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**LA THÈSE A ÉTÉ
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A Task oriented Approach to Job Stress
Implications of Task Analysis

Christine L. Wohl

A Thesis
in
The Department
of
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ABSTRACT

A Task Oriented Approach to Job Stress: Implications of Task Analysis

Christine L. Wohl

In order to provide a further basis for examining job stress in relation to the social work task, a task oriented analysis was developed linking organization theory (Thompson) with behavioural theory (Janis & Mann,) focusing on decisional conflict within the field of the social services. Both theories emphasise the need for careful information processing prior to decision-making, both from the view point of task accomplishment and for reduction of job stress.

The analysis developed was tested empirically in an exploratory study utilizing content analysis to review casework records in order to identify caseworkers' information processing and decision-making procedures. The purpose was to identify whether the information and decision-making processes were 'rationally' or 'irrationally' based. The results of this initial study found that the caseworkers' information processes were overwhelmingly 'non rational'. Reasons for this and the implications for task accomplishment and job stress were then discussed.

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A Task Oriented Approach To Job Stress:

Implications of Task Analysis

Introduction:

Over the past decade, there have been significant changes in the organisation of social services in Quebec. Large centralised social service centres under direct government control have replaced the diversity of agencies which had existed in the past. Resistance by social workers towards working within these bureaucratic structures has been very evident and openly discussed. At a personal level, social workers perceived the changes as creating a form of job-related stress, which has been popularly identified as 'burnout' and is well documented in the literature.

To date, much of the literature related to this problem of job stress has either focused on treating it symptomatically, i.e. suggesting remedial measures by which social workers can ease their stress or has emphasised that there is irreconcilable conflict between the professionals and the bureaucratic organisational structures. The implication seems to be that professionals should not have to work within such bureaucratic structures. However, this fails to take into account the fact that the majority of

social workers have always worked within some form of bureaucracy and that bureaucratic control is a reality throughout our society today.

The most significant of all the changes is the direct involvement of state mediation in defining both the social work task and how it will be carried out. The Quebec government has placed specific emphasis on the task of working with certain target groups, namely the elderly and children 'at risk'. In addition, the government now also makes the demand for evaluation of the effectiveness of social services provided. What is it about the identified tasks (i.e. working with these target groups) and the evaluative process that is related to job stress? It is interesting to note that while all of the studies describing job stress as 'burnout' agree that job stress is causally related to the task, the task itself has not been the focus in any of these studies.

To date the prevailing approaches to analyzing job stress have not focused on the fact that social workers are faced with a considerable degree of uncertainty in relation to their task. There is 'uncertainty' as to the type of skill and knowledge required (or available) in order to effectively handle the task. In addition, there is 'uncertainty' as to the precise goals to aim for in carrying out the task; e.g., what form of care should be available for a child considered 'at risk'?

Opinions constantly change as to what are considered the most effective forms of intervention. What are the implications of uncertainty in the social work task in relation to job stress when rational administrative processes are emphasised?

Theoretical Framework And Approach Used In This Study:

In order to find evidence of studies which have focused on the implications of uncertainty in relation to task issues, it is necessary to turn to organisational theorists. However organisation theory related to task is considered by many within the social service centres as having relevance only for industrial bureaucratic complexes and not applicable to an understanding of the task and related procedural problems in the area of human services. Organisational theory emphasises the fact that organisations are purposive, i.e. task oriented. Where organisational theorists have focused on the processes of assessment and decision-making, particularly in relation to the certainty/uncertainty factors, they have demonstrated that there are issues common to all organisations performing a task. They are as relevant to service organisations as they are to commodity-producing organisations. I believe that such theoretical insights can be used as effectively to increase our understanding of task and organisational issues (and thereby job stress,) in the field of human services as they can in industrial

bureaucratic complexes.

Thus, the focus of this study relates to the task process in the field of social services, using organisational theory as its theoretical base. The purpose is twofold. Firstly, to undertake an exploratory study using a typology developed by the organisational theorist, James D. Thompson (1967). The study tests the practical utility of this typology in the field of human services as a means of clarifying task and organisational issues. The results of this study are then examined to evaluate the potential of such a framework for use in further research and as a tool for developing further hypotheses. Secondly (and more immediately), to provide insight into specific task issues and thereby, indirectly, into the problem of job stress. It is hoped that the study will have relevance for both management and workers alike in planning the most effective means to perform and evaluate the social work task, over and above clarifying factors relating to job stress.

The structure of the thesis is as follows:

Chapter 1: The literature on job stress is briefly reviewed. It reveals that, to date, little attention has been given to the task itself, in spite of the statements by many writers on the subject that job stress is task-related.

Chapter 2: The relevance of organisation theory for such

applied human service settings as social services is discussed. Particular attention is given to those theorists who stress the significance of the processes of assessment and decision-making in relation to the certainties and uncertainties of the task itself.

Chapter 3: The discussion centres on the research design and method used for the study. A typology presented by James D. Thompson is operationalised in order to test its utility, in providing further insight into task related issues and thereby, indirectly, job related stress.

Chapters 4 & 5: The findings of this exploratory study are presented. These are evaluated from the perspective of Thompson's typology, focusing on the assessment and decision-making processes as identified in case records.

Chapter 6: The thesis concludes with comments on the findings of the study and on the use of Thompson's typology. Implications for social work practice are then discussed from the perspective of the findings of this study.

Chapter 1: Overview Of The Literature Pertaining To Job

Stress:

In this chapter, the literature on job stress is briefly examined. Three main perspectives are identified. An overview of these perspectives reveals the need to refocus on the task itself in order to provide further insight into this problem.

In reviewing the literature which focuses on job stress, three major themes can be clearly identified. Each will be considered separately and briefly examined.

1.1 Job Stress As 'Burnout':

It is necessary to take into account the significantly large body of literature describing job stress as 'burnout', if only because this literature has gained wide attention and popularity. It is a syndrome which is considered to disproportionately strike those in the helping professions such as teachers, counselors and social workers. People experiencing burnout are reported as physically seeming tired all the time and unable to get sufficient sleep. Behaviourally, they appear to be disenchanted, fatigued, bored, discouraged and confused and responding with anger and frustration to issues which may seem relatively unimportant.

1. The term 'burnout' was originally used in reference to machinery wearing out from repeated use. The term was used in 1974 by Freudenberger, a New York Psychoanalyst, for a syndrome of staff burnout in mental health treatment personnel.

'Burnout' is seen by all authors to be a specifically job related syndrome and is described by numerous authors in considerable detail (Freudenberger & Richelson, 1980; Pines & Aronson, 1981; Maslach, 1976; Emener, 1979; Hall, