'm going to be a crazy person and obviously I got a lot done, so if I'm feeling like I didn't get anything done, I can look at my list of kids that I've seen and say 'well, look how many you did,' I think you forget ... actually keeping a log which nobody wants any more, is very helpful to me because I look back if I'm really stressed out and look in September and say 'heck, I saw 15 kids' and all these things are finished and so there's a good reason that I'm stressed out.

Reflections

Influence of Life Experiences on Professional Identity

Two important experiences had their impact on Lauri's practice of school psychology. First, her prior training in elementary education and child development which allowed her to view children's problems from a broad perspective. For example, instead of looking only at test scores or classroom achievement, she was able to take into consideration the child's history and home environment. The other formative experience was having been a parent herself. Lauri believed that raising her own children had increased her sensitivity and compassion towards the families she worked with:

When I had my own children, you really change perspective on parents' capabilities and what to expect them to do. They're doing a lot of homework, monitoring their children, going to school when there's a problem. Just the work of being a parent wears you out. You don't have enough energy left to handle things at school. So for us to expect them to take over is perhaps too much.

Advice to School Psychology Students

Lauri's advice to students of school psychology was twofold; first, she emphasized the fact that much of the work of a school psychologist involved negotiation, conflict resolution and interpersonal skills:

The testing is the easy part, and you can learn that in school, but that's not the main thing. That's a big part of how you spend your day but that's not where the skill really is ... I think that to be a good school psychologist you have to have a lot of skills that don't even encompass working with kids, you have to understand political things that are going on, you have to compromise, you have to be very tactful, you have to be somebody who can walk down the middle on top of a fence and there's people on both sides ... I think the (training in) consultation addresses

this maybe some but that still doesn't address being in the middle a lot, and being somebody who has to deal with conflict resolution and making lots of people happy or trying as best you can or not make them unhappy in a tactful way (laughed).

Moreover, Lauri believed that a well supervised practical training, such as the internship, and a strong support group were critical to the successful practice of school psychology. She, therefore, advised school psychology students to:

Find somebody who's good at it and really watch what they do because it's ... it's so much more than just the testing, and it takes a while to figure that out. Find a district where you can have a lot of support from other school psychologists, so you don't feel like you're out there by yourself... and people that you can go back and talk to and say ' you know, what's going on here, am I nuts?' Or when principals get really demanding ... just really have a good support group.

Sara K. Murphy

Early Family Life

Sara, who is currently in her mid thirties, was raised as an only child in the rural suburbs of a large Mid Western city. In addition to an extended family that lived near her, Sara enjoyed a close relationship with both of her parents and believed that having been an only child, her upbringing may have been “a little sheltered:”

My parents now whenever I go anywhere I call them ...being an only child I think that changes some things. I still probably speak to them every day on the phone I call if we're going somewhere just to say we got home ok.

As a child, Sara was influenced by two family members: her father and her paternal grandmother. She described being influenced by her father's “work ethic” while her grandmother influenced “the religious aspect” of her life.

Education

Sara attended a small school from kindergarten all the way through High School. She described herself as hardworking and self-motivated student:

I always liked school ... as a student, I think I always wanted to do well and it bothered me if I didn't. Always studied ... I guess I took it fairly seriously .. it's more of an internal motivation as far as academics I can't think of anything that was really too difficult or that I had a difficulty with.

Sara had planned on going to college since she was a ninth grader and her family encouraged and supported her plans. By tenth grade, Sara had made up her mind to study veterinary medicine because of her interest in animals.

However, during 11th grade, Sara studied sociology and psychology and developed a strong interest in the social sciences. When she entered college, Sara enrolled as a psychology major and graduated with a double major in psychology and sociology:

I went to college right under psychology and never changed my major which I think is unusual (laughed) because I think a lot of people change several times but I think the interest just came with the high school classes."

With her parents financing her college education, Sara didn't have to work through college. She was, thus, able to focus on her studies and became involved in student organizations through both the sociology and psychology programs. Early on during her college years, Sara had made up her mind to attend graduate school :

I knew right off that I was gonna have to go to graduate school and that was something they told you from the very beginning that you're not gonna get too far with a bachelor's degree (laughed) in psychology.

School psychology: First Encounter and Early Impressions

Early Training

Sara completed a Specialist Degree in Psychology from the same college where she completed her undergraduate degree:

My advisor from my freshman year was the school psychology chairperson so possibly it could have come from that, and the chairperson of my department which I knew through some of my classes his wife is also a school psychologist and I ended up doing a practicum with her when I got into the program .

Sara's program focused on training in clinical work and counseling. By contrast, she believed that the program's focus on courses in education was "lacking:"

We took some of our classes in the education department but only 9 hours of the 72 hours of our program, only 9 actually were in the education department ... I think I had teaching reading and an interventions class and school law.

Early Impressions

Sara recalled that her early impressions of school psychology were a lot different from what she actually found it to be:

When I look at my job now there was a lot more excitement and variety (during early training) than what you do have (now) ... assessment was one part and I didn't see the emphasis of assessment until I got into the practicum situation or into an internship. (It wasn't until) after your first year that you see that it's a larger part than maybe you thought, and maybe not thinking about the amount of clerical work that's involved with the report writing and I never liked to write (laughed) ... that's something you have to adapt to.

Early Professional Life

Sara had worked for one year as a school psychologist in another district before working at Southvalley. Her first job as a school psychologist involved diverse functions such as teaching and counseling:

The one county (where I worked) I was able to do different things, we taught a social skills class and counted as a nine week class where we gave a grade and everything for special education students, I did some counseling and evaluation and reevaluations.

Sara recalled her first days on the job as "nerve wracking:"

The first thing was going to an inservice that a psychologist was presenting, luckily I didn't have to present, but that whole idea ... presenting to people who just aren't interested in what you're saying (laughed) teachers ... you know about new laws and changes and things, and I also felt pretty young at the time, I think, and not having children ... sometimes I feel at a disadvantage with parents and do I have a right to say anything that I haven't experienced myself too.

Among Sara's early concerns was whether or not she was living up to others' expectations of her role:

Because people ask about interventions and I felt like that was an area where I could have used more instruction in and ... I think people look at you as an expert ... people looking at you as an expert was a scary thing.

In dealing with these stresses, Sara found some support in sharing the decision making process with other professionals:

I think the staffing process where you're brainstorming and people ... it's not just you responsible for coming up with ideas, you can build on other people's ideas and get information, that's helped.

Current Work Setting

General Characteristics

Sara has been working with the Whitehills school district for the past three years. At the time of these interviews, Sara was responsible for four schools spread over three districts, in addition to referrals from private schools and an adult education program. Sara's role as defined by the district focused primarily on evaluation:

My responsibilities as far as within the Intermediate School District were more of an evaluator role. We have more than 15 school social workers who do the counseling and the groups, so as far as the psychologists

within our building we are included in on pre-referral types of child study meetings, and those kinds of things but otherwise we're more kind of evaluators.

Each year, Sara completed from 75 to 85 evaluations, the majority of which involved learning disabilities. More recently, however, Sara noticed an increase in the number of referrals involving Attention Deficit Disorders:

Within the last *couple* of years here it seems like I've had more of the section 504 evaluations looking at Attention Deficit which seem to be almost more time consuming than maybe the special education evaluation itself (because) I think you're doing more observations doing more types of interviews with parents, you still would do that with your other (evaluations) but we do a very thorough developmental history with the ADHD, and also the behavior rating scales to most of the teachers and then to the parent, maybe a self-rating youth report .

According to Sara, her present work setting differed from her previous district in three ways, first, she experienced more variety previously than at her present job. In her previous district, there was no social worker; thus, school psychologists were doing "counseling in groups with more variety."

Second, in her current job, Sara believed that she had more flexibility in the decision making process than she did in the earlier work setting:

(In my previous job), in the evaluation process itself, you were very limited to what you could use and you had to have two observations and you had to have an adaptive behavior for everyone and it had to be for LD above 85 (IQ) and they had their table (of scores) and it was a lot stricter and then I came here and it's almost like people had pulled the rug out from under me because I was used to such strict guidelines and then I came here and nobody tells you what to use, you can make these decisions and you can actually use some professional judgement Here I felt more freedom to use what instruments I want to use, if it doesn't exactly fit into the formula there's not that worry... and that was hard to adapt to because I was used to having those guidelines to go by and here it was too

much freedom, am I doing it right or wrong, no one would tell you either way.

As a result of the increasing flexibility, Sara's style of practice gradually changed. She became less "concerned about the numbers," referring to test scores, and became progressively more comfortable using her own judgement instead of following strict guidelines.

Finally, while in the previous setting Sara was directly employed by the school district, in her current setting she was employed by an intermediate school district. Sara believed that this arrangement made a difference in the school psychologist's interaction with administrators, including superintendents. That aspect, according to Sara, made a difference in "the amount of power you have:"

Because we were housed at the board of education with the superintendent, here (at Southvalley) you're not really part of the (local) district, you're part of the (Central County Office) ... In some situations I think (it gives you less power), but then also I think that in some situations you're a little more objective too, so I've seen both sides of it. But I think power wise with having the superintendent, and having constant contact with him, sometimes there was a little more power there.

Resources and Support Network

In her current work setting, the people Sara interacted with on a regular basis varied depending on the size of the school and the administrative involvement in special education activities:

In some of the smaller schools I see there more social interaction with the teachers, some of the large schools not as much ... with administrators it depends on the school if they're really strongly involved in special

education or if they're not, and if there's that involvement then (administrators) seem to be your contact person ... otherwise it may be the special education teacher, or the guidance counselor ... I have a school where the assistant principal is a former special education teacher so I feel that there's more involvement and more control over what's happening so I have more contact (with the administrator.)

In the course of her daily work, Sara saw the school secretary as an important contact person whom she referred to as a "mediator" between herself and other staff members:

I have a lot of interaction with secretaries ... they're the ones that are organizing the office, and those are the people that you're dealing with, and I didn't even think on that level, but in a lot of schools that's a big contact person for me because they're the mediator between you and the teacher, with our position we're only in each school one day, so you're not there throughout the week ... (also) for scheduling purposes, a lot of times it's hard to get in touch with the principals so I find that the secretaries (have helped) just with relaying information back and forth.

