Not just a job
A study of the needs of residential child care workers in Melbourne, Australia

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While it is universally accepted that residential child care workers have a key role to play in the quality of services for children in care, the working conditions of many staff are poor and do not reflect the importance of their work. Very little research has been undertaken which focuses on the needs of residential child care staff. The following study examined the factors affecting the job satisfaction of residential child care workers in Melbourne, Australia.

Background

As primary caregivers, residential child care workers have a key role to play in the quality of services for children in care. Consequently, the workplace needs of residential personnel, in terms of their working conditions, should be of central concern to agencies which are responsible for maintaining acceptable standards of residential child care practice.

Although much of the contemporary literature on residential child care has emphasised the important role of residential personnel in providing quality care for children, there is evidence to indicate that the working conditions of staff employed in residential child care facilities are frequently poor, and do not reflect the importance of the work which they are undertaking (Reed, 1977; Ross, 1983; Murphy, 1988, 1992).

This study was an examination of residential child care employees' perceptions about their working conditions. It took place in Melbourne Victoria and was completed in June 1992.

Initially, the study was motivated by the researcher's position as manager of a family and youth support agency in Mornington, Victoria, which provided a residential group care program for adolescents within its range of services. An agency review of the residential program was prompted by concerns about the adequacy of support provided to clients of the program.

Staffing issues were central to these concerns. These issues related to the inability of some residential staff to perform their assigned tasks and responsibilities at an acceptable standard; questionable agency personnel practices which included the appointment of inexperienced, untrained and undertrained residential staff for complex and demanding responsibilities; lack of in-service training opportunities; an inadequate pay structure, and the existence of strained relationships between residential staff and agency social workers.

Residential staff were openly dissatisfied with their working conditions, and there was a high rate of turnover among them.

At that time, the researcher's involvement with the regional residential child care network and with the Children's Welfare Association of Victoria entailed contact with a wide range of other agencies in the field which provided residential group care services for children. It was clear that the field was facing common problems with its residential care staff.

An examination of the literature on residential child care revealed that very little had been written about the working conditions of residential personnel. Payne (1988, p.x) was prompted to comment that although it is universally accepted that 'staff are the key factor in the creation of an adequate quality of life for any resident population', invariably staff issues in research studies are presented as secondary or as incidental findings.

A review of the major social work and child care journals revealed only a very few studies which examined the working conditions of human services workers and their jobs, and even fewer about residential child care employees and their work.

Job satisfaction

Although there appears to be no one agreed definition of 'job satisfaction' in the literature, an examination of job satisfaction theory led to the adoption of Locke's (1976, p.1319) definition:

> Job satisfaction results from the appraisal of one's job as attaining or allowing the attainment of one's important job values, providing these values are congruent with or help to fulfil one's basic needs.

The 'needs' to which Locke is referring relate to 'physical needs' and 'psychological needs', especially the need for growth. This study began an exploration of the relationship between residential child care workers and their jobs. To provide a theoretical basis for the study, a framework focusing on job satisfaction was utilised.

There have been numerous studies undertaken about individuals and their relationships with their work, mainly in the area of job satisfaction. In his review of the literature, Locke (1976) reported that there were in excess of 3000 references on the subject of job satisfaction.

Over the last 50 years, job satisfaction research has been the dominant approach used by researchers to

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examine the motivation, performance, and working conditions of employees. Job satisfaction research has been utilised to bring about improvements in employees' performance at work and to their working conditions.

Previous studies have indicated that an employee's job satisfaction is affected by a wide range of work and non-work-related variables which include personal factors such as health, gender, family, culture, etc.

An adequate examination of the large number of possible work and personal factors affecting the job satisfaction of a particular work group would have been a mammoth task for a single study. Therefore, for the purposes of this study it was decided to focus mainly on the work factors.

Once the range of work-related factors has been identified, it can be combined with the range of non-work factors to gain a better understanding of the relationships which residential child care workers have with their jobs.

Theories on job satisfaction

The systematic study of job satisfaction has gone through an evolutionary process in terms of theory development. The early theories were adapted from theories of motivation (Herzberg et al, 1957; Maslow, 1963), while contemporary theories have been developed specifically with job satisfaction as their main focus.

A number of theories have been developed and applied to the study of job satisfaction. These theories have been divided into two main categories – content theories and process theories (Miner & Dachler, 1973, p.381-397).

Content theories examine the needs, values or expectations which are important to individuals in determining their degree of job satisfaction. Process theories attempt to present an account of how the individual's needs, values and expectations interact with the job to provide job satisfaction or dissatisfaction.

