

SUPERVISION OF PARAPROFESSIONALS IN  
THE HUMAN SERVICE FIELD:

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

By:

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This research study examines the supervision of paraprofessionals in the human services using a qualitative methodology. It focuses on the views of the paraprofessionals, who were all women, with the central research question: What are paraprofessionals' views of supervision in the human service field? The literature on this topic is scarce and the goal of this research is to improve our understanding of the most effective supervisory practices for paraprofessionals and ultimately to improve practice in this area. The qualitative methodology was based on a phenomenological approach and used one on one interviews to capture the views and experiences of the participants.**

**The findings indicated that women paraprofessionals clearly value and benefit from supervision and respond best to approaches that are highly supportive, empowering and collaborative in nature, and use a variety of formats including one on one sessions, group meetings and peer support. It is important to ensure adequate job orientation and relevant training.**

**The supervisory relationship is key to the success of supervision and should include ongoing feedback and validation. Concerns regarding safety in the workplace as well as burnout need to be addressed to improve working conditions and job satisfaction for the paraprofessional. Issues related to oppression and culture are important in understanding the unique experience of the paraprofessional and need to be addressed by both supervisors and the agencies that employ them. Further research on this topic is recommended.**

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### *1. Rationale for the Research*

This qualitative research study focuses on the paraprofessional's experience with supervision in the human service field. Currently there is limited information and research regarding the supervision of paraprofessionals in the human services. In addition, there is no research that explores the experiences of the paraprofessional in supervision. Given the important work of paraprofessionals, I believe there is a need to explore and understand how to best support and enhance their work. Supervision has the potential to support and enhance the experience of the paraprofessional, which ultimately affects the paraprofessional's work with clients, families and communities. The focus on the paraprofessional's perspective is important, as it will provide valuable insight into supervision of this group. This research has the potential to contribute to our knowledge base, thus adding to the development of a meaningful framework for the supervision of paraprofessionals.

The central research question for this study is: *What are paraprofessional's views of supervision in the human service field?* The purpose for gathering this information is to contribute to our understanding of the most effective supervisory practices for paraprofessionals with the goal of improving supervisory practice. The argument I make is that improving supervisory practice with paraprofessionals will have a direct impact on front line practice with clients as well as the overall quality of service delivery.

## ***2. Background and Interest in this Research***

My interest in this research stems from my own experience as a social worker, both as a supervisee and as a supervisor. In my early years as a social worker and as a supervisee in child welfare, I first became aware of the significant impact of supervision on my practice with clients and on my own personal well being. When I received ‘good supervision’ from a supervisor who was available, supportive and offered helpful challenges and solutions to difficult casework, I felt energized, focused and ready to tackle the challenges that I faced in the workplace. On the other hand, when I was supervised by someone who was difficult to access, unsupportive, and with few ideas to assist with problematic casework, I felt isolated, burdened and unprepared to deal with the complex cases that I faced. This led me, early on in my career, to examine the importance of good supervision and the impact that it has on clinical practice in social work.

It is within this context that I embarked on my recent experience as a supervisor of paraprofessionals. My first experience was supervising paraprofessional treatment foster parents for two years in the 1990’s. This was a challenging position, trying to balance the need to be supportive of foster parents while at the same time holding them accountable to provide quality care to high needs children living in their home. More recently, I have supervised paraprofessional home visitors in a specific program within a health care setting. While in the program, I struggled to provide good supervision and ensure that the program delivered a quality service to women who were dealing with addiction issues and parenting. I witnessed the benefits of the paraprofessional model, in particular the

shared life experiences of the paraprofessional and the client as well as the bond that develops between them. This bond enabled the paraprofessional to have a significantly positive influence on the client's growth and development over time.

The concern that I have had with the delivery of this paraprofessional model with high risk women, however, is that the paraprofessional by definition may not be fully equipped to deal with the complex situations that they encounter with their clients in the community. I believe that the supervisor has a significant role to play in ensuring the quality of the service delivery and adherence to appropriate boundaries and ethics. The support offered by the supervisor can also have a significant impact on the health and well being of the paraprofessional as she struggles with complex high risk situations. The literature to date does not provide sufficient guidance in dealing with the complex issues that arise in the supervision of paraprofessionals. Within this study, I have explored the specific components of supervision, according to the paraprofessional, that could address these difficulties. This exploration could contribute to the creation of a meaningful supervision framework which will best support the paraprofessional working in the community, prevent burnout and staff turnover, and enhance the quality of service delivered to the client. In addition, the findings from this study could assist in the use of the paraprofessional model with other populations in the community.

### *3. A Brief Overview of the Thesis*

The first chapter of this study includes an extensive literature review of the key defining constructs regarding paraprofessionals, supervision and the supervision of paraprofessionals. I discuss the contribution this study makes for front line and administrative service staff within human services. The theoretical foundations of supervision are discussed in detail in Chapter 2. In particular, systems theory, supervisory relationships and oppression theory provide a strong foundation for the study. There is a scarcity of information available in the literature on the topic of supervision of paraprofessionals, however empirical findings do exist and are presented in this chapter.

The methodology and research questions are presented in Chapter 3. The qualitative research design uses a phenomenological approach, as this approach best captures the lived experiences of the paraprofessionals with supervision (Creswell 1998). The data collection procedures are presented in detail and include sampling strategies, sites and population, as well as the use of semi-structured interviews. Issues related to oppression including gender, class and culture are presented in the context of data collection from this population. Data analysis for this study is discussed. The analysis is also based on a phenomenological approach, proceeding through methods of reduction, analysis of themes, and a search for meaning (Creswell 1998).

Ethical considerations regarding the impact of the study on the participants are presented and discussed in Chapter 3. In particular issues related to confidentiality, informed consent, associated risks and benefits, and reciprocity were particularly important to

address in studying this population. The strengths and limitations of the research design and the study are also presented. Issues of reliability and validity are addressed. A number of strategies have been incorporated into this design to enhance its rigor and are discussed in detail. They include the use of triangulation, peer debriefing/support, and an audit trail. Finally, the gaps that exist in the literature are discussed and lead the reader to a greater understanding of the importance of this study in terms of building on our existing knowledge base on this topic.

The findings from the study are presented in Chapter 4 and highlight the experiences that paraprofessionals had with supervision, led by the open ended questions asked during the interview. My intention was to give paraprofessionals a voice and to learn from their experience with supervision. I was impressed with their responses, their insight and their ideas for how to improve practice in this area. I was also concerned with the degree of difficulty they experienced overall in their work in the community as well as some of the concerns they expressed about supervision. This further reinforced my belief that supervisors need to better understand and address these issues both within supervision and within their agencies to improve practice in this area.

The discussion in Chapter 5 examines the findings in relation to the literature and what we already know about supervision of the paraprofessional. I discuss theoretical frameworks that fit with the findings as well as new information and understanding about the needs of paraprofessionals that emerged from this research. I had expected to find a strong connection between systems theory and the supervision of paraprofessionals and

this did present itself and is discussed. I also explored the importance of the supervisory relationship on the paraprofessional and this does prove to be a significant framework. I was surprised however by the finding that oppression, in terms of culture, gender and class has a significant impact on the paraprofessional and needs to be fully understood in the context of supervision. This discovery allowed for a deeper understanding of the difficulties faced by paraprofessionals as well as the unique challenges this presents within the supervisory relationship.

In the conclusions and recommendations, I was able to make recommendations regarding the supervision of paraprofessionals based on the findings from the study as well as my own experience working with paraprofessionals. In the end I was able to better understand my experience as a supervisor of paraprofessionals and hope that the learning from this study will contribute to a stronger knowledge base in the area of supervision of paraprofessionals in social work.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

#### 1. *Definitions*

- **Paraprofessionals**

There is general agreement in the literature regarding the definition of 'paraprofessional' in the human service field. In one of the earliest references to the paraprofessional in the literature, Austin (1978) refers to a paraprofessional as "any individual, male or female, who lacks the traditional credentials- of either education or experience-for social work and social welfare jobs" (p.70). He went on to compare the paraprofessional with the professional and suggested that often there is very little difference in the roles of both in a social welfare agency, however, stated that paraprofessionals have lower salaries and status than professionals. Briscoe (1977) in her work on supervision of community workers states that it is the lack of professional affiliation and specific qualifications, which qualifies community workers as paraprofessionals. A more recent definition of paraprofessionals is offered by Hiatt, Sampson and Baird (1997) in their article entitled "Paraprofessional Home Visitation: Conceptual and Pragmatic Considerations" and is consistent with the early definitions offered by Austin and Briscoe. They define the paraprofessional as "an individual who has not received baccalaureate, postbaccalaureate, or professional training but who has practical experience in the community and familiarity with resources" (p.79). Generally the literature is consistent in referring to paraprofessionals as individuals who have no post secondary professional degrees, but who do offer personal knowledge and experience of the community or group to whom they are providing service. Paraprofessionals are paid employees of human service

organizations within a variety of fields. Even though there is occasional mention of paraprofessionals as unpaid labour or volunteers in the literature, this study focuses primarily on paraprofessionals in the paid work force.

In addition to the term paraprofessionals, other terms are used in the literature to describe this population of workers such as nonprofessional, preprofessional, subprofessional, indigenous worker, case aide, outreach worker, support worker, home visitor, mentor, advocate, psychiatric aide, community worker, and others. Siang - Yang Tan (1997) in his article on the role of the psychologist in paraprofessional helping, also includes pastors and other religious workers under the heading of paraprofessional, although this reference is to unpaid volunteers in the community.

Austin (1978) provides an early comprehensive history of the introduction of paraprofessionals into the human services. Paraprofessionals were introduced into the social work profession in the United States in the 1960's in response to a flood of social legislation supported by funds from the War on Poverty Community Action Program. The creation of new programs aimed at fighting poverty led to a need for workers to address problems in the community amidst a shortage of trained social workers. In addition, the relevance of professionals to accomplish this task was called into question, as the typically white middle class social workers were confronted with issues of credentialism and social class bias. The use of paraprofessionals also indirectly addressed poverty by providing employment for those persons who lived in areas that needed improvement in human services. Community members that were hired as

paraprofessionals may have had a high school diploma but often did not. They were typically 'people of color', who had direct experience with poverty as well as extensive knowledge of their community. The War on Poverty programs were associated with a belief that poor people with similar backgrounds to those of the recipients in terms of economics, ethnic origin or social circumstance, should be hired to serve the target population. The use of paraprofessionals can also be seen as part of a social movement having the potential to transform service delivery in bureaucratic organizations. Austin (1978) attributes this movement to what he called "newism" meaning that the idea gained support simply because it was new and not because of any strong research or compelling analysis that led to the preferred use of paraprofessionals.

The literature presents a number of factors that contributed to the emergence of the paraprofessional in the human services during the 1960' and 1970's. Clearly, the use of paraprofessionals helped to solve the staffing shortage. As previously stated, employment of community members living in poverty also contributed to the alleviation of poverty during the early movement. The work experience itself was seen as a therapeutic experience for paraprofessionals who had struggled with poverty. In addition, the use of paraprofessionals was seen as a way to increase the efficiency of services, as their shared experience with clients increased their ability to access and engage with individuals who were struggling in the community. Richan (1972) identified government attempts to cut costs in social programs as another motive for the use of paraprofessionals. Cost conscious government agencies sought to lower credentialing requirements as a way to save money.

Historically, paraprofessionals have made major contributions to the development of the human services. Their efforts to serve the target population were visible and seen as innovative. Their role was an extension of the client and the community and as such, the activities of the workers and their personal characteristics are inseparable. Their value was to act as a bridge between the agency and the client group. “Their ‘indigenoussness’ would give them a unique ability to cross class lines” (Austin,1978 p.88). Being embedded in the very community they served challenged organizational bureaucracy and encouraged flexibility in practice. The door to door approach of the paraprofessional surfaced many unmet client needs within the community and new and responsive programs developed in response to these unmet client needs. The paraprofessional was able to reduce the burden on the professional in servicing these needs. Their usefulness as helpers, however, challenged the profession of social work, as professionals were threatened by the fact that someone with less training could potentially do their job or even possibly do it better (Austin, 1978).

Interest in the use of paraprofessionals does seem to have grown in the last decade, as evidenced by the growing body of recent literature presenting paraprofessional models. A number of recent paraprofessional models have been presented in the areas of home visitation to low income mothers (Graham, Stabile, Powell, Pruett, Hakes, Butler, 1997; Hiatt, Sampson, and Baird, 1997; Wakou, 2003), home visitation and advocacy to substance using pregnant women (Grant, Ernst and Streissgruth, 1999), mental health and health services (Musser, Granski and Carillo, 1997; Lambert, 1999; Minore and Boone, 2002) as well as the use of paraprofessionals in education (Riggs, 2001).

Given the current age of 'fiscal responsibility' within government, particularly related to the ever increasing costs of social services and health care, it is likely that the cost saving elements of the paraprofessional model are appealing to government funding bodies. In addition, social problems and related costs in our society continue to rise in spite of the efforts of 'professionals' and programming in the field. As in the 1960's, when the War on Poverty led to the introduction of the paraprofessional as the 'solution' to poverty, perhaps the government of today is also looking to the paraprofessional for the cure to our present day social problems. The reality is that the paraprofessional has continued to be a major contributor within human services throughout this period. The role of the paraprofessional has changed, however, since the 1960's, in response to economic, cultural and systemic change in our society.

Hiatt et al. (1997) state that "the strength of paraprofessional visitors lies in their histories and their potential to share their success in such a way that their clients are inspired to grow, change and shape their own destinies" (p.91). Siang-Yang Tan (1997) adds to this in relation to health care in the U.S. "In today's era of managed health care, paraprofessional helpers will play a crucial role in the delivery of much-needed but ill-afforded mental health services, including rural mental health delivery" (p.368). For the most part, he discusses the use of volunteer paraprofessionals or unpaid workers as a support to psychological services in the community. He rounds up the findings in the literature and states that "the general conclusion is that paraprofessional helpers are generally as effective as professional therapists" (p.368). He sees the benefits of the paraprofessional as "providing support through fostering a service in the community,

relieving client isolation, and providing a safe place where clients can attempt new skills that will result in changing their behaviour for the better” (p.371).

- **Supervision in the Human Services**

Kadushin & Harkness (2002) present a history of supervision in the human services since its early origins in the Charity Organization Societies (COS) in the early nineteenth century. Along with industrialization, came many societal ills including poverty, isolation, and changes in the structure of work and the family. When a family requested help, a paid agent of the COS assessed the family’s need and a volunteer visitor was assigned to the family. The ‘home visitor’ was a person of ‘good character’ who visited families. The essence of their work with the poor was based on the home visitor’s character, not in their technique. The visitor’s work was overseen by the agent in what is considered to be the first evidence of supervision in the helping field. This early function of supervision was strictly administrative in nature and served as a natural form of administrative control. “The agent provided a dependable administrative point of contact for the visitor, gave continuity to the work, and acted as a channel of communication” (Kadushin & Harkness, p.3). As the demand for help in the community increased, the charitable societies also grew and the system of helping had to adapt. The complexity and demand of the work created high turnover in volunteers. It became necessary for the COS to recruit paid staff. The training and apprenticeship of new staff by those more experienced at the turn of the century was the beginning of the educational component in supervision. In addition, the first schools of social work were emerging in the early 1900’s along with the development of social work theory and professionalization. As the

technology increased, there became a need to transfer this knowledge to the front line staff. Supervision and training became the likely mechanism for this function.

Supervision occurs in all fields of human service work as part of the structure of most organizations or agencies. Most of the literature on supervision comes from social work, counseling, health care, community work and public administration. Within this literature review the focus will be on those fields that are directly responsible for providing service to women and families in the community, such as social work, community work, and health services. The unique nature of this work has a specific impact on staff and implications for supervision of these staff. The issue of supervision with high needs populations has been most widely studied in the field of social work and as such, the literature on supervision within this field is very rich. Supervision is widely covered in the field of counseling and psychology as well, however the focus of supervision in this professional context is more clinical in nature and less relevant to the study of supervision of paraprofessionals.

The field of social work is clearly situated within human services. The framework for supervision within social work can be applied more broadly within other organizations based on a number of common attributes. Most notably as discussed by Kadushin and Harkness (2002), service is focused on addressing the needs of human beings and is delivered within organizations that operate with ambiguous goals and outcomes. Public funds are used, and mandates for service exist in health care and public welfare - hence the need for accountability in supervision. A hierarchy is present because social services

operate largely within organizations that rely on bureaucratic structures. The distinctive nature and difficulty of the work makes a demand for support in supervision. Social services are typically delivered within an agency setting that is a complex organization. The complexity of the structure requires a chain of command or hierarchical structure to ensure efficiency and accountability. The supervisor is situated within this structure closest to the front line worker and ultimately the client. Kadushin & Harkness (2002) provide a comprehensive definition of supervision in social work, based on their formative work in the field:

A social work supervisor is an agency administrative-staff member to whom authority is delegated to direct, coordinate, enhance, and evaluate the on-the-job performance of the supervisees for whose work he is held accountable. In implementing this responsibility, the supervisor performs administrative, educational, and supportive functions in interaction with the supervisee in the context of a positive relationship. The supervisor's ultimate objective is to deliver to agency clients the best possible service, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in accordance with agency policies and procedures (p.23).

The importance of the administrative function comes from the need for systematic coordination in the pursuit of objectives within an organization. Kadushin & Harkness (2002) describe in as neutral a manner as possible how:

a bureaucracy is theoretically, the most rational, efficient, effective organizational format for coordinating the cooperative efforts of a sizable group of people, each of whom is engaged in a different task necessary for the achievement of common organizational objectives.... Any organization, particularly a bureaucratic organization, needs administration. Administration is a process which implements organizational objectives (p.45).

Further to this, Kadushin & Harkness (2002) suggest a number of tasks which need to be performed under the administrative component: staff recruitment and selection, inducting

and placing the worker, work planning, work delegation, monitoring reviewing and evaluating work, communication, advocacy, administrative buffer, and change agent.

Kadushin & Harkness (2002) stress the importance of evaluation of the supervisee and present it primarily as an administrative function due to its focus on accountability to agency standards. “Evaluation provides a systematic product, a report, which administration uses in making informed administrative decisions - retention, merit pay increases, promotion, suspension, etc.” (p.347). They do acknowledge the educational function of evaluation stating that evaluation is most commonly used in motivating professional growth and development. “A second principal objective is focused on the worker’s professional growth and development. Evaluation is a teaching – learning process that identifies strengths and weaknesses in the worker’s job performance so as to enable the worker to improve his performance” (p.347). In order to be meaningful, evaluation should be communicated within the context of a positive relationship and should be a mutual, shared process. The authors recommend that the evaluation focus on the work rather than the person and review both strengths and weaknesses, growth and stagnation, and should be fair and balanced.

The supervisor as educator is discussed widely in the literature, and is agreed upon as being a critical function, “concerned with teaching the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for the performance of clinical social work tasks through the detailed analysis of the worker’s interaction with the client” (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002, p.135).

Educational supervision is often referred to as either clinical supervision, which de-

emphasizes the administrative function, or as consultation which has no administrative function. Clinical supervision is defined by Schulman (1993) as “an intensive, interpersonally focused one to one relationship in which one person is designated to facilitate the development of therapeutic competence in the other person” (p.6). Kadushin & Harkness agree with Schulman regarding the importance of the role of educational supervision although Schulman places a stronger emphasis on this role within supervision than do Kadushin & Harkness.

Supportive supervision acknowledges the interpersonal relationship between supervisor and supervisee. The supportive function within supervision is widely discussed and advocated for in the literature, particularly related to the social work profession. It tends to be downplayed or made invisible in the literature related to the counseling field that has a stronger emphasis on professional counseling and consultation. The ultimate goal of the supportive component is consistent with the goals of administration and education – to enable the workers and the agency to deliver the most effective and efficient service to clients. The tasks associated with this component include “seeing that the people who do the job are comfortable, satisfied, happy in their work, and have a sense of psychological well being” (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002, p.226). The supportive component of supervision is primarily concerned with expressive considerations and includes procedures such as reassurance, encouragement, recognition of achievement, and attentive listening that communicates interest and concern. It must be noted that the administrative, educational and supportive components of supervision are interrelated and are most often performed by one person in the role of ‘supervisor’.

Kadushin & Harkness (2002) describe social work supervision in the context of short range and long range objectives. Short range objectives are to improve the worker's ability to do his/her job more effectively, to provide the worker with a work context that helps him/her do their job effectively, and to help the worker feel good about doing his/her job. The long-range objective of supervision is "to effectively and efficiently provide clients with the particular service the particular agency is mandated to offer" (p.20).

Skidmore (1990) identifies supervision as a basic component of social work practice since formal social work education began at the turn of the century. "It is an integral part of most social work agencies and is generally regarded positively" (p.205). He argues that supervision as a concept is more highly developed in social work than in other areas of human service, the medical profession or in the business sector as evidenced by the scarcity of information on supervision in these fields. Skidmore states that supervision encompasses three main functions: teaching, administration and enabling. Teaching is aimed at helping workers increase their knowledge and develop their professional skills. Administration refers to directing and guiding workers, and dealing with salaries, case assignments and other agency work. Enabling involves facilitating the work of the supervisees so that they can deliver service, and opening doors so that they can use their skills and abilities. These three components are similar to the components of supervision as defined by Kadushin & Harkness (2002). Rivas (1991) presents a model for supervision in human service organizations that is also similar to Kadushin & Harkness, but "more clearly specifies the types of supervision provided to an employee in relation

to the employee's position with the organization over time. It also accounts for the relationship between the type (and extent) of supervision and the professional employee's need for increased autonomy over time" (p.192).

Bernard and Goodyear (1992) are cited by Kaiser (1997) and offer their definition of supervision as "an involuntary relationship in which the supervisor is imbued with the power to make decisions or take actions that affect such things as hiring and firing, promotion, salaries, or, in the case of a student, passing or failing" (p.7). Kaiser (1997), in her recent work on supervisory relationships, identifies the function of supervision as "a multifaceted one, involving a complex process of accountability that hopefully leads to the ensurance of competent work with clients" (p.5). Both authors agree that accountability is inherent in the role of the supervisor.

Overall the components of supervision that are the most widely accepted in the literature are the administrative, educational and supportive functions as first identified by Kadushin in the 1970's. Hughes and Pengally (1997) identify a number of additional functions for supervision within human services, as the work in this field has become more complex over time. They recognize the supervisor's increasing role in negotiating with management and other organizations as a mediation function. Schulman (1993) also identifies a mediation function for supervisors and proposes that "the general function of the social work profession is to 'mediate the process through which the individual and society reach out for each other through a mutual need for self fulfillment' (Schwartz, 1961)" (p.20).

The communication function is a second additional function discussed by Hughes and Pengally (1997) and refers to the supervisor's responsibility to channel feedback from practitioners to the organization on policy and practice issues. They describe supervision as being assigned a " 'piggy in the middle' position between management accountability and professional responsibility; between broad policy formulation and its application to individual situations; between the organization and its users; between prescribed procedures and the emotional impact of high risk work" (p.24). Schulman (1993) describes this mediation function between staff and administration as an important 'third force' function of supervisors. Kadushin & Harkness (2002) echo this concept by identifying the supervisor as a member of both management and the work group, or 'middle management', acting as a bridge between the two. The supervisor is responsible for the work of the front line worker and is accountable to the agency administration. He/she is in indirect contact with the client through the worker, helping the worker to help the client. The position of supervisor is hierarchical in nature within a human service organization. In contrast to the role of the front line worker, Kadushin & Harkness describe the agency executive administrator as "primarily responsible for program planning, policy formulation, agency funding, and community relations. Unlike the supervisor, the administrator is externally oriented and is concerned with a broader perspective. Front line supervisors are internally oriented, focusing on the work environment and the job that needs to be done" (p.21). It is easy to see however that the boundary between the two roles is often blurry and overlaps depending on the size of the organization, the management philosophy (autocratic vs. democratic), the skills of the individuals involved, and the mandate of the organization.

A central paradox of the role of the supervisor is presented by Perlmutter, Bailey and Netting (2001) as the balancing act between "the need to motivate with the need to evaluate performance" (p.144). It is necessary for supervisors to inspire confidence and motivate employees, however this must be balanced with ensuring that the work of the organization gets done. They describe motivating, appraising and rewarding as being essential and interdependent activities in supervision.

As previously discussed, the role of supervision with counselors in a professional therapeutic environment has similarities to supervision in social work settings, well as a number of obvious differences. Counselor supervision is defined by Bradley and Ladany (2001) as "a) being performed by experienced successful counselors (supervisors) who have been prepared in the methodology of supervision; b) facilitating the counselor's personal and professional development, promoting counselor competence, and promoting accountable counseling and guidance services and programs; and c) providing the purposeful function of overseeing the work of counselor trainees or practicing counselors (supervisees) through a set of supervisory activities that include consultation, counseling training and instruction, and evaluation" (p.4). This focus on professional training and clinical supervision characterizes counselor / clinical supervision and focuses on the professional development of the trainee. Supervision with the clinician downplays the administrative function of supervision as well as the supportive function of the supervisor, with most of the role focused on training and the education component of supervision.

- **Supervision of the Paraprofessional in Human Services: A Historical Perspective**

The introduction of paraprofessionals into the human service field has challenged the traditional top down role of the supervisor. As described by Austin (1978) the paraprofessional started to send messages back up the chain of command, regarding “the desire for a different supervisor/supervisee relationship, increased autonomy based on the paraprofessionals’ community expertise, a greater recognition of life experiences in contrast to traditional credentials, and a role in the policy formation process which affected agency operations” (p. 94). This challenge contributed to the early identification of the training needs of paraprofessionals, with a strong focus on the paraprofessional as an adult learner. Austin advocates for the use of adult learning concepts and applied these to the training of paraprofessionals. They include the need for 1) autonomy and self direction, 2) life experience as a crucial ingredient in the process of learning, 3) learners grouping themselves according to their interests and learning needs, 4) expansion of their problem solving capacity. He further illustrates the hands on nature of the role of the paraprofessional by quoting an old adage of Confucius. "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand". (p.122)

Paraprofessionals were, and still are seen as having specialized knowledge from their experience in the community. Because of this, they belong in a different category from untrained workers, as far as supervision and training goes. Certain considerations are of particular importance in the supervision of paraprofessionals. According to Austin (1978) supervisors of paraprofessionals experience a “psychic stretch” in understanding the

paraprofessional's particular expertise. "Extensive self awareness and cultural awareness is basic to an effective supervisory relationship with paraprofessionals" (Austin,1978 p. 119).