In their role as a link between the school psychologist and other staff persons, the school secretaries were perceived as part of Sara's support network.

With respect to administrators, their support to the school psychologist was expressed in various ways:

As far as administrators, the ones that I've worked with I've had really excellent support to the point where they're asking to have more school (psychologists) in a district, to showing you letters where parents have mentioned your name or someone else's name, and giving you the feedback that you need.

Sara perceived feedback in general, whether positive or negative, as a source of support to her work. Although it didn't take place very often, feedback

was more likely to occur in the smaller schools that Sara had worked in for an extended length of time.

Sara also relied on other school psychologists for support, which could range from formally organized training sessions to informal personal feedback:

We've done computer training when we had the new laptops, one of the psychologists in the technology team came in and gave several computer types of instructions so that we can use those things. We've done Attention Deficit, and sometimes it just turns into cases when someone presents a case and says I need help with this and can we do that, sometimes it's just time to vent on things that are going on (smiled) which is important ... it's kind of, not that you're there all the time to just complain about those things, but it's nice to have that support I think.

However, the opportunity for frequent contact with her colleagues was limited. Previously, school psychologists were able to meet during lunch time to discuss various issues as well as to conduct inservice training programs. These training programs enabled the psychologists to earn credit that was necessary for maintaining their credentials. Current State Department guidelines, however, have prohibited formal training during lunch hour. The Central School District, however, has continued to allow its school psychologists to meet for credit.

Transitions in the Work Setting

Within the previous two years, one of the school buildings Sara was responsible for implemented a new program that has had a significant impact on the number of referrals she received as well as on her role in general. The intervention program involved a multidisciplinary team that consisted of an administrator, a special education teacher, a guidance counselor and a regular

education teacher. The child, who would otherwise be referred for a full psychoeducational assessment, was referred to the team in order to develop an appropriate intervention plan. Several meetings would then follow in order to determine progress and decide whether a special education referral was in order.

Sara pointed out the difference between such a program and other so called

“prereferral” programs:

It’s a kind of not a prereferral process but more of just an intervention type of program ... I think the point is that it’s not just an automatic pre-referral to referral process, but it’s an intervention process, but some *may* go to referral. I think a lot of times it’s called pre-referral ... so the next step is automatically ‘let’s go to referral.’ Now, I have some other schools they call it child studies, getting away from the name.

Among the effects of the program was a dramatic drop in special education referral rates:

The referral has dropped dramatically and the school system is looking at maybe 6 or 7 referrals for the whole year, new referrals, compared to (before the program when) it was a 2 day job in that school. So I’m seeing ... some of those programs working and implementing them in the schools themselves taking more control over situations.

According to Sara, the program has also affected the general perception of her role as a gatekeeper. Previously the school psychologist was looked upon as the one who controlled entry to and exit from special education programs as well as decisions as to whether a child should be referred for formal assessment.

Now, Sara believed, administrators, teachers and other support staff were assuming a larger share of the decision making process:

I think part of it with those types of new programs (is) that we're looked upon in a little more positive light, that we're not the gatekeeper there and we're not the one saying, 'no you can't go to referral, you need to do this' ... I'm not the mean person (laughed) ... saying you need to go back and do that, they're trying that, they're doing behavior contracts, they're doing homework assignment sheets ... and then by the time it comes to a referral meeting they have some things to present and most of the time those are good referrals to go through.

Roles and Functions: Related Issues

Role Definition

Sara considered her role to be tied to evaluation. A critical aspect of the evaluation process, Sara believed, was the psychologist's ability to assume a broad perspective when interpreting a child's test results:

I think the evaluation is one part and ... it's more than just the numbers that I get ... I think the evaluation itself has to be that you're looking at the numbers that you get, you have to look at the reason why you possibly could have gotten those numbers, like the information that parents give you, teachers give you and take all of that into consideration.

Sara was concerned that when cases were discussed by Individualized Educational Planning Committees, there was too much emphasis on the scores from standardized tests administered by the school psychologist:

Sometimes those numbers they take on the greatest importance in that meeting and sometimes I just want to be another input person, you know, this is what I found and yes these are important but let's look at the total picture here.

Recently, the school psychologists along with their supervisor have tried to address these concerns. One of the changes recently implemented was changing the format of the psycho-educational reports so as to de-emphasize test

scores and emphasize practical interventions. Implicitly, these changes were also meant to de-emphasize the role of the school psychologist and test scores in special education placement decisions and to emphasize, instead the process as a shared decision:

As a district we've tried to change that, we've changed our reports ... the front page of our reports now is our recommendations ... So we're trying to get people to look more at what are the recommendations, and a lot of the recommendations come from teachers, we put things in there, what has worked with the student, if the student is going to another school what recommendations would you make that have been effective in the past that can help, very technical types of things but things that work and that other people would *want*, because I think we know a lot of people don't read the reports ... (laughed) ... so we have tried that ... just so that we're not looked upon as total expert in this meeting, then it's not that this is what you're saying but everyone has input in here and it's just not always the scores that count.

Perceived Ideal Role

Sara wished her role involved a greater range of variety:

I personally would like to see a little greater variety in my job whether that be counseling, maybe. It would be nice to have more of an intervention type of role and be part of that ... it may not necessarily be the counseling but (perhaps) doing more CBA (curriculum based assessment).

However, she believed that her current responsibilities left little time for role expansion:

When you're in school consultation, oh, you need an hour just to identify the problem and (laughed) the truth is that you have 15 minutes to sit down and do that ... I think that part of it is you get in there and it takes a lot of time to deviate from the routine that you do and where do you find the time to do that?

Sara believed that in order for role expansion to take place, the school psychologist's caseload should first be reduced:

I think technically you need to cut down on your numbers to do assessment ... of course we've been told from other districts and the state that we have a low number of (evaluations,) 70, 80 ... but you know, we would probably need at least another person which would give you more time I think and then it would also cut down on report writing.

It also appeared that the smaller the school and the more familiar the staff was with the school psychologist, the easier it was for the psychologist to function as a consultant:

The smaller school I'm at, the teachers are more familiar when I'm there and it's a situation where I have a full day there, it's really a half a day work and I take the other half to do paper work, and I find parents just stopping by the room and asking different questions: 'the teacher said you would be here today,' but it's not like that in every school and I think it depends on the school. You have situations where they want information for outside resources or outside therapy and if I can give that to them, then I call the social worker and be a resource person ... I've had situations where I've had a parent stop in the elementary school and her daughter is a first grader who couldn't read and the words are jumping out on the paper, and they're concerned about Dyslexia, and she passed her vision and I said well maybe you need to have her vision rechecked somewhere else, and then she came back, she needs glasses. So there are some of those instances at that school particularly that I see parents a little more comfortable, it's a really small school, one class per grade, parents are really involved there so I think they feel more comfortable.

Stressors

One of Sara's primary responsibilities was to determine students' eligibility to receive special education services. Eligibility depended on whether or not a child met predetermined criteria, such as specific deficits in academic or social-emotional areas of functioning. A dilemma often occurred when a child

appeared to need special services but did not meet all the criteria specified by special education regulations. For some psychologists, like Sara, this was a frustrating situation:

I think the way the system is set up at this point ... you have to meet those specific guidelines and there's instances ... where children don't meet those guidelines but they really still need the help. Some States I came from before they did what was called a remediation plan whether you met (the criteria) or not and I can see that being very beneficial here. Because they (the children) don't meet eligibility it doesn't mean their problems disappear, they're still there.

Another source of frustration in Sara's work was being isolated from regular school staff, such as teachers. In the meantime, her busy schedule left her little time to develop a social relationship with other itinerant staff like herself:

I think in a way because we aren't part of their system, I think there's some stress in being a little isolated from the people that you're working with too ... you're kind of an outsider and we don't have a lot of time here that you really identify with a lot of people in your office either, so there's not that consistency that a lot of people have where every day you go and see the same people.

Much of the stress, however, resulted from the very nature of her job, including a constant effort to meet timelines, such as due dates for completing evaluations and submitting reports:

The job itself, it's a bunch of timelines and sometimes you just know you're not meeting those timelines ... (laughed) ... so that in itself is stressful, it's almost from the beginning you're behind.

In order to remain up to date on some of her responsibilities, Sara resorted to doing some of her work at home:

I need to do that to function here at work, I can't have a lot of times things hanging over my head ... and that's not all the time but at different times of the year ... and there's other people who disagree with that and say you should not take any of that home because if you do that then that becomes the expectation, but part of that is that if I didn't do that I don't think I can function because I need to have some closure on some of those things.

Sara's ability to work at home, however, was made easier by her personal circumstances:

My husband works a lot at home too, so it's not been an issue (to take work home) ... at this point I don't have a family so it's a little easier for me to just do it at home and to know that some of those things got done.

Sara also found it helpful that her district provided each psychologist with a laptop computer to use throughout the year:

The laptops have helped a lot though ... you can take it home and there's always those 15 minutes at school or during the lunch hour that if you want to you can start writing ... you feel like you're getting something done.

Advice to Students of School Psychology

Sara strongly believed that field training and "job shadowing" were most valuable in the preparation of new psychologists. The important point, however, was to get a clear idea of what the psychologist's role involved, to "*really* talk to the psychologist and understand what their role is," rather than just practicing the technical aspects of the job.

Looking Back

When pressured by her workload, Sara sometimes questioned her future in this profession. However, there were always positive experiences that made her stay:

You know, I think even after my internship there were questions ... you do 70 or 80 evaluations and you have 50 reports to do in the summer, there is 'why did I get into this?' ... and 'is this what I thought the program would be?' and there's the people I've talked to and there's the feeling that I've went too far and now I'm stuck with this but and then something positive comes along and you work with a student ... I think I knew that I always wanted to do something in a school system, I liked that and it's been a fun place and it always felt safe.