Because there are an infinite number of job facets which are potential predictors of job satisfaction, the process theories remain popular with contemporary researchers because they allow the opportunity to

study the particular variables of interest.

By identifying the job satisfaction variables of importance to employees in different occupations and in different work settings, it is possible to develop a better understanding of the employee and how they relate to the work environment, and vice versa.

This allows the development of a 'person-environment-fit' approach (Mumford, 1972) to more fully understand the job satisfaction phenomena, and assists to predict whether an employee will be satisfied or dissatisfied in a particular job as well as providing the opportunity for employers to create more fulfilling work environments for their staff.

A major inhibition to the development of a comprehensive job satisfaction theory has been the wide variety of individual and organisational variables which have been shown to be related to job satisfaction. However, the existing evidence indicates that it is possible to measure satisfaction validly with different job facets.

Gruneberg (1979, p.72), in commenting on the lack of a generally acceptable theory on job satisfaction, said that sometimes expectations or values will be the main focus of interest. On other occasions examining the individual's personality or cultural background will be the best approach.

Therefore, future theory and research are needed which map in detail the relationships among the different ways of measuring satisfaction, the various facets associated with satisfaction, as well as any other independent and dependent variables thought to be relevant.

Findings of previous studies

To date there appear to have been two distinct approaches taken by researchers in examining the attitudes of employees to their jobs. Firstly, there are those studies which have focussed exclusively on the relationship between the individual and the work situation. Some of the main work situation variables identified as being important to workers' satisfaction with their jobs are: job content; supervision; financial rewards; promotion opportunities and status; relation-

ships with co-workers; management; and job security.

The second approach taken by researchers adopts a broader perspective, and maintains that there are many more variables influencing an individual's level of job satisfaction than just those which are exclusive to the work situation. These variables include personal factors such as age, gender, personality, education level, culture, and so on.

Despite the large amount of literature on the topic of job satisfaction, only a small proportion of this material has focused on the work situation of human service employees. Barber (1986, p.25) commented that this is an interesting situation given that the human services constitutes one of the largest and fastest-growing occupational areas.

The amount of job satisfaction literature relating to residential child care work is negligible. Most of the existing literature on the working conditions of residential child care workers has focussed on staff stress and its consequences, and particularly staff turnover.

Generally, the studies which have been undertaken about job satisfaction within the human services have drawn mainly on the theory and research methodology developed outside of the human services. Interestingly, the findings have replicated the findings of earlier studies undertaken by researchers in non-human service settings.

Study methodology

Between February and August, 1989, 101 residential workers from 31 non-Government residential facilities in Melbourne Victoria, participated in the study by completing questionnaires. Residential facilities chosen for inclusion in the study were adolescent units (11), youth hostels (11) and family group homes which specialised in adolescent care (9).

A purposive (non-probability) sampling method was utilised to secure participants for the study (Seaberg, 1985, p.146). This method was used both for the selection of facilities to be included in the survey and for the selection of respondents who were employed in the facilities.

The questionnaires sought data on what job factors residential child

care workers believed were important to them at work; the job factors with which workers were satisfied or dissatisfied; whether workers were generally satisfied with their jobs (global satisfaction); and whether there were intervening variables such as basic socio-demographic factors influencing workers' job satisfaction.

Although a number of pre-existing job satisfaction research instruments were available, they were discarded for the purposes of this study because they were either too specific and related to particular fields of employment, or were too general and assumed that the job satisfaction variables included were universal to all employees in all fields of employment.

The questionnaire contained both fixed choice and open-ended items. The fixed choice items contained multiple topic areas including satisfaction with working hours, wages, co-workers, the work itself, promotion, supervision, management, job security, and community support services. The fixed-choice items also included personal information about respondents such as age, gender, length of employment, qualifications, career aspirations, and so on.

The open-ended items gave respondents the opportunity to include additional variables not covered in the fixed choice items.

Results

Main findings

Most respondents were aged between 25 and 44 years, with 67 per cent being female. Three-quarters were Australian-born. The larger proportion of respondents were married.

The main findings of the study revealed that most residential child care workers were untrained, undertrained and inexperienced in their present jobs as well as in the field generally.

Qualifications

While the majority of respondents had completed their secondary education, Table 1 shows that only 40 per cent had qualifications relevant to their current positions as residential workers.

Table 1

Number of respondents with formal qualifications relevant to their current job

	N	%
Relevant qualifications	40	39.6
No relevant qualifications	61	60.4
Total	101	100.0

Interestingly, despite their lack of qualifications, most respondents felt that special training was not necessary for their jobs. This finding was supported by the findings of a number of other studies undertaken within the field both in Australia and overseas (Millham et al, 1980; Hansen, 1988).