In the current climate, the supervision of paraprofessionals builds on the concepts and framework of supervision as described in a dated publication by Austin (1978).

Essentially, he states that the requirements of good supervision apply to paraprofessionals. He goes on to state that supervisors need to assist paraprofessionals to manage the dual responsibility to the client and to the agency, particularly since the paraprofessional will experience more of a pull towards the client. Given their shared characteristics and identification with the client group, the paraprofessional is likely to experience a stronger sense of responsibility for the client. According to Austin (1978), he/she would also be more likely to use a direct mode of confrontation with their supervisor and would be less inclined to see supervision as a shared process. The paraprofessional recognizes they have some expertise but may feel that presenting weaknesses will jeopardize their job. Austin states that supervisors need to create a climate of openness and safety where the paraprofessional feels free to take risks.

Briscoe (1977) presents the supervision of community workers (paraprofessionals) within the framework identified by Kadushin & Harkness (2002) that includes administrative, educational and supportive components. In the administrative function, the supervisor sets up a supportive climate for community workers to carry out their work in the field by educating decision-makers in the organization regarding the unique work of the

community worker. They need to ensure the allocation of adequate resources and flexibility of the work environment to back up community workers. Flexibility needs to be built into their role in the field in order for them to respond to unpredictable work situations.

The educational role of the supervisor is stressed by Briscoe (1977). Training is seen as a priority, as effective community work service is related to the level of skills and abilities of fieldwork staff. Two aspects of the educational component within the supervisory role are identified as self-development and skills and knowledge of the community worker.

The author states that it would be important for the community worker to become increasingly self aware and gain greater awareness of their responses and actions in the field. In addition, these individuals need to develop skills and knowledge in specialized areas related to their particular practice in the community. The author advocates for the use of group work or group supervision related to the educational component for community workers, with the use of additional training from specialists outside of the organization.

The supportive element of supervision is strongly advocated for by Briscoe (1977) and was initially designed to help community workers cope with stress on the job and reduce pressures. The supportive role of the supervisor is seen as being helpful in setting limits on the unstructured nature of the work to ensure the effective use of the worker's time. Workers are so close to the action in the community that it is often difficult to see slow and progressive change over time. The supervisor provides valuable feedback to the

community worker from a more objective position that could lead to corrective action regarding mistakes made in the field and finding solutions, while still maintaining confidence in the worker. Problems with the community worker are often related to idealism and operating outside the constraints of the organization. The supervisor's role is to help community workers become more independent, self-critical and self-directing.

The educational component of supervision has been highlighted in the literature with reference to paraprofessionals and has been most often described in the context of training programs. This is due to the inherent qualifications of the paraprofessional specifically related to lack of training or credentials in the field as previously stated. Traditionally, training programs for paraprofessionals have included a more practical focus and include orientation to the employing agency, the development of knowledge and skills for a specific job function. Training for paraprofessionals has not been designed to provide transferable skills and knowledge to other human service fields as in professional training or educational programs. Overall, the authors cited have historically emphasized the educational component of supervision for the paraprofessional. The literature consistently recommends however, an approach to supervision that includes all three components - administration, education and support as presented by Kadushin & Harkness (2002).

- **Recent Paraprofessional Models and Supervision**

The literature describing the supervision of paraprofessionals is limited, particularly in the recent literature. Authors such as Austin (1978) and Richan (1972) have presented

theoretical frameworks and models of supervision specific to the paraprofessional that are very useful, however these works are dated and are more meaningful within a historical perspective. The theoretical models of supervision of professionals as presented in the previous section are clearly relevant and meaningful in this discussion, however in most cases they fall short of addressing the unique supervisory challenges presented by paraprofessionals.

A number of paraprofessional models have emerged in the literature that specifically discuss the issue of supervision. Graham, Stabile, Powell, Pruett, Hakes and Butler (2000) present a Healthy Start home visiting demonstration project in the U.S. that serves low income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers. Professional nurses and paraprofessional home visitors provide this outreach service. Because of the difficult circumstances of the projects' target population, it is important for the paraprofessional to work flexible hours and to work towards regularly scheduled visits with families. The authors suggest that supervisors need to help home visitors keep track of families and address problematic patterns of contact.

Home visitors starting the project receive five weeks of initial training and require ongoing training and supervision.

“Intensive supervision is critical in order to provide a quality home-visiting program staffed by paraprofessionals.... Supervision requires the ability to focus on the daily activities that accomplish the mission, solve problems, provide feedback on performance, and continually motivate performance. Supervision of home visitors, especially those who are spread across counties and office locations, is a challenge for even the most experienced of managers. Supervision of paraprofessional home visitors requires frequent large and small group meetings, individual conferences, and review of weekly written reports for

inappropriate behavior” (Graham et al. 2000, p.32).

Due to the intense level of supervision needed for paraprofessionals, the authors recommend a low supervisor / paraprofessional ratio of no more than six home visitors. The supervisor should be personally familiar with every family served by the home visitor and meet each family within the first month of contact. Direct contact with families allows supervisors to mentor home visitors and provide moral support to the home visitor.

Paraprofessionals that are new to the job need detailed guidelines regarding policies and procedures as well as rules regarding dress, office hours, travel, documentation and use of cell phones up front. In addition, “home visitors need to be part of a strong, supportive peer group, fostered by their supervisor. Supports specifically help home visitors deal with personal and job-related stress.” (Graham et al. 2000, p.34) The authors recommend supervisors make daily phone contact with each home visitor to help alleviate isolation as well as weekly one on one face to face supervision with each home visitor. The sharing of experiences, problem solving, and practicing of new skills in supervision helps to boost both performance and morale.

Grant, Ernst and Streissguth (1999) discuss the supervision of paraprofessionals working with high-risk substance using pregnant women in a unique model in Seattle called the Parent Child Assistance Program (P-CAP). They focus on characteristics and hiring of the ‘advocates’. “The most important background characteristics of advocates is their shared history with clients, and their subsequent personal achievements” (Grant et al.,

p.6) Advocates also share characteristics of having empathy, excellent problem solving skills, tenacity, and a direct, honest, but nonjudgmental manner. “Comprehensive ongoing training is essential to a successful paraprofessional program” (Grant et al., p.7). The initial training period of 80 hours for advocates covers issues specific to the work conducted by the staff in the program. For staff satisfaction and retention a limited caseload size of 12-15 clients per advocate is recommended to permit the time necessary to do the intensive work. Community recognition for advocates is also important for staff satisfaction and retention, in that it helps staff develop a sense of pride in their work and helps them to remain positive in the face of client setbacks. Advocates work beyond traditional agency policies and procedures and are encouraged to ‘think outside the box’.

Supervisors provide support and encourage the creative problem solving efforts of the advocates in this model. According to Grant et al. (1999), regular supervision and staff retreats, performance evaluations and adequate salaries and benefits are important administrative strategies to enhance staff satisfaction and retention. Strategies for administering the program include regular individual supervision, group ‘staffing’ or group supervision, communication and accountability, and linkages with the community. The authors refer to findings from other home visitation programs and identify the importance of providing ongoing training and supervision in achieving program success. The program includes an outcome evaluation, program development evaluation and ongoing evaluation activities that combine to demonstrate the effectiveness of the program in achieving its goal to prevent fetal alcohol syndrome. “The combination of sound administrative principles with ongoing program evaluation decreases job stress and

staff attrition, and increases group morale, staff effectiveness, and individual job satisfaction, which in turn have positive effects on the quality of service clients receive from the program” (Grant et al. 1999, p.14).

This program has been replicated in Manitoba, funded by the provincial government under Healthy Child Manitoba by the name of Stop FAS. Umlah and Grant (2003) discuss the use of the same administrative strategies in supervising the paraprofessional staff in Manitoba. “The ‘mentors’ are trained paraprofessional staff with work experience in the social services field, particularly with high-risk populations.... They are women who represent diverse ethnic backgrounds, and who may have experienced many of the same difficulties as their clients” (p.5).

Musser-Granski and Carillo (1997) comment on the training needs for bicultural and bilingual paraprofessionals in mental health services. They state that workers need “personal qualities of caring, empathy, warmth, sensitivity, genuineness, openness, calmness, confidence, and respect for the client. A non-judgmental attitude, maturity and emotional stability, and good listening skills are essential” (p.55). Paraprofessionals need to be paid competitive salaries, and provided with opportunities for advancement. Because of the tendency for paraprofessionals to over identify with clients due to their shared backgrounds, Musser-Granski and Carillo state that paraprofessionals need good supervision and emotional support from professionals, and a safe supportive environment. Citing Egli (1991) and Sauls and Dammann (1991), they discuss the importance of the supervisory relationship with the need for “a trusting, respectful, open,

comfortable, cooperative relationship. They must develop an excellent rapport and understanding” (p. 58). Supervisors should also help paraprofessionals with issues of transference, self-awareness and boundaries.

Lambert (1999) discusses the use of the paraprofessional in mental health and emphasizes the importance of addressing boundary issues in the supervision of paraprofessionals working with the mentally ill. The author identifies a movement in the U.S. towards community-based care and an emphasis on psychosocial rehabilitation that lends itself to the use of paraprofessionals. “Client contact often occurs in nontraditional venues such as on the street, in a client’s home, or at a grocery store using a ‘whatever it takes’ philosophy to engage clients and restore or improve functioning” (Williams and Swartz, 1998, cited in Lambert, p.377). The context of working in such situations leads to complex boundary dilemmas. Given the challenge of managing such a degree of closeness with a client, Lambert suggests that an inflexible approach will be an obstacle to positive treatment outcomes given the stigma, isolation, and difficulty in forming interpersonal connections for the severely mentally ill. “Many front line staff...possess limited training in the therapeutic use of boundaries. Untrained or inexperienced staff run the risk of employing boundary crossings that they have seen modeled by others, which may not be appropriate to the particular situation at hand” (Drake and Marlowe, 1998, cited by Lambert, p.377).

Supervision is seen as critically important in assisting and addressing boundary issues that arise between the client and the paraprofessional. Lambert (1999) advises open

discussions within supervision about boundaries on an ongoing basis. The framework she recommends suggests adherence to the law and ethics code as well as agency-specific guidelines, and traditional boundaries that exist within the helping field. Common themes that are relevant to the supervision of paraprofessionals include the need for individualized decisions based on context, a well developed rationale for the boundary crossing, and the promotion of self-awareness in the paraprofessional. Lambert further suggests that it is important for supervisors to encourage staff to pursue fulfilling personal lives as way to prevent staff from focusing on relationships with clients as a way to meet their personal needs.

## ***2. Theoretical Foundations***

- **Predominant Systemic Models in Supervision**

Social systems theory offers a sound theoretical framework that helps to explain the concept of supervision and it's evolution over time. Just as systems theory has shaped social work and the helping professions since the early years of the Charitable Organization Societies, it helps us to understand the development of various components of supervision in response to organizational change. Hughes and Pengally (1997) connect an open systems approach to supervision "stressing the interrelatedness of the individual, group, organization and environment with the management function being essentially one of managing issues at the boundary between these" (p.20).

In consideration of the influence of the external environment on supervision, Perlmutter et al. (2001) discuss new and emerging challenges for managerial supervisors in the field.

They place the human services within a turbulent context of ideological, economic, social and technological change. Even though the authors do not directly address the front line supervisor, clearly these same forces find their way to the level of supervisor and supervisee. Three challenges are identified by the authors: “1) the blurring of the boundaries between the for-profit, non profit and public sectors; 2) the impact of changing public policy on human service organizations and; 3) the requirements associated with the increasing use of teams and new forms of professional collaborations”(p. 11). The authors present several approaches to address supervisory challenges within a changing context. Supervisors must recognize the identity of their own profession and be self aware, particularly in positions where they provide clinical supervision. The authors acknowledge the likelihood of supervising persons from professions other than their own, as well as paraprofessionals and even volunteers. They advise supervisors to maintain a clear focus on the underlying assumptions they bring to their work when responding to their supervisee, particularly in response to inappropriate actions of the supervisee. It is also important for supervisors / managers to maintain up to date knowledge in the field and to provide effective leadership within this turbulent and ever changing context.

Perlmutter et al.(2001) are advocates for the Management by Objectives (MBO) style of supervision that is popular in the business sector (Hunter 1981), which integrates motivation techniques with results based criteria. MBO is characterized by the use of formal and informal performance appraisals, goals and objectives as motivators, recognition of diverse employee needs, attention to equity or social comparison, and staff

development and rewards such as recognition, salary increases, promotions and benefits. Within MBO, management's focus is to motivate employees to perform at their best and in the interest of the agency, and to evaluate an employee's performance from the personal and the organizational perspective. The supervisor's role within MBO is to set measurable objectives and develop a related plan. This business model falls short, for the human service field however, with respect to the lack of focus on relationships within supervision and the absence of the supportive function.

Schulman (1993) uses systems theory as a foundation to the Interactional Approach to supervision, which assumes that the movements of the worker are continuously influenced by other systems, both internal and external. He illustrates this concept with the following diagram (p. 16):

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Even though the model is focused on the social work professional, the author states that it can be applied to workers in any setting in the helping profession. The supervisory relationship is highlighted and he states that supervision requires a positive working relationship with staff. Given the power imbalance inherent in supervision, the author states that the 'authority theme' is one that requires constant attention. A good supervisor is not without problems, but is the one that is able to bring the problems to the surface.

Within the Interactional Model, Schulman (1993) stresses the teaching of core practical skills and the educational function of supervision. He describes supervision within the context of one on one supervisory sessions as well as within a group setting. The author's central assumption about educational supervision is that "staff members are active participants in the learning process" (p.157). He goes on to say that "the supervisor's knowledge of the subject area and ability to transmit ideas clearly are central to teaching, but they are only part of the process. The task for supervisors is to mediate between the learner and the subject areas to be learned" (p.201). Schulman captures the concept of 'parallel processes' in supervision where the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee parallels the relationship between worker and client. "Supervisors are seen as modeling their views of the helping process through their interaction with staff" (Schulman, p.10).

Evaluation is seen by Schulman (1993) as closely tied into the educational function of the supervisor as it has the potential to significantly contribute to the worker's development and ultimately to improve services to clients. Schulman recommends ongoing attention to evaluative feedback with the supervisee rather than saving concerns for the yearly formal evaluation. The attention to the supervisory relationship as well as the education function of supervision within the Interactional Model, provides a useful framework for supervision of the paraprofessional.

Morrison (2001) in his workbook on supervision in social work also focuses on an adult learning model and discusses the impact of organizational culture on workers and on

supervision. He promotes the use of a developmental and a solution-focused model for supervision, and recommends the use of contracts for individual supervision. Like Schulman (1993), he sees supervision as a collaborative process. Morrison provides a practical and useful framework to assist the social work supervisor. His use of the developmental and solution focused approaches could easily fit into a broader framework for the supervision of paraprofessionals.

Psycho-dynamic theory, as well as the emergence of practice theories in social work have made an important contribution to clinical practice and have been used in the training and development of workers in the field. This framework for supervision of the counselor is less interactional in nature and more focused on the role of the supervisor as 'teacher'. Page and Wosket (2001) present a Cyclical Model for counselor supervision that has its roots in psychoanalysis. This model uses a developmental approach focused on clinical supervision initially with the trainee and eventually with the more advanced practitioner. Good supervision should be 'emancipatory' and power should be shared as equally as possible. The authors do acknowledge the power differential in supervision, however they focus more on this in context of supervising someone who is part of a minority group, where there is even a further imbalance of power. "Cultural accountability in supervisors does require active monitoring of contextual (political, social and institutional) oppression but also requires, to use Rapp's (2000) phrase, close attention to 'the subtle ways in which we constantly misuse one another'" (p.227). The literature on counselor supervision, while helpful in its focus on practice skills, is limited in its contribution to the supervision of paraprofessionals given the obvious differences in the

training, knowledge and experiences between professional counselors and the paraprofessional.

Group supervision has become a popular framework for supervision in Britain as well as in the U.S. and Canada. Group supervision can take place in formal or informal staff groups as well as in different types of staff groups including staff meetings, group consultation, group supervision, and in-service training. Historically, both Kadushin & Harkness (2002) and Schulman (1993) have advocated for the use of group supervision as an important supplement to the mainstay of individual supervision. Schulman identifies that group supervision can help staff to develop a culture for work as well as deal with conflict within the staff team (p.257). Kadushin & Harkness identify a number of advantages to a group setting that include the economical use of administrative time and effort, the opportunity for enhancing sharing and learning amongst group members, as well as opportunities for emotional support, and building and maintaining staff morale. The group setting is often seen as less threatening and provides a safer learning environment for supervisees to confront the supervisor.

Proctor (2000) promotes the use of group supervision for supervision of professionals in counseling and psychotherapy. In contrast to Kadushin & Harkness (2002) and Schulman (1993), Proctor identifies group supervision as preferable to individual supervision for a number of reasons. Group members have access to a broader range and variety of learning, stimulation and confidence in a group. They also have an opportunity to experience in practice what is meant by group dynamics, and a greater number of

members allows for the development of a wider choice of creative methods of supervision. Besides being more economical, Proctor states that group supervision has the ability to 'harness' forces of competition and differences that often produce tremendous anxiety in supervision. She presents the Group Supervision Alliance Model that identifies four types of supervisory groups ranging from an authoritative group that maintains the supervisor in a lead role, to the other end of the spectrum in a peer group where members take shared responsibility for supervising and being supervised (Proctor, p.39). For group work to be successful, she states that supervisees need to take shared responsibility for the development of colleagues in the group as well as to share their work publicly and be open to receiving feedback, support and challenges from their colleagues. Supervisors must demonstrate respect, empathy and genuineness as well as develop group work skills and be able to move fluidly within different 'ways of being'.

Peer group supervision is defined by Kadushin & Harkness (2002) who cite Hare and Frankena (1972) in defining peer group supervision as a process by which "a group of professionals in the same agency meet regularly to review cases and treatment approaches without a leader, share experiences and take responsibility for their own and each other's professional development and for maintaining standards of service" (p.483). Kadushin and Harkness state that the use of peer supervision symbolizes the capacity for greater independence of the worker and allows greater freedom in the absence of an authority figure. The difficulties inherent in peer supervision, according to the authors, include rivalries for leadership and control and the reluctance of less experienced workers to participate. At an administrative level, peer supervision presents difficulties regarding

decision making, evaluation and salary increases when the supervisor has not been exposed to the work of the supervisee.

In summary, I believe that group supervision can be a beneficial mode of supervision for the paraprofessional, particularly because of the rich opportunities for workers to process their experiences in the field and learn from one another regarding their work with clients. Peer supervision on the other hand is a poor fit for the paraprofessional given the lack of a clinical framework within which to supervise one another, as well as the paraprofessional's limited experience providing leadership in a work environment.

In contrast to the models for supervision presented from within a bureaucratic and hierarchical structure, Vinzant and Crothers (1998) present a model of Street Level Leadership that they argue is a more appropriate and useful framework for understanding what front line workers do in the human services. They focus on the street level public servant such as social workers and police officers who deal with a wide variety of complex and unpredictable problems in the course of their work on the front line. They state that the crisis nature of the work requires decision-making and action, often without benefit of supervision or direction or back up from the organization. The authors only briefly discuss the educational and administrative role of supervisors.

The Street Level Leadership Model makes very little reference to the supportive function of supervision, as the authors appear to see workers as autonomous workers in the field. They make the case that the outreach or 'on the street' activities of the street level worker

does not lend itself to direct or immediate supervision since the supervisor is simply not present at the scene in the moment of decision making by the worker. Therefore they present the need for an alternative model such as street level leadership that more accurately reflects what actually happens in the field. They present 'leadership' as an appropriate and useful theoretical framework because street level workers must exercise discretion and judgment in complex and fluid environments. Front line workers make decisions based on complex situational factors and they have a great deal of power. Vinzant and Crothers (1998) advocate for a more flattened hierarchy within the bureaucratic system. This model offers an interesting and challenging framework that should be given consideration for professionals within the human service field.

I believe that its description of the front line worker as leader is a fairly accurate portrayal of what actually happens in the field in terms of the need for 'on the spot' decision making. This model does raise important issues for the supervision of the paraprofessional, as they also make decisions autonomously in the field at times, without the benefit of supervision. The challenge is that paraprofessionals, by definition, lack the education and training needed to exercise leadership and discretion on the front line.

- **Importance of Relationship Models**

The supervisory 'relationship' emerged within the context of the Charitable Organization Societies in the early 1900's as the supportive component of supervision was introduced as a way to retain workers in the emerging field of human services. "Since visitors were always difficult to recruit, easy to lose, and often frustrated and disappointed, they needed

supportive supervision from the agent-supervisor in addition to administrative direction and training. The paid agent had to deal with the feeling responses of visitors to their work” (Kadushin & Harkness, 2002 p.4). The literature emphasizes that the supervisor’s administrative, educational and supportive responsibilities are most effectively implemented within the context of a supportive relationship.

The concept of supervisory relationships is presented and discussed by a number of authors and provides a meaningful framework for understanding and delivering supervision. Schulman (1993) as previously discussed, believes that supervision requires positive working relationships among staff. Kaiser (1997) takes this concept one step further and presents a Conceptual Model of Supervision that acknowledges systems theory and places supervision within a larger context of interaction between individual and various systems they encounter. “In the discussion of the conceptual model, I define the process of supervision as one of accountability and the goal of supervision as competent service to clients” (Kaiser, p.8). Accountability includes the telling the truth to the best of one’s ability, and taking responsible actions. She presents the supervisory relationship as the context within which supervision takes place, and includes elements of power and authority, shared meaning and trust.

Kaiser (1997), as well as other authors cited in the discussion of systemic models, makes an assumption that “supervision occurs within the context of a power differential between supervisor and supervisee” (p.26). Supervisees are dependent on supervisors for guidance, education and more significantly on evaluations that can affect future jobs,

salary increases as well as hiring and firing. Professionals in the human service field acquire power from society, from the clients they serve, as well as from a sense of their own personal power. Supervisees also have power, albeit less than the supervisor, in whether or not they choose supervision. They have the power to “enhance or sabotage the supervisory process” (Kaiser, p.48). Supervisors ultimately need the cooperation of the supervisee in exercising their educational function within supervision.

Within Kaiser's model, shared meaning refers to “the grease that allows the smooth running of the supervisory relationship.... Shared meaning (is defined as) both mutual understanding and, ideally, mutual agreement between supervisor and supervisee” (p.88). The greater the overall differences between supervisor and supervisee, the greater difficulty there will be in creating shared meaning. The blocks to shared meaning are even greater in cross-cultural supervision, where the supervisor is from a different culture than the supervisee. To address differences between individuals, the author recommends the use of contracting around “the structure of supervisory sessions, expectations of the supervisee, standards for evaluation, types of information that will be shared in supervision and how that information will be used, and the focus of a particular session” (p.127).

Kaiser (1997) sees trust in the supervisory relationship as crucial to its effectiveness. She identifies two basic elements of honesty and the supervisor's attention to shame in the relationship, which contribute to the development of trust. The supervisee's experience of shame is inevitable and comes from their own sense of personal vulnerability, the impact

of the client's pain, and the impact of transference and counter transference on the supervisee. She believes that there are many different ways to address shame in supervision depending on the individuals and the circumstances. To avoid shame however, the supervisor must be experienced as 'safe' by the supervisee. Honesty is related to the concept of accountability – telling the truth about oneself and taking responsible action. It is incumbent on both supervisor and supervisee to approach one another with authenticity in the relationship if it is to succeed.

Kaiser (1997) discusses the importance of the knowledge differential between the supervisor and the supervisee. How supervisors manage the degree of difference between their level of expertise and that of the supervisee is seen as a crucial issue. The supervisor needs to have greater knowledge and something to teach the supervisee. When a supervisee perceives that the supervisor has nothing to teach him/her, they will not tell a complete story regarding their work and will likely leave supervision unsatisfied. Misuse of the knowledge differential by the supervisor can be destructive. Kaiser states that “the challenge ... is for supervisors to promote their supervisees growth without stifling the supervisee in order to maintain a one-up position and without abdicating their position of power by providing no guidance or support for the supervisee” (Kaiser, p.30).

The limit setting function “occurs at the point at which the supervisor defines a bottom line by telling a supervisee whether certain behavior is acceptable. Any negative feedback a supervisor offers can be defined as limit setting” (Kaiser 1997, p.33). Limit setting is often delivered through formal and informal or ongoing evaluation. According

to Kaiser, evaluation is often sidestepped by both supervisor and supervisee because of reluctance on the part of the supervisor to give negative feedback and risk discomfort, and defensiveness on the part of the supervisee to receive feedback.

Barnes, Down and McCann (2000) discuss the supervisory relationship in light of the 'work' (what is to be done and how will it be done) that is done is supervision rather than the relational aspects between the supervisor and supervisee and their impact on supervision and work with clients. The authors quote Jones (1993) with regards to power and hierarchy within supervision and describe how the pretense of democracy in a supervisory relationship will not work as the supervisor often has greater knowledge and experience as well as structural power in the relationship. Ignoring this can lead to the abuse of this power. The authors go on to describe the process of initial control on the actions of the beginning trainee that evolves over time to more of a consultancy role at the end of the training. This framework is less relevant for the supervision of the paraprofessional as it represents more of a clinical model of supervision in which the professional trainee becomes self sufficient in their work with clients as they become more experienced.

Muse-Burke, Ladany and Deck (2001) agree with Kaiser that the supervisory relationship is a fundamental component of supervision. Bordin (1993), as cited in Muse-Burke et al. identify three primary components of the supervisory relationship as "a) mutual agreement and understanding between the supervisor and the supervisee of the goals of supervision b) mutual agreement and understanding of the tasks of the supervisor and

supervisee and c) the emotional bond between the supervisor and supervisee” (p.57).

Holloway (1997), as cited in Bradley and Ladany (2001) adds that how the supervisor’s power manifests itself in the relationship depends on both the supervisor and supervisee. Holloway states that the conditions necessary for an effective supervisory relationship include empathy, genuineness and respect.