Chapter 5

DISCUSSION

One of the purposes of this study was to understand some of the processes whereby school psychologists constructed their professional roles and identities. Robert White (1952) defined professional role as the way a society expected a person to behave by virtue of his or her membership in a certain group. In reference to the medical profession, for example, he argued that "each individual medical student finds the role already defined for him" (P.125). As will be shown in the following discussion, this statement held true for the school psychologists whose lives were described in this study. However, what I found to be most striking was the active role that these school psychologist played in composing their own professional roles in spite of pre-existing definitions. The six psychologists portrayed here did not passively accept their socially prescribed functions; rather, they used the given definitions as a medium through which they created their own unique version of their professional role.

In her study of individual lives, Mary Catherine Bateson (1985) viewed the way people crafted their lives as an "improvisatory art ... (where) we combine familiar and unfamiliar components in response to new situations." In today's

society, Bateson (1985) argued, it was no longer possible to follow the paths of previous generations:

Many of the most basic concepts we use to construct a sense of self or the design of a life have changed their meanings: Work. Home. Love. Commitment (p.2).

These changes required that, in crafting their lives, individuals recombined familiar and partly familiar materials in new and creative ways. There are some similarities between Bateson's (1985) metaphor and the process by which the six psychologists portrayed in this study construed their professional roles and identities. The context within which school psychology is currently practiced is changing rapidly (Fagan & Wise, 1994). Many school psychologists are realizing that a traditional role that is restricted to diagnosis and placement is no longer suited to the growing needs of today's educational institution, nor does it address the complex needs of today's families. Moreover, the field of school psychology is beginning to embrace a much broader view of assessment, what it encompasses and intends to accomplish (Bardon, 1994). Given these circumstances, the process of professional role construction is more likely to resemble a work of art rather than a passive application of a prescribed technique. Moreover, the tools and materials used to construct these roles are likely to be varied and complex, reflecting both characteristics that are unique to the psychologist as well as aspects related to the setting in which he or she works.

In this chapter I will examine some of the tools and materials used by the participating school psychologists in constructing their professional roles and identities. These tools and materials are important because they shape the possibilities and define the boundaries of the professionals' role within their respective settings. As will be seen in the following discussion, professional roles and identities were construed within the possibilities and boundaries afforded by social expectations, personal characteristics and institutional resources and limitations.

The discussion in this chapter will focus on two areas: first, I will discuss some of the tools used by school psychologists to define their roles and identities. Second, within this discussion I will also examine some of the diverse and unique ways in which these tools have been used by the school psychologists in creating their roles

The Process of Role Composition: Its Tools and Materials

I use the term "materials" or "tools" here to refer to aspects of the professionals' lives and their environment that became part of their portrayal of their professional roles and identities. These materials are presented here within the context of three dimensions: personal, organizational and social-historical. The personal dimension involves elements that are most unique to the individual's biography, such as family background and prior training. In this section, I will discuss some examples of how the individual's biography mediates

the portrayal of professional identity. The biographical dimension is followed by a discussion of the organizational dimension, which includes features of the educational setting that have been consistently referred to by the psychologists in constructing their professional roles and functions. In this context, I discuss two types of organizational features: those perceived as restrictive to professional growth and others viewed as supportive of their efforts to expand professional roles. Following the institutional level are some of the social and historical transitions mentioned by the school psychologists in portraying their professional roles and identities. In this section, I examine some of the historical transitions that have affected the nature of the communities served by the school psychologists, and how the psychologists' perceptions of these changes have mediated the process of role definition. Throughout this discussion, there is emphasis on the idea that the school psychologist is actively involved in constructing his or her professional role and identity by drawing on the tools described above. Rather than being a repository of social and institutional forces, the professional school psychologist re-interprets these forces in individual and unique ways.

The Personal Dimension of Role Definition

In this section, I discuss some ways in which life history shapes the construction of professional roles and identities. I believe that by making these processes visible, we develop an understanding of "how people bring affects into the process of collaborating at work with others" (Jennings, 1996, p.42). This

understanding is important because it allows professionals and those involved in their training to nurture the internal resources, such as personal strengths and values, that reside within professionals and play an important role in their interpretation and construction of their work relationships.

In examining the biographies shared in this study, I observed that there was often one or more central themes which seemed to organize and punctuate the participants' life histories. For Mark Hughes, for example, early exposure to diversity and a continuing interest in jazz music were central to his self-portrayal. Louise Thompson, on the other hand, organized her story around the hardships her family endured and the forces that threatened to undermine her aspirations as a woman seeking a professional career. Meanwhile, Kevin Bradley referred to the religious and moral teachings instilled early on by his parents as "a context from which everything else was laid." Among the interesting and important findings of this study were the parallels between these central themes on the one hand and the way the school psychologists portrayed their professional identities on the other hand. In other words, themes that were central to the school psychologists' life histories were also critical to the way they construed their professional identities.

Mark Hughes, for example, described his professional life in ways that closely paralleled his relationship to music, particularly jazz. Mark often referred to his work setting in collective terms such as "we" and "our community" in reference to his colleagues and the population he served. It was

significant that he saw his relationship to parents and teachers as “cooperative” and “collaborative,” in much the same way that he described his relationship to members of a jazz band where there is “a lot of give and take,” and “a sense of *esprit de corps*.” Furthermore, Mark stressed the parallels between the risk taking involved in playing jazz and the flexibility and “being willing to take risks” involved in becoming “a school psychology consultant.” One might also draw some comparison between the “freedom” and “risks” involved in playing jazz with a band on the one hand and the willingness to take the initiative and to play an active role in expanding one’s professional role and changing others’ perceptions of a psychologist’s role, both of which were evident in Mark’s portrayal of his professional identity.

Louise Thompson’s depiction of her professional style emphasized “compassion” towards her clients. Louise described the impact of her background and “the way it hurt so much” on her sensitivity towards the families and children she worked with. The trials and ordeals of Louise’s life were tools which allowed her to convey a confidence that few people could legitimately claim to possess: “It’s not difficult typically for me to relate to the families I work with because anything they’re going through ... *I’ve been there*.” The influence of Louise’s unique biography was also apparent in the way she chose to present herself to her clients: “I leave the psychology jargon at the office,” and “I learned that fancy clothes make a lot of my families feel uncomfortable, so I dress fairly plainly.”

As for Kevin Bradley, it was of interest that he embedded his professional role within the framework of his "struggle as a human being to be a conscious, aware person." For Kevin, his moral struggle was "what I do for a living," while the more specific functions involved in being a school psychologist happened to exist within that moral framework. Also of relevance was the fact that a unique feature of Kevin's role definition was his emphasis on "the process" rather than the product. He was not bothered by the fact that he was sometimes referred to as a gatekeeper. For Kevin, what was more important than the labels used to describe his profession were "the huge ethical and moral dilemmas that persist ... and ... drive us to be the best that we can be and try not to make decisions based on ... the degree of popularity or the degree to which this (is) the best possible solution vs. the right thing to do." In accordance with his emphasis on the internal struggle rather than on "winning a popularity contest," Kevin's professional style was expressed in the form of a quiet commitment and a non-confrontative definition of his professional role.

The psychologists' role outside the profession was also an influential tool in their construction of professional identity. Lauri Anderson, for instance, talked about the impact of her experience as a parent on her expectations of the families she worked with, "when I had my own children ... you really change perspective on parent's capabilities and what to expect them to do." While Martha Smith described the impact of becoming a grandparent on the way she perceived her professional priorities, "for me as a grandmother, whether the

child can do arithmetic is important, but there's other things that might be more pressing". In these examples, the lessons that accompanied personal transformation have translated into a broader perspective from which these two psychologists approached their jobs. Also, in these two examples, the transitions in the psychologists' personal lives released them from a strict application of theory and technique and helped them move towards a more natural and integrated way of functioning in their professional role. As Martha Smith put it:

I think initially I felt real secure having the assessment kit because you can feel like topsy turvy inside out ... and if you have that kit you're like, *wow* look, (laughed) ... I got this, so I think now I'm much more secure that I know a variety of ways to help children learn and I know formal assessment but I know informal and it's just a part of my body now and my being so I think that's changed from the security of needing something like that and now just feeling like I can be down on the floor with children and I'll know a lot about them.

It is also important to note that this outlook was not simply a result of "being" a parent or a grandparent; rather, it was initiated by the psychologists themselves through a process of self-reflection that led to the integration of some lessons from their personal role with the practice of their professional role.

Another consistent finding related to the psychologists' prior education in areas other than school psychology. Since school psychology is a graduate degree, school psychologists are likely to have been exposed to diverse disciplines prior to their professional preparation in this field. In this study, the participants brought a diverse range of formal backgrounds, including prior experience in teaching, social work, child development and psychology to their practice of school psychology. These backgrounds were among the important

tools that the participants used to construct their professional roles and identities.

In the case of Martha Smith, for example, her prior experience as a teacher was an important part of her early struggle to define her identity as a school psychologist. She described early worries about "'role' ... what does this role mean now?" and her struggle to "switch identity from teacher to school psychologist ... are other people gonna see me as a teacher? are they gonna see me as a school psychologist?" Martha's extensive experience with handicapped children also seemed to have influenced the role prescribed to her by the institution. According to Martha, having worked as teacher for deaf children, she was assigned to work with children who were multiply handicapped because, "when you work with deaf children then the administration gives you the physically handicapped children." Additionally, switching roles from teaching to school psychology involved an important adjustment in Martha's relationship with other professionals. As a teacher, Martha saw herself as being "the bottom line ... I'm responsible," whereas as a school psychologist "you're in the building where there could be ... four other specialists looking at this child." Learning to function as a team player with other professionals was among the difficult transitions that Martha had to go through in becoming a school psychologist. Eventually, Martha came to view her past and present roles in collaborative rather than competitive terms. Thus, as she matured in her role as a school psychologist, Martha saw herself as functioning partly as a teacher: "to

me now it feels like more of a continuum ... *I am* a teacher ... a different focus from a classroom teacher, I teach parents I teach children still as a school psychologist."