Experience

While respondents reported that their agencies encouraged staff to undertake additional training for the work they were doing, they reported that their agencies did not have adequate staff training programs in operation.

Most respondents were inexperienced in their present jobs and lacked experience in residential child care work generally. For 47 per cent of respondents, their current job was actually their very first job in the human services.

Table 2 reveals that nearly half (46 per cent) of the respondents had been employed in their current job for 12 months or less, with the majority of these (29 per cent) being in their current job for six months or less. Only a third of the respondents had been employed in their current job for more than two years.

Table 2

Respondents' period of employment in their current job

Employment period in months	Respondents N	%
0-6	29	28.7
6-12	17	16.8
12-18	12	11.9
18-24	11	10.9
24-36	13	12.9
36+	19	18.8
Total	101	100.0

While most respondents had limited experience in their present job, many were also inexperienced in the field generally. Table 3 reveals that,

of the 61 respondents who indicated that they had previous experience in the field of residential child care, five had less than one year's experience, 15 had between one and two years' experience, 20 had between three and five years' experience, and 12 had six to seven years' experience. Only nine respondents had more than eight years' experience in the field.

Table 3

Respondents' length of previous experience

No. of years	N	%
0-11 months	5	8.2
1 year	7	11.5
2	8	13.1
3	5	8.2
4	8	13.1
5	7	11.5
6	4	6.6
7	8	13.1
8	1	1.6
9	4	6.6
10	1	1.6
12	1	1.6
20	1	1.6
23	1	1.6
Total	61	100.0

Salary and award considerations

Other major findings of the study were that most respondents were dissatisfied with their level of pay and their working hours. Table 4 indicates that three-quarters of respondents believed that they were underpaid for their jobs, and half felt that the wages they received were inequitable with the wages of other workers who were doing similar work.

Table 4

Respondents' annual salary

Salary	Respondents N	%
Less than $10,000	13	12.9
$11,000-$20,000	20	19.8
$21,000-$30,000	47	46.5
$31,000-$40,000	21	20.8
Total	101	100.0

Fifty-three per cent of respondents (N=24) were employed under the Residential Care Workers Award with the remainder employed under the Social and Community Services Award.

The respondents most dissatisfied with their wages were those employed under the Residential Care Workers Award. This award provided substantially lower salaries than did the other awards under which respondents were employed. For example workers employed under the Residential Care Workers Award 24-hour determination received a salary based on a 24-hour shift flat rate with no overtime provisions. The industrial awards under which the other respondents were employed included overtime salary provisions.

Working hours

In addition to dissatisfaction with their wages, many respondents were also dissatisfied with their working hours. Three-quarters of respondents were employed on a full-time basis. Two-thirds of respondents reported working more than 40 hours a week, and a quarter reported working more than 60 hours weekly.

Table 5 shows that three-quarters of respondents reported that their working hours were disruptive to their private lives. Around two-thirds indicated that the hours were convenient. A third of the respondents felt that the shifts that they worked were too long, while nearly half of the respondents believed that their work schedules did not allow them sufficient time to recover physically or mentally. Forty per cent of the respondents were of the opinion that their performance at work was hindered by their long working hours.

The majority of respondents (84 per cent) found their jobs mentally fatiguing. Seventy-three per cent of respondents found their jobs physically fatiguing.

Relationships with co-workers

The study also examined respondents perceptions about their co-workers. A number of studies have indicated that the work team (co-workers) are more important to employees in some fields of work than in others (Krueger, 1987).

Table 6 — Responses to statements on co-workers

Statement	Agree N	Agree %	Disagree N	Disagree %	Totals N	Totals %
Co-workers accepted me	98	97.0	3	3.0	101	100
Enjoy company of fellow workers	95	94.2	6	5.9	101	100
Co-workers supportive	93	92.1	8	7.9	101	100
Good working relationship with co-workers	40	39.6	61	60.4	101	100
Shifts too long	34	33.7	67	66.3	101	100

Of all the variables examined in this study, co-workers brought the most positive responses from employees. Table 6 reveals that only three per cent of respondents indicated that they felt that their co-workers had not accepted them as a member of the team. The great majority of respondents (97 per cent) were of the opposing view.

Ninety-four per cent of respondents revealed that they enjoyed the company of their co-workers. Ninety-two per cent of respondents maintained that they had supportive co-workers, and that they shared good working relationships with their colleagues.