The literature identifies overall that effective supervision occurs within a positive working relationship with staff (Schulman,1993; Kaiser,1997; Muse-Burke, Ladany and Deck, 2001). The concepts of relationship and power are particularly important for supervision of the paraprofessional as there are greater differences between the professional supervisor and the paraprofessional. These differences can lead to greater difficulty creating shared meaning in the relationship which places more importance on a positive working relationship within this context. The power differential is also likely to be greater within this context which would place additional pressure on the relationship within supervision (Kaiser, 1997).

- **Anti-Oppression Models - Culture, Race and Gender**

Mullaly (2002) defines oppression as “the domination of subordinate groups in society by a powerful (politically, economically, socially and culturally) group” (p.27). He presents an anti-oppressive model for social work practice that addresses oppression at personal, cultural and structural levels. His theoretical base and framework provide a useful tool for the social work supervisor who is confronted with experiences of oppression within the client group of the agency, the supervisees as well as the agencies political and structural

climate.

Mullaly (2002) identifies a number of strategies to deal with oppression. At an individual level, he recommends consciousness-raising as well as repairing and counteracting the “intrapsychic damages associated with oppression and...build(ing) strengths in the individual for developing solidarity with others in order to take action against their oppression” (p.192). Regarding cultural oppression, he recommends “developing strategies of resistance, challenging dominant discourses with alternative discourses and confronting negative stereotypes” (192). In terms of structural oppression, anti-oppressive practice “focuses on both confronting and changing those social institutions, policies, laws, and economic and political systems that operate in a way that benefits the dominant group at the expense of subordinate groups” (193). Finally, Mullaly states that the constructive use of anger is the most important element in challenging oppression in any form.

Bishop (2002) in her work on breaking the cycle of oppression, discusses the many forms of oppression in our society including racism, class-ism and heterosexism as well as discrimination based on disability, religion, etc. She encourages all of us to examine how we perpetuate oppression in our society and challenges each one of us to address this in our own lives. She advocates for a movement from ‘power over’ others towards ‘power with’ others. She believes the cycle can be broken through consciousness and healing and recommends speaking out about oppression and healing and reclaiming our connections with others.

Kaiser (1997) discusses oppression in our culture and the impact this has on the supervisory relationship. She uses the term 'blaming the victim' to describe situations where oppressed people are blamed for the difficulties they experience as a result of oppression. Sometimes this can lead to what she calls 'destructive entitlement' in which those who have been mistreated experience unmet needs from childhood that were beyond their control. The resulting anger can manifest itself in the individual as well as in the supervisory relationship, particularly when a member of a minority group is the supervisee and the supervisor is from the majority culture.

Kaiser (1997) also discusses the impact of culture, race and gender on the supervisory relationship. In recognition of the need to create a more equitable system, organizations are making an effort to recruit and retain people from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds that reflect an increasingly diverse clientele. One of the consequences of this trend according to Kaiser, is that some of the individuals hired from the community may not have the formal training to do the work due to the lack of opportunity and experiences of oppression in our society. "Adding more diversity to the agency therefore potentially creates a more effective service for all clients. On the other hand, without formal training, many practitioners may lack important skills, which then need to be learned on the job" (Kaiser, p.36). She states that there is a need to weigh the importance of maintaining a certain standard of practice with the need for increased diversity in the workplace. For workers whose cultural diversity is of primary importance and who may lack certain skills, the supervisor must ensure that the work with clients is not compromised. Learning goals and timelines should be established to ensure that these

workers acquire the skills necessary “to perform at a level that does not require extra support” (Kaiser, p.37).

Many of the challenges of cross-cultural supervision, according to Kaiser (1997) can be related to issues of shared meaning. This can be very complex when the supervisor and supervisee are from diverse backgrounds. In addition to differences in culture between supervisor and supervisee, the culture of the client also has an impact on treatment decisions. According to Kaiser it is important to be aware of these differences and the impact one person may have on another. It is equally important to develop an understanding about one another’s cultures and negotiating these differences. She identifies that the primary challenge of supervision is to “blend the values and norms of all cultures involved” (p.128).

Kaiser (1997) identifies racism as another sensitive and important issue in supervision. Racial tensions “add stress to cross-cultural supervisory relationships and can contribute to mistrust between supervisors and supervisees” (Kaiser, p.162). The challenge, she states, is in arriving at a shared meaning as to what constitutes racism. She recommends close examination of one’s own attitudes and an effort to ensure that an authentic discussion occurs in the supervisory relationship.

Barnes et al. (2000) state their premise that racism is the context within which all relationships exist in our society. They echo Kaiser (1997) with their belief that supervisors and supervisees alike need to be aware of their own racism, biases,

stereotyping and prejudice and how these elements affect their work in supervision and with clients. In response to the potential for racism within the supervisory relationship, the authors suggest that supervisors use the position of “respectful curiosity” and “cultural naivete” (p.74), as a teaching tool and role model this for the supervisee.

Kadushin & Harkness (2002) discuss race as a factor in supervision in that it is a source of stress for supervisors. They do not go into detail regarding theoretical frameworks associated with race or culture in the supervisory relationship, which limits the usefulness of their discussion. On a practical level, however, Kadushin & Harkness state that where there is a strong likelihood that a white person will be in a professional supervisory position, and a person from a minority group or of ethnic origin will be the supervisee, they recommend that the supervisor educate him/herself as to the culture of the person he/she is supervising as well as the client culture. This is relevant to the focus on supervision of paraprofessionals, as it is more likely that the paraprofessional supervisee will belong to a minority culture than the professional supervisor.

Regarding gender differences within supervision, Kaiser (1997) promotes feminist values and behaviours in response to these issues. She suggests that the hierarchical nature of the relationship should be minimized as much as possible. Kaiser cites Wheeler and associates (1986) who suggest that responsibility for contracting and evaluation should be shared between supervisor and supervisee. Clear understandable language and respectful encouragement of the supervisee’s questions and ideas should be used in order to promote a more collaborative relationship.

Kadushin & Harkness (2002) recommend an approach to supervision that is 'androgynous'. They see a good supervisor as having qualities that reflect strengths in expressive (female stereotypes) and task (male stereotypes) domains. According to Barnes et al. (2000), feminist values have led to a more collaborative approach within supervision, however they caution that the assumption that gender differences in supervision have already been addressed is 'dangerous complacency'. The authors believe that this issue requires ongoing attention in the field. Kaiser (1997) presents the most useful framework in dealing with gender issues in supervision with the use of a more flattened hierarchy within the supervisory relationship. In doing so, she is promoting feminist values of equality. She is realistic, however in stating that power imbalances do exist and it is important for supervisors to make a conscious effort to address issues of power openly and minimize the negative impact this can have on the supervisee and the supervisory relationship.

It is particularly important to understand the influences of oppression on the paraprofessional as well as paraprofessional models. Paraprofessionals, by virtue of their shared histories with the clients they serve, will often have similar experience with oppression, racism and discrimination as their clients. This can compound the impact that oppression has on supervision of the paraprofessional. The power dynamics inherent in the supervisory role are likely to trigger the experience of oppression for paraprofessional staff. Ensuing feelings of anger and vulnerability could lead to a number of destructive dynamics within the supervisory experience such as anger, manipulation, passive aggressive behaviour and insubordination (Mullaly, 2002).

Supervisors in the social work profession have a role in assisting oppressed workers to deal with personal experiences of oppression and have a role in transforming structural and cultural practices within the organization. Both Mullaly and Bishop (2002) offer thoughtful and practical frameworks to address oppression that can be applied to the workplace and supervision of paraprofessionals.

- **Burnout and the Importance of Supervision**

The experience of burnout by workers in the human services is defined by Schulman (1993) as "a syndrome exhibited by workers dealing with intense stress over a period of time and lacking support" (p.259). This term is well documented in the literature, particularly related to workers in the child welfare field, however it can be used to describe workers in any high stress field of practice. The causes of stress on the job include death of a client or staff member, a physical assault on a worker, public challenges of agency practices, funding cutbacks, staff cutbacks and agency reorganization. The literature suggests that it is important for organizations and supervisors to assist staff to face the stress and develop the social supports to cope with the stress.

Azar (2000) describes burnout in professionals and paraprofessionals as "an exhaustion of a practitioner's mental and physical resources attributed to his or her prolonged and unsuccessful striving toward unrealistic expectations (externally or internally driven)" (p.644). Burnout is more common in high stress jobs that require care-giving and that provide inadequate support for this work according to Azar. Other terms used to describe

burnout in the literature include "compassion fatigue" (Figley, 1995, cited by Azar), and "vicarious trauma" (McCann and Pearlman, cited by Azar).

Supervision can be seen as a protective factor against burnout in staff. Azar (2000) states that "essentially, the goal in supervision is to provide the professional and paraprofessional with a 'revised' worldview that is more flexible and consonant with the realities of the work and that allows him or her to maintain meaning in the face of many obstacles to feeling successful" (p.651). Strengthening supervisory practice is crucial to addressing burnout in staff. "In supervision, the exposure to trauma and the strain of multi-stressed families are 'twice' removed, but their effects may be played out more strongly and in ways that may make them harder to identify and alleviate" (Azar, p.644). The author recommends a cognitive behavioral approach to address burnout that will "enable the supervisor to identify when role expectancies have been violated and thus, a potential source of the affective dysregulation in supervision. It also provides ways to work with them once they are identified" (p.650). She describes cognitive work as "a slow shift of individual deeply held and cherished belief systems, expectancies, and assumptions" that requires a deep level of engagement and a safe and supportive space to work through the issues (p.644).

Azar (2000) identifies four targets for the cognitive work in supervision that include role strain, unrealistic expectancies, values conflicts, and indirect trauma symptoms that might be directed at the supervisor. The intervention involves identifying deeply held and maladaptive or overly rigid assumptions/expectancies regarding a supervisee's role as a

service provider, challenging these expectancies and attributions, and replacing them with more flexible and adaptive beliefs, expectancies, assumptions and interpretations. Azar raises the importance of systemic change in combating burnout, as the origins lie within a socioenvironmental context. She stresses the need for systems change and advocacy from supervisors regarding better training and better pay for staff as well as greater valuing of the work from society.

The concept of burnout is important to address with regards to the supervision of paraprofessionals. As stated by Azar (2000) burnout is more common in high stress jobs that require caregiving. By virtue of their front line position with high needs populations in the community, the paraprofessional is more vulnerable to burnout. The shared life experiences of the paraprofessional and the populations that they serve, and the reduced distance between them, also leaves the paraprofessional more prone to the emotional impact of the work. Adequate and effective supervision therefore becomes an important element in maintaining and promoting the work of the paraprofessional.

### ***3. Empirical Findings***

Within the literature search, I looked for research studies that provided information regarding the topic of supervision of paraprofessionals in the human service field specifically. Research findings on this topic are scarce. There were however numerous studies on recent paraprofessional models that offer some important information on supervisory practices within the paraprofessional model. These models provided helpful grounding for the study and guided the development of the research design. In addition, I

discovered studies related to stress and burnout as well as 'good supervision' which also added to the understanding of the supervision of paraprofessionals.

- **Stress and Burnout**

In his study regarding job stress, Schulman (1993) found that front line child welfare workers reported considerably more stress than their supervisors (p.28). Conversely, front line workers had considerably lower levels of job manageability as compared to their supervisors. Schulman explains this difference in stress levels due to the nature of the front line work and to being closer to the actual problem. Lower levels of stress for supervisors was associated with supervisor effectiveness particularly in the areas of capacity for empathy, the ability to provide consultation and the worker's willingness to talk openly with the supervisor.

The value of supportive supervision is associated with reduced incidences of stress and burnout in workers. Kadushin & Harkness (2002) state that "good supervision reduces the development and negative effects of burnout" (p.275). Berkeley Planning Associates (1977) cited by Kadushin & Harkness studied 11 protective service projects across the U.S. and found that the nature of supervision was a crucial determinant of the level of burnout. "It was found that those demonstration projects in which workers report inadequate supervision had the highest incidence of burnout. Good supervision is crucial to worker's performance and satisfaction" (Kadushin & Harkness, p.275).

Rauktis and Koeske (1994) studied the impact of various types of job stresses on

satisfaction amongst social workers and the role that supportive supervision plays in alleviating the effects of stress. A sample of 404 social workers was drawn from the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the US. A questionnaire was distributed by mail to respondents. The findings indicate that “as work load increased, satisfaction with salary and promotional opportunities decreased. However, work load had no main effects on intrinsic job satisfaction.... Supportive supervision had consistently positive main or direct effects on satisfaction, indicating that high levels of perceived emotional support from a supervisor contributes to greater job satisfaction for social workers” (Rauchtis and Koeske p.54). Citing a 1985 study by Kadushin & Harkness, Rauchtis and Koeske state that “supportive supervision provides the psychological and interpersonal resources that enable the worker to cope with work-related stresses while at the same time mobilizing the emotional energy needed for effective job performance” (p.54). The study further suggests that “there is an important limiting condition to supervision effectiveness: when work demands are high, emotionally supportive supervision loses its benefits.... Supportive supervision cannot salvage every work situation. Management must be attuned to the critical break point when altering work demand is needed to maintain social worker morale and effectiveness” (p.54). The authors conclude their findings stating that “supportive supervision may be most effective when complemented by administrative interventions that decrease work load and other sources of job stress” (p.55).

- **Good Supervision**

Kadushin & Harkness (2002) have derived a picture of the ‘good supervisor’ from

research regarding supervisee satisfactions and preferences. The authors condense a 20-point composite of the good supervisor as follows: “Good supervisors are available, accessible, affable, and able. The general picture of the ‘good’ supervisor shows him/her to be a person who is a technically competent professional, with good human relations skills and good organizational-managerial skills” (p.339). The ability for a supervisor to be effective however is strongly influenced by the supervisee and the nature of the supervisor-supervisee relationship. Kadushin & Harkness found that a supervisor’s tendencies towards certain characteristics can be muted or mitigated by the response or characteristics of the supervisee.

Skidmore (1990) reports on the characteristics of an effective supervisor as knowledgability, high quality practice skills, having an open door policy as well as a high level of commitment to supervision, an attitude of openness, and showing appreciation and giving commendation (p.210). Kaiser (1997) reports on the general features of good supervisory relationships as follows:

The supervisors are seen as having an approach to treatment the supervisees consider effective and about which the supervisors are perceived to have greater knowledge. The supervisors are willing and able to set limits when necessary. The supervisees have a clear sense that the supervisors are in charge of the relationship and will use power fairly. Supervisees are clear as well, about what is expected of them and what they can expect from the process. They also know they have the power to ask for what they want and need. In addition, they are respectfully acknowledged if they challenge their supervisors on either clinical or relationship issues. The supervisors are experienced as safe-that is, not shaming-although the approach to shame may differ dramatically among them. In the language of the conceptual model, these relationships are characterized by a high degree of trust and shared meaning and an effective use of power and authority (p.166).

- **Paraprofessional Models and Supervision**

Hiatt et al. (1997) in the study of the Home Visitation project state that the relationship-building skills of the paraprofessional were central to the success of the program. The shared experience and decreased social distance of the paraprofessional often places the paraprofessional in the role of friend rather than helper. This shared experience, one of the paraprofessional having 'been there' was seen as a powerful relationship building tool and a key asset for paraprofessionals in the Home Visitation project. Supervisors found issues of transference and counter-transference to be active forces in the client-visitor relationship. "Transference involves the redirection of feelings on the part of the client, especially those unconsciously retained from childhood, toward a new object, in this case the paraprofessional home visitor. Counter-transference occurs when an intervenor develops a complex set of feelings toward the client during the course on the intervention arising from the intervenor's own personal life" (Hiatt et al., p.84). The decreased social distance from the client does increase the intensity and likelihood of dynamics of transference in the working relationship. The project found that "the key to overcoming these and other challenges of paraprofessional intervention was thoughtful and consistent supervision" (p.87).

Hiatt et al. (1997) identified a supervisory structure for paraprofessionals that worked well for the project that included a minimum of two hours of group and one-to-two hours of individual supervision per week. Informal, unscheduled supervision was also available anytime. They further recommend a smaller supervisor-visitor ratio than professional supervision given that most paraprofessionals are newer to the workplace than

professionals and require more time and attention. Several standard issues were covered by supervisors: the need to promote socialization to the work environment; maintenance of appropriate boundaries in working with families; organizational skills of paraprofessionals such as scheduling visits, paperwork, etc; promoting paraprofessionals skills in anticipating and recognizing problems which may arise for the client and assisting paraprofessionals with the development of therapeutic relationships to build on their natural empathy with clients. Supervisor's roles included administrator, teacher and supportive therapist.

The supervision of this 'widely disparate group' was described by Hiatt et al. (1997) as a challenge (p.88). New paraprofessionals tended to respond to individual supervision as a "hostile, fact-finding mission, designed to point out their failings as home visitors.... The nature of this kind of work and the intensity of the personal struggles can create an emotionally charged work arena, especially when crises with clients erupt" (p.88). The authors further recommend day-long retreats on a quarterly basis to promote team building and maintain a positive work environment.

Within this model, every effort is made to retain home visitors given that the success of the intervention lies in the relationship between the paraprofessional and the client. They found a higher attrition rate for clients where a change in home visitor had occurred.

Parallel processes also occurred in the project – as clients changed, the paraprofessional saw the growth and change in clients as direct result of the intervention. This change in the client as well as the personal and professional growth of the paraprofessional led to

their increased confidence. The paraprofessionals' growing confidence helped to build trust and openness with clients who were consequently more open to the intervention.

Hiatt et al. (1997) also discussed the importance of training/orienting paraprofessionals to the professional culture - "supporting, training and introducing paraprofessionals to the culture of professional work life requires time" (p.82). Hiatt et al. cited Almonte (1994) who defined the three stages of professional acculturation as euphoria, culture shock, and adaptation. "Promoting social skills appropriate to the workplace, monitoring reactions, feelings, impulsivity, and monitoring personal and professional boundaries were a continual challenge for the supervisors" (p.82). Hiatt et al. identify the training of paraprofessionals as being critical to program success.

Other paraprofessional programs reviewed by Hiatt et al. (1997) identified a broad range of training from initial orientation to up to 50 hours of intensive training. The authors cite a meta analysis by Hattie et al. (1984) indicating that when initial training in a program exceeded 15 hours, paraprofessionals were more effective than professionals in clinical outcomes of clients.

Minore and Boone (2002) studied the use of aboriginal paraprofessionals to deliver health care and mental health services in many northwestern Ontario indigenous communities. Paraprofessionals were used "to address a shortage of health professional human resources and to overcome cultural barriers (as well as to) fill service gaps in many rural contexts" (p.140). Regarding the use of paraprofessionals, they found that the

interdisciplinary teams “must have a mutual understanding of one another’s roles and mutual respect for each others’ capabilities” (p.139). “Paraprofessionals are employed not only where there are insufficient professional staff, but where a new sort of worker is required to fill the service gap” (Fuller, 1995 cited in Minore and Boone, p.140).

Health providers in most communities are described by Minore and Boone (2002) as professionals and also outsiders. People in need in the community are more likely to turn to the insiders - the paraprofessionals - for help. Within health services in northwestern Ontario, paraprofessionals are community health representatives, mental health workers, and national native alcohol and addiction program (NNADAP) workers. Established programs do exist in northwestern Ontario to train community members as paraprofessionals. The Aboriginal Community Services Worker Program established in 1997 and the Indigenous Wellness and Addictions Prevention Program established in 1999 were both developed in partnership between the Confederation College and the Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (p.142).

Minore and Boone (2002) found that the major source of frustration for the paraprofessional worker is not knowing their role or what is expected of them. Paraprofessionals are often left out of the loop on interdisciplinary teams because the professionals fail to recognize the important contribution and skills of the paraprofessional. This also reflects the professional's lack of confidence in the competence of the paraprofessional. The authors strongly suggest further study of paraprofessionals on interdisciplinary teams. They further recommend the inclusion of

information on working with paraprofessionals be included in health care curricula, especially in light of the increased use of paraprofessionals in response to financial pressures in health care funding. The authors advocate for better preparation for paraprofessionals in training programs, providing them with skills that will help them function in actual settings in the community working alongside professionals. According to the authors, this is most relevant in rural settings characterized by high turnover of professionals and scarcity of resources.

Riggs (2001) conducted a study in Connecticut on the training needs of paraprofessionals in education under a number of different job titles including teacher assistant, teaching assistant, paraeducator, paraprofessional, teachers aide and instructional assistant. The study asked paraprofessionals themselves about their training needs. The results of the study indicate that training was a high priority for paraprofessionals. Specific areas were identified as valid for future consideration. In conclusion, it was found that paraprofessionals themselves are able to articulate their training needs. This suggests that planning for training for paraprofessionals should always begin with a needs assessment. The study underscores that paraprofessionals must be a part of the process in identifying their training needs.

Hiatt et al. (1997) indicate that characteristics of staff need to be congruent with the goals and methods of services that are to be delivered. The home visitor must also be able to respect and respond to the cultural values and beliefs of the community in which they are working. In the Home Visitation program they witnessed “an allegiance to the

community by the paraprofessionals which went far beyond the typical relationship that exists between service provider and client. Paraprofessionals belong to the community” (p.82). Issues for paraprofessionals in the project included their limited formal education and training that often led to a lack of credibility by other professionals. The authors recommended that paraprofessionals receive assistance and training to be able to negotiate issues of credibility.

Wakou (2003) studied the personal attributes and job competencies that are necessary for the job success of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) in the U.S. This is a federally funded paraprofessional model focused on outreach to low income women and children. A qualitative descriptive design and a three round modified Delphi methodology was used in a sample of professionals in 14 states. The results of the study generated 37 personal attributes necessary for the paraprofessional, 18 job competencies prior to hire and 43 job competencies after training was completed. The top six personal attributes identified were “dependable, honest, good interpersonal skills, respectful, confidential, and nonjudgmental” (Wakou, p.19). The author discovered that changes in the workforce, the program participants and paraprofessional roles over the last 30 years have implications for hiring and training of paraprofessionals. He recommends that these attributes and competencies be used prior to hire in all EFNEP programs. Wakou states that typically, it is the program goals within human service organizations such as health, education, and child welfare that determine the skills the paraprofessional needs. He strongly recommends that “further research should include paraprofessionals to determine the competencies professionals need to include in

preservice and inservice training” (p.24).

#### ***4. Gaps in the Literature***

While the literature regarding supervision in the human services is thorough and useful for the study of the paraprofessional, there is clearly a scarcity of theoretical knowledge and research specifically on the topic of supervision of paraprofessionals. As previously discussed, a number of authors from the 1970's offered a theoretical framework that was useful during this period. While this information provides a backdrop for the current climate, it does not address the changes that have occurred in the social, economic and political context that directly impact on the supervision of paraprofessionals. The practice of delivering paraprofessional models and supervising paraprofessionals has grown over time, and the literature does not adequately describe or address these changes.

In particular, there is an absence of a specific theoretical framework to lead in the supervision of paraprofessionals. The recent literature does describe the workings of a number of successful paraprofessional models. While this literature does address administrative and supervisory issues, the discussion is program specific as opposed to being focused on the broader issue of supervision of paraprofessionals. In addition, the focus on the paraprofessional model does not address the supervision of countless paraprofessionals that are woven into professional programs within the human service field. The use of paraprofessionals within professional programs or agencies raises additional challenges as described by Minore and Boone (2002) when the role of the paraprofessional is unclear and often undervalued within a professionalized service such

as health care.

The studies that have been done on paraprofessional models have been primarily descriptive in nature, with a focus on program outcomes. With the exception of one study previously mentioned by Wakou (2003) that was a mixed method design, I was unable to locate any additional qualitative research on the topic of paraprofessionals in the literature. After completing an extensive literature search in the subject, Wakou states that “the limited number of related studies also indicated the need for more research using systematic methodology to forecast characteristics appropriate for hiring, training, and evaluating the job performance of paraprofessionals today and in the near future” (p.18).

With regards to the views of paraprofessionals themselves, I was able to locate only one reference as previously presented by Riggs (2001) in the study of training needs of the paraprofessional in the educational system, that actually used the paraprofessionals in the study. Riggs strongly suggested that paraprofessionals must be a part of the process in identifying their training needs.

In conclusion, it seems clear that research on the supervision of the paraprofessional is a meaningful pursuit that will advance our knowledge and understanding of this unique role within the field. The paraprofessional has much to offer the community and the organizations that are committed to improving the lives of the individuals and families they serve. It will be important to discover supervisory practices that will best meet the needs of the paraprofessional in an effort to better serve the community. Given the gaps

identified previously in the methodology, the research should include the voice and the experience of the paraprofessional in a qualitative design.

## Chapter 3

### The Study

#### *1. Central Research Question*

The central research question for this study relates to the supervision of paraprofessionals as follows;

*What are paraprofessionals' views of supervision in the human service field?*

#### *2. Research Design and Rationale*

Given my focus on understanding the components of supervisory practices that maximize the effectiveness of the paraprofessional, I chose a qualitative research design.

Qualitative research is defined by Sherman and Reid (1994) as “research that produces descriptive data based upon spoken or written words and observable behaviour” (p.1).

Padgett (1998) identifies a number of reasons for choosing qualitative research that include: 1) to explore a topic about which little is known; and 2) to capture the ‘lived experience’ from the perspective of those who live it and create meaning from it. Within the lived experience of paraprofessionals, this study reflects an emic approach, that according to Padgett seeks to capture the respondent’s point of view. Furthermore, Padgett states that “qualitative methods are inherently inductive; they seek to discover, not test, explanatory theories. They are naturalistic, favoring in vivo observation and interviewing of respondents over the decontextualizing approach of scientific inquiry” (p.2). Qualitative research requires an immersion of the researcher who is seen as “the instrument of data collection” (Padgett, p.3).

### ***3. Phenomenological Approach***

This research study is based on a phenomenological approach that according to Creswell (1998) is one of five traditions within qualitative research. Creswell states that phenomenology is "an approach to studying the problem that includes entering the field of perception of participants; seeing how they experience, live, and display the phenomenon; and looking for the meaning of the participant's experiences" (p.31).

The emphasis on the 'lived experiences' of paraprofessionals with regards to the concept or 'phenomenon' of supervision provides valuable insight into this phenomenon within the human service field. The perspective of the lived experience of the paraprofessional is particularly important, given the absence of research in this field from this perspective.

As previously stated, I believe there is much to be gained from understanding this experience, as it could have implications in designing effective frameworks and practices regarding the supervision of paraprofessionals.