Prior experience in social work also played important but different roles in the way Kevin Bradley and Louise Thompson construed their professional roles and their relationships in the work place. In the case of Kevin Bradley, his prior training in social work influenced his role description by laying "a great foundation upon which I was able to further pursue the profession of school psychology, keeping in mind the ecological, systems-based dimension of my training as a social worker." Kevin's experience with the concepts of family therapy provided materials with which to expand his role into that of a consultant and problem solver. Thus, Kevin drew on some of the processes and principles employed by a social worker in working with their clients in his present description of his role as a school psychologist. His particular interest in family therapy seemed to have provided him with a perspective that was lacking from his training in school psychology:

There are things having to do with families and how families interact and there being a system in and of itself ... it's important to recognize and appreciate, and then there are variables between how families interact within a school system and within a particular school building psychology too narrowly defined problems on an individual level ... it didn't take into account the bigger picture that I was looking at as a human being and needed to appreciate in order to do what I wanted to do ... that main concept of multisystemic perspective, that ecological perspective that these tests might be important but there's a lot of other things to consider ... that's why I think I do my job well I think I might have *some* degree of understanding or appreciation than the average person who just gives the test.

In the case of Louise Thompson, prior training in social work influenced her early perception of her role in a different way. Louise described her early experience in social work as "sitting on the other side of the table from schools." She had worked as a social worker before special education laws went into effect. Thus, while at that time the schools were providing some services for the mildly handicapped, "if (the student) didn't have dressing skills or toilet training (the student) wouldn't get services." Louise also worked with community mental health at a the critical transition stage, when "special education had just got into effect and we were struggling with the schools, the institutions and the community regarding foster care, programs, hiring teachers ... so I found myself serving as an advocate." Given this background, Louise referred to the fact that her entry into school psychology included some "prejudices" against the school system. Added to these biases was the limited role prescribed by the district in being told "literally, that 'your job is testing.'" Louise knew she "wouldn't survive under those conditions." These same conditions, however, were a catalyst that eventually lead her to question her assessment practices and to seek to expand her role definition beyond testing and reporting test results. As the special education system evolved over time, Louise also found herself working in collaboration with teams involving other professionals all of whom were advocating for the child's best interests:

As I got working here longer and longer and we reverted to the *team* evaluation process, I think the word evaluation becomes broader and permits us to tap into other people who can make a contribution to the

knowledge we *have* about a student, okay? and sometimes, that teacher's knowledge or that social worker's knowledge may have more of an impact upon what we recommend than a reading test.

As her role evolved, and as special education services broadened in scope, Louise described her increasing collaboration with other professionals and other disciplines within the school system. And while she still advocated for the child's best interests, her current advocacy did not necessarily involve sitting on the other side of the table from the school system, but trying to objectively assess available resources in order to reach an optimal resolution of presenting problems.

Professional Identity within an Organizational Context

According to Gumpert (1993), organizations shape identities by constructing borders which define one's place in the world. The organizations represented in this study provided not only a setting in which the participating school psychologists carried out their roles, but also a context for developing their identities. The six school psychologists whose biographies were described here were expected to provide services in accordance with the roles prescribed by educational organization. While prescribed roles could be beneficial in that they clarify the professionals' functions within the institution and protect them from unreasonable and irrational expectations by others, they also have the potential of limiting professional growth. According to White (1952), limits to professional growth could occur when prescribed roles conflicted with some of the standards by which the professional evaluated his or her decisions and

choices. For example, while the organization may evaluate the psychologist's work based on the number of formal evaluations completed each year, the school psychologist may evaluate his or her own performance based on the educational outcomes of his or her recommendations.

The school psychologists interviewed in this study referred to two types of roles played by the educational institution in shaping their professional identities. On the one hand, some aspects of the educational scene were viewed as limitations to the school psychologists' efforts to expand their role beyond "test and place" model. On the other hand, some organizational features provided pockets of opportunity for the school psychologist to outgrow the traditional function of a gatekeeper. Thus, while for the most part, I found support for Hyman and Kaplinski's (1994) statement that: "schools have kept (school psychologists) locked in the crushingly futile role of classification" (p.573), there was also evidence of supportive organizational efforts that facilitated professional growth among psychologists. Ironically, even organizational features that were typically viewed as limitations to role expansion sometimes indirectly spurred the psychologists to seek role expansion, albeit with much effort and difficulty. For example, as will be shown in the case of Mark Hughes, discussed later in this chapter, the organization's conventional approach to evaluating his productivity encouraged him to seek new ways for evaluating his performance, thus, expanding his role to include research and advocacy for the profession. This situation also illustrates the diverse ways in

which individual psychologists respond to similar forces that contribute to their role definition. While some psychologists may feel helpless when faced with restrictive institutional regulations, others will seek innovative ways of responding to these limitations.

Organizational Features Perceived as Limitations to Professional Growth

Conflicting assumptions regarding assessment practices.

One of the most consistent patterns that emerged from this study had to do with the conflicting assumptions held by school psychologists and their respective organizations regarding the potentials and limitations of assessment practices. Phillips (1990) described this situation as a struggle on the part of school psychologists to pursue an “unrealistic quest for certainty” which is driven by pressures arising within the educational system:

As I see it, school psychology is caught up in two competing paradigms. The “mechanistic” paradigm views school psychology as exacting and predictable in its practice. Every problem has a cause; diagnostic testing will reveal the cause ... and only exact diagnosis will lead to effective intervention. In contrast, I believe that school psychology needs to be viewed more from a “probabilistic” paradigm. In this paradigm, a nonlinear model of causation is assumed, and cause, chance, and fortuitous circumstances are inextricably linked (p.19).

Furthermore, Dawson (1994), argued that:

When a student is referred to school psychologists because of learning or behavior problems, we are asked to look at only one side of the equation: factors within the child. If we choose to look at anything else - teacher characteristics or classroom environment - we are, in essence, rewriting the terms of an unwritten contract. And this can have potentially dire results.

The fact that legislation mandates that special education services be accessible only to children who fit certain diagnostic categories has been translated in many educational settings into a “mechanistic” approach to student assessment. This perspective favors a narrower explanation of student failure (e.g. a diagnostic classification) rather than a broader explanation (e.g. systemic explanations that take into consideration classroom dynamics, teacher student interactions and family processes). One of the emergent patterns in this study suggested that when the school psychologist assumed a more systemic approach to student failure, the school district’s demand for exact, categorical answers to these failures tended to be viewed as a “pressure.”

For example, Kevin Bradley described his approach to assessment in ways that suggested a probabilistic paradigm in which many variables that were involved in a student’s school performance were “not as quantifiable or empirically measurable.” Referring to the assessment of childhood autism, for instance, he observed that: “... someone might call a kid who might have some mild autism features autistic on the South end and someone else in another part of the city might not call that kid autistic.” He recognized that there were a lot of “complex issues” involved in diagnosing these disorders and that there were a lot of “differences of opinion even among professionals” because “professionals haven’t been able to define or come up with a good quantifiable objective set of criteria on which to make those decisions.” Meanwhile, Kevin referred to a

dilemma that involved facing the “pressure” to provide a categorical diagnosis in order to ensure accessibility to certain special educational services:

The inherent nature of the (special education) system ... is that a lot of pressure formally or informally (is) exerted on people in the gatekeeper’s position ... to put those kids (who do not succeed in school) in special education because no one else is gonna help them.

Other school psychologists I spoke with expressed a similar frustration with the limitations of a system that demanded exact answers to complex problems. Louise Thompson described the dilemma as “being locked into the special education diagnoses and you’ve got to, if you’re gonna provide services, pick one of those (diagnoses),” while Sara Murphy voiced her concern that “because (children) don’t meet eligibility it doesn’t mean their problems disappear, they’re still there.”

These dilemmas required that school psychologists use caution and creativity in exercising their decision-making authority. In Kevin’s case, for example, this process involved a clear understanding of the larger issues surrounding child assessment, namely, “understanding what it is we want to or can accomplish with that particular student and using a label is only a method to try and accomplish something and before I use a label I want to know what it is I’m trying to accomplish.” He also acknowledged that his obligation was to provide valid and reliable information that would help in the decision making process rather than to make a final decision on his own:

As a professional, I’m obligated to provide every detail on which my decision was founded and (the) other evaluator has the same obligation ... I just say what I think, and other people are able to do the same thing

and then we all kind of make a decision based on that. We kind of make the best decision we can.

In the case of Louise, dealing with this dilemma involved having a clear focus on whom she was trying to help and making a decision that best advocated for her client. However, according to Louise, conflict could arise when the school psychologist advocated for the child against the institution's recommendations:

There are times when we get called on the carpet for advocating trying to match the student with available programs when perhaps at that moment the school is saying we're going by diagnosis ... that could cause some real problems.

Of interest here was the fact that rather than expressing powerlessness in response to conflict (Dawson, 1994), these school psychologists felt empowered to make their voice heard within the larger institution. In doing so, they were acting in accordance with the professional standard set by the American Psychological Association's (1987) ethical principles for psychologists:

When conflicts of interest arise between clients and psychologists' employing institutions, psychologists clarify the nature and direction of their loyalties and responsibilities and keep all parties informed of their commitments.

These examples also suggest that the school psychologists' efforts to expand their professional roles should take into consideration the implicit assumptions held by their respective organizations regarding the possibilities and limitations afforded by their profession. Learning to recognize and clarify these implicit assumptions could be a valuable strategy to school psychologists working as change agents within the school system.

Organizational decisions that imply marginalization.

Organizations can influence the psychologist's professional identity through decisions and choices that imply the marginalization of the school psychologist's services. In this study, school psychologists made reference to three types of such decisions: those related to program reductions, time structure and space allocation.

Program reductions.

A recent decline in student enrollment has lead the Brookfield school board to resort to the independent contracting of school psychological services. According to the Historical Encyclopedia of School Psychology (Fagan & Warden, 1996), independent contracting involves a variety of arrangements including contracting between the school district and one or more individuals or agencies to conduct psychological services normally carried out by school-based psychologists. Private contractors are usually hired on a per case basis to provide assessments as required by special education regulations. The National Association of School Psychology (NASP) has provided professional standards for contractual services. In general, NASP advocates for full-time, school based services wherever feasible and for the use of contractual services that *supplement* rather than *supplant* existing employee services (Fagan & Warden, 1996). In many cases, however, private contracting tends to emphasize assessment services while de-emphasizing the consulting and other problem solving services

often provided by school based psychologists, such as involvement in special committees and student support teams.

According to Gumpert (1993), the work of those located on the edge is most visibly threatened as it is redefined by the organization "when the edge itself is moved to exclude them." This exclusion tends to be not only a personal issue, but also a public issue with explicit social and professional dimensions. In the case of the Brookfield School District, a publication authored by its staff has indicated a concern that the privatization of school psychological services could result in a "ripple effect" in neighboring districts. The practice also suggests an implicit emphasis on the psychologist's role as tester and gatekeeper and a dismissal of his or her role as consultant and problem solver.

For psychologists like Mark Hughes, who had been actively involved in expanding his practice beyond testing, outsourcing implied a dismissal of his potential within the institution. Mark described school psychologists as "the people who are most comprehensively trained problem solvers within the school system" and yet "the premium is put on what salaries and benefits cost rather than how much bang for the buck can you get out of the person." He further stressed that the school psychologist's potential to help the district "typically gets ignored and the bottom line is always what the salary adds up to and what we cost the district to employ rather than what we can offer."

Even in districts where outsourcing was not an issue, there was an awareness among its staff of this issue's potential threat to the profession. Louise

Thompson, for example, doubted if “we’re still (going to be) here as a profession in 10 years.” To Louise, the profession’s vulnerability to outsourcing translated into an urgent need for school psychologists to improve their visibility within the organization:

We need to make changes, because if we *don’t* and people *continue* to see us as testers only, they (the district) will find less expensive ways of testing ... there are other people out there who test cheaper ... I think we need to *model* for teachers more than we do, we need to get in there and say ... instead of handing somebody a list saying ‘try this with a student,’ we need to have time to get into that classroom to show the teacher what we’re talking about. We need to teamwork even more with social workers to help relieve their burden ... I don’t want to be seen as another administrator.

Louise’s awareness of forces that threatened the existence of her profession were among the tools that spurred role expansion and revision. For example, she translated her awareness into efforts to “customize assessment” to suit the needs of high school students, avoiding the reflexive use of standard test batteries which had little relevance to the unique needs of these students.

Time structure.

The assessment of children who are referred for special education services is a time consuming process that often occupies a large portion of the school psychologist’s time (Hutton, Dubes & Muir, 1992). This process is often associated with bureaucratic demands such as the completion of forms and attendance at meetings, which tend to dominate the psychologist’s day to day functions (Hyman & Kaplinski, 1994). Furthermore, many psychologists are often assigned to three or more school buildings and a great deal of their time is

spent commuting from one building to another. The school psychologists interviewed in this study indicated that their respective districts have informally encouraged their role as consultants. Nonetheless, these districts still mandated roles that mostly emphasized diagnostic testing and the determination of eligibility for special education placement. In other words, the organization appeared to be sending a double message to its psychologists.

The implicit and persistent emphasis on a traditional gatekeeping role was sometimes conveyed explicitly, as when one school psychologist was referred to by her administrators as a “tester.” In other cases, the school psychologist’s perception of the mandated role was inferred from the way the psychologist’s time was allocated by the district. For instance, Lauri Anderson mentioned that her role as a consultant was “encouraged but not encouraged” by the district, “because it’s what the district wants more is somebody to do more consultation ... with at risk kids to keep them out of special education, but at the same time your (special education caseload) assignment hasn’t changed to accommodate that, so ... you get stuck still in just trying to get the evaluations done because that’s still how your whole assignment is set up.”

Another implicit way of controlling the psychologist’s time structure was evident in the way the district evaluated the psychologist’s job performance. Mark Hughes, for example, referred to the fact that “the things that count are the mandated things ... people that keep track of what we’re accomplishing, they only look at the mandated assessments,” and that although administrators “have

more or less legitimized our role as prereferral consultants ... they haven't really made an accommodation for that additional time we spend dealing with those consultations and with teacher assistance meetings and made an adjustment in the expectation for formal assessment."

Given this background, it was inevitable that the psychologists' perception of their ability to expand their professional roles was inextricably tied to issues of time allocation. The responses of the psychologists interviewed in this study indicated that the availability of time was viewed as an important mediator of their role construction within their respective institutions. The allocation of a psychologist's time was also an important mediator of the gap between the psychologist's actual and desired role. Many of the psychologists I spoke to indicated a preference for the role of a consultant to that of a tester. However, when the majority of the psychologist's time was spent in the formal testing of children and other administrative tasks, performing additional consultation services with teachers and parents became difficult to accomplish. Furthermore, an important component of meaningful and effective consultation is captured in the degree of rapport and trust established between the consultant and consultee.

As some psychologists have indicated, consulting with teachers and parents required a great deal of time spent in establishing a trusting relationship and identifying the problem. For example, Lauri Anderson explained that in order to establish a meaningful consultation relationship, the psychologist must

not only understand the system but other staff members also have to view her as part of that system. In order to establish that perception school psychologists *“really* have to be there (in the school) and not just be busy running around doing things. You need to sit in the lunch room ... you need to be available to catch in the hallway and say ‘what do you think about this?’ so you really look like you’re part of the system.” According to Sara Murphy, while “you need an hour just to identify the problem, ... the truth is that you have 15 minutes to sit down and do that.” Thus, when asked about the resources they needed in order to expand their roles, it was not surprising that the number one resource was, in Louise’s words, “a four-lettered word called time.”

Not only was time allocation an issue on a day to day basis, it was also an issue with regards to the way it was allocated in the long run. Lauri Anderson referred to the situation where school psychologists were periodically assigned to different school buildings. According to Lauri, these frequent change in assigned buildings undermined the psychologist’s efforts to establish a trusting relationship with school based staff. According to Lauri, “when you change districts it takes a while before you feel like when you walk in the room the teachers expect you to be there and they come up to you and they say hello and they’re happy to see you.” This was particularly significant given the fact that many school psychologists felt that they were outsiders compared to other school-based staff, such as teachers.

Space Allocation.

The way space was allocated within the school was also a subtle but important mediator of the way the school psychologists perceived their professional identities. Many psychologists I spoke with voiced their frustration regarding lack of a regular and appropriate work space to test children or to meet with their clients. Psychologists reported situations where they met with their clients in cluttered "storage rooms," "furnace rooms," "in basements" or in a "janitor's closet." Sometimes the psychologist reported not having access to a telephone or getting "tossed out of a room in favor of somebody else (who is in the building more often.)" Having a regular and adequate work space was not only a matter of convenience but also an issue of professional identity. The provision of work space was a sign of professional status and the expectations, values, and regard of the school psychologist by the school. An assigned room allowed the psychologist to establish important networks with school staff. For example, when the psychologist had an office space that was available on a regular basis, it became more convenient for teachers and parents to seek her out as a resource and, in the case of Louise Thompson, to "ask questions ... not just questions any longer about reading tests ... they're actually asking questions about programs ... (like) do you have any suggestions for how we can work with Johnny to improve his spelling?"

Organizational Features Perceived as Supportive to Professional Growth

While some organizational decisions were described by the psychologists as incompatible with their service delivery model, other organizational features were viewed as resources that helped them provide meaningful and valuable services to their clients. Most importantly, supportive administrators were perceived as an important resource for most school psychologists. While some administrators supported the role of the school psychologist directly (e.g. by providing feedback or advocating for school-based psychological services,) others were indirectly involved in promoting the school psychologist's role in the schools (e.g. by organizing stress management workshops for the school staff, including school psychologists.)

Four of the psychologists portrayed in this study described various ways whereby people in a leadership position have supported their role. Kevin Bradley, for instance, mentioned that it was "the building principal that makes the difference for me and my job." In Kevin's opinion, leadership characteristics that made a positive difference in his work involved the principal's concern for the needs of students rather than for administrative accountability: "it's not about politics as much as it is everybody doing their job and doing what's right for a particular situation." Likewise, Martha Smith described a supportive school principal as someone "who has just a real zest for her job, believes the children can succeed and believes in supporting her staff to help them help the children get to the best they can be." As an example of staff support, Martha

cited an incident where, "because (the principal) realizes the end of the school year is so difficult, she is a person who practices yoga, so she brought in a yoga teacher and six staff people would just meet once a week ... when times are very stressful at the end of the year it was just a nice way to support the staff." As for Louise Thompson, administrators have helped her broaden her understanding of the system by treating her "more as a peer" and through their willingness to involve her in "discussing the politics of the school district than they perhaps might with their own teachers." Sara Murphy, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of the administrator as a source of feedback, for example, by "showing you letters where parents have mentioned your name or someone else's name and giving you the support you need."

Administrative decisions have also indirectly supported the school psychologists in the Southvalley school district. The district has allowed its school psychologists to earn continuing education credits necessary for maintaining their credentials as a result of meeting as a group and organizing various professional development activities. These activities involved training sessions presented and attended by the district's psychologists. The focus on acquiring a range of skills that included learning how to use a laptop computer and updating assessment and intervention skills with children exhibiting attention deficit disorders. More importantly, however, these sessions were an opportunity for school psychologists to express their personal and professional

support to one another. According to Sara Murphy, those meetings were “a time to vent on things that are going on.”

The Socio-historical Dimension of Role Definition

Demographic Changes

The roles and functions of the school psychologist are interwoven with the transitions and developments that occur within the community and society. Of particular importance are changes in the American families and their impact on the challenges faced by children in today's society. Fagan and Wise (1994) described the family of the 1980's as characteristically single-parent as the result of divorce, which forced mothers into the workplace for economic survival. Furthermore, the rising costs of living have created hardships for many single and two-parent families. Political and international events have also affected the American society by increasing the ethnic diversity of its population. The attendant impact of these and other circumstances was quickly felt in the schools. For instance, by the 1980's, the intense focus on special education was replaced by a concern for “at risk children.” This category included children of divorce, “latchkey” kids, substance abusers and their children, suicide prone children, pregnant teens, potential “dropouts,” and other students who required academic and behavioral assistance but not traditional special education (Fagan and Wise, 1984).

As professionals who are concerned with the well being of children and their families, school psychologists have been affected by these social changes.

On the one hand, psychologists are currently being called upon to deal with increasingly complex problems in the form of "at-risk" children. Since many at-risk children did not necessarily qualify for traditional special education services, this posed a challenge to the traditional role of the school psychologist as diagnostician. In some cases, this challenge translated into a sense of frustration with the system and helplessness. Responses such as, "the kids are more stressed so the needs of the families are greater and we can't do much about it," and "because the children don't meet the eligibility it doesn't mean their problems disappear," are examples of this reaction. On the other hand, the need to respond to these challenges has spurred school psychologists to seek new ways of serving children and families. Louise Thompson, for example, described how in the past 10 years she had been "doing a lot more work with families that need help with organization," and "as cases became more difficult and involved ... you find yourself working with schools, other agencies, families and your own school people." By expanding her role to respond to the needs of the children and families she served, Louise felt like a "real resource."

Decreasing Financial Resources for Public Schools

Within recent years, the educational scene has witnessed an increase in the number of private schools and independent public schools, such as charter and magnet schools. The increasing diversity of schooling services and its resulting competition with the public school system has sometimes posed an indirect threat to the school psychologist's job security. This was brought up as an issue

by the Brookfield school psychologists. Kevin Bradley, for instance, referred to the fact that his school district had been forced to cut its expenses due to the loss of its student population to charter and other independent schools. One of the implications of a reduced school budget for school psychology was described by Mark Hughes as a pressure to "do more with less." Kevin Bradley further explained that "... the district says that you're a gatekeeper and we're gonna have you doing a huge amount of evaluations because we can't afford to pay enough of you to do all this." In these cases, therefore, competition between public and other independent and private schools has indirectly contributed to limiting the psychologist's opportunity to expand his or her role because of an increasing caseload.

Loss of student population and a limited budget have also resulted in the reductions of support staff, including school psychologists. The attendant threat to the psychologist's job security has lead school psychologists like Mark Hughes to construct a professional role that emphasized campaigning for the survival of his profession. Therefore, he became actively involved in "looking for ways to making ourselves indispensable to the school and that comes out of being an endangered species."

Two Approaches to Redefining Professional Role and Identity Within The System's Boundaries

Margret Dawson (1994) argued that the biggest threat to school psychology was the fact that all too often "*we feel powerless to change what is wrong with schools.*" I have chosen the following cases to illustrate an alternative response to feeling powerless and passive in a system where many decisions and features were perceived as limitations to role expansion. These examples show how two psychologists have chosen to actively expand their role definition by working for incremental changes in their unique ways within their own small niches.

Louise Thompson

Over her years of work with the Southvalley school district, Louise had managed to expand her work beyond that mandated by the district. The expansion coincided with an increasing complexity in the types of cases referred to her:

A few years ago I would have told you that the number one diagnosis I was working with was a learning disability. Now, I'm seeing very few cases where that's real clearly what is happening. Most of the children and young adults that I work with have overlapping concerns. They all have academic problems, otherwise they typically wouldn't be referred, but then we get into the case and you're looking at: is there an emotional impairment, is there learning disability, of course everybody ... huh ... I say this sarcastically... has attention deficit disorder (laughed), and we're being asked to look at many more handicapping conditions than I believe I was asked to look at 10 years ago.

The increasing complexity of the types of cases referred to Louise emphasized the need to change the focus of her practice:

Ten years ago, frankly, we were still arguing about whether to use a regression model to determine whether there was a severe discrepancy. Now that is the least of my concerns ... my concerns are more ... why isn't this child doing well at school? and I'm not talking just academically. I also feel that within the last ten years there have been ... I seem to be doing a lot more work with families that need help with organization ... there are so many resources out there, so many services, people don't know where to turn and the school seems to be one place where they can go and we seem to be able to move people in different directions or different agencies for help. I feel like a real resource.

Gradually, Louise initiated and became involved in a number of special committees the goal of which was to improve different aspects of the special education system. The ideas developed within those special committees were eventually discussed with supervisors and piloted in schools to assess their viability. An example of one such project was a program aimed at revising the way re-evaluations of high school students were conducted:

Two years ago we said, we have got to look at how we re-evaluate students at the high school. It seems silly to test seniors, it seems silly to test second semester juniors, and we ask ourselves, if we could evaluate high schoolers the best way possible, what would it look like? and I asked students, and they all said, they wanted more vocational, they don't like to be tested in reading and math, they tell me, 'I already know I can't add, and every time I see you you're telling me the same thing,' ok? (laughed) so, we looked at what is it that we really need to do to address special education and if the student is eligible in one area, for example math, *why are we* testing reading? ok? *why are we* testing writing when they've never been eligible? Let's customize each evaluation for that student, let's add a vocational part to it, let's add the learning styles part to it, and let's decide when in a student's high school career should this all take place ... and in our small committee we said, 'the earlier the better,' because we were running into a problem of students becoming potentially decertified by the time they're juniors and seniors and you've invested all the time and money into advanced vocational programs for them etc. etc. only to have them be possibly decertified. And if the decision is made to decertify that student, let's do it early so that they don't get dumped on as a junior and senior. So we decided to pilot a program that assessed these skills as freshmen and then we pulled it all together ... and then we would get a

very comprehensive look at how that student is functioning, match the system up, we've gotten some real positive feedback.

An important decision that helped Louise expand her role involved her willingness to collaborate with other professionals. This collaboration allowed her to deal with the time constraints imposed by her increasing responsibilities:

As cases became more difficult and involved, and you find yourself working with schools, other agencies, families & your own school people ... *time management* becomes a real *issue*, you can't afford to duplicate the efforts that someone else may have already put in, and I think we need to know when we can use the information from other people ... There was a time that perhaps I wouldn't accept a written language sample from somebody that wasn't a school psychologist, that's ... silly (laughed), that's silly, and there wasn't a time perhaps when I would have looked seriously at homework for students versus what you might find in a testing situation and I think we had to re-evaluate how we do business.

Self-reflection was an important element that enabled Louise to redefine her role in broader terms and allowed her to incorporate other disciplines into her own role definition:

As I got working here longer and longer and we reverted to the *team* evaluation process, I think the word evaluation becomes broader and permits us to tap into other people who can make a contribution to the knowledge we *have* about a student, okay? And sometimes, that teacher's knowledge or that social worker's knowledge may have more of an impact upon what we recommend than a reading test. So I started becoming a little more broader based and questioning why I was doing what I was doing in testing, because there are cases where reading and math, or writing are the least of our concerns. And it was the question of 'why *do it?*' and our team members were very supportive. If I have confidence in my language people, why do I need to test it?"

The efforts that Louise had invested into role expansion were personally fulfilling and rewarding. To her, they were also necessary for the future of the profession in general. Louise believed that expanding her role and educating

others about the broad range of services that school psychologists provided were critical for the survival of the profession. Despite her efforts to expand her role, Louise felt that there were still many other changes that needed to be made in school psychologists' practice in order to improve their visibility within the system:

I think we can (change our role) if we're willing as a profession to get in there and I think we need to *model* for teachers more than we do, we need to get in there and say ... instead of handing somebody a list saying 'try this with a student,' we need to have time to get into that classroom to show the teacher what we're talking about. We need to team work even more with social workers to help relieve their burden. There's no reason why a school psychologist and a social worker cannot team work counseling sessions, ok? ... but I know that that occurs in other places, however. But I think most of all, I don't want to be seen as another administrator, we need to get in there and *show* teachers what we're talking about.

Mark Hughes

Mark believed that role expansion was a matter of "finding and meeting the need where you're at." Mark first attempted to expand his role by providing additional services while maintaining his original role as a diagnostician. The process required many sacrifices:

(I managed to expand my role by) functioning within the parameters of the role as it's been defined by the district and then sacrificing personal time ... I mean there's no getting around the fact that you have to give of yourself ... the school district is not gonna pay you overtime to do those little extra add-on's ... so if you're interested in doing more things than just evaluations, many times you end up taking work home with you or staying after the hours which is not really as far as I'm concerned a problem, I see teachers doing that all the time, teachers putting in 10 hour days, 11 hour days, it's incredible really. If the general public saw how dedicated these folks were, I think they'd have a different attitude, but that's a fact of life, if you want to do more than one person's job ... you want to spend extra time.

Four years ago, Mark was part of a prereferral intervention program that emphasized helping children succeed in their regular classrooms rather than relying solely on solutions involving placement in special education classes. As in Louise's case, this expansion involved a great deal of self-reflection and a willingness to collaborate with others:

Before this model was implemented our special education support model was reactive I would say, so ... the teachers would come and suspect a handicap and we would just assess, you know like test-and-place kind of a model, rather than what can we do to help support intervention, maybe correct the problem without needing to refer to special education ... that's a whole different way of thinking about things, the way we do things ... and we've learned well how to collaborate.

The initiation of this model, however, created some difficulties. As a result of this program, Mark began to deal with more cases within the general

education system while his caseload of 70 to 80 special education referrals remained unchanged. Thus, while a substantial portion of his time was still spent on referrals for special education placement, he was called upon to handle an increasing number of general education consultations. Since his primary responsibility to the district still involved dealing with special education referrals, Mark found that his ability to address the consultation cases was restricted by his limited time.

Mark's involvement in the prereferral program presented yet another predicament. Successful preventive consultation could eventually lead to a decrease in the number of children referred for special education testing. If the psychologist's achievements continued to be judged based on the number of formal assessments he completed, the full range of his services could be curtailed:

If you're doing a good job with prereferral, after some period of time, hopefully a year or two, people are enabled and become their own problem solvers and their own resources at the building level, so you hope that your referral rate will drop and that has been the case I would say... .. That is an issue and we've been fighting sort of an uphill battle with the administration that they need to be documenting the time and the effort that we put into consultation because what we're fearful of is that as the number of evaluations may be curtailed, they may see less of a need for maintaining the current ratio of psychologist to general education students.

If decisions were made to increase the student to psychologist ratio, school psychologists would find it even more difficult to engage in preventive consultation activities:

If they ostensibly increase general education to psychologist ratio it makes it more difficult to get things done and it sort of narrows your role because you have so many hours in a day.