Work with other agencies

The study revealed that local support services for clients were seen as very important by respondents. However, two-thirds of respondents were dissatisfied with the availability of community back-up services, particularly the lack of youth accommodation services, the lack of recreation options, and the lack of adequate support provided by the State Government agency Community Services Victoria (now Health and Community Services).

Promotional opportunities

The study also revealed that the majority of respondents were dissatisfied with the opportunity for career advancement in their present jobs. Table 7 shows that two-thirds of the respondents who indicated that they would like to further their careers in their present jobs, reported that they were dissatisfied with the opportunities for promotion in their current jobs.

Table 7

Respondents satisfaction with promotional opportunities in their current jobs

	N	%
Satisfied	20	35.1
Dissatisfied	37	64.9
Total	**57**	**100.0**

Table 8 reveals that of the respondents who were asked if they were interested in being promoted in their field of work generally, but not in their present jobs, just over two-thirds were satisfied with the opportunities for promotion in the field generally. The remaining third of respondents indicated dissatisfaction with this factor.

Table 8

Respondents satisfaction with promotional opportunities in the field generally

	N	%
Satisfied	42	67.7
Dissatisfied	20	32.3
Total	**62**	**100.0**

This latter finding is interesting as it suggests that while respondents' had hopes of career opportunities being available in the field outside of their present job, they did not possess accurate knowledge of the actual availability of career opportunities within the field. The results shown in the previous table, Table 7, suggest that career advancement opportunities in the field were not available.

Overall job satisfaction

Despite many respondents indicating dissatisfaction with various of their working conditions, it was not the actual working conditions which were seen to be the most important influences in respondents' overall assessment of their jobs as satisfying or dissatisfying. Respondents were asked to make an overall assessment of their jobs as satisfy-

Table 5 — Responses to statements on working hours

Statement	Agree N	Agree %	Disagree N	Disagree %	Totals N	Totals %
Hours disruptive to private life	75	74.3	26	25.7	101	100
Hours convenient	69	68.3	32	31.7	101	100
Not enough time to recover between shifts	46	45.5	55	54.5	101	100
Long hours hinder work performance	40	39.6	61	60.4	101	100
Shifts too long	34	33.7	67	66.3	101	100

ing or dissatisfying. Table 9 shows that the majority of respondents (86 per cent) were satisfied overall with their jobs, while only 14 per cent indicated that they were dissatisfied overall with their jobs.

Table 9

Overall job satisfaction of respondents

	N	%
Satisfied	87	86.1
Dissatisfied	14	13.9
Total	**101**	**100.0**

More important to respondents was the intrinsic job factors such as their belief in the value of the work and in their capacity to make a meaningful contribution to the job.

Table 10 shows that when asked to rank 11 different job satisfaction factors in order of importance, 'the actual work itself' was ranked as the most important by respondents.

Table 10

Respondents' ranking of 11 job satisfaction factors

1. The work itself
2. Co-workers
3. Work environment
4. Wages
5. Job security
6. Hours of work
7. Supervision
8. Information and training
9. Agency management
10. Opportunities for promotion
11. Community support & interest

In a subsequent question respondents were asked to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about their satisfaction with various aspects of the actual work itself. Table 11 reveals that in most instances the great majority of respondents were satisfied with the intrinsic benefits of their jobs.

Although not a key area of examination in the study, a major finding was that 50 per cent of respondents indicated that they intended to leave their present jobs within the following 12 months (Table 12).

Table 12

Respondents' intention to leave their job within 12 months

	N	%
Intend to leave	50	49.5
Intend to stay	51	50.5
Total	**101**	**100.0**

While there may be a discrepancy between employees reporting their intention to leave their jobs and actually terminating their employment, the research indicates that intention to leave is an accurate predictor of an employee eventually leaving their present job (Kraut, 1975; Hom et al, 1979).

Conclusion

The main results of this study revealed that while workers were satisfied with the **intrinsic** rewards of their jobs - the opportunity to do meaningful work, to use their skills and talents, to make a valuable contribution to a disadvantaged group of children, to do interesting tasks, and to experience a sense of achievement through their work - a significant number of them were dissatisfied with the **extrinsic** rewards offered by their jobs.

It would appear that employees' dissatisfaction with the extrinsic aspects of their work have serious implications for the residential child care field.

The findings of this study allowed the construction of an interesting but worrying employment picture for residential workers which traced their progress from their first job in the field to their point of departure.

This picture presented the residential child care field as a low-status profession in the human services unable to attract or retain experienced, qualified and skilled personnel to residential worker positions in sufficient numbers to provide adequate standards of service provision.

The picture was one of young, inexperienced, untrained and undertrained employees in their first job in residential child care as well as in their first job in the human services.

Many of these workers were experimenting with their careers and would leave their present jobs within 12 months to continue career experimenting elsewhere, and not necessarily within the residential child care field.

Despite the fact that they believed the work had intrinsic appeal - they saw it as work which was meaningful, worthwhile and as an outlet for their skills and talents - it was not seen as a long-term employment option because of the poor working conditions which included unattractive working hours, an inadequate salary, and very limited opportunities for career advancement. Only a quarter of workers who participated in this study had been in the residential child care field for more than five years.

Recommendations to the field

It is a common perception that residential care is the last and least desirable option - to be used only when all other approaches to provide care and protection for children have been tried first (Murphy, 1992, p.432). The field's current practice of staffing residential facilities with inexperienced, untrained and undertrained personnel, providing them with an inadequate salary and virtually no career structure, suggests that agencies consider that little can be done for those children who finally reach the 'last alternative' and who, therefore, only warrant a minimum allocation of resources to provide for their care.

It is common for children placed in residential facilities to have experienced the emotional trauma of years of family dysfunction, often years of sexual and/or physical abuse, and often multiple placements in alternatives to family care. By the time children are placed in residential

Table 11   Responses to statements on the 'actual work itself'

Statement	Agree		Disagree		Totals	
This job provides me with the opportunity to:	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**	**%**
• make worthwhile contribution	98	97.0	3	3.0	101	100
• feel a sense of achievement	89	88.1	12	11.9	101	100
• do something meaningful with life	88	87.1	13	12.9	101	100
• use skills/talents	87	86.1	14	13.9	101	100
• do interesting tasks	81	80.2	20	19.8	101	100
• experience intellectual challenge	76	75.2	25	24.8	101	100
• make valuable contribution to community	75	74.3	25	25.7	101	100
• feel needed	71	70.3	30	29.7	101	100
• experience appreciation from clients	70	69.3	31	30.7	101	100

facilities of the type participants in this study were employed, invariably their needs are many and complex. Therefore, they require maximum opportunities to receive, and hopefully respond to, skilled intervention in properly planned programs administered by trained and experienced residential personnel.

At worst it is irresponsible, and at best naive of agencies to believe that staffing residential programs with inexperienced, untrained and/or undertrained staff will somehow benefit clients.

While the availability of adequate funding is an issue, underlying and contributing to this issue is the preparedness of agencies to operate inadequately funded residential programs. This practice is a sanction for funding bodies to withhold the provision of adequate levels of financial support to agencies for their residential programs.

> *At worst it is irresponsible, and at best naive of agencies to believe that staffing residential programs with inexperienced, untrained and/or undertrained staff will somehow benefit clients.*

Agencies need to move beyond the basic needs model of residential service provision and begin to focus on models which address the developmental needs of children in care.

Agency personnel practices need to incorporate staffing standards which include minimum qualification prerequisites for applicants for residential positions, in-service training, supervision and support structures and, importantly, a career path which encourages practitioners to remain and develop within the field.

Also vital to the resolution to the staff turnover issue is the provision of salaries to residential workers which are fair and just in relation to the actual number of hours worked, and **when** they are worked (eg. adequate overtime and penalty rates for work done after hours, weekends, public holidays, etc.) and which recognise the importance of the work which they are undertaking.

Adequate salaries will not only help to attract trained, experienced and skilled workers to residential positions, but will also encourage them to remain in their jobs with their agencies and/or within the field.

The salaries of residential child care practitioners need to be equitable with the salaries paid to social workers and other welfare professionals in recognition that residential work and residential workers are important in the range of services provided to children and their families.

Agencies need to introduce work schedules which acknowledge that the nature of the work is demanding, and that long shifts without breaks can place excessive physical and psychological pressure on residential staff. Work schedules need to be flexible and recognise that residential staff have lives and families outside of their work. Unattractive working hours in residential child care are a major contributor to staff turnover, and deter interest in residential positions from workers who value and want to protect their family and leisure time.

Improvements to staff working conditions are crucial if the field's serious staff turnover problem is to be resolved. Only when the field is able to achieve contentment and stability within its workforce will the field of residential child care really begin to develop.

Clearly, the important role of residential workers warrants additional examination in further research if the field is to gain an adequate understanding of how to best meet the needs of the client group who are often the most needy or troubled children. Because staff are a key factor in service provision, conclusions about their role should be the consequence of the **main** research findings rather than simply attached as an aside to the findings of research which has examined other issues in the field. ◆

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