Phenomenology has its roots in philosophy and in the search for wisdom. Crabtree & Miller (1999) state that the tradition of phenomenology "recognizes the importance of the subjective human creation of meaning but doesn't reject outright some notion of objectivity. Pluralism, not relativism, is stressed, with focus on the circular dynamic tension of subject and object" (p.10). The authors go on to state that "phenomenology...is the search for essences. It answers the questions, 'What is it like to have a certain experience? What is the essence of this particular experience?' To accomplish this, investigators must 'bracket' their own preconceptions, enter into the individual's lifeworld, and use the self as an experiencing interpreter." (Crabtree & Miller, p.28).

According to Patton (2002), the final dimension that identifies phenomenological study is that “there is an essence or essences to shared meaning”(p.107). Patton states that the basic elements of an experience, to those who experience it, are identifiable.

Patton (2002) identifies two implications of the phenomenological study. Firstly, it is important to know what people experience and how they interpret the world. This is the subject matter or focus of phenomenological inquiry. The second implication relates to the methods used. “The only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves. This leads to the importance of participant observation and in-depth interviewing” (Patton, p.106). The use of in-depth one on one interviews with paraprofessionals was used in this study in order to capture as closely as possible, their lived experiences. The interviews will be discussed in greater detail in another section.

#### ***4. Sampling Strategies and Recruitment***

- **Sampling Strategies**

Qualitative inquiry lends itself to purposeful sampling strategies, that typically focus on depth in a relatively small sample of the population of interest. According to Patton (2002), “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information rich cases for study in depth. Information rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of inquiry, thus the term purposeful sampling” (p.230).

A typology of 16 strategies for purposeful sampling advanced by Miles and Huberman (1994) is presented by both Patton (2002) and Creswell (1998). Within this typology, a 'criterion' sample that focuses on finding individuals who have experienced the phenomenon is best suited to the phenomenological approach. According to Creswell, "it is essential that all participants experience the phenomenon being studied. Criterion sampling works well when all individuals studied represent people who have experienced the phenomenon" (p.118). I used a criterion based sampling strategy within this study, focused on paraprofessionals who are experiencing supervision within a human service agency.

Patton (2002) does not identify an ideal sample size, however he recommends that "qualitative designs specify minimum samples based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon given the purpose of the study and stakeholders interests" (p.246). He further recommends adding to the sample as the fieldwork unfolds if this is necessary, and keeping the design 'flexible and emergent'.

I have used a sample size of 12 participants within this study, drawing from paraprofessionals from two social service agencies in Winnipeg. I chose a smaller sample size to allow for a more in depth process of data collection. As suggested by Patton (2002), "the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p.245). This sample size was large enough, however, to ensure that adequate coverage of the

topic area was achieved, particularly since participants were recruited from two separate agencies. The use of two agencies allowed for comparison between groups and added richness and validity to the data collection and analysis. A number of significant themes emerged from the research that corresponded with the literature on this topic and provided valuable insight into the experience paraprofessionals had with supervision. Given the richness of the information gathered from the interviews, it was not necessary to expand the sample size in this study.

- **Recruitment**

As previously stated, I chose to recruit participants from two agencies or programs within Winnipeg. The agencies were small to medium sized in terms of staff complements and each one uses a paraprofessional model to provide service and support to women, families and their children in the community during pregnancy and while parenting. The paraprofessional staff were mostly women from the community who are natural helpers with specific qualifications that include a minimum Grade 12 or GED education. They receive ongoing training specific to the programs they work in, as well as supervision from professional staff within each program. Although I did not specifically request women as participants, given that only a very small number of men were employed as paraprofessionals in one agency, I was not surprised that only women came forward to participate in the study.

Initially I contacted each of the agency directors by telephone in August 2005 to introduce myself and present the research study on paraprofessionals and supervision.

Each program director agreed to review a summary of the research and to consider the use of their agency to access research participants. I sent a summary of the research proposal to the director from each program site to review (Appendix A), along with a covering letter of introduction (Appendix B). A follow up call was made to each director. Both agencies expressed interest in the study and agreed to give me access to their paraprofessional staff to recruit participants. I gathered general information from each director about each program regarding services offered and the target population as well as the general profile of the paraprofessional staff employed at their agency. This enabled me to verify that the sample of participants meets the criteria or 'phenomena' of interest for research purposes.

Handouts requesting participation from paraprofessional staff (Appendix C) were subsequently sent out to each agency director. The handouts were distributed to each of the paraprofessionals employed within the two programs by the agency directors. This handout outlined the goals of the research study, the procedures for gathering the information and a request for participation. Each paraprofessional staff that was interested in participating in the study was asked to contact me directly by phone to make arrangements to meet with me in an interview setting. The handouts advised potential participants that their participation in the study would be confidential and even though their agency knew about the study, they were not involved in any way and would not know who came forward to participate.

I received many calls for participation in the first week after the handouts were

distributed. I had some difficulty initially, accessing participants from one agency and I called the executive director and requested to meet with the paraprofessional staff team briefly to discuss the study and answer questions as needed. She invited me to a staff meeting and I presented the study to the staff team and asked for their participation, on a voluntary basis. They were discouraged from coming forward during the meeting because of the need for confidentiality and were encouraged to call me on my cell phone anytime after the meeting. This presentation was successful as I received two more calls for participation which completed the study requirements.

### ***5. Data Collection Procedures***

- **Semi-Structured Interviews**

The interviews were semi-structured, one on one with the sample of paraprofessional staff as previously discussed. As described by Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell (1996), the semi-structured interview is situated between the structured and unstructured types of interviewing and is sometimes called a ‘guided interview’. According to the authors, “semi-structured interviews are particularly appropriate when you want to compare information between and among people while at the same time you wish to more fully understand each person’s experience” (p.56). They allow the interviewer to question on a specific topic while at the same time posing the questions in an open-ended manner that will allow for considerable depth from the respondents. For the purpose of this study, the semi-structured interview was the best fit, given the need for focus on the topic of supervision as well as the importance of reaching for in depth responses from the participants. The open-ended nature of the interviews allowed for the ‘discovery’ of

important information that could be building blocks in developing a framework for the supervision of paraprofessionals.

Patton (2002) presents this type of interview as a 'standardized open-ended interview' and states that since respondents answer the same questions, the responses are easier to compare and the data is complete for each person on the topic in question. He links this method for data collection to the phenomenological approach in that it

requires methodologically, carefully and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon – how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others. To gather such data, one must undertake in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest, that is they have 'lived experience' as opposed to second hand experience (p.104).

The use of the standardized open-ended interview also facilitates organization and analysis of the data. Patton presents that the weaknesses of this method is in its limited flexibility and standardized wording of questions that may “constrain and limit naturalness and relevance of questions and answers” (p.349). However, probing around the standardized questions during the interviews did serve to offset this limitation to some extent, and further justified the usefulness of the standardized open-ended interview for this study.

- **The Interviews**

The interviews were conducted between September and November 2005. They were held in a number of neutral and accessible locations depending on the preference of the participant. These locations included coffee shops, the university, participants' homes

and on one occasion in my home. At the beginning of the interview, I reviewed the purpose of the study with each participant and asked her to sign a Consent Form (Appendix D) to participate in the study. I reviewed issues related to confidentiality and attempted to ensure that they were comfortable in the interview setting. In addition, I offered each participant an idea of the topics I planned to cover which helped to reduce any anxiety they may have had about the content of the interview. I stated clearly to participants prior to the start of the interview that I believed that as paraprofessionals, they have a great deal of insight and understanding about their own needs in the supervisory relationship and their responses would contribute a great deal to the findings of this study.

The interviews went well overall. I made a sincere effort to join with each participant at my first contact and during the interviews. I was genuinely interested in their answers and was keen and attentive to each of them. I wanted to understand and learn about their experience. Part of my motivation and interest was driven by my previous experience supervising paraprofessional staff and wanting to better understand my strengths and limitations as a supervisor. I felt empathy and concern for participants when they shared some of their painful stories with me as well as their frustrations and difficulties on the job. I was also extremely impressed with their commitment to the work, their respectful attitude and their genuine caring and concern about their clients. Some participants were initially anxious about confidentiality, however they overcame this reluctance when I reassured them that their responses would be kept confidential.

At times, it was difficult for participants to share their stories. Some of their stories were painful, some unresolved and some brought out feelings of shame. Overall, their responses were well informed and thoughtful. They wanted me to understand their experience as paraprofessionals as well as their experience with supervision. They were quite open about their concerns, even when they expressed overall satisfaction with supervision.

- **The Interview Questions**

The interview questions are presented in Appendix E. Question #1 was designed to open the conversation and build rapport with the participant. It also set the stage for the participant to begin to tell her ‘story’ and focused on her experience as key to the interview. Question #2 inquired about her background related to the job as well as her personal interest in the work. Direct questions regarding education were avoided to reduce possible defensiveness from the participant regarding their lack of formal education. Question #3 opened the door to the specific subject matter under study and attempted to gather background information about the training the participants had experienced related to the job. Questions #4 to #8 were experiential questions. They were designed to illicit the opinions and expectations of the participants with regards to the supervision that they had received. Question #9 was also aimed at understanding the opinions and ideas of the participants with regards to supervision, and invite their recommendations.

The interviews included a number of demographic questions that were asked at the end.

These questions focused on information regarding age, experience, education and cultural affiliation that assisted in the analysis of the data. As previously indicated, participants could choose not to answer these questions, however all of them did agree to provide the demographic information.

- **The Participants**

Based on the demographic information provided by participants, the following data is helpful in understanding who they are and how they describe themselves. All of the participants in this study were female. While this was not a requirement for the study, only women came forward to participate. This is likely due to the overrepresentation of women, in not only the helping field but as paraprofessionals as well. Their ages ranged from 22 to 58, with the average age being approximately 40 years. Their ethnic backgrounds were diverse, with half of the participants identifying themselves of minority origin. The other half did not identify themselves with a culture, and were presumably Caucasian. Their cultural backgrounds included Afghan, African American, Chilean, Filipino, and Metis. A number of these women were immigrants as well who spoke English as a second language.

Their educational backgrounds varied as well, with over half having taken some form of post secondary education, either at a college or university level. Five of the 12 participants had completed a university degree in general arts or human ecology, with two of these participants earning their undergraduate degrees outside of Canada. In terms of college programs, three of the 12 participants had earned a college certificate in either

early childhood education or family support, with one of these participants earning their certificate outside of Canada. The remainder of the participants had either finished high school or had taken some years of post secondary education and had not completed their studies. More of these participants had higher education than I would have anticipated given the literature on paraprofessionals.

Most of the participants discussed having begun their current positions with some form of previous training in the form of workshops and courses that were gained outside of formal educational programs. These included training in first aid, CPR, suicide prevention, domestic violence, literacy, working with various childhood disabilities such as autism, fetal alcohol syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. They also described numerous learning opportunities provided over time in their current positions that have contributed to their skill development.

The number of years of experience in the field as a paraprofessional ranged from 8 months to 18 years, with the average years of experience being approximately 10 years in the field. This included both the participants' experience in previous jobs as well as within their current position.

- **Issues of Gender, Class and Culture**

As stated, all of the participants in this study were women. Even though one of the agencies in this study does employ male paraprofessionals, men represent only a small percentage of the staff and no men came forward to participate. In terms of my

relationship with the participants, I found that responding to participants who were all women was very comfortable for me and appeared to offer the participants a measure of comfort and ease as well. The potential barriers between myself as the interviewer and the participants need to be considered however, related to class and cultural differences. About half of the participants were Caucasian, with others representing a number of minority groups as previously discussed. Overall they lacked professional credentials and are therefore more likely to represent a lower class population in terms of wages. As a white middle class woman, I was conscious of the power differential between myself and the participants. I tried to approach each interview with respect and appreciation for our differences while at the same time reaching for that which we had in common as women working in the helping profession.

Issues related to class and culture are discussed in the literature without any obvious solutions. Padgett (1998) discusses the pros and cons of 'matching' common characteristics in the interviewees with the interviewer. In conclusion she states that "for some studies, the effectiveness of the interview may depend on matching; for others, a skilled interviewer is sufficient. A good dose of common sense should guide decisions about the most appropriate type of person to collect the data" (p.66). Patton (2002) states that "cross cultural inquiries add layers of complexity to the already complex interactions of an interview" (p.391). He cautions the researcher about false assumptions of shared meaning however, and dispels the myth that the interviewer must be the 'same' as the interviewee. He does recommend that "getting valid, reliable, meaningful, and useable information in cross-cultural environments requires special sensitivity to and respect for

differences” (p.394). I feel that I was able to apply this sensitivity within the interviews which minimized the potential barriers to collecting valid and reliable data. My training as a social worker and my experience in the field helped me to join with and empathize with the participants in this study. I also shared with each participant the genuine respect and appreciation I have for their skills and experience as well as my keen interest in the research topic.

- **Tape Recording**

To collect the data from the interviews, I used a tape recorder in each session, with permission from each participant. I reminded them that the tapes would be confidential and they would be destroyed after the study was completed. In addition, I had the interview questions typed for my own use during the interviews. This provided me with an opportunity to take brief notes during each interview. The note taking also served as a back up for the tape recorder in case of problems. The written notes highlighted the most important points from the interview as well as any specific impressions I had during the course of each interview. These notes provided an important context and additional information during analysis of the interviews.

- **Journaling**

In addition to the use of field notes, I kept a journal to record my personal thoughts and reflections throughout the research process. Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell (1996) recommend the use of journaling to “note your impressions, reactions, hunches, and general comments about what you have learned”. They state that “in this way you can

capture any particular intrapersonal or interpersonal experiences that might affect the way you make sense of the data” (p.69). I used journaling throughout the process, prior to each interview, after the interview and during the coding and analysis phases. This process helped me to be explicit about any concerns or biases I had, as well as to capture ideas or thoughts that assisted in making sense of the data.

Journaling also provided a mechanism to ‘bracket’ my own preconceptions regarding the experience of paraprofessionals with supervision. Involvement in this study brought up thoughts and feelings about my previous experience as a supervisor of paraprofessionals that had the potential to interfere in both the interviews and the analysis. In order to protect the integrity of the research, I made a conscious and careful effort to bracket my feelings and focus on learning about the experience of each participant.

## ***6. Data Analysis***

The raw data, in the form of audio tapes, field notes, journaling and written program information was organized during the initial stages so that it was accessible during the analysis. A professional transcriber was used to transcribe the audio tapes of the one on one interviews. This allowed me to focus more energy on the coding and analysis of the data. Once the tapes were transcribed, I reviewed and edited the tapes. This allowed me to correct mistakes made by the transcriber and to become more familiar with the data. I also referred to my journal notes as needed while reviewing the transcriptions.

Reviewing the tapes was both interesting and helpful. I was able to listen to the

interviews from a distance which allowed me to listen with more objectivity than during the interview itself. It also helped me to begin formulating thoughts and ideas about the meaning of the research. As thoughts arose related to either coding decisions or analyzing the material, I made note of this for future reference in various files I had created on the computer at the same time. I found the process of reviewing the tapes both tiresome and tedious, as it took many hours. Because of this, I was especially careful to ensure the transcription accurately reflected what was discussed.

Creswell (1998) identifies phenomenological data analysis as

“proceed(ing) through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and a search for all possible meanings. The researcher also sets aside all prejudgments, 'bracketing...his or her experiences (a return to 'natural science') and relying on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the experience" (p.52)

In conducting the interviews for this study and analyzing the data it was important for me as the researcher to put aside or 'bracket' my own preconceptions regarding the experience of paraprofessionals with supervision as discussed.

Regarding data analysis, Creswell goes on to state that “researchers search for the essential, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” (p.53). In phenomenological data analysis, the data is divided into statements (horizontalization) and the units are transformed into clusters of meaning. These clusters are then tied together to make a general description of the experience, the 'textural description' of what was experienced and the 'structural

description' of how it was experienced. "The report ends with the reader understanding better the essential, invariant structure (or essence) of the experience, recognizing that a single unifying meaning of the experience exists" (Creswell, p.55).

Initially, I reviewed each typed interview and made notes on the computer of important comments, thoughts and opinions from each participant, that are described by Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell (1996) as 'meaning units'. The result was a rough list or picture of the participants' experiences with supervision as well as their work as paraprofessionals. I also reviewed my handwritten notes taken during the interviews and my journal notes and included additional information or meaning units into the analysis as appropriate. As I reviewed the data, I was careful to document emerging thoughts and ideas about the meaning of the data. Patton (2002) describes this process as 'memoing', whereby the researcher puts into writing their thoughts and ideas about coding decisions as they emerge.

I went on to organize this large list of meaning units, using a cut and paste method. Tutty, Rothery and Grinnell describe this first level coding as "a combination of identifying meaning units, fitting them into categories and assigning codes to the categories" (p.100). According to the authors, codes are simply a form of the category name that becomes a short hand method of identifying the categories. I reworked and reorganized these categories a number of times until various themes emerged. The themes represented the paraprofessionals' experience with supervision and created the framework for the findings. Once the themes were identified and the beginnings of the narrative were in

place, I reviewed the interviews again and brought forward quotes from participants that best illustrated their views and experiences. The quotes were integrated into the various themes as appropriate and provide much needed evidence to support the narrative.

In terms of the discussion of the findings, I reviewed the literature on supervision in the human services and supervision of paraprofessionals in particular and identified supervisory practices that addressed the needs of the paraprofessional as discussed by participants in this study. This material was compared to the findings directly, and participants voices regarding their experience and concerns were directly linked to the theoretical literature. This process led me to identify the gaps in the literature in terms of the supervision of paraprofessionals. These gaps were discussed and led to the conclusions and recommendations made in the final chapter.

### ***7. Ethical Considerations and Confidentiality***

Because of the nature of qualitative interviewing, ethical concerns and issues of confidentiality must be given consideration in this study. Confidentiality of the participants was given high priority particularly in light of the fact that supervisors have power over the participants in the study. The proposal for this study was submitted to the Research and Ethics Board of The University of Manitoba and was passed prior to the beginning of the research phase.

According to Patton (2002), interviews are interventions and the process of interviewing brings up thoughts, feelings and knowledge that can have a profound impact on both the

interviewee as well as the interviewer. Even though the goal of a research interview is to gather data and is not intended to change people, the potential impact of the interview on the participant needs to be addressed. Some participants did express feelings during the interview, particularly when they shared concerns about difficult or traumatic events related to the job. On these occasions, I responded with empathy and concern and made inquiries to ensure that they had resources available to them as needed.

Patton (2002) identifies an Ethical Issues Checklist as a framework to assist the researcher to address areas of concern prior to beginning the research (p.408). For the purpose of this study, I identified ethical concerns prior to the beginning of the interviews. These included informed consent, confidentiality, associated risks and benefits, and reciprocity.

The basic elements of informed consent are identified by Padgett (1998) as a brief description of the study and its procedures as they involve participants; full identification of the researcher's identity; assurance that participation is voluntary and that the participant can withdraw at any time; assurance of confidentiality; any risks or benefits associated with the study (p.35). The 'handouts' (Appendix C) that were sent out to each participant, through the agencies, outlined the above stated information by Padgett. This information was also included in the Consent Form (Appendix D) and was reviewed in person with each participant at the face to face interview and prior to the start of the interview. Two copies of the consent form were presented to each participant for signing at the interview, and one copy was given to the participant for their records.

The risk to participants about being identified by their involvement with the study was addressed by ensuring them confidentiality. Every effort was made to ensure that the identity of participants was not revealed. Even though participants were informed about the study through their workplace, they were asked to call me privately if they wanted to participate. In this way neither their supervisor nor the agency was aware of which staff came forward to participate. In addition, interviews were scheduled for after work hours so that the staff did not identify themselves in their absence from work. In terms of the written study itself, I advised participants that I would be excluding any identifying information in the study in order to protect their identity. The possibility, however unlikely, that they could be identified despite my efforts, was discussed with participants as a potential risk and was stated in the consent form.

In terms of incentives or paybacks offered, compensation for travel costs and child care of \$25.00 was provided to each participant that was interviewed. They were informed of this provision in the initial handout as well as the Consent Letter. A further incentive, a copy of the complete study and the findings was offered to each participant in the study in appreciation for their contribution to the research. Each participant asked to receive a copy of the findings.

### ***8. Strengths and Limitations of the Study***

The strength in this design lies in its qualitative methodology, giving paraprofessionals an opportunity to present their experience with supervision. The in-depth exploration, which is part of the qualitative design, facilitates understanding of paraprofessionals' experience

that could contribute to a better framework for their supervision. Having accessed participants from two separate agencies that employ paraprofessionals, the research provides an opportunity to identify themes that are not agency specific, but relevant to paraprofessionals as a group.

The limitations of the design are that the findings cannot be generalized to other paraprofessionals or agencies. This sample is not diverse enough or large enough to draw conclusions about the supervision of paraprofessionals. For example, I was unsuccessful accessing participants within an aboriginal agency for the study. This sample could have provided a much different look at supervisory structures and provided additional rich data for consideration. In addition, I have brought into the research my own biases and past experience as discussed that has impacted on the research despite my efforts to be objective.

Other limitations include the sample of participants accessed from programs that only employ paraprofessionals. The use of paraprofessionals in the human service field is actually much broader, in that many social service agencies employ both professionals and paraprofessionals working as a team to provide service to clients. This dynamic would also be interesting and important to study, particularly in rural or aboriginal communities.

### ***9. Validity and Reliability of the Design***

Padgett (1998) describes a number of threats to the credibility and trustworthiness of

qualitative research, that fall primarily into three broad categories: reactivity, researcher biases and respondent biases. “Reactivity refers to the potentially distorting effects of the qualitative researcher’s presence in the field”(Padgett, p.92). Researcher bias refers to the “temptation to filter one’s observations and interpretations through a lens clouded by preconceptions and opinions that can plague even the most meticulously designed and well-intentioned study” (p.92). Respondent biases occur when respondents “withhold information and even lie to protect their privacy or to avoid revealing some unpleasant truths. At the other extreme, they may try to be ‘helpful’ and offer answers that they believe we want to hear” (Padgett, p.92). The author suggests a number of strategies for enhancing rigor in a qualitative study that include prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing/support, member checking, negative case analysis and audit trail. Applied to this research study on the supervision of paraprofessionals in the human service field, I have incorporated a number of these strategies to enhance the rigor of this design, including the use of triangulation, peer debriefing/support, and an audit trail.

There are a number of different types of triangulation, according to Padgett (1998) including data triangulation, investigator triangulation, theory triangulation and methodological triangulation. Triangulation in qualitative research “refers to using two or more sources to achieve a comprehensive picture of a fixed point of reference ... ..triangulation is widely practiced as a valuable means of enhancing rigor in qualitative research” (Padgett, p.96). In order to strengthen this study, I have triangulated the data by collecting multiple sources of data from the interviews, taped interviews, journaling, and field notes as previously discussed. In analyzing the data, I referred to all the sources of

data from each participant to ensure their responses were consistent with my impressions and my notes. I used bracketing to help me put aside my biases and assumptions during the process. I used my own experiences however, to inform the findings and include in the discussion, as my learning about the supervision of paraprofessionals was also significant to report.

Peer debriefing and support was used with a number of individuals throughout the research process, which helped to reduce researcher bias. My relationship with my advisor at the university is positive and I relied on her perspectives and challenges throughout the process. I felt comfortable sharing my concerns and vulnerabilities with her, especially when the process triggered feelings about supervision from my past experiences. I had ongoing opportunities to debrief with a number of professional colleagues as well, that helped me to resolve some of the difficulties I had completing the research and who provided much needed emotional support and encouragement. As Padgett (1998) states, “because so much depends on the qualitative researcher, wear and tear on the ‘instrument’ can take a toll. Attending a peer support group meeting gives the researcher a chance to share the emotional ups and downs of fieldwork and data analysis” (p.99).

The audit trail in this study consisted of tape recordings, journal notes, field notes, archival information, background information, and memos used during data coding and analysis, and helped to reduce researcher bias. “Leaving an audit trail means adopting a spirit of openness and documenting each step taken in data collection and analysis”

(Padgett, 1998 p.101). As a personal style, I rely heavily on note taking and documentation in my personal and work life, so this strategy was comfortable for me as well as reliable in terms of ensuring that the findings from this study could be confirmed by others if necessary.

In addition to Padgett's framework for enhancing rigor in qualitative research, Borkan (1999) addresses issues of validity in qualitative research in describing the importance of reflexivity, depth of description, accuracy, rigor, intellectual honesty and searching for alternate hypotheses and interpretations. Regarding accuracy, Borkan states that "accuracy is the primary responsibility of the investigator" (p.193). I certainly made every effort to ensure that the information gathered accurately reflected the views and experiences of the research participants, with attentive listening during the interviews, and accurate recording of the interviews on tape. In terms of intellectual honesty, I was committed to recording, examining and interpreting the data with integrity and adherence to the standards of research. Borkan stresses the importance of reflexivity which he describes as "the technique by which researchers turn the focus back on themselves to evaluate their influence on the findings and interpretations" (p.194). The use of journaling, field notes, peer debriefing and support provided me with the opportunity to be 'reflexive' in my efforts to produce sound research.

## Chapter 4

### Findings:

#### What Do Paraprofessional's Say About Supervision?

The study findings are presented in this chapter, beginning with paraprofessionals' views of their work in the field, as well as their thoughts about training and a brief description of the supervisors. The next section describes their views on what works in supervision and what doesn't. Next, findings related to support are presented, followed by supervisory relationships, safety on the job, pay and compensation. The chapter concludes with recommendations from paraprofessionals to improve supervision.

##### *1. Views of Their Work in the Field*

The paraprofessionals in this study appear to have a tremendous commitment to their work with women and families and they take pride in their accomplishments. Most participants work in the helping field because they sincerely want to help others. "I guess it feels good, especially after you've been with a family and helped them through the crisis and they're doing better and then it's time to move on" (Barb). Others found the job rewarding because they could see that their involvement made a difference. Many saw their job as a career choice and had aspirations to move forward in their workplace.

I really like it. I think it, I think I feel like it's my career, probably not a very good paying career. I mean it's not something that people normally choose as a career because of the pay range, but I really enjoy it and I feel like there's a lot of room for you to grow. (Ingrid)

Alice started off needing the job but over time has come to find the work meaningful.

"To be brutally honest I took the job because I needed it but now I see it needs me."

Overall, most participants expressed a great deal of respect and admiration for the families with whom they worked. Below, Alice described the personal growth she experienced because of the job and the perspective that she has gained about what people go through in their life.

A lot of them have been good experiences, some realization experiences. I've never done this type of work before...I realize now there's a lot of stress that people have to overcome that I've never had to go with and it's just absolutely shocking what people go through in a lifetime. You know, I thought that the experiences that I had to go through were pretty rough but when I look at some of these families, oh I take a step back and maybe my day wasn't so bad after all.

When participants were able to spend the time necessary with a family and had a chance to see the results, they felt more satisfied in general as described by Gail. "When I'm able to spend a longer period of time in a home I'm more successful...I had a home that I've been in for over two years, but finally I saw the fruits of my labour right now". A number also expressed appreciation for the down to earth and client focused work they were able to do in their front line jobs as paraprofessionals. In terms of their job choices, several specifically mentioned that they gravitated towards workplaces that were client centered and holistic in their approach to families. Janice also expressed her belief in empowering the women she worked with. "Empowering people and people's rights to like what they have rights to and self-esteem with women is huge with me".

## ***2. Who are the Supervisors?***

All of the supervisors described in this study were female. Their educational backgrounds were described by participants as originating from a number of professional fields including social work and human ecology, both at an undergraduate and graduate level,

the majority of whom were social workers. The human ecology grads were described as having specialties in infant development, family studies and food studies (dieticians). Other supervisors were described as having degrees in general arts. Some were seen as “having come up from the ranks”. Janice described this as follows, “my understanding is most supervisors have post secondary education and they may be bachelor degrees. I think one may have a lot of life experience and working experience which helps her better understand our role”.

A number of the women interviewed also identified people in management or administrative roles as supervisors and at least half described having significant connections with management in their agency. People in charge of the organization and the values of the overall system seemed to have had considerable influence on the job satisfaction of the paraprofessionals in this study.

At the (agency) also we have a good director, like anybody in the (agency) not just supervisors. Our director if we have something that we are really concerned about and we think we are not heard or maybe our supervisor hasn't been fair or like on the client side, then we can talk to other people...like we have somebody who provides us like with training and workshops and she is a wonderful person and she says, any of you any time, any kind of problem just give me a call (Cassie).

Gail expressed concern about the lack of involvement from the director/management in her agency. She felt strongly that they should be more involved and more interested in the work experiences of the staff.

Overall, they described the supervision framework within their workplaces as hierarchical in nature, acknowledging the various levels of authority that exist within the

agency. Even though the hierarchy and different roles in the agency were acknowledged by participants, many of them stressed the importance of working together as a team. A variety of formats for contact with supervisors were mentioned by participants, including one on one supervision, phone supervision and in person meetings which are discussed in more detail in the findings.

### ***3. Training***

All placed great value on the opportunities their workplaces gave them for initial and ongoing training on the job.

When we started that job we got lots of training, lots of workshops, something about the (agency) that I really love, that you get training on different topics, speakers come and we have one day workshops and things like that (Deanna).

For Deanna, the training that was offered by her agency was what initially attracted her to the job. There were however mixed feelings amongst others about their initial orientation to the job, with the newer staff expressing more dissatisfaction with their preparedness for the job as well as the initial orientation they received.

I guess I remember when I first started my home...it was really strange just being there because I didn't know what to expect and I didn't know. Like every client is different but just being there my first time like what am I supposed to do? (Erin)

The need for extra feedback and assistance as a new paraprofessional was an important issue that was mentioned by a significant minority. As stated, some felt unprepared and uncertain about their role initially in homes with families they were assigned to. These women referred to the lack of initial orientation and support they received on the job and felt strongly that this should be improved. A number of participants talked about job shadowing as a helpful component of their initial orientation on the job, and

recommended this for all new workers. Erin described the importance of job shadowing as follows, “Definitely the job shadowing at the beginning is to better acquaint and get a little bit of experience and just feedback in evaluations in the beginning, a little bit more contact with the supervisor and the (worker)”.

Ongoing training and upgrading on the job was considered to be very important for almost all those interviewed. Adequate and appropriate training contributed to their overall self esteem and confidence on the job. They also appreciated being informed about programs or training that may be available outside the workplace.

That is one thing that I really like about the (agency). They are really doing their best about upgrading the workers by sending us to different venues and letting us take topics you know like I did meal preparation, loss in the family, understanding the different ethnicities and what else, safety in the workplace, how to care for yourself as a caregiver (Faith).

While most participants discussed the importance of training, a significant minority reported dissatisfaction with the amount of training offered and often did not feel that it was relevant or frequent enough to address the demands of the job. Gail stated “Everything became beyond what I expected and we probably don’t get enough credit for the amount and the professionalism that we need to bring, and the skills really go way beyond what we ever had training for”. These same women expressed dissatisfaction with the level of training offered on the job as well as the ambiguous nature of their role as paraprofessionals. A few suggested that having a training manual available for their position would help them to deal with gaps in training as well as the ambiguity that they struggle with in their role. “I think the lack of proper training, and like the vagueness of

the job...Like I don't even know how you would begin putting a training manual together" (Kathy). Nancy also suggested developing a specific program to train paraprofessionals, especially if new staff had no previous experience working as a helper in the field.

#### ***4. What Works in Supervision and What Doesn't***

The issue of supervision of paraprofessionals was aptly described by one participant as 'uncharted territory'. Within this context there is much to learn from paraprofessionals regarding their experience with supervision. The women in this study offered considerable information and insight into their experience from their own perspective. The findings presented in this section represent various themes that emerged from the interviews that best describe the 'lived experience' of the paraprofessional regarding supervision.

- **Responsiveness of Supervisors/ Need for Involvement**

Participants consistently expressed the need for involvement with their supervisors. All of them saw their supervisors as important sources of support for the job. The supervisor's ability to respond and her willingness to help was considered extremely valuable. Most of the women spoke positively about the responsiveness of their supervisors on the job, not only about being there for them but also in terms of the genuineness of their responses.

The supervisors that I've encountered, they seem really great and they're willing to, you know if you need something then it doesn't matter whatever else is going on they're willing to, if they can't do it for you right then and they will get back to you soon as they can with some type of solution. I think that's helpful just knowing that they would be there (Erin).

The turn around time it took for supervisors to respond had a considerable impact. Satisfaction was associated with timely responses from their supervisors. “When they get our messages and if they reply back as soon as possible, that’s another thing that you think highly of your supervisor – (we) are important, she returned my call”(Deanna). Even if responses were not immediate, most of them seemed to appreciate that their supervisors were busy as well. They appreciated an acknowledgement from their supervisor as well as her efforts to help and to respond as soon as possible.

A significant minority described not having ongoing contact with their supervisors, and this lack of contact made them feel unimportant. Gail stated that in one particular home, she had not seen her supervisor for a year. She felt resentful about the lack of supervision she received overall. She tried to understand the pressures her supervisors experienced but didn’t feel that it justified the lack of supervision.

It’s a job where we need to share the loads of what’s going on. I mean, I guess it’s unfair because I don’t see what their worse day entails but and I’m not saying they don’t do the work but when I find out that, like there’s a number of us that are not being supervised...(Gail)

The supervisor’s ability to problem solve or assist during a crisis was considered important and contributed to how supported paraprofessionals felt on the job as described by Kathy. “So they understand, so there’s a lot of not just support but there’s a lot of suggestions, have you tried this?” This was also true when supervisors extended themselves to find answers on behalf of their staff. The interest they expressed in helping with problem solving and their willingness to find the answers was highly valued by many. Gail described this as follows: “She gets to questions that you’ve asked and if she

can't come up with the answer she definitely makes it a point to find out and get back to you. She gives good feedback...She seems interested".

Opportunities for brainstorming were seen by the majority as valuable within the team setting as well.

We've run up a couple of brick walls for sure and we do a lot of – some pretty immediate brainstorming situations...it's really been positive. I think I can't remember when something hasn't worked out or – you know, sometimes it might just take time (Kathy).

It is important to point out that a number of participants described that they had never had a problem accessing help from either a supervisor or the team. This was a rare finding however, as most women described the need for some improvement in terms of responsiveness of supervisors.

Participants described feeling cared about and important when supervisors reached out to them to check in or touch base with them on the job. They valued the efforts that supervisors made to contact them independent of scheduled visits or supervision. "It's not that they should come when it's like a formality, it's a home visit, but once in a while give them a call - just to see how things are going"(Deanna). This was particularly important in situations where they were working exclusively in client's homes, and didn't have the benefit of a supervisor or a team available on site. Ingrid's comment illustrates the isolation experienced working in a home when the supervisor did not reach out or check in regularly. "But in the home itself we're on our own and if we don't ask for help we probably won't have any contact with anyone from the office for several months".

For a few, supervisors were perceived as unresponsive. When they did not have adequate access to a supervisor, they felt discouraged and resentful as described by Gail.

It's the supervisor's job to bring it to the table and to be interested. If you're not interested in like doing this, then this isn't the job for you because you have to be interested in people and yes, I get disillusioned with that – I love the job and I like the work that I do, very much, and I really believe in it.

In particular, a few women were distressed when they really needed help on the job and couldn't get hold of anyone. Gail stated that even when she asked for help, she found her supervisor reluctant to respond or get involved.

It feels strange when I'll call them and ask, would be almost begging them to come out, and I'm thinking I should just be able to say it, because I rarely make that call, I should just say, I need some supervision here, and it's so strange and they'll be saying, well I don't know if I really need to come out.

A number described it helpful when supervisors provided practical help on the job, such as help making a phone call, dealing with another agency, writing a letter, etc. When supervisors offered this kind of assistance, it was seen as very helpful as described by Janice. "I have worked with really good supervisors, they can see. 'I can see that you are overloaded and let me do this for you'. You know maybe asking is better". Janice also expressed dissatisfaction when supervisors did not respond with practical support. "When you expect them to step in and they don't step up to the plate and help carry some of the load. Actually I've already carried this much, I'm dragging down and you need to support me."

The experience of supervision was met by some with ambivalence, particularly as it related to their perceived need for supervision and the amount of time they did or didn't spend with their supervisors as described by Gail. "I flip flop between thinking perhaps

the supervision is good the way it is and it's different...I have never been in a position where I'm so little supervised". Most women however, including Gail appreciated a balance between autonomy on the job and the support offered in supervision.

I'm sure you know, as much as there are times I wish I could have more supervision, there is that element of it that's great. Because I suppose if you had a lot of that plus the stress of the home, you know, I could be telling you a whole different thing, you know. So there are pros and cons to it.

- **Availability and Access to Supervisors**

The issue of availability was important to all participants with the majority finding supervisors both available and accessible to them on the job. "Well they really are only a phone call away and if the supervisor isn't there and if something is an emergency you can talk with somebody else. You have access so there's always somebody available" (Barb). Having supervisors available on an 'as needed' basis was considered ideal and contributed to job satisfaction and confidence. "...the important part of me being able to call them when I have a problem, and know that they were going to help me with it, that is always there"(Linda). A number of participants described the most helpful aspect of supervision was just knowing that supervisors were available on a consistent basis. Linda felt that there was never a time when she didn't have a supervisor available.

I have never felt the loss or the struggle of not having someone in that capacity to watch my back or talk to me. And I have personally experienced the opposite of that in another agency and it just boggles my mind how people can think that way when they are in the helping field...There are no holes or gaps like I am not supported.

Even in situations where supervisors were not immediately available, most were generally satisfied with the efforts of their supervisors to get back to them and to be available to answer questions as needed most of the time. Barb did express dissatisfaction

with the frequency of her contact with the supervisor but had resolved this somewhat based on what she thought was reasonable access.

One of the supervisors was like, well if I hear from you once a month, and certainly I thought that was a little bit too little when you're in a home but that was just one opinion...But their case loads are very large so you don't want to, you know, phone them with every little thing but you still want to use your discretion.

Access to supervisors after hours was also considered important. They described situations when they worked in the evening and either needed assistance or needed to debrief about something that happened during the day.

I've had to on a couple of occasions with cases call my supervisor after work hours and this has been a very important thing, because I've had to go over something that it's just out of this world and there is no one near...one thing that comes to mind is I remember I was pregnant with my last son and I went to visit a mom and I didn't realize her baby had passed on and her baby was with her - still I had no idea. She had put the baby in my arms, I was so and she was still trying to breast feed the baby...at that point I hadn't met the baby. I knew that she had been in the hospital and the baby was there...I was very stressed about it and of course I was very professional about it...(at home) I went upstairs, I locked myself in my bedroom and I was freaked out, my husband didn't know what was going on. I looked up my supervisor's numbers and so and I just cried, that's all I could do and I felt horrible for her, I felt horrible for me (Janice).

Having a supervisor available to debrief was crucial in this situation. Even though Janice did not have a list of supervisors' after hour numbers, she looked them up in the phone book. However, not everyone felt that supervision was available after hours, as Gail describes...“and they don't like coming out in the evening, even though our work requires some evenings, they'll do anything to try and make it happen in the day, I mean the daytime things do not go on in the evening”.

Being able to access different supervisors as needed as well as different levels within the agency was seen as important, although there were mixed responses on this topic. Some described this in the context of a 'team approach' and found it quite satisfying. Alice stated that she preferred having access to different supervisors in the agency as this enhanced her learning opportunities on the job. "The different styles and the way they do things, the more different styles, the more knowledge for me". A few, however preferred having access to their own supervisor when they needed help regarding a client as she would have more relevant knowledge of the specific family situations.

Sometimes like at that moment we want to talk to our own supervisor, it's something – of course the other one's like, I told you they are there to help too, but you feel very close with your supervisor because she knows the family and has met them and everything (Deanna).

Some women expressed concern about not knowing who to turn to on the job, especially when they started. "Not knowing who to call, ya that was an issue when I started. I think I called, I didn't know who I was supposed to call if I got cancelled"(Cassie). Having different supervisors to deal with also led to confusion for Ingrid who was distressed by conflicting messages she received from two different supervisors when she started at the agency.

I had a lot of problems when I first started especially understanding some of the policies with the time sheets that we were filling out, and so I was getting inconsistent information because I had two different supervisors...I asked a supervisor once it was, how do I do this and she explained her view of it. But then the other supervisor would get upset at me...so I found that kind of frustrating because there wasn't that consistency that you only had one supervisor.

Ingrid seemed to resolve her initial concerns and talked about her appreciation for different perspectives as she gained experience in the workplace.

There've been other times where it's been useful because I feel I learned more plus it gives you a different perspective. So I think it worked out in the end but in the beginning it was very frustrating because I didn't really know how things worked.

- **Understanding**

Supervisors who were understanding and willing to listen were seen by participants as supportive. All of the them mentioned the need to be heard and understood consistently during the interviews. "Well, like the understanding...you just hear so much stuff and they understand, like I said before, the effect that it has on you, it's not just – they just don't say they understand, I think they really truly do"(Kathy). Paraprofessionals experienced considerable distress working with families in need and found it helpful to 'unload' this burden or 'vent' to someone whom they felt understood what they experienced, as explained by Alice.

I phone the (supervisor) and I mean there's been times when I've had to just vent and then sorry, I know it's not you but somebody needs to hear about this day and its important and they completely understand and encourage it. They encourage you to phone them, even if it is just to vent.

This was echoed by Deanna who appreciated her supervisor's ability to listen as well as her professionalism. Even in conflict situations with clients, she felt that her supervisor understood both perspectives and responded in a helpful manner.

The supervisor has a big role there...and yet they listen to us, they listen to clients because they are professionals. They do talk really nicely and professionally to both of us, make us feel good and sometimes if it doesn't work that's okay, sometimes clash of personality or something that's alright. Then they can collect around that family and send us to somebody else and that family gets another supervisor or support worker.

Supervisors having the same work experience as paraprofessionals or having worked in the field was seen by a number of women as being an asset. According to Alice,

experience working in the field helped her supervisor understand the situations that she encountered on the job.

I think that because they've been out to the families, some of them may have been support workers. I don't know for sure, I'm speculating here, but they understand the situation that you're in and they understand how you would feel in a certain scenario so they can give you the compassion or the not compassion that you need or if you still need them to help you get through it.

Linda appreciated the commonalities between herself and her supervisor and felt this improved the understanding between them.

Because they are what I am...we'll talk and she came from where I am and I know that I can sit down with her and have a conversation and it's not –she's thinking the same way I'm thinking...I really appreciate that about our relationship.

- **Formal vs Informal Supervision**

Supervision that was more informal, spontaneous and voluntary was generally preferred.

The more formal, regular form of one on one supervision, often seen in more clinical settings, was not popular for most participants as Janice described.

I don't like getting formal anything. I don't really like formal, I like to be able to go in there and just chat on a casual basis and have that open line of communication. When that happens, I get very nervous and I don't feel comfortable, but that's just me. It may be a helpful process for other people but it's not for me.

Janice goes on to describe the impact that formal supervision had on her.

I feel that I have to in some way prove myself, that I have been working, that I'm doing good work and that I know what I'm talking about, that I know what's going on, with my work.... I feel like it's like a performance 'cause you walk in there with all of your binders with all the women you are working with and your file box and you're saying, look I know this about these people, I've done this time, and I don't know – it's like I'm preparing for a court case or something, for lack of a better term.

It seems that for Janice, the issue is not with supervision per se, but the expectation that she needs to 'report' and prove herself to her supervisor on a regular basis that she resents. In terms of formal vs informal, most wanted their supervisors available to them and attentive to their needs, however they did not express a need for regular, formal supervisory sessions. Overall they seemed to respond best to an 'open door policy' where they could access their supervisor as needed in an informal way, and where they felt welcomed by their supervisor. There were no participants that specifically expressed a preference for formal supervisory sessions which I found to be quite interesting.

- **Independence on the Job / Isolation Factor**

Overall most participants appreciated the independence that they experienced working in the field as a paraprofessional. The need for independence however, did not preclude the need for involvement from supervisors. They continued to value their supervisor's involvement, but appreciated feeling autonomous. "There is a difference between being supervised and being, you know, like I'm being constantly watched. I don't feel that way"(Alice). Ingrid described quite clearly the value she had for her independence on the job as well as the need for support from her supervisor.

I'm a very independent person so it's a good job for me... 'cause I feel confident in my day-to-day things, so I just need that. Somebody looking out for me once in a while kind of thing... I mean they treat us like they expect us to be able to handle what we're doing, you know, and they don't check on us constantly.

The down side to the autonomous nature of the job is the isolation that many described. Working independently in client's homes can lead to isolation for the paraprofessional, particularly when there are no systems set up to build a connection to the workplace. This

was particularly true for those working within agencies that had limited access to their team members.

Our job is very lonely - like you and the kids and even sometimes you have to decide you know, sometimes you call the office...and get the answering machine. Nobody answers the phone or you have to go back to the main phone and they send you to – you know (Heather).

Taking responsibility for the support needed on the job was seen by Janice as a helpful solution to the isolation. She saw her workplace as responsive and appreciated working autonomously and felt it was her responsibility to reach out to other team members and/or the supervisor as needed. She also saw the team meeting as an opportunity to connect with each other and minimize the isolation factor. The difficulty lies in workplaces where there are limited or inadequate opportunities for paraprofessionals to connect with the team on a regular basis.

Visits to the home by supervisors were met with mixed reviews. Some liked it when their supervisor dropped in to the home to observe the needs of the family and the work being done. Alice felt that home visits gave her supervisor a more accurate picture of the situation in the home and what she was up against in terms of the work and helped to reduce her feelings of isolation on the job. She described that if her supervisor actually witnessed some of the difficulties she experienced in the home, she was more sympathetic and responsive when concerns arose in the future. She also expressed that when the supervisor could really see what was happening in the home she was better able to appreciate the workers. Ingrid, however was uncertain as to how helpful visits by the supervisor to the client's home really were, especially when they were infrequent. "I don't know how helpful I find that simply because how do they judge the situation when

they're only there, you know, one time out of three months". Most felt that supervisors should visit the homes and the staff more often in general.

Generally, the majority preferred prearranged home visits by supervisors as opposed to unscheduled visits, so that they had a chance to prepare themselves. Surprise visits were viewed suspiciously by Gail who felt 'caught off guard' by unannounced visits from her supervisor.

One other thing I want to mention is that there are a number of us that, the supervisors will just show up. We won't know that they're coming and it's not because they're trying – I know that they're not trying to sneak up on you to see what's going on. It's just that they don't think it's important to call ahead and the importance of that is if we know they're coming, if we have something that we need to discuss we can start formulating it in our mind. Plus you can facilitate it by having the day organized in a way that maybe you will be able to talk to the supervisor.

Gail felt that she needed the preparation time especially since she felt she had limited opportunities for supervision. "I think it's just respectful that they let us know because it's – our supervision is so infrequent. If I haven't seen someone for eight months, it would be different if I was seeing them every month and once in a while they just showed up".

- **Empowerment and a Collaborative Approach**

An empowering and collaborative approach was discussed by most as an approach that they appreciated and to which they responded best. Supervisors who engaged them in problem solving, respected their views and encouraged them to discover their own solutions were highly regarded and contributed to their confidence as well as their sense of ownership about their work. They also felt supported when supervisors encouraged them to try new things as described by Barb.

They're there to suggest, you know like try this with the child or children or even the mom for that matter. But then if I say, if I want any of my input, they will say, it sounds good. Give it a try and especially I think often they are like, 'you're our eyes and ears, you know' kind of thing and they really do respect our opinions.

Women who were interviewed generally appreciated hearing other perspectives when they struggled with job related issues, but at least half preferred overall to be encouraged and supported to find their own solutions. Janice found it disrespectful when supervisors jumped in to offer solutions prematurely or without invitation. She also found it more helpful when her supervisor acted as a 'sounding board' when she was struggling with an issue and encouraged her to find her own solutions. She appreciated hearing a different perspective from her supervisor when she was too 'short sighted' to see the solution. The other half of the participants however, welcomed direction from their supervisors, particularly in difficult situations when they were either too close to the situation or had run out of ideas. "Where I wasn't sure about something...I didn't want to take matters into my own hands or something; just get input from the supervisor" (Erin).

Most preferred having choices about the work that they do and expressed dissatisfaction when they were not involved in decisions pertaining to their work, as described by Ingrid.

I guess the thing that I liked about the other people... I had a choice if I took this assignment or they'd find me another one, whereas in the last month or two it's been you know I'd call and ask for a new assignment and then I'd wait a long time and then they'd call me and say this is your assignment, which I didn't like that as much. I think that, especially if they don't know us that well, they should be asking us and offering us an option...it's a little threatening that I'm being told where I'm going and not being asked a lot about my preference.

Trust was an important component of an empowering approach. Many felt that they were trusted on the job by their supervisors and they valued this as discussed by Faith who stated “I have no doubt that they trust me completely”. They also appreciated when supervisors respected their unique and individual styles of work.

[W]hen a supervisor doesn't undermine what you – like again if your job doesn't have very good, like parameters so...that's not the right word but the way people do things that's different...So when they sort of acknowledge that your ways might be different from somebody else's (Kathy).

When their supervisor was able to listen and not try to fix the situation for them, they felt trusted. Janice described feeling that her supervisor trusted her and gave her the space she needed to do her work.

“I like the fact also in terms of supervision there's enough trust in my ability that they allow me to have my own space to do what I need to do and not overtake me, or not feel that they need to supervise everything I do”.

For Janice, having enough space to do her work was balanced with the supervisor's ongoing support and offer to help as needed.

- **Characteristics of a ‘Good Supervisor’**

Many of the participants offered their views about what makes a good supervisor. Their descriptions came from their own experiences with supervisors and captured the essence of what works for them. This supervisor was seen by Faith as supportive, approachable and advocated on behalf of her staff.

She was doing a very good job very, very supportive and approachable. You can call her any time. She's always there for you. She will even intervene on your behalf like it happened to me one day. I was in a home where this mother wanted me to punish the children and I said I don't do that. We are not allowed to. She phoned the office and she told the office that I was a ‘jello’. She wanted me to punish her child and I don't want to. And my client got hold of her (my

supervisor) and she told me right away. She said, we're backing you up. Don't worry. You're out of that home. This will be your last day.

Supervisors that were sympathetic in nature and warm and caring people were seen by many as being a good fit for the job. "I think it is important for them to be very sympathetic with this job we have. If we don't get a supervisor with like empathy or sympathy it won't work, and people will complain" (Deanna). Cassie described her supervisor in these terms –"thoughtful and considerate, just nice". Caring about others and treating people with respect were considered important qualities as well described by Ingrid. "I think most of my supervisors have all been very warm caring people really. They care a lot about the clients and treat us with a lot of respect, so I guess they choose their supervisors very well". Deanna associated these same characteristics with good supervisory experiences on the job. "I have had lots of good experiences with them and I think it's the reason I have had good like experiences with them, because most of them are very warm and friendly people. You don't want a cold supervisor".

Characteristics of flexibility, honesty and openness were described by a number of women as essential for supervisors. "I can think of a few adjectives to describe people that I think should be in this role and flexibility is so important especially for a supervisor, and being open and honest with the people that work in the office" (Linda). Linda also felt that it was important for supervisors to be clear about what their expectations were in the supervisory relationship and honest and 'real' in their approach.

- **Importance of Feedback and Validation**

Getting feedback and validation from supervisors was described by at least half as critically important to their survival on the job. Recognition and validation provided considerable positive impact. They described how they felt important and valued on the job, particularly by their supervisors. “I can’t talk enough about that. We feel important. We feel encouraged. We feel that there is somebody that – like we can count on if we are in trouble, they can help us” (Deanna). Validation for a job well done and acknowledgement from either the supervisor or management was very powerful as illustrated by Janice.

Last year I received from a (supervisor) a hand written card. I kept that card for a very long time. I was so incredibly touched, because you wonder sometimes when you’re working really hard, does anyone ever care or know what I am doing? Do I even really matter? When I got that card I was very touched, almost in tears, I kept it out at my desk and I kept it at home. I thought, that’s the power of words and people that get it, really, really understand it. There would be a lot less issues in the workplace, people who can understand it, people need to feel appreciated. They need to feel that they matter.

The majority of these women felt they received helpful feedback about their work. They especially appreciated positive feedback as illustrated by Deanna. “Ya, its great support, like it’s good for our ego and it feels good when our supervisor tells us you know what a great job you are doing”. Erin recognized the importance of feedback in general as it gave her direction as well as an opportunity to improve her work and make positive changes as needed. “I like how they give you feedback ... because some places...kind of let it go and then you don’t know when you’re doing something you shouldn’t”. Even constructive feedback was welcomed by Faith, as she preferred to know exactly what was expected from her by her supervisor. “When they tell you exactly what – when they give

you feedback about the families, that helps, very, very much, because that's about the family, then you would know exactly what they thought, what are their expectations".

Faith also described the positive impact of 'appreciation nights' that were sponsored by her agency.

There are like appreciation nights, Christmas party, there are appreciation nights only for people. They really do a lot of you know meal preparations for everybody and you get to have cake and salads. Wonderful...It feels nice, you feel appreciated. That is the purpose of that to let you know that what you do is not just being taken for granted but you are being appreciated and – it boosts up your self esteem.

Kathy described that feedback about her work was mostly restricted to yearly evaluations. While she found the evaluations helpful, she felt it was important for feedback to be given to workers on an ongoing basis throughout the year. A few participants described feeling unappreciated and uncertain about their value as a paraprofessional when their work on the job went unnoticed. Cassie described how distressed she felt without adequate supervision or feedback as a new employee.

You don't have that supervision, like they're not in the home with you, so sometimes I wonder like what are they thinking about me? Am I doing a good job? Like this way I think it was a little overwhelming because you get only two days of training when you start.

- **Back Up From Supervisor**

More than half of participants mentioned the importance of having a good back up system in place for them on the job, especially when problems arose while they were working in the community. They counted on back up from their supervisor when they ran into problems in the home and often needed their supervisor to intervene on their behalf, as illustrated by Cassie.

So when a supervisor did contact me back...ya this was unacceptable and so she really did like back me up and then she called the client and said that if she wouldn't open the door her home support would be terminated. So I felt like thanks, finally and it's not me saying it, it's her saying it, so you can kind of hide behind your supervisor, if you're having a problem.

Back up from the supervisor also helped in situations where they felt threatened or taken advantage of by their clients as described by Ingrid.

I had a client when I first started who was very overbearing and wrote up a schedule for me of tasks because she didn't think I worked hard enough for my pay. So, because I played with the kids all day – that's not work – so ya, so I talked to my supervisor about it and so she said, 'well would you like me to pull you out of that home or how do you want to deal with it? You know, what would you – I can pull you out – I can help you talk to them about it or I can talk to them for you'. So I talked to them a little and I didn't feel that that was enough so she came in and talked to them also, gave them papers about what specifically I can do and what is not in my job description and so I found that was supportive.

The use of agency policies can also provide paraprofessionals with helpful back up on the job. Ingrid described how her supervisor assisted in a home where agency policies were in question.

Sometimes questions of policy come up or a parent doesn't respect my authority when as representing the (agency) when I say that we're not allowed to do something. So then I call my supervisor and get clarification to make sure I understand and if the client still isn't you know believing me or whatever, or has a problem, then they'll get involved and make sure that things get worked out...so I know that if I can't work out a problem with a client they'll do it for me.

In this case, Ingrid felt that she could count on her supervisor to get involved when needed and also to support the limits she needed to set with the family.

Most of the women discussed how hard the work was at times, dealing with families who are struggling with multiple issues in the home. They found it helpful when their

supervisor understood the impact that the job has on them and were willing to respond. “I’m so glad, like it’s a big relief to me that I know they are there” (Deanna).

Some felt that they didn’t have back up from their supervisors, and this contributed to their dissatisfaction with the job as well as feeling unsafe. Heather felt her supervisors were ineffective at applying pressure to families to do their part in following through with their contract for service. She also described that there were times when her supervisor would ask her to do work in the home that went against agency policy. Gail describes a crisis situation in a home and her feelings about not having back up.

There have been some severe times where I wasn’t given any back-up...I was in a home with some very tiny children, and a caretaker and some very large people wanted to get into where I was and they wanted to show the suite and I didn’t want them...So I called the supervisor and I said, you know I spoke to the individual, I don’t want them coming in...She said, no it would be a breach of confidentiality, and I said it’s going to be a breach of safety because I’ve got some really big guys that I don’t know and they’re going to be coming in the suite momentarily. I said, maybe you could sort of stop them by explaining – and she said, no, she wouldn’t do that. She said if it gets that bad call the police and I – I just felt, just give it a shot because I don’t feel safe and that’s got to override confidentiality.

- **Boundaries**

A number of participants described needing help from supervisors regarding boundary issues with clients. In particular, they had connections with their clients that they often struggled to manage. They didn’t always feel that supervisors understood or appreciated how emotionally attached they became to their clients as described by Faith. “And over the years they will tell us, do not be emotionally attached. When you go home just forget it, leave it, leave it. Little do they know that most of the clients that are like gone out of service already are still close friends”. She seemed to appreciate, however that

supervisors were acting on professional guidelines that cautioned against getting too close to clients. “They don’t stop, the feelings don’t stop when you stop going in a home. I think the supervisors know, they do. They are just acting on guidelines but I think they are also human. I think they know, they sympathize. They just keep within the professional side of it.” The issue of boundaries came up with Ingrid as well, who found professional boundaries in her agency to be a helpful form of back up on the job.

There’s policies that are set up to support me with various rules that were designed to protect us from you know like we’re not allowed to carry the clients money, or with money because that can cause us problems, and they give us training in boundaries to protect us.

Some participants described that job expectations were too vague and their roles as paraprofessionals were too broad in nature. For Kathy, this has created a problem in the workplace as she sees some workers going beyond their role and being rewarded for this by supervisors. She felt that supervisors should be monitoring this and setting limits or boundaries on the role of the paraprofessionals on the job, as described.

I think also that supervisors should be, be really sure that counseling is not happening...in other words some (workers) are counseling more than they really should be but it’s kind of – it’s let slide because they don’t mind the way they’re doing it.

Kathy felt that their role as paraprofessionals in the community was too broad and questioned the ability of team members to manage this. “I think it’s just the broadness of it and also too broad of a role and I don’t think we are capable.”

- **Fairness**

Participants described the need for fairness from supervisors in terms of how they are treated within the team. Most felt that they were treated fairly overall, as described by

Deanna. “They are fair, that’s what – they listen and they decide ya”. Others expressed concern about the differential supervisory needs of coworkers and how this was managed within the team.

The boundaries are difficult to figure out. I find that one thing that also is a problem is that some people need more supervision than other people, and that shouldn’t like – but if you work in a team..., it does affect everyone if one person needs more supervision. I find that very distracting (Kathy).

The issue of favouritism was raised by a number of women who perceived that some coworkers got more validation and support from the supervisor than others. Kathy described this as follows.

Well if a supervisor likes somebody’s approach or their technique or way then it may make you the other person feels that yours is not. I guess things like playing favourites or whatever...And you can sometimes see it too, in the team dynamic you know...when you feel that one person is getting more validation and support and it really is difficult for the rest of the staff.

Janice echoed these concerns and recommended that supervisors receive specific training on this issue.

I think supervisors should be keeping up with some kind of training and learning more ways how to deal with supporting. Sometimes I see supervisors in our office they seem to use favouritism. It doesn’t happen with me but I see some of my other co-workers. They’re not treated as well...and it’s evident and I think it’s very sad...I don’t know what to recommend for that but I really think that there needs to be a standard - there can’t be favouritism.

She goes on to discuss the issue of bullying in the workplace and the destructive effect this can have on the workplace.

We did have an incident of a co-worker that was bullying but I think everyone turned a blind eye and a couple were scared. I don’t know, but we really needed someone to step up and no one did...There was a huge elephant in the living room you know there and everyone was pretending that they don’t see it and it was frightening. So this person had bullied some of the people. And they had no protection and I don’t know what to suggest but there should be training for that.

### ***5. Where Do They Get Their Support From?***

Women were asked in the interview to describe where they get support from for the job. The question was intended to be open ended, not only because I didn't want to assume that they found their supervisors supportive, but also to find out what other circumstances or situations were perceived by paraprofessionals as supportive. In fact many did find the majority of their support comes from their supervisors. "I walk into a home and I'm exasperated. I phone the supervisor" (Alice). Heather adds to this and explains,

Now, with the supervisor I am working I feel support about her, yes. Any problems in the home I explain to her what happened during the day or what happened with the children and I call or leave a message to her and she calls me back.

Alice described the work itself as providing her with support.

Knowing that the kids need you, the kids and the parents, everybody needs you there and it's maybe for different reasons. The parents may need you there for a different reason than the children need you there, but it's whatever the reasons, they are good reasons.

Practical supports such as transportation, as well as access to outside resources were all considered a source of support.

The cab service I find very, very useful and very, very good...and also for us to be, you know treated special in the wintertime and when you are not able to catch the bus. That is, to me that is the most help that is a very, very good help. They know, they can relate to your anxieties like when it is -26 and you are catching the bus, is very stressful (Faith).

Access to personal counseling was available to many participants. Some have used this service in the past and others, like Barb appreciated knowing it is there. "Well I haven't had to use it but we do have – say something happens, I don't know if it's at work, but it could be at work or in our personal life to have this time you can use where you come in to their counseling department".

An agency newsletter was considered to be a helpful resource on the job that a significant minority appreciated. A newsletter seemed to help them stay connected to their work place, particularly when they worked in family homes and had little contact with the larger agency.

They are now coming up with a newsletter...I like that...and then you could give your feedback, do you have any information to share. That's a good thing, more socializing, more of the write up or literary you know – before they hardly put out newsletters, but now they do (Faith).

Cassie liked the opportunity the newsletter provided for staff to get to know their supervisors better. She suggested getting to know their coworkers and supervisors through write ups or stories every month or so, “like (about) new people they hire on but maybe like background information, a little bit about each supervisor because that's who you're dealing with quite regularly”.

Staff days or retreats were seen as very supportive to a number of women. Kathy described a session on vicarious trauma as being very helpful to the team and to herself personally.

They have tried to give us staff days...like vicarious trauma workshops, so they are aware, very aware of the impact of our job, so that's good...I don't know what the answers are but they are at least aware of it and they are trying to minimize the impact on us and we do actually we talk about that.

Social events with team and coworkers were seen as especially supportive by at least half of the women, as they offered opportunities to connect with others as well as a chance to ‘lighten their load’ and have some fun together.

They are very good with activities like a bowling night and with our supervisors and there is an exchange of pleasantries. That's a good one but if they could do

that more often that would also be good, you know, like kind of a little bit of more socializing with the supervisors and co-workers (Faith).

Cassie echoed her appreciation for the social events set up at the agency as they gave her an opportunity to meet other women at work. “They do have some...pot lucks. Every once in the blue moon I would say something there, I was like, okay but I don’t mind that at all and it was good for me to meet some of the other women at work”.

A few referred to their personal life as offering them support for the job as described by Cassie. “I get really good support from my family too.” Not only was her husband a source of support, but she also drew support from her faith. “My husband is a huge support. He, you know when I feel like I can’t do this job one more day, he really encourages me, and my beliefs I guess. I’m a Christian, so I find support in that”.

- **Peer and Group Support**

Peer and group interactions were highly valued by all women in this study. They felt that they had valuable information to share with one another and they found these opportunities to be very supportive as described by Deanna. “The support we get from co-workers and employers, that makes it (the work) much, much easier”. Meetings with peers offered them a chance to debrief as well as connect with each other and vent about the clients and the work, as described by Barb. “And you go and you talk about – talk to each other whether it’s about your clients or not. It’s just for a get together and to chat and to vent and to let it all out and things like that”.

Cassie offered a suggestion for networking with peers based on support she received from a coworker when she was new to the job.

I know a couple that were veterans there and they gave phone numbers and said if you ever have any need to talk about this. I think one day after that I got a ride home with one of them and I just kind of like lost it, it all came out...you really need to have an outlet, to leave work at work when it's people you're dealing with.

Connections with peers was also appreciated by Linda who described how coworkers in her workplace offered support and assistance to one another.

I am extremely fortunate to work in that office with those particular women. We all just really seem to gel...And we in turn supervise each other kind of thing...Because we're comfortable with each other that way. If I know that someone needs something then I just kind of do it and vice-versa.

Professional and paraprofessional colleagues working with paraprofessionals in the community were also seen as a source of support. Janice liked the feedback, encouragement and new ideas generated by her colleagues. "They're encouraging. They tell me whether my perceptions are right or wrong or they tell me that maybe they see things differently which gives me an opportunity to maybe see that mom in a different way or in another way that I could help them". Feedback from colleagues as described resembles that of a consultation role. Consultation, because it is removed from the agency itself, can be a helpful tool in that it offers workers a more objective viewpoint about their work.

Group supervision was described and experienced by most participants as helpful and offered opportunities for problem solving, dealing with administrative items and providing support. The amount of time offered for group supervision varied within one

agency depending in some cases on the paraprofessional's level of experience. They appreciated having access to their supervisors during these meetings to touch base and deal with problems as needed.

Every other month we get to sort of chat...The supervisors are there and we get each others support as well as she will provide formal time to talk about the work and so stuff like that, then you can check in too. If I had a concern about a client's home and I knew that meeting was coming up I could arrange a time to meet with that supervisor then and there as well. Sometimes they just peek in and say hi. They know we are coming (Barb).

Training on various relevant topics was often incorporated into group meetings as needed or available. These training opportunities were seen as helpful by all, although a number of women felt that they should be more frequent and more relevant to current topics in the workplace.

Group meetings were very powerful and offered opportunities for support and problem solving that individual supervision did not provide, as described by Ingrid.

I was a little concerned about it at first but I have found it to be very helpful. Because when we're talking to each other, things come out that might not come out otherwise, concerns that we have that we might tell our peer but not a supervisor, and then sometimes that – there are supervisors in the group though, and so we end up talking about it in a way that's more comfortable for people.

Ingrid experienced group supervision as less threatening, more comfortable and more productive than individual sessions with the supervisor.

Getting together as a group was sometimes difficult, especially when paraprofessionals were busy working in the field. Heather found it hard to participate because she was busy and because the group/peer meetings were not paid for at her level.

Sometimes it's hard. We don't spend much time, we don't come too often to the office even with our co-workers, you know. That's why now I say no. I am going all day...My co-workers, sometimes they don't go because they say if we go there, they don't pay us...we don't make a big salary, we don't have the salary (so) sometimes they don't want to participate.

All who discussed this issue felt it was important to be paid to attend group sessions as they viewed this as part of the work. A few also felt that there weren't enough opportunities for group supervision built into the job and sometimes found that group sessions did not meet their needs, as described by Gail.

(Some) people meet once a month because they're working in more severe homes. I asked if I could possibly go to (this meeting) because I had some things that were beyond what I should get in my (meeting). The (supervisor), she thought it wasn't a bad idea, but when she approached management they said no. If they did that for me they'd have to do it for everyone. I just thought, I've never asked for this in all these years and I have, you know a home with a lot of police involvement and this and that and I need, I'm asking for it.

Gail went on to explain that her group did not meet often enough and the content of the group session she attended did not meet her needs. She felt that she needed more training on the job and did not feel that her requests or concerns were regarded by her agency. "I need some more training because I can't fly by the seat of my pants...I don't feel that the input from employees is really regarded".

## ***6. Supervisory Relationships***

The women talked about how important it was to have a positive relationship with their supervisor, particularly at a personal level. "We're not just sort of employees, we matter and they care, that's important" (Erin). Having a personal connection with their supervisor for many meant that they felt important, cared about and supported.

- **The Personal Touch**

They expressed the need to feel appreciated and cared for by their supervisors, as described by Alice.

The compassion, like...if you go into a situation and you're very concerned and you think, oh my God, and you phone the supervisor and you say, okay, this is what you need to do to, give me the compassion. And you know if I walk into a situation and it's made me cry - you get the hug and the pat on the back.

A number of them appreciated when supervisors were affectionate towards them and expressed concern about their personal lives.

Some people are more 'huggee' than others but when I'm there most of the supervisors always hug me and ask me how I'm feeling. And if there was ever something going on in my personal life and I was a little teary or whatever you know they're always there. So that's really nice, especially when I'm not in the office every day. I can't speak for all of the workers but most of us are happy with the support we get from there (Barb).

They appreciated when supervisors encouraged self care and attended to the personal needs of staff.

When I first started I thought they were babying the staff. I never had a number of supervisors making sure that you're okay, you know, you're feeling okay, you need to come do this, you need to call in advance, you need to make sure, you know, take your due time...and I thought, what a bunch of babies! And then I started working and then I realized okay, they obviously have been working here longer than I have! I'm just gonna be quiet (Alice).

Alice came to appreciate the attentiveness of her supervisors, as she gained more experience and realized what an impact the work could have on her personally. This was discussed by Linda as well who credited her team and her supervisors for their focus on self care. "I can honestly say that I think because we are such a tight group and if I need something, self care is a big thing for me...My feeling journey was a lot of – large part of my education...and I brought a lot of that with me and they really appreciate it".

- **Power and Authority**

Most acknowledged that they work within a hierarchy and for the most part were accepting of this, provided that they were treated fairly. “We know who our bosses are and who’s, you know the superior, but the important thing I think is to not like to feel that way, and for them not to act superior. It’s like, we know, but you have to be firm but fair” (Erin). Most of the women valued working as a team within more of a ‘flattened hierarchy’. “Even (the executive director) doesn’t like being called boss, you know, like I do that to tease her, but she’s...she doesn’t put herself there, she thinks it’s not needed, you know” (Linda). Linda as well as a number of other women felt free to disagree with their supervisor and voice their opinions as needed. “I just want to point out that even if I don’t – it’s not really lack in supervision or the skills, but if I don’t agree with my supervisor and I have run up against that, I don’t feel pressured to keep it to myself”. Linda went on to state that she didn’t feel intimidated by her supervisors, despite the power differential.

Cassie did, however feel reluctant at times to bring up issues with her supervisor. “For me too sometimes you don’t want to call your supervisor, you know like, you know am I going to be in trouble for this”. There were also situations where participants felt they had to go beyond their supervisor’s authority to advocate on behalf on their client, as described by Barb. “There’s only been twice that I recall where I had to go over a supervisor’s head to get longer service (for the client)”.

Criticism from a supervisor had a strong impact on some who described feeling upset when challenged by their supervisor. Ingrid described feeling intimidated when her supervisor brought up concerns regarding her paperwork. Her supervisor met with her in person to help her understand how to complete the paperwork and discussed how it affects others in the agency. She had this to say about it.

At the time of course it was intimidating and I felt threatened but looking back it was the appropriate way to deal with the situation and she was respectful, you know, so I never had any problems with that.

Ingrid clearly appreciated the respectful way she was approached by her supervisor in this situation. Having clear expectations from the agency and supervisor can also help paraprofessionals manage potentially difficult situations. “Sometimes I, they can be very rigid of course and I’m not a rigid person, and so sometimes we don’t always agree but I know what’s expected of me. There’s no question or surprise, so” (Ingrid).

The supervisor’s use of power was seen as appropriate and helpful to a number of women who needed back up related to their work with clients as stated by Barb.

I had a lot of kids in one home and so I was having trouble with discipline and just keeping them under control because I would end up with them all by myself. And so we (the supervisor and I) realized at some point that the kids thought of her the way a lot of kids think about a principal. So she came down and she wrote a contract about behaviour with them and because she was my boss, she had authority...and I thought it was terrific. She was one of my favourite supervisors.

- **Evaluations**

The use of evaluations was seen by most as important and helpful. In fact it was surprising to me and interesting to note how many women not only welcomed evaluations regarding their work, but also complained when they were not done in a

timely manner. They appreciated feedback in the evaluations that was both constructive and timely. Often supervisors were described as inconsistent in administering evaluations. This was frustrating for many who wanted and needed regular feedback about their work.

It would be nice if supervisors were able to you know have evaluations maybe a little more often because they don't share their feedback with you. I'm thinking in particular of my co-workers I know, the one that I know one that is not always treated fairly. She tries to really do good work and she doesn't really get a lot of feedback. She never thinks she is doing a good job but there is no one really to you know do an evaluation. It would be really helpful for her (Janice).

Participants appreciated when their evaluations were recorded and when copies were provided to them. Faith collected all of her evaluations over the years and they represented to her a job well done.

I have collected all those every year and it's this many I collected...after we finish the client...(the supervisors) are in touch with the client and they talk like about that. And they should because they ask the client, okay, was she on time, how was she with your kids, stuff like that and are you happy...and then they give you a copy of it and you know kind of make a file of that and, my files are this thick already...Oh, it's good because you see the client's response to that, and you will see how the client thought about you, you know and how you performed.

Barb appreciated the feedback that was generated by the evaluation as well as the recognition she received for the work she had done.

...they're an example of, because it's on record especially the jobs that are well done. Because this was actually not a complicated home, this little guy...he got a diagnosis of autism which is great because he gets way more at school. And she thought that the stuff that I had done in the home was really amazing. The (supervisor) was like, way to go, job well done and it was really good. On top of that the couple had separated over this stress of the child and towards the end of my time there was a little over two years, they were getting counseling and I was there for them to go to counseling. They are now together again. And it feels really good.

## ***7. Safety on the Job***

The issue of personal safety on the job was discussed by just over half of the participants, all of whom had strong feelings on this topic. The importance of this topic for women was an unexpected finding for me and highlighted both the isolation that paraprofessionals felt in the home as well as their vulnerability.

I think our safety is a really big thing if we're not – if we don't feel safe... You can certainly get out of a home but you might not be able to get out at the moment type of thing, but I think cell phones are important. For a long time, and it still goes on, people are working in homes with no telephone... I really believe that we should all have a cell phone... I just think, you know that it's just so much better to have access to a telephone with the dangerous man in a home or a dangerous situation (Gail).

Gail felt that cell phones should be provided to all paraprofessionals working in the community to improve safety. The concern about safety in the homes was echoed by Cassie who clearly felt vulnerable going into homes at first. Even though she talked about the back up available, she still sounded uncertain about her safety.

You're going into people's homes and there's that safety issue at first. Like is this what I want to do, like am I going to feel safe? I mean they really reassure you if you don't feel safe in the home don't go to the home, so I mean they do, they say they always back you up like the worker over the client, because these are employees and you really should feel that back-up.

The involvement of supervisors and the support from the agency was seen by some as offering protection on the job. Faith appreciated the taxi service for late night hours and spoke about home visits from her supervisor to check out safety issues. "We get home visits from the supervisor and if they are aware of anything at all, life-threatening or otherwise they would try to, you know, pull us out or ask our opinion are you safe there, you know".

Health issues such as disease and lack of cleanliness in the homes were seen by some as safety risks, as described by Heather. “Like for me it’s not safe to go to the bathroom. It’s really dirty and you don’t want to go...you know that kind of stuff”. Gail identified similar concerns about health risks and linked this with her dissatisfaction about the pay she received. “(There are) lots of health risks, lots of illness and communicable diseases and that type of thing, so that’s what I worry about not being compensated properly”. She felt that dealing with health issues on the job often required ‘extras’ that her salary did not normally cover.

The potential for violence on the job was seen as ever present. The need for better policies to protect paraprofessionals was discussed by Gail as extremely important.

One thing I don’t agree with and they believe is that when a partner or a spouse, a violent ex-partner / spouse sometimes will come to the home. They always say things like, don’t worry they’re not after you, you know, they’re after the other person. But the thing is when those people are in an angry state, they’re not thinking anything, they’re not after you that’s true, but you’re in the way, you’re standing in the way.

Heather illustrated this quite graphically by describing an incident of sexual assault by someone in the home where she was working.

I (was) also working, well, when I get there the babies were sleeping and the mother was not there, it was the father. I say, I am the (worker). I come to work to help you with the babies...the tv was on, the guy says, sit down and watch tv, because the babies are sleeping and she is sleeping and he was sitting in the chair. I watched tv but when I sit there I didn’t feel so comfortable with him and I asked, where’s your wife, and he said, she’s on the second floor, she is sleeping. Okay. And then I was watching tv and the man started masturbating. You know I, I feel oh so – I start getting the looking what I going to do and I stand up and I went to see the babies because one of the baby’s start crying...I picked the baby in my arms when suddenly the man was standing up and he stand behind me, you know... I notice this guy follow me, when I sit down I sit to watch tv and he started, you know. What am I going to do? I was so nervous and when it was

12:00 o'clock time to go...I'm going to leave, okay, bye, bye. I just come to the office to report that you know.

Heather was tearful and upset recounting this traumatic event during the interview, as she clearly still had feelings about it. She did get support from her work place and the incident was reported to police. "The supervisor...I explained to her and she said, you know you have to report that to the police and they call the police and I had to explain what the man do, and I didn't work for the rest of the afternoon." In addition, supportive counseling was provided to her by her workplace to help her deal with the trauma. Understandably, Heather described her main concern on the job as safety. She expressed concern as well about supervisors not doing an adequate screening of a home before the staff go in.

### ***8. Pay and Compensation***

Issues related to pay and compensation were mentioned by half of all the participants, who expressed concern that their pay did not adequately compensate them for the work they were doing as well as the risks to their health and safety.

I feel like what I'm doing is worth \$25 an hour, because what job do you go to - police officers and firefighters they have risks but they have back-up, you know. When we do this kind of job there is no back-up when things go crazy and you're putting your safety on the line and you know I just think no child psychologist is either getting exposed to the kind of things we're having to do and yet you use the skills they have to use and talking people down and all that kind of thing. I just think that money isn't everything but ...(Gail).

The other women echoed these concerns that the demands and skills required on the job were greater than the compensation offered, particularly in situations where they didn't feel they received adequate supervision. Again, Gail stated this most clearly.

Because we're doing so many things plus we're basically our own supervisors, I've always felt that you know in pay equity it's, I guess that's been one of my concerns...I don't mind taking on all that responsibility but if I am and I'm doing these other jobs then I should be reimbursed, not just me but all of us that are having to do that.

Not all of them expressed concern about their pay, although they still acknowledged they are not getting paid much. Faith felt grateful for her pay. "Of course, like you know we are not getting lots of pay, we only get \$11.00 an hour but I'm so grateful, I'm not complaining". Likewise, Ingrid felt her pay was low, but she remained committed to her job and appreciated the opportunities it provided for growth and advancement. "I feel like it's my career probably, not a very good paying career, I mean it's not something that people normally choose as a career because of the pay range but I really enjoy it and I feel like there's a lot of room for you to grow".

Even though the issue of pay was a concern, some found other rewards on the job that seemed to compensate them for their efforts, as Janice described.

It's not about money otherwise I would've stayed with (my other job) and for a lot of women that are in there it's not about money, it's not about getting a raise although that is helpful. Really it's the little things that help you go a little bit further and that's really what it is, you know, really, because you are emptying your tank daily and you need to be filled up in another way.

### ***9. Recommendations from Paraprofessionals***

Paraprofessionals were asked during the interview to make recommendations that would improve supervision for themselves and others. Their responses were varied but capture some of their previous thoughts and opinions about their experience with supervision and are presented in order of importance or 'weight' given by the paraprofessionals.

- **Supervisors should be more involved in the homes with paraprofessionals and provide more outreach to staff in general.**

The majority recommended that supervisors should be more involved with the work in the community. “I guess more ongoing home visits. I know their lack of time especially in the longer goings on when you’re there for a year...Just for them to see more what is going on in the homes, on top of what I am telling them” (Barb). According to Alice, more involvement from supervisors would help them to better understand what she faces in families’ homes. Kathy raised concerns that supervisors were not always aware of what went on in the homes and “should have their eyes open to say kind of realize what goes on in the home visit”. They also wanted more involvement from supervisors in term of planning for families and setting goals.

Many felt that supervisors needed to reach out more often to offer support and see how the staff were doing. The need for outreach from supervisors was an important one, as stated by Deanna. “It’s not that they should come when it’s like a formality, it’s a home visit, but once in a while give them a call and just to see how things are going and how the service or your (worker) and how things are working”. Faith felt forgotten about at times and wanted her supervisor to check in regularly to see how things were going for her. “A regular, regular basis, and not just forget to wait for us to phone them you know and gather some feedback information you know. So you are not being neglected...”.

- **More training should be offered to staff and supervisors.**

A significant minority talked about the importance of education and training in the workplace from a number of different vantage points, as stated by Ingrid.

I kind of think that the (agency) should require more education from us...like the minimum of a day-and-a-half seems fairly low to me, 'cause we all come from different backgrounds. Sometimes we don't have certain skills and I think that a lot of us, myself included, probably need more education in this kind of work.

Improved training options should be paid time as well according to participants. Janice felt that the supervisors needed more training, on how to better support staff and deal with favouritism and bullying in the workplace. She recommends "I really think that there needs to be standards. There can't be favouritism".

A few recommended improved orientation in the workplace including the use of job shadowing for new workers. Kathy recommended the use of a training manual as she felt this would assist workers in identifying job roles, appropriate boundaries as well as offer guidance and clarity to all the staff about their roles in the community.

- **Safety needs to be improved on the job.**

The issue of improved safety was recommended by a minority of women, however they all felt very strongly about this issue. Heather felt that supervisors should do a better job of assessing homes for safety in advance of the paraprofessional going in. Another participant felt that this assessment should also include information about 'red flags' within families, again prior to the worker starting service.

Gail recommended that cell phones should be provided to all workers in the community to improve safety. This was especially true in homes where the family did not have a phone and the participants were concerned for their safety, as described by Heather. “The family sometimes they are low income, they – and sometimes they don’t pay the bill, they cut the service. Sometimes I – well I talk to the – maybe I have to buy a cellular for my safety you know, but now I am not able to, I have to pay other bills”.

- **Communication needs to be improved with supervisors and within the team**

A few participants felt that improved communication in the workplace would reduce isolation and improve connections overall. “There needs to be more communication, cause you do feel isolated... You kind of feel anonymous in your own work because they don’t know what your circumstances are, what your life is about, you know” (Cassie). Linda felt that there should be more opportunities for paraprofessionals to work together as a group. “I think we need to spend more time in a group together...there is not a balance right now as far as manpower is concerned, so...it would be nice I think, as group to keep us more together. Sometimes we need more self care”. The need to improve the focus on self care within the team was also recommended. They felt it was important for supervisors to support and encourage self care.

In terms of communication, Cassie suggested setting up a network between workers to ‘mentor’ one another, as well as improved opportunities to meet with her peer group. She described this as follows. “Maybe have a network where you – like have phone numbers of people and you know people who are willing to just talk or having where you have like

groups of (workers)...Maybe some of them don't need this but just having like ...small groups where they're meeting this time, and you get paid for it, 'cause you don't really feel connected to your work". Faith recommended more opportunities for socializing with coworkers and supervisors. "They are very good with activities like a bowling night and with our supervisors and there is an exchange of pleasantries. That's a good one but if they could do that more often that would also be good, you know, like kind of a little bit of more socializing with the supervisors and co-workers".

Cassie also recommended that agencies provide clear and updated information regarding contact people in the organization as well as information about their roles.

Possibly also if they made us more aware of who our contact people are, that would make a difference too...One time I received a paper that who we contact for certain situations, questions, or whatever, but that changes and I think it was more by name than by job title and so there's quite a bit of turnaround in the office so that really needs to be updated regularly I think.

Gail recommended that her agency run focus groups with paraprofessionals to assist the agency to understand the specific needs of their staff.

I think a focus group, that you know the people could volunteer, where management and maybe a few supervisors would be present so that we could discuss what, you know, what is working, what isn't working, what would be better – to serve our needs.

Other individual recommendations included an improved focus on evaluation and feedback from supervisors, as well as hiring more supervisors to improve the supervisor / staff ratios.

## ***10. Summary of Findings***

I believe that the findings represent the experiences of the paraprofessionals who participated in the study and provide insight into their 'lived experience' in supervision. The importance that they placed on the supportive role of the supervisor as well as the relationships with their supervisors was a strong finding, one that was not completely surprising to me, however they placed more emphasis on this issue than I would have expected. This was evident not only in the content of the interviews but also was reflected in the need most of the women had to debrief about some of their experiences on the job. Overall most participants seemed satisfied with their experience in supervision which speaks to the good work that is already being done in the field. The recommendations they made with regards to supervision were insightful and thoughtful and add weight to the discussion of the findings as well as the overall conclusions and recommendations.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion of Findings

#### **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, findings were presented based on the paraprofessional's views of supervision in the human service field. In this chapter the findings are analyzed and discussed within a number of theoretical frameworks related to supervision in social work and human services. Supervisory practices within existing paraprofessional models are analyzed in response to the views expressed by participants in this study and gaps in the literature are highlighted for consideration.

#### *1. Women's Work and Caring Roles*

It is clear from the recent literature on paraprofessional models that paraprofessionals have made significant contributions in the helping field. They are valued as well by the agencies that employ them as evidenced by the women's experiences in this study. Hiatt et al (1997) state that "the strength of the paraprofessional visitors lies in their histories and their potential to share their successes in such a way that their clients are inspired to grow, change and shape their own destinies" (p.91). The findings speak to the importance of the role of the paraprofessional and I have personally seen the unique connections that paraprofessionals have been able to create with their clients as well as the emotional attachment and support that inspires clients to take a leap of faith and make changes in their own lives.

A number of conditions remain of great concern. Women are more likely to work as paraprofessionals in the human service field than men. In this study as previously discussed, only women came forward to participate, as there were very few men, if any who were employed by either agency as a paraprofessional. Gabriel (1999) discusses how women's work in the labour market is marginalized. She uses the term 'occupational segregation' to describe the differences that women experience in the labour market related to labour market participation, work experience, earnings and unemployment. She discusses globalization of the economic market and the negative impact this is having on women in the work force and in particular women of colour. "Different groups of women have been and continue to be unequally incorporated into a labour market constituted by intersecting and multiple social relations, including those of gender, class, 'race', sexuality, age, disability, among others" (p.127). She goes on to state that more often than not, women "work for lower wages and their work is often undervalued" (p.130). This is even more pronounced for women of colour who not only share labour market characteristics of other women, but also "experience simultaneously racialized and gendered forms of class oppression" (141). As previously stated, at least half of the women in this study identified themselves from minority cultures and a number were also immigrants.

The issue of women's work and caring roles applies to paraprofessionals in the human service field. The women in this study are providing paid care to families in the community and as such are working within their gendered roles. Baines, Evans and Neysmith (1998) discuss how even though women's caring work as a whole remains

undervalued in our society, there have been gains made in traditionally female occupations such as social work, nursing and teaching that has not been seen in the front line work of paraprofessionals.

While professional social workers have gained more status, front line caregivers such as child-care workers, homemakers, and residential workers remain amongst the lowest paid. Many of these workers belong to the most disadvantaged groups in our society, immigrant women and women of colour (p.7).

The devaluing of women's work and high representation of women from minority groups was true for those in this study. They described their lower status and pay as being an issue of concern, particularly in terms of sustaining them in the field. A number of women also described their frustration with their lack of influence in terms of policy and decision making within their agencies. While most found their work rewarding, their value was not always acknowledged in the workplace and a number found support for the job to be lacking.

Despite some of these drawbacks, most found their work meaningful and saw it as their career. There is a need, however for greater recognition within the social services regarding the value of paraprofessionals and this should include better working conditions, better pay and more involvement in agency planning. Musser-Granski and Carillo (1997) in their article on training needs of the paraprofessional in mental health services, agree that paraprofessionals need to be paid competitive salaries, and provided with opportunities for advancement, all of which are supported in the findings.

## *2. Systems Theory and the Supervision of Paraprofessionals*

Social systems theory offers a sound theoretical framework to understand supervision in the human service field, and applies directly to the supervision of paraprofessionals. Schulman (1993) and Hughes and Pengally (1997) stress the interrelatedness of the individual, group, organization and environment and advocate for an open systems approach to supervision. Participants in this study described how the degree of involvement of management within their agency had a direct impact on them as employees and on the work they do in the field, in terms of relationships and feeling valued. When management was actively involved and interested in the work that they did with families, they stated that they felt valued as employees and that they made a difference. They counted on agency policies to back them up on the job and help them to navigate the challenges they experienced in the homes as well as with other systems. It was important for them to have a voice in the agency and to influence agency practices and policies, and equally important for them to understand what was happening within the agency.

Mediation is identified by Hughes and Pengally (1997) and Schulman (1993) as a function of supervision that is systemic in nature, with the supervisor mediating the process between the client, the worker and the organization. This function also relates to the need for communication up and down the chain of command in an agency. Women in the study discussed the importance of mediation related to the need for back up from supervisors in terms of dealing with problematic situations with clients or systems. When

supervisors were able to mediate successfully between the clients and themselves, they felt more overall satisfaction with supervision.

Within a systems theory approach, supervisors are in a position to advocate on behalf of staff for changes that will improve working conditions and satisfaction of staff. Advocacy is needed from supervisors to improve conditions for paraprofessionals on the job, especially in terms of improved working conditions, safety issues, pay and compensation as well as improved service for clients. Many participants had concerns about their safety on the job as well as low and inadequate pay for the work that they did.

### ***3. Group / Peer Supervision and Support***

Group supervision is discussed widely in the literature and recommended by a number of authors as a useful form of supervision, usually supplemental to individual supervisory sessions (Kadushin and Harkness, 2002; Schulman, 1993). Group work can be either in formal or informal staff groups, and can include in-service training as well as administrative business. Schulman sees staff as active participants in the learning process and advocates for group supervision as an excellent tool to enhance learning for professionals. Kadushin and Harkness identify a number of advantages to a group setting that include the opportunity for enhanced learning and sharing, as well as opportunities for emotional support amongst members and building staff morale. Proctor (2000) agrees with the above authors, however she advocates for the use of group supervision as preferable to individual supervision as it offers group members access to a broader range of learning opportunities and stimulation. She also presents group supervision as being

able to 'harness' forces of competition and differences that can produce tremendous anxiety in supervision.

The literature on paraprofessional models recommends the use of group meetings as a form of supervision for paraprofessionals (Graham et al., 2000; Grant et al., 1999). The participants in this study discussed the use of group work/supervision and all agreed that it offered them a strong source of support. All of them valued and appreciated opportunities for group supervision, and in fact many felt that there were not enough opportunities within their workplace to meet as a group. Group supervision was experienced as a less threatening learning environment for participants, and was also seen as a safer environment to confront or challenge supervisors.

The women described 'support group' meetings and 'team meetings' as having enhanced opportunities for sharing and learning from each other as well as their supervisors. They valued having formal time to talk about the work with each other which often led to more dynamic and meaningful discussions. The emotional support offered during these meetings was highly valued and had an extremely positive impact on staff morale. Staff retreats were also seen as a supportive and useful group activity. Although they were not asked directly to compare group to individual sessions, it seemed participants in this study found group supervision preferable to individual sessions. Overall, I believe that group supervision is a good fit for paraprofessionals as it increases their sense of personal power, builds connections and support within the team and provides enhanced learning opportunities and skill development. It should be offered however within an overall

context that includes opportunities for both group and individual supervision and should be considered paid time as noted in the findings.

Peer supervision is defined by Kadushin and Harkness (2002) as a process by which professionals meet to discuss cases and treatment approaches without the involvement of the supervisor. Formal peer supervision as so defined was not discussed by participants in this study and does not appear to have been used in the agencies that employed them.

Normally peer supervision is not recommended for paraprofessionals as by definition it demands a level of clinical expertise and leadership for which paraprofessionals are not educated or trained. What is useful for paraprofessionals however, are opportunities for peer support in the workplace. The women in this study repeatedly discussed the importance of connections with their peers as described by Linda. “I think that just being with the girls I am with and speaking to them that level we have all experienced it here and there both personally and professionally ... There are no holes or gaps like I am not supported”.

Meeting with peers offered them a chance to debrief and vent to one another about their work. They enjoyed the ‘camaraderie’ and down to earth nature of these connections and described that talking with their peers helped to lighten their load and manage the stress of the job. This was also true about social events sponsored by the agency. Many talked about these events as being positive for them as they helped to build connections with one another. A few talked as well about their connections with colleagues in the

community and the valuable feedback and learning opportunities these connections provided.

Peer support is an important component that needs to be built in to all paraprofessional programs or work environments. This is discussed by Graham et al. (2000) who recommend that “home visitors need to be part of a strong supportive peer group, fostered by their supervisor. Supports specifically help home visitors deal with personal and job related stress” (p.34). Paraprofessionals need opportunities to connect with each other as well as debrief and vent about the work. I experienced this first hand during the interviews as many participants used the interview time to debrief about the work that they did. It was my impression that they did not have enough opportunity to do this in the workplace and welcomed the chance to talk about their work to an outside interviewer. Even more, I felt that some participants had unresolved issues about events that had occurred on the job and needed assistance to deal with them, which I was unable to provide in my role.

#### ***4. Three Functions of Supervision***

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) discuss three basic functions of supervision within social work that are identified as the administrative, educational and supportive functions. This framework for supervision has been widely used and accepted in the social work field since the 1970's and is still relevant today. I present this as a useful framework for the supervision of paraprofessionals based on the findings from this study. Austin (1978) and Briscoe (1977) in the earliest literature on the supervision of paraprofessionals discussed

the need for administration, education and support, although more emphasis was placed on the training and support of paraprofessionals. Skidmore (1990) echoes the functions of supervision as presented by Kadushin and Harkness (2002) and calls them teaching, administering and enabling. The literature on paraprofessional models does discuss supervision within this framework and includes the importance of administration, orientation and ongoing training, evaluation as well as support. (Graham et al., 2000; Musser-Granski and Carillo, 1997; Hiatt et al., 1997). Grant et al. (1999) discuss the importance of sound administrative practices as well as program evaluation but makes little mention of the importance of the supportive function within supervision.

The administrative functions discussed by participants include hiring, training, work delegation, pay, monitoring and evaluation, advocacy and communication. They valued having good systems in place to deal with work hours and pay in particular. They also appreciated the flexibility offered by their agencies related to work hours and personal needs and preferences. In terms of the work itself, most found it helpful to have policies and guidelines in place to assist them with boundaries and setting limits with clients.

Communication between various departments or sectors within the agency was considered important and the need for improved communication was a recommendation made by participants in the findings. They wanted to know what was happening in the agency, not only from a policy perspective but also on an interpersonal level; who was leaving, who was new to the agency, etc. Some women were distressed when they needed help on the job and didn't know who to turn to for what. They recommended that this

information should be made available to all staff and be clear and kept updated on a regular basis.

Evaluation is a significant supervisory function and the literature places it within both the administrative function (Kadushin and Harkness 2002) as well as the education function of supervision (Schulman 1993). Women in the study talked about evaluation and overwhelmingly described the need for ongoing feedback as well as validation regarding their work. They appreciated getting positive feedback as it made them feel good about the work they were doing, but they also appreciated constructive feedback as it assisted them to take corrective action as needed.

Schulman (1993) in the Interactional Model for supervision sees evaluation as closely tied to the educational function. He also stressed ongoing evaluation throughout the year and not saving it for once a year review. This fit for participants in the study as they too described the need for evaluation as a mechanism for them to improve their skills as well as take corrective action as needed. They also preferred feedback that was delivered consistently and as needed, not waiting for yearly reviews.

Many authors agree that evaluation should be communicated in the context of a positive relationship with the supervisor and as part of a mutual collaborative process (Kadushin and Harkness 2002; Schulman 1993; Kaiser, 1997). Kadushin and Harkness focus on evaluation as an administrative function. Schulman's view of evaluation places it more in the context of the supervisory relationship which I believe is a better fit for

paraprofessionals. Kaiser in her work on supervisory relationships discusses evaluation as part of a limit setting function within supervision. She sees it as important to give ongoing feedback to staff to assist them with corrective action. This fits with both Schulman's views on evaluation as well as the feedback from participants in this study.

The education function is described in the literature by a number of authors. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) as well as Schulman (1993) and Skidmore (1990) focus on the educational function of supervision within the context of skill development for the professional. I believe that the development of therapeutic skills is important for paraprofessionals and generally inherent in most interactions with supervisors. The women in this study however, discussed their educational needs in more practical terms. They referred to the need for training that was specific to the learning needs of the job as well as the need for a complete and thorough orientation at the beginning of the job. The importance of training for paraprofessionals is presented by a number of authors on paraprofessional programs, who describe the need for training that is practical in nature and job focused (Hiatt et al. 1997; Minore and Boone 2002; Grant et al. (1999; Graham et al. 1997; Musser-Granski and Carillo 1997).

Austin (1978) discussed the training needs of the paraprofessional with a strong focus on the paraprofessional as an adult learner, advocating for the use of concepts that included the need for autonomy, the value of life experience, and the expansion of their problem solving capacity – all of which are described as important for participants in this study. In more recent literature Morrison (2001) focuses on an adult learning model in supervision

that he states works well for the professional as well as the paraprofessional helper. He recommends the use of a developmental and solution focused model for supervision that addresses the growth and development of the supervisee over time. I believe that a developmental model is a good fit for the paraprofessional. The participants in this study described that they needed more supervisory involvement and training during the initial stages of the work and less supervisory input and/or a more solution focused approach to supervision as they gained experience and competence on the job.

A number of authors recommend that paraprofessionals receive extensive orientation and training at the start of the job (Graham et al. 2000; Grant et al. 1999; Hiatt et al. 1997). For example, Graham et al. recommends 5 weeks of initial training as well as clear policies and procedures to assist new staff to become oriented to their new position. The need for improved orientation to the job was echoed by many who felt that they were unprepared for the work initially because of the lack of a proper orientation. They reported that when they received adequate orientation and initial training for the job they felt satisfied and prepared. Others who had only one or two days of orientation felt afraid, and unprepared. Erin found job shadowing at the beginning to be extremely helpful and she recommends this for new workers. Kathy suggested that having a training manual for new staff would help to prepare them for the work. The need for extra feedback and assistance as a new paraprofessional was also an important issue for many and they described needing increased access to supervisors during their initial orientation phase.

Paraprofessionals in the study placed great value on training opportunities offered through their workplace and stated that this contributed to their overall satisfaction on the job as well as their confidence in their own abilities. As described by Gail however, some reported that the training that was offered was inadequate and affected their ability to do their job. “[W]e probably don’t get enough credit for the amount and the professionalism that we need to bring, and the skills really go way beyond what we ever had training for”. Paraprofessionals require extensive and specific training related to their job, on an ongoing basis to provide them with the tools to intervene effectively with populations that they are serving. The need for improved training options and orientation was a recommendation made specifically by paraprofessionals in the findings.

The supportive function in supervision acknowledges the interpersonal relationship between supervisor and supervisee. Kadushin and Harkness (2002) identify the tasks associated with this component as “seeing that the people who do the job are comfortable, satisfied, happy in their work, and have a sense of psychological well being” (p.226). Because of the tendency for paraprofessionals to over identify with their clients because of their shared backgrounds, Musser-Granski and Carillo (1997) state that paraprofessionals need emotional support from their supervisors and a safe supportive environment. The issue of ‘support’ is critical in supervision of paraprofessionals as discussed by women in the study. Overall most felt that they had adequate or exceptional support from their supervisors, with many finding the majority of their support coming from their supervisor. However, a few did express dissatisfaction with the support they received on the job which led to feelings of isolation and distress.

Participants described needing genuine and timely responses from their supervisors, as well as assistance with problem solving. They stressed the importance of availability and access to supervision, not only during the day but after hours as needed, especially in crisis situations. Supervisors who were understanding and willing to listen were seen as supportive. They also described the importance of receiving ongoing feedback and validation from their supervisors. Supervisors who provided back up for them on the job and were willing to ‘pitch in’ and help out as needed were highly valued. In terms of feeling cared about, they appreciated when supervisors reached out to them on the job to check in with them. This was particularly important for those who spent the majority of their work time in family homes and who had little opportunity to connect with supervisors or coworkers at the agency itself.

A number of other resources or situations were described as supportive. These included access to transportation such as cab rides in unsafe or difficult to access areas, having a newsletter to keep up to date on agency events and information, as well as staff retreats and social events. Faith appreciated the opportunities her workplace provided for social events and recommended more such events. Getting together with supervisors and coworkers in a social setting helped her feel more connected to the workplace and closer to the people with whom she worked.

The supportive component of supervision, while acknowledged in the literature on supervision, was not emphasized sufficiently to meet the needs of paraprofessionals. Even in the literature on paraprofessionals, little mention was made about the importance

of support. In a dated publication on supervision of community workers, Briscoe (1977) recommended that support be provided to help community workers cope with the stress of the job. She saw support as providing valuable feedback to the paraprofessional regarding their work, in terms of the need for corrective action, and encouragement and assistance to help the paraprofessionals see the benefits of their work. I am surprised that the issue of support was not discussed in more detail within the literature and in particular related to paraprofessional models. I feel that the paraprofessional models described in the literature fall short of addressing this significant component. It seems that too much emphasis is placed on accountability in these models and not enough attention paid to the support needs and the supervisory relationships.

#### ***5. The Centrality of 'Relationship' and 'Power' in Supervision***

The concept of relationship as central to supervision is presented and discussed by a number of authors and provides a meaningful framework for the supervision of paraprofessionals. (Kaiser, 1997; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002; Schulman, 1997; Muse-Burke, Ladany and Deck, 2001). Kaiser in her Conceptual Model of Supervision, acknowledges systems theory and presents the supervisory relationship as the context within which supervision takes place. She addresses issues of power and authority, knowledge differential, limit setting and shared meaning and trust. She also talks about issues of culture and oppression that are relevant to the discussion of supervision of paraprofessionals. Participants in this study discussed these issues related to relationships with supervisors and strongly valued a positive working relationship. They described the importance of having a personal relationship with their supervisors; knowing them as

people and being known and understood by their supervisors. Having a personal connection with their supervisor for many meant that they felt important, cared about and supported.

The knowledge differential as discussed by Kaiser (1997) refers to the impact that supervisors' advanced knowledge has on the working relationship with supervisees. With regards to paraprofessionals, participants in this study valued the problem solving and suggestions of their supervisor, as long as it was done respectfully and in a supportive manner. Kaiser also discusses the limit setting function within the supervisory role and its impact on supervisees. Any negative feedback is defined as limit setting by Kaiser, delivered through either formal or informal evaluations. The women in this study welcomed evaluations and found it distressing when they were not done on a regular basis. Kaiser agrees that the issue of providing feedback either formally or informally should not be sidestepped. Participants seemed to welcome constructive feedback as it provided them with opportunities for validation and also development of their skills through corrective action.

The issue of power and authority is an important topic in supervision overall. It can be considered even more significant in the supervision of paraprofessionals, as the power differential is greater between the paraprofessional and the supervisor than in the professional context. Kaiser (1997) states that "supervision occurs within the context of a power differential between supervisor and supervisee" (p.26). Schulman (1993) also

discusses the power imbalance inherent in supervision and recommends constant attention to this in the supervisory relationship.

For the most part, those in the study acknowledged and accepted the power differential within supervision. Some participants expressed frustration and a sense of powerlessness however, when they were unable to influence the system to meet their own needs.

Concerns were expressed about not having enough supervision or enough access to supervisors and they felt they couldn't do anything about it as described by Gail. "Right. Sort of like if we don't, we see your mouth moving but we're not really hearing, you know if we don't then we don't have to take responsibility." Others felt that their concerns were heard and responded to, which lessened their frustration and improved their overall satisfaction with the job. Some were quite adamant that while they accepted the 'one up' position of the supervisor, they actively resisted this at times when they disagreed with their supervisors on work related issues as stated by Linda.

I think the bottom line is, I am the one going into that house. I'm with them, and I have a relationship with them, but it is my job to make them [the supervisor] understand that... We have on occasions made compromises and that's fine, great but if I strongly in my gut know that that is not the right thing for the family and the kids then I have to speak up.

Linda is describing the sense of personal power presented by Kaiser (1997). Kaiser states that supervisors need the cooperation of the supervisee in exercising their role. This is certainly true in working with paraprofessionals as Faith expressed. She stated that they are the 'eyes and ears' of the work and supervisors needed the workers' cooperation if they are to fully understand what is happening out in the field.

Kadushin and Harkness (2002) stress the hierarchical nature of supervision and describe this within the context of a bureaucracy. Kaiser (1997) acknowledges the power imbalance within the hierarchical nature of supervision but recommends the use of a flatter structural hierarchy. This approach promotes feminist values of equality within the supervisory relationship. Participants described working in a hierarchy with everyone having their different roles, but they tended to stress the importance of working together as a team. They clearly preferred working within a flatter hierarchy as discussed by Kaiser and others. They valued supervisors who were willing to 'pitch in' and help with the work as needed. They knew who their bosses were, but most didn't find this intimidating, because their supervisors had a more collaborative and inclusive approach as described by Linda. "Even (the executive director) doesn't like being called boss, you know, like I do that to tease her, but she's...she doesn't put herself there, she thinks it's not needed, you know."