Mark actively addressed these obstacles at two levels. At the first and more specific level, he addressed the issue of accountability by seeking more meaningful ways to document the school psychologist's services:

We're currently in our district exploring new ways to more effectively evaluate our school psychology service delivery model and it's not the administration that's spearheading this effort, it's the school psychologists because we're just a cog in the wheel ... (laughed) ... you know, we're a gear in this big machine here and we're a small minority at that.

Mark also used professional associations as a resource for acquiring innovative evaluation tools:

I've just acquired from NASP a packet that deals with evaluating school psychological services in the school district. They publish a manual and several questionnaires for that purpose that will help you set up a research study to actually measure the quality and effectiveness of your school psych services, so we're taking a look at that.

At the next level, Mark recognized the importance of educating others about the services that school psychologists could offer:

We're just becoming aware of some tools that are available ... that will help us survey our consumers. We're looking at ways to enlighten the people holding the purse strings and making policy decisions about what we can offer to the school district. We're looking for ways to make ourselves indispensable to the school and that comes out of being an endangered species somewhat, you know, people are becoming more motivated to do those sorts of things ... I've used the professional advocacy resources from NASP to help us design public relations materials and campaign to educate our board, our administration ... I get a lot of information about how to do PR, how to support school psychology at the grassroots level.

According to Mark, the school psychologist's ability to initiate action and to communicate with those in a position of power were crucial to successful role expansion:

Some of it is a matter of your interpersonal style too, if you're comfortable dealing with a wide range of people, you know, parents ... people that are stakeholders, more or less, and people that are in power positions and policy making positions, and you can make yourself known to them and sort of get their ear, that's ... I think that's just personal initiative, really ... you can learn how to be a better communicator, and what are the right and wrong things to say but it still boils down to you being willing to do that on your own.

Thus, it was up to school psychologists to take matters in their own hands in order to expand their service delivery model:

I really think that school psychology programs are built from the ground up or from the practitioner up. If you've got a group of practitioners that are interested in innovating and making a school be the best it can be, and that *probably* can happen, if you have people that are complacent and you know, sort of rusting out (laughed), then your service delivery model reflects that and the way you're viewed by your public or consumers reflects that.

Despite the difficulties involved in role expansion, Mark felt that the outcomes could be very rewarding:

I would say generally ... the buildings have appreciated the fact that we're out here all the time ... on site, working with the students rather than sort of hopping in and out just to evaluate ... we're a lot more accessible as service providers than we've ever been, and that's been a good thing. It's increased our visibility with general education staff, with administration, with parents, you know, we're just more there ... we're there more.

Conclusion

The portraits reported in this study represent diverse and unique ways in which school psychologists interpret their professional roles and identities. They also illustrate some of the complex processes involved in becoming who they are within their profession. More importantly, this study explores the process of role definition as a personal construction that is deeply connected to the individual's interpretation of his or her biography. From this orientation, the school psychologist is not a dispassionate, value-neutral player of the professional role, but an active participant in the very process of role creation.

While it may not be surprising that the practitioner's interpretation of biographical and social elements are essential to the process of role definition, it is of interest that the literature on school psychology has given little attention to this and other interpretive and social-relational aspects of role definition. Phillips (1990) has argued that the neglect of social surroundings and larger societal contexts was not only characteristic of the literature on schools, but of American psychology in general. Further, Henning-Stout (1994), has argued that within the scholarship of psychology and education there was little emphasis on "connected ways of knowing," that is, making sense of experience in the context of relationships with others. In the meantime, there is a disproportionate emphasis in scholarly literature on less relational and less interpretive orientations to school psychology. Generally speaking, present literature focuses on researchers and practitioners as observers rather than participants in social

phenomena. The costs of disregarding constructivist ways of knowing may be seen in the forces that push service providers towards less relational orientations. For instance, Henning-Stout (1994) referred to how some professionals want to pinpoint the source of psychopathology and not be bogged down in the nuance of social and cultural context:

Educators embrace medical explanations based in human systems (in relationships) as subjective and imprecise. We are easily attracted to judging success in terms of dollars spent or saved, scores on standardized tests, or numbers of bodies passing through our doors regardless of service outcome (p.192).

Interestingly, some of the forces described by Henning-Stout (1994) were apparent in the conflicts described by the six psychologists portrayed in this study. These conflicts included administrative decisions that evaluated the psychologist's productivity by focusing on the numbers of assessments completed and others that placed more value on "what (psychologists) cost the district to employ rather than what can (they) offer" (Mark Hughes, interview 1997). Such conflicts were viewed by service providers as major obstacles to their attainment of an expanded and more meaningful service delivery model.

To some readers, the cases portrayed in this study may represent a discouraging picture of the forces that limit the school psychologist's professional growth and role expansion. In my opinion, these case studies are encouraging examples of how some professionals have been able to address the conflicts and pressures inherent in their work setting in creative and constructive ways. These cases also reveal that despite the presumably narrow definition of

the profession, there is room for the creative and active involvement of the practitioner in constructing and shaping his or her professional role and identity. As these cases illustrate, the components and materials psychologists use to create their professional roles and identities are complex and varied. Central to the process of role construction is the personal voice of the professional. In reflecting upon their own lives, the decisions and policies made by the organization, and the historical and social conditions that surround their practice, school psychologists play an active role in defining the parameters of their professional practice. One wonders what Louise Thompson's professional profile would have looked like had she not integrated perceptions of her early struggles and family circumstances into her professional identity. One also wonders what Kevin Bradley's role construction would have been like had he not drawn upon his prior foundation in social work and multisystemic theories.

In conclusion, while the results of this study present a disturbing picture of the forces that work against the professional growth of school psychologists working in public schools, they also present encouraging examples of creativity and individual initiative despite the conflicts and pressures that they experience within their work setting. Each of the psychologists interviewed in this study has managed to expand his or her role beyond the limits prescribed by the institution.

Who are school psychologists? The answer to this question defies precise definitions and cannot be found in abstract lists of functions. Rather it is to be

found in the stories of many school psychologists “weaving ever changing patterns, yet always meaningful patterns” of their own professional roles and identities (Sacks, 1985).

Implications for Professional Training and Research

The Need to Explore the Discipline from Alternative Epistemological Lenses

The results of this study draw attention to the importance of introducing school psychology students to a broader range of epistemologies, or ways of knowing, upon which they could draw as they try to understand and interpret their professional roles and functions. According to Saigh and Oakland (1989), academic and professional coursework in school psychology is generally intended to enhance the student’s understanding of the theory, science and technology of psychology. Furthermore, the majority of coursework in school psychology is devoted to assessment activities, including introductory courses on tests and measurement and on using intelligence and personality tests, while advanced coursework may focus on behavioral, family and neuropsychological assessment, as well as consultation and intervention. Meanwhile, students are rarely invited to explore and reflect upon questions such as: How do we know what we know? How is meaning constructed? How does culture shape and reflect our realities? Honest and non-defensive examination of these and similar questions are essential for helping service providers establish a firm understanding of their discipline and explore personal biases that may influence

understanding of their discipline and explore personal biases that may influence their own as well as other people's interpretation of their social world.

According to Henning-Stout (1994) these questions bear direct relevance to our professional activities as providers of social services because "the way we make sense of the world determines the way we act within it" (P.194). For example, approaching school psychological assessment from a social constructivist orientation shifts the locus of childhood disorder from the "interior region of the mind to the processes and structure of human interaction" (Gergen, 1985, p.271).

The Importance of Self-Reflection to the Professional School Psychologist

Not only is it important to expose future school psychologists to the epistemological foundations of their discipline, it is also necessary to provide professionals with the tools necessary for self-reflection. These tools may involve coursework that encourages the use of reflective writing and guided discussion as means of exploring personal, social and political elements that mediate professional development (e.g., Henning-Stout, 1994). These elements may include, among other things, biographical events, personal experiences involving gender and minority issues, and reflections on the meaning of power and authority and how they are mediated and represented in organizations, by the media and in the larger society.

Exploring personal ways of knowing can help practitioners outgrow a reflexive use of assessment tools and a dependence on the technical aspects of their profession. As the responses of some psychologists in this study have

revealed, reaching a more mature understanding of service delivery often involved a process of reflection where questions such as, why am I doing what I am doing? and why am I administering these test?, were explored. These questions have lead to important changes in the way these psychologists practiced their roles on a day to day basis. In the cases of Louise, Lauri and Martha, for example, making the connection between personal experiences and professional relationships has fostered a deeper understanding of important issues, such as child abuse in the case of Louise, the demands of parenthood and how it could limit parents' involvement in their children's learning in the case of Lauri, and the way health issues could interfere with a child's school performance in the case of Martha. According to Phillips (1990), this process of releasing oneself from the details of practice and focusing instead on integrating practice into one's thinking is one step towards "exemplary professional practice" where:

The theory becomes a "natural" response to the practice situation and becomes integrated into the thinking of the practitioner. Thus, the practitioner can apply the theory from a position of a truly integrated knowledge base; that is, from a point of wisdom (p.73).

The Need For Encouraging Understanding and Collaboration Among Disciplines

In addition to exposing future professionals to a broader range of epistemologies and more connected ways of knowing, this study also points to the importance of fostering collaboration across disciplines during an early stage

in the professional's career. In discussing the future of school psychology, Phillips (1990) argued for a more independent role for school psychologists:

Although there are some other practitioners trained in child-oriented areas of psychology, it is time for school psychologists to make greater claims on other settings where children are involved and to see them as domains for their practice (p.248).

While this recommendation could help broaden the base of future school psychological practice, it ignores the fact that the majority of school psychologists work in settings that heavily rely on collaboration between disciplines that may somewhat overlap in their functions, such as psychology and social work. Also, as indicated by some of the participants in this study, school psychologists who work in public schools often have to deal with turf issues and are not totally free to claim all the roles they are capable of doing. In fact, as in the case of Louise, positive role expansion was facilitated as she learned to collaborate with other disciplines and to draw upon the services of other professionals, even if these services were within her domain of practice. This view does not mean that school psychologists should passively define their roles according to the limits set by other disciplines. Rather, it suggests that school psychology should establish its role based on a collaborative rather than a competitive relationship with other disciplines and this needs to be explicitly addressed in preparation programs.

Collaboration among disciplines needs to be based on a careful understanding of the school as an organization as well as the possibilities and limitations of other disciplines with which the school psychologist's work is

intimately related. This interdisciplinary relationship should be emphasized throughout the professional training of future psychologists. It may include the careful examination of cases where school psychology has successfully collaborated with other disciplines in order to provide meaningful services within the public school setting. It may also include interviewing social workers, teachers and speech therapists who have successfully worked with school psychologists in order to understand their point of view on what the profession could provide to other disciplines. In short, the base of school psychology cannot be broadened in isolation from other disciplines. Rather, this profession needs to remain open and responsive not only to changes that occur in the educational scene, such as legislative amendments, but also to the needs of other disciplines and agencies that share similar goals as far as the welfare of children and families are concerned.

The Importance of Understanding the Organizational Structure of the School System

Many psychologists I spoke with emphasized that a central part of the school psychologist's work required an understanding of the politics of the school and the ability to negotiate conflicts and communicate with others. This process could be made easier for future professionals by promoting their understanding of the organizational structure and political hierarchy within the current educational system. Some of this understanding can be introduced during graduate training through coursework dealing with the organizational

structure of public schools. Understanding the political hierarchy of the school system can also be achieved by fostering a dialogue between practitioners and administrators at different levels of the organization.

Implications for Research

In conjunction with the above discussion concerning the importance of understanding the political hierarchy and organizational structure of schools, there is a need for research that explores in depth the relationship between the profession of school psychology and the political structure in which it is embedded. As one psychologist explained to me during an interview:

I know that people above (my supervisor's) level are very unlikely to know what it is I do or why I do it or whether it's important or not, I'm just a person who costs them a certain dollar figure a year and if the laws were different they wouldn't have to pay for me. They don't view me or people in my position as a resource which is really interesting and somewhat troubling to me.

This type of research would explore ways in which school psychology is conceptualized by stakeholders within various levels of the educational organization. Exploring these perceptions could help facilitate the communication and identify areas of misunderstanding that might exist between professional school psychologists and administrators within their respective organizations.

This study also suggests the importance of exploring role construction as part of the individual's life history. More specifically, the relationship between the psychologist's life span development and the process of role definition needs to be further examined. Within each phase of adult development, there are

salient developmental tasks or issues that the individual deals with. Daniel Levinson (1979), for example, argued that the adult life span follows a sequence of alternating periods where relatively stable, structure-building periods are usually followed by transitional, structure-changing periods. The major developmental tasks and choices of each period are different and there is a need for in depth inquiry regarding the role that adult development plays in the evolution of one's professional identity. For example, according to Levinson (1979):

The nature of a man's work changes appreciably in middle adulthood. Much less thought, and certainly much less public discussion, have been given to the meaning of work in these years. How should jobs and careers evolve during middle adulthood? What new kinds of work are desirable from the viewpoint of the individual and of society? What can be done to provide for greater learning and rejuvenation within the same occupation, for shifting to a "second career," or for early retirement and change to new forms of work in middle adulthood? (p. 339).

Although much research has been done to examine some developmental aspects of school psychology (see Wilczenski, 1997 and Reschly and Wilson, 1995), the majority of this research has focused on points of entry into or exit from the career, or on general trends in role satisfaction and burning-out among school psychologists. The in-depth examination of the relationship between the transitions of adult development and the evolution of professional identity among school psychologists is yet to be explored in future research.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A

INITIAL INVITATION LETTER

Dear school psychologist

I am writing to invite you to participate in a study for my dissertation entitled: THE ENCHANTED LOOM: SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONSTRUCT THEIR PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND IDENTITIES. In this study, I explore how we, school psychologists, interpret and define our professional roles and identities and how these definitions are part of our unique biographies. The roles of school psychologists are commonly described in terms of the percentage of time spent doing various activities. I do not believe that this approach adequately captures the complexity and contributions of the role. With your help, in-depth research like this study can help to educate and inform policy makers, administrators, educators and parents about our rich and diverse contributions. Furthermore, by sharing our stories we validate our own experiences and allow other school psychologists to learn from our choices and insights.

For the purpose of this study, I anticipate meeting with each participant twice for in-depth interviews. Each interview should last from sixty to ninety minutes. During the interviews, we will discuss various topics: for example, I

may ask you to describe the setting where you work and the nature of your responsibilities as a school psychologist. I will also ask for some background information about events or people that may have led to your choice of school psychology as a career. Because most of the interview questions are intended to explore your point of view, there will be no right or wrong answers, nor will your responses be evaluated against other participants' responses.

I would be happy to meet with you during the Summer months at a time and place that is convenient for you. If you prefer to meet at Michigan State University, I can provide you with a parking permit to make your visit easier.

If you would like to participate in this study, please complete the attached Informed Consent Form and return it in the enclosed self addressed, stamped envelope. If you do not wish to participate you need not complete the Informed Consent Form, just return it in the enclosed envelope. This will help me keep track of my records.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are under no obligation to participate. You may also withdraw at any time during the study without penalty. The data collected during this study will be treated with strict confidentiality; actual names will not be used in any written reports or presentations concerning this study. I will do all I can to ensure the anonymity of your responses. However, given the small number of participants, there is still a risk that others may be able to identify you. Due to this limitation, you will have the option to classify some of your responses as "off the record" or to turn

the tape recorder off while sharing certain information. Such responses will not be quoted in any written report.

The final report will be published as a dissertation study which will be accessible through the Michigan State University College of Education. Also, portions of this dissertation may be published in professional journals.

A request to conduct this study has been approved by your school district. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please feel free to contact me at (517) 333 9456. The Chairperson of my dissertation committee is Dr. Evelyn Oka and she can be reached at (517) 355 6683.

Sincerely,

Hanaa Gomaa, Ed.S.
School Psychology Program
Michigan State University

APPENDIX B

APPENDIX B

FOLLOW – UP INVITATION LETTER

Dear school psychologist

You may recall my earlier letter about a study that I am conducting for my dissertation entitled: THE ENCHANTED LOOM: SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS CONSTRUCT THEIR PROFESSIONAL ROLES AND IDENTITIES. I am writing to thank those of you who have graciously accepted my invitation to participate and also to renew my invitation to participate for those who have not as yet done so.

Since my last letter, there are two new conditions that would make it easier for you to participate. First, the time involved would be only two interviews rather than three. Based on the interviews I have conducted so far, two meetings were sufficient. Second, because this is the end of the school year, I can extend to you the choice of meeting with you during the summer at a time and place that is convenient for you. If you prefer to meet at the University campus, I can provide you with a parking permit to make your visit easier.

And now, let me briefly review the purpose of this study. I am exploring how we, school psychologists, interpret and define our professional roles and identities and how these definitions are part of our unique biographies. The roles of school psychologists are commonly described in terms of the percentage

of time spent doing various activities. I do not believe that this approach adequately captures the complexity and contributions of the role. With your help, in-depth research like this study can help to educate and inform policy makers, administrators, educators and parents about our rich and diverse contributions. Furthermore, by sharing our stories we validate our own experiences and allow other school psychologists to learn from our choices and insights.

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The final report will be published as a dissertation study, which will be accessible through the Michigan State University College of Education. Also, portions of this dissertation may be published in professional journals.

A request to conduct this study has been approved by your school district. If you have any questions or would like additional information, please feel free to contact me at (517) 333 9456. The Chairperson of my dissertation committee is Dr. Evelyn Oka and she can be reached at (517) 355 6683.

Sincerely,

Hanaa Gomaa, Ed.S.
School Psychology Program
Michigan State University

APPENDIX C

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INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Part One: Focus on the Career

Topic	Questions
<u>Focus On Current Work Setting:</u> General Work Setting Resources The work setting in a historical context	•How long have you worked in this district? •How many school buildings are you responsible for? •Do you have a favorite school building? Why do you prefer that building to other buildings? •About how many cases do you do each year? •Over the years, have you developed special strategies to help you organize your work and manage your time? •Describe to me a typical work day from the time you arrive to school until you leave work. •Among the people you work with, who do you feel are the most important sources of support to you as a school psychologist? •What kind of facilities, resources make your work easy in this district? •What makes it difficult in this setting to do your work as a school psychologist? • What changes have you observed in this school district since you've started working here? • In what way have these changes / transitions influenced your role as a school psychologist?

Topic	Questions
Role Clarification	•How do you define your role to yourself? •School psychologists are commonly defined as professional psychological practitioners whose general purpose is to bring a psychological perspective to bear on the problems of educators and the clients educators serve (Fagan & Wise, 1994). How accurately does this definition describe you in the psychologist's role? •What do you value the most in your work? What do you find to be least satisfactory and uncomfortable? What do you worry about in your work? •In your years of practice as a school psychologist, what were occasions when you felt that you were providing meaningful and valuable services to your client(s)? Tell me about one or more of these occasions. •What were some occasions when you wished that your work involved different responsibilities than the ones you are expected to do •Ideally, from your own point of view, what should be the role of a school psychologist in public schools? • In your opinion, what do school psychologists need in order to do a better job serving children, families and school systems?

Part Two: Placing the Career in Context

Topic	Questions
Biographical History	•Describe the family where you grew up •What was it like growing up in your family? •Who made a strong impression on you as you were growing up? •In what ways have these people influenced you?
Education	•What do you remember the most about your school years: elementary, middle and secondary? •What aspects of your college experience have had the most lasting impact upon you? What aspects had the least impact?
Professional Trajectory	•What were your earliest career plans as far back as you can remember? •When was the first time you learned about the field of school psychology? •What did you think about it then? •Who influenced your decision to become a school psychologist? •Who / what helped you pursue your plans?
Early Professional Life	•Do you remember your first days as a school psychologist? What were they like? •What were some of the concerns or difficulties you encountered early on in your career as a school psychologist?

Professional Development:	• If you think back into your life, what events or experiences have had a strong impact on the way you think about or practice your career? • Are you aware over the years of having changed your style of practice? How so? • What have been the most important turning points in your career as a school psychologist? • Were there times when you asked yourself whether to stay in the profession or leave it? • At what time in your career did these doubts occur? Why did you stay? • If you had to do it all over again, would you go into this field? why or why not? • What advice would you give to beginning students of school psychology?
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