The use of an empowering and collaborative approach was recommended in supervision by a number of authors (Schulman, 1993; Morrison, 2001; Kaiser, 1997). Barnes, Down and McCann (2001) also discuss the influence that feminist values have had on supervision that has led to a more collaborative approach overall. These approaches are strongly preferred by the women interviewed. Supervisors' who engaged participants in problem solving, respected their views and encouraged them to discover their own solutions were highly regarded and contributed to workers' confidence as well as their sense of ownership about their work. They also preferred having choices about when to

access their supervisor and input into the content of the supervisory sessions as stated by Janice.

Definitely when I choose to go into my supervisor's office as my choice and I talk with them...I'm very assertive to say...I'm not really looking for solutions right now, and when that is heard and respected and that's supporting to me.

Kaiser (1997) recommends that supervisors address issues of power openly to minimize the negative effect this has on the supervisory relationship. This is even more important where power imbalances are greater, such as with paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals need an atmosphere of openness and safety where they feel free to take risks, and are able to challenge their supervisors. This is supported in the literature by both Kaiser (1997) and Austin (1978) in the early literature on the supervision of paraprofessionals. Most participants felt free to speak out openly and disagree with their supervisor as described by Linda. "If I don't agree with my supervisor and I have run up against that, I don't feel pressured to keep it to myself." There were even occasions where participants described 'going over their supervisor's head' to advocate on behalf of a client or address a concern. This practice seemed to be supported by their agencies without any obvious negative consequences for the participants. I think this speaks highly of each of these agencies openness and willingness to collaborate with paraprofessionals.

The degree of flexibility, independence, and autonomy afforded to participants had an impact on how they felt about supervision. Overall they seemed to appreciate a work environment that offered them independence and autonomy as stated by Alice. "I'm a very independent person so it's a good job for me...they treat us like they expect us to be able to handle what we're doing, you know, and they don't check on us constantly". The

need for autonomy and independence was also seen in their preference for informal supervision where they could seek out assistance from supervisors as needed. I was surprised by this finding, as the literature on paraprofessional models advocates for formal, regular supervisory sessions as the mainstay for supervision of paraprofessionals in various programs. As previously discussed, it seems that formal supervisory sessions are preferred by paraprofessional programs as they provide a stronger measure of accountability. Looking at this issue from the point of view of the paraprofessional however, women in this study had a clear preference for informal supervisory sessions, where they had more control over supervisory sessions as well as more choice as to the frequency and content of the sessions.

### ***6. Oppression and Culture***

Kaiser (1997) identifies cultural differences as potential blocks to shared meaning in the supervisory relationship. She describes shared meaning and trust as “the grease that allows the smooth running of the supervisory relationship...shared meaning (is defined as) both mutual understanding and, ideally, mutual agreement between the supervisor and the supervisee” (p.88). In terms of culture, Kadushin and Harkness (2002) state that supervisors are more likely to be white and supervisees are more likely to represent diverse cultures. I believe that there is an even greater likelihood of barriers to shared meaning between the supervisor and the paraprofessional, not only because of cultural differences, but because of different life experiences as well as differences in educational backgrounds. Kaiser states that recruiting and retaining workers with diverse cultural backgrounds creates a more effective service for clients, a point with which I would

agree. Workers with cultural knowledge have unique skills to bring to the workplace and something of value to teach their colleagues.

Kaiser (1997) states that it is important to be aware of differences within the supervisory relationship and equally important to develop an understanding about one another's cultures and negotiate these differences. She further recommends authentic discussion about cultural attitudes to promote shared meaning. In this study, women did not specifically discuss cultural differences within the supervisory relationship, even though at least half of them identified with a minority culture. They did however discuss issues of shared meaning. Supervisors who had worked in the field as paraprofessionals were seen as having an advantage in terms of understanding and sharing meaning with the participants. Even without the shared work experience, supervisors who were understanding and willing to listen were seen by participants as supportive, reducing the gap between them in terms of differences and enhancing the shared meaning between them.

One participant did talk about cultural differences with a client who was aboriginal and how she learned to be more appreciative and less judgmental of aboriginal women from this experience. Another participant talked about different practices in Canada as opposed to her homeland of Chile and expressed frustration that our system was less willing to impose standards or 'rules' on families here. She expressed frustration with our social service system because they were unwilling or unable to 'force' families to comply with the care plan.

I did not experience any challenges in the interviews from participants in terms of my white middle class presentation. It may have been that our common experience as women reduced the gap between us or that I did not adequately probe on this topic during the interviews. It could also be that participants felt intimidated by our differences and/or reluctant to discuss their views on this issue for fear of judgment.

Kaiser (1997) describes the importance of honesty and supervisors attention to shame or respectfulness. Honesty is seen by Kaiser as telling the truth about oneself and taking responsible action. Women in the study valued an honest and genuine approach in supervision and described that it built trust and confidence in themselves and in their feelings about their supervisors. To avoid shame, Kaiser states that supervisors must create a safe environment for supervisees. This was also stated as important for women and most described that they felt safe with their supervisor which allowed them to address issues without fear of shame or reprisal.

A number of authors (Kaiser, 1997; Morrison, 2001; Schulman, 1993) recommend the use of contracting to address differences between individuals in the supervisory relationship and promote a positive working relationship. Contracting can promote clearer expectations and understanding about what will take place within supervision and in the work and can also address cultural differences between the supervisor and supervisee. The use of contracting as discussed by Kaiser could be a helpful tool in the supervision of paraprofessionals. A number of participants discussed the importance of having clear expectations and honesty within the supervisory relationship. Contracting

could also provide an opportunity for collaboration between the supervisor and the paraprofessional and build trust and confidence. It is important to note, however that the women in this study did not discuss the issue of contracting in supervision. Given their stated preference for supervision that was more informal in nature, I would speculate that the use of contracting may not be well received by paraprofessionals, depending on how it was presented and the purpose of it within supervision.

In terms of oppression, some women in the study exhibited signs of being oppressed in the workplace. Even though the supervisors and the paraprofessionals were all women, there is a clear power differential in place, with supervisors representing the dominant group and paraprofessionals representing the oppressed group in terms of lower pay and status on the job as well as poorer working conditions. Signs of oppression demonstrated by women in this study included anger and resentment and were expressed by a number who didn't feel heard or valued by their agencies. According to both Mullaly (2002) and Bishop (2002), anger can be seen as a personal response to oppression. Anger is described by Bishop as a source of power, and as such the responses from paraprofessionals can be seen as productive as well as active resistance to oppression in the workplace. Mullaly also recommends the constructive use of anger in addressing oppression (p.193). The problem here is that even though paraprofessionals may be expressing their anger constructively, the opportunity for 'transformation' is limited unless they are heard and joined with by the dominant groups in their workplace.

Concerns about favouritism and fairness in the workplace were discussed by a number of participants in the study and may reflect resistance to their experience with oppression. It is possible that differential treatment of supervisees in the workplace may trigger experiences of oppression in the women interviewed. Mullaly (2002) describes resistance as a form of power, “which may be manifest in the everyday ways that oppressed groups and individuals struggle against domination” (187). The women in this study discussed a number of situations that could be seen as acts of resistance. A few described resisting their supervisors’ efforts to advise or direct them in their work. Another declined to attend group meetings and gatherings at the agency that were not considered paid work. Others described their dislike of formal supervision and wanted control over when and how they experienced supervision.

Internalized oppression is another response to oppression as described by both Mullaly (2002) and Bishop (2002) and is often manifested in compliance by the oppressed group of the values of the dominant group. Mullaly describes internalized oppression as follows. “When one’s personal identity matches the negative portrait or social identity provided by the social world, then we have a case of internalized oppression” (p.59). This concept can be applied to the workplace and was seen in the findings when paraprofessionals were reluctant to speak poorly of their supervisors and tried not to complain about the drawbacks of their job in terms of pay, safety and lack of supervision. Gail stated this clearly when at one point in the interview she felt uncomfortable presenting her concerns and stated “I don’t wish to speak you know poorly of my supervisors. I want – you know. I work with all of them and I want to be able to work

well with them”. It seemed that a number of paraprofessionals in this study were reluctant to go against the practices in their agencies or downplayed their concerns. This could be because they were afraid to speak out or because they had internalized the idea that they should be ‘grateful’ for what they had.

Mullaly (2002) and Bishop (2002) both advocate for transforming ‘power over’ into ‘power with’ others to address oppression in our society. Bishop also encourages us to look at our role as oppressor in society and challenges us to ‘become an ally’ and help break the cycle of oppression. This strategy can apply to the supervision of paraprofessionals in the human service field. It is important for supervisors and agencies alike to join with paraprofessionals to improve their working conditions and address issues of oppression in the workplace at a personal, cultural and structural level.

### ***7. Boundaries***

In terms of the literature on supervision, professionals are assumed to maintain appropriate boundaries in the workplace, although issues related to transference and counter transference are discussed, especially with regards to clinical supervision (Muse-Burke, Ladany & Deck, 2001; Kaiser, 1997). The issue of boundaries was discussed in more detail in the literature on paraprofessional programs (Musser-Granski and Carillo, 1997; Lambert, 1999; Hiatt et al., 1997). Musser-Granski and Carillo discuss the importance of addressing boundaries, as paraprofessionals are by nature ‘close’ to the clients they are working with and tend to over identify with clients due to their shared backgrounds. Lambert (1999) states that the front line nature of paraprofessional work in

the community as well as the non traditional venues for client contact make it especially important for supervisors to assist paraprofessionals with boundary issues. She recommends a flexible approach in supervising paraprofessionals and advises open discussions about boundaries on an ongoing basis within supervision.

The issues of boundaries was discussed by a number of women in the study as well. They described needing help from supervisors negotiating boundary issues with clients and with their role in the community. For the most part, they recognized the closeness and the emotional attachment that often occurred with clients as well as how difficult this could be to manage at times. At times they spoke of looking for more direction on this issue than supervisors were able to provide. In terms of their roles in the community, a number of participants felt that they needed clearer expectations and assistance with maintaining a reasonable boundary regarding their work with clients. One described their role as paraprofessionals in the community as too broad and difficult to manage. She was clearly asking for help from her agency in this regard.

### ***8. Burnout and Safety***

The experience of burnout by workers in the human services is discussed by a number of authors. (Schulman, 1993; Kadushin and Harkness, 2002; Azar, 2000). Azar presents the following definition of burnout or 'compassion fatigue' which she applies to both professionals and paraprofessionals in the human service field. "an exhaustion of a practitioner's mental and physical resources attributed to his or her prolonged and unsuccessful striving toward unrealistic expectations (externally or internally driven)"

(p.644). She sees burnout as more common in high stress jobs, especially when there is inadequate support for the work. Supervision, including access and availability of supervisors, is seen as a protective factor against burnout and Azar recommends a cognitive behavioural approach to address burnout. She points out that paraprofessionals are at high risk for burnout because of the stress of working with high risk families as well as the closeness that they tend to have with their clients. The women in this study described various incidents including the death of a client, physical assault of a worker, agency policies that are inflexible and unsupportive, funding problems and lack of support, all of which are described in the literature as risk factors for burnout. None of these participants described themselves as 'burned out' on the job but a number presented as frustrated with the lack of support they received, and described incidents occurring on the job that continued to cause them distress and remained unresolved.

The issue of safety is related to burnout. I believe that if adequate mechanisms are not in place to ensure worker safety, then paraprofessionals are more likely to experience burn out on the job. Worker safety was not discussed specifically in the literature on supervision or paraprofessional models. One of the key findings of this study was the number of participants who felt unsafe on the job. My impression was that many participants interviewed did not feel safe and issues of safety had not been adequately addressed by their workplaces. Ensuring worker safety requires true understanding from supervisors and agencies about the risks that paraprofessionals experience on the job as well as back up from supervisors, improved agency policies, the use of cell phones and improved and careful screening of homes in advance. Agencies should also be involving

paraprofessionals in planning and policy development regarding the issue of safety in the community.

Systemic mechanisms must be in place on an ongoing basis to address the issue of burnout with paraprofessionals. Related to this is the need for advanced clinical input into programs that employ paraprofessionals. The clinical issues that arise, particularly as they relate to boundaries, require the input or direct supervision of well-trained clinicians. Strengthening supervisory practice is crucial to preventing and addressing burnout for paraprofessionals.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusions and Recommendations

I embarked on this research to better understand the supervisory needs of the paraprofessional and to improve supervision for paraprofessionals in the human service field. The literature on this topic falls short of providing a useful and comprehensive framework and it was my goal to explore this further from the perspective of the paraprofessionals themselves. I was also interested in better understanding my own experience as a supervisor of paraprofessionals. This section sums up the discussion of the findings and offers recommendations for consideration.

1. There is a need for greater recognition of the value and contribution of the paraprofessional in the human service field. Women's work is devalued in our society and this clearly has implications for the paraprofessional. Agencies that employ them and their supervisors should join with them to learn about their experience with the work as well as develop ways to improve working conditions. This would include providing opportunities for advancement in the agency, more equitable pay for the work as well as improved working conditions. Since supervisors are in a more powerful position within the agency, they should be advocating on behalf of paraprofessionals and clients as needed in the agency and within the broader service community.

2. Supervisors need to be more actively involved with paraprofessionals to assist with assessment and planning in the homes as needed, providing back up, and being available

in situations of crisis. The use of a developmental model is recommended in supervision with more involvement from supervisors for new paraprofessionals, moving towards less involvement and more autonomy as they gain experience and skills on the job. It is important to note that complete self sufficiency is not a goal for supervision of paraprofessionals as they express the need for ongoing support and outreach from supervisors regardless of how much experience they have.

**3.** The need for support was seen as critical for those in the study. In many workplaces in the human service field, not enough attention is paid to the supportive function within supervision. This function needs to be highlighted in working with paraprofessionals and given extra consideration. Supervisors who were understanding, responsive, validating, willing to help, caring and honest were considered very supportive. Other forms of support need to be considered as well, including opportunities for peer support, socializing with coworkers and keeping in touch with agency events through newsletters or the like.

**4.** Group supervision / group meetings are recommended not only in the literature but by paraprofessionals themselves. This is an important form of supervision that provides paraprofessionals access to a wider range of learning opportunities as well as connections with each other. It was seen by them as a less threatening and safer learning environment. Group supervision should be part of an overall framework of supervision that includes one on one sessions as well training and staff retreats.

**5.** Feedback, validation and regular evaluation from supervisors should be a priority and should be delivered within the context of a positive working relationship with paraprofessionals. The women in this study also stressed the importance of outreach from supervisors to ensure that they felt connected, appreciated and looked after.

**6.** It is important to ensure adequate opportunities for ongoing and relevant training on the job for the paraprofessionals. By definition, most paraprofessionals come into the job without post secondary training or education and therefore training should be incorporated into the job and considered part of their paid work. Orientation activities should be highlighted within the agency and be sufficient to ensure they feel adequately prepared to offer service to families in the community. The amount of time and the content of orientation will vary depending on the position, however it requires careful consideration for paraprofessionals.

**7.** Supervisory relationships are significant and require ongoing attention with paraprofessionals. The use of a flatter hierarchy within existing systems is recommended as well as an empowering and collaborative approach to supervision. Issues related to power need to be addressed openly within the supervisory relationship and attended to on an ongoing basis. I believe there is a need for both informal as well as formal supervision with paraprofessionals. Respondents did prefer a more informal, open door framework, however I believe that there is still a need for formal supervision to address issues of accountability in supervision. This issue requires further in depth study and inquiry however from paraprofessionals.

**8.** Paraprofessionals need help to address issues related to boundaries with clients as well as within their role in the community. This requires ongoing attention as paraprofessionals by virtue of their shared characteristics with clients and the nature of their role in the community are confronted with boundary issues on a daily basis.

**9.** The safety of paraprofessionals working in the community needs serious consideration in the workplace. Agencies need to understand the impact that the work has on their staff and respond to this. Their response should include revision of policies related to safety as well as attention to the impact of trauma in the workplace. Paraprofessionals need more opportunities to debrief about their experiences on the job as well as assistance from supervisors to address their concerns. The issue of safety is related to burnout and supervision is seen as a protective factor against burnout. Systemic mechanisms need to be in place to address both safety issues as well as burnout of paraprofessionals. This should include clinical input on an ongoing basis regarding the work itself, staff retreats, improved training, as well as strengthening the supervisory relationship.

**10.** It is important to be aware of paraprofessionals' experience with oppression, in terms of their past experiences as well as oppressive practices within the workplace, particularly as they relate to power and culture. Agencies should draw from anti-oppressive models of practice within social work for direction in terms of their supervisory practices. Supervisors need to be aware of the impact of their role as oppressors and challenge themselves to transform 'power over' within the supervisory relationship into 'power with'.

- *Implications for Social Work Practice*

Many social workers are in positions in the human service field where they are responsible for the supervision of paraprofessionals. This study has highlighted the unique challenges and rewards of working with paraprofessionals, and offers a number of important recommendations for consideration within social work practice. Social workers, by virtue of their professional status and position of authority as the supervisor will have greater power than the paraprofessional in the workplace and need to be conscious and thoughtful about how to deal with this power differential.

The use of a flattened hierarchy within the human service field certainly fits with social work values of equality and collaboration and was preferred by paraprofessionals in this study. Supervisors and agencies alike should examine their efforts to work collaboratively with paraprofessionals and include them in planning around service delivery within their agencies. The issue of oppression and women's work needs to be made conscious and better understood within the human service field and in particular regarding the supervision of paraprofessionals. Social workers and administrators should be challenging the experience of oppression in the workplace and strengthening their attention to anti-oppressive social work practice.

It is important to highlight the significance of the supportive function within supervision and attention to this with paraprofessionals. Women in this study had strong views on this issue and stressed how important it was for them to feel supported on the job and for their

unique experiences working in the community to be heard. Of equal importance to them was the nature and quality of the relationship that they had with their supervisor(s).

- ***Implications for Further Research***

This exploratory research of the paraprofessionals' views of supervision is the first of its kind in the human service field. The results from the study are not generalizable however and more research from different vantage points is recommended. This could include more specific inquiry and research around a number of the key findings from the research, including supportive supervision, group work vs individual sessions, safety and burnout, and the supervisory relationship. Further research on the topic of supervision from the perspective of the supervisor would also provide an interesting comparison to this study as well as a different perspective on this topic.

There is a need for better understanding of cross cultural supervision as well, especially within aboriginal agencies. I was unsuccessful in recruiting in connecting with an aboriginal agency to draw participants for the study. This is clearly a limitation of the study and research on supervision of paraprofessionals within Aboriginal or immigrant agencies would be worthy of follow up. It would also be useful to study supervision of paraprofessionals who are integrated into professional program areas such as child welfare, mental health, etc., and explore this topic within a multi-disciplinary setting.

The findings from this study will be presented back to the individuals and organizations that participated in the study, with the hope that this research can inform the

administrative practices within these and other interested agencies and organizations. It may also be useful to consider publishing the findings from this study, given the scarcity of research related to the supervision of paraprofessionals.

- *On a Personal Note*

I have learned a tremendous amount from this research study, not only from the background literature on this topic, but from the thoughtful responses and personal experiences of the women who generously agreed to participate. I have come to better understand my own experience as a supervisor of paraprofessionals. I have always valued both a flattened hierarchy as well as a positive working relationship with staff and coworkers. I have been committed to a collaborative and respectful workplace and sincerely cared about the paraprofessionals with whom I have worked.

What I may have failed to consider was the impact that the power differential had on the paraprofessionals that I supervised. I was naïve and uninformed about the impact of oppression in the workplace and within the team. I tried to be their friend and colleague, as well as a caring supervisor. I did not recognize my role as oppressor. Nor did I realize that my position of power intimidated the staff and kept them watchful and vigilant to all of my actions, no matter how small or unimportant they may have seemed. I believe in retrospect that they were mistrustful of my goodwill and support. My response to their individual needs may have given the impression of favouritism, an issue that festered for many years in the hearts and minds of the staff. My experience reinforces the need for a

better understanding of paraprofessionals and the challenges associated with supervising this unique group of workers in the human service field.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **Summary of Proposal:**

#### **Supervision of Paraprofessionals in the Human Service Field: A Qualitative Approach**

This research study will focus on the supervision of paraprofessionals in the human service field. The study will focus on the paraprofessional's experience with supervision and will use a qualitative methodology. The central research question is: What are paraprofessional's views of supervision in the human service field?

The purpose for gathering this information is to contribute to our understanding of the most effective supervisory practices for paraprofessionals in the human service field with the goal of improving supervisory practice.

The method of data collection will be the use of semi-structured, one on one interviews, approximately one to one and a half hours in length. Interviews will be tape recorded with the permission of the participants. Participants will be recruited from a number of social service agencies in the city and their involvement in the study will be voluntary and confidential. A review of the research study and a request for participation will be distributed to each program site and interested paraprofessionals will contact myself, the principal researcher directly by phone. Interviews will be set up with participants outside of the workplace and outside of workplace hours, to ensure confidentiality. Within the study, the identity of the participants will be disguised as needed and pseudonyms will be used. Results from the completed study will be made available to participants and participating agencies/program sites.

## APPENDIX B

### Letter of Introduction to Program Director(s)

Name of Site :

Date :

Attention: Program Director

As per our recent telephone conversation, please find enclosed a summary of the research proposal entitled « The Supervision of Paraprofessionals in the Human Services Field : A Qualitative Approach » for your review and consideration. Thank you for your initial interest in the study and for agreeing to review this proposal. The research I am conducting focuses on the supervision of paraprofessionals in the human service field, from the perspective of the paraprofessional. The completion and defense of this thesis will satisfy the requirements for my Master's Degree in the Faculty of Social Work.

I would like to invite the paraprofessional staff from within your organization to participate in this study. Please see the various appendices attached which provide detailed information regarding the content and process involved for participants.

I will be contacting you within the next week to discuss gaining access to the paraprofessional staff within your organization. If you allow me access to the staff, I will not require any additional information or assistance from yourself. I will be dealing directly with the paraprofessionals on their own time, outside of work hours. Their identities and participation in the study will be held in strictest confidence, to ensure their authentic participation.

When this research study has been completed, I will be glad to send you a copy of the findings for your interest. Please feel free to call me if you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and the participation of paraprofessional staff from your organization. You are also encouraged to call my supervisor at the University of Manitoba, Dr. Lyn Ferguson at #474-8273 if needed. I greatly appreciate your support for this study as well as the opportunity to make contact with the paraprofessionals within your organization.

Sincerely,

Cathe Umlah B.S.W.  
Graduate Student – Faculty of Social Work  
University of Manitoba  
Home :  
Cell :

**APPENDIX C**

**ATTENTION :**

**Support Workers / Outreach Workers !**

**Would you be interested in being part of an important study ?**

**I am doing a research study with the University of Manitoba to complete a master's degree in social work. I am interested in understanding your experience with supervision as an outreach worker. Your views and experiences are extremely important and are the focus of my research study.**

**If you agree to participate, I will need one hour or so of your time, outside of work hours to interview you in person. Your name and participation will be strictly confidential. Your workplace will not be told about your participation in the study. Your agency has been advised of this study in general, however and are supporting it.**

**I need your help !**

**If you are interested, please call me (Cathe) at ###-#### as listed below. Please leave a message if I am unavailable and I will call you back the same day. I am providing each participant a \$25.00 fee to cover any expenses for your participation.**

**I look forward to hearing from you !**

**Cathe Umlah  
Graduate Student/Researcher  
University of Manitoba  
Ph :**

**Please direct questions or concerns to myself or my Faculty Advisor Dr. Lyn Ferguson, University of Manitoba at 474-8273.**

## APPENDIX D

### Consent Form

Research Project Title : Supervision of Paraprofessionals in the Human Services

Researcher : Cathe Umlah BSW

Graduate Student – University of Manitoba

This consent form should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation should involve. A copy of this form will be left with you for your records and reference. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the supervision needs of the paraprofessional within the human services. Hopefully the findings from this study will assist and inform practice where paraprofessionals are employed.

This one on one interview will be one to one and a half hours long and will be tape recorded with your permission.

Your identity and your responses will be kept completely confidential and the tapes will be destroyed after the study is complete. Under no circumstances will your participation in this study be shared with your employer or anyone else involved with this study. Your identity will not be revealed in this study.

Eventhough all precautions will be taken, it is important that you are aware of the risk, however remote, that your involvement in this research may be identifiable to your employer.

A copy of the findings from this study will be made available to you. When the study has been completed, I will contact you to arrange for you to receive a copy.

A stipend of 25.00\$ will be provided to you at the end of this interview to cover any expenses you may have incurred as a participant of this study.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in this study and that you agree to be a participant. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time or refuse to answer any question without penalty. Feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Researcher : Cathe Umlah BSW  
Graduate Student – University of Manitoba

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Telephone :

Research Advisor : Professor Lyn Ferguson  
University of Manitoba – Faculty of Social Work  
Telephone : 474-8273

This research has been approved by the University of Manitoba's Research and Ethics Board. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above named persons or the Human Ethics Secretariat at 474-7122 or e-mail to:margaret\_bowman@umanitoba.ca

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's Signature : \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher's Signature : \_\_\_\_\_ Date : \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX E**

### **Interview Questions**

The open-ended questions that I will be using to guide the interview will be:

1. Tell me about your experience working in this program.
2. Tell me about your interest in this work and how you prepared for this job.
3. What kind of training have you received for this job?
4. Regarding your supervisor in this program, do you know what her professional background and/or training is? (ie, social worker, nurse, arts, etc.)
5. Tell me about the supervision that you receive on the job.
6. Do you receive any other forms of support on the job? If so, tell me about this.
7. Tell me about the kind of supervision that you find most helpful on the job and why. Could you give me an example of this from your experience?
8. What do you find the least helpful about the supervision you receive on the job and why? Could you give me an example of this?
9. What recommendations would you have to improve the supervision you receive on the job?

### **Demographic Questions**

1. How old are you?
2. Do you identify with a particular culture? If so, which one?
3. How long have you been working in this program? In your field?
4. What is your educational background?
5. Would you like a copy of the findings from this research study? If so, what is the best way for me to get them to you?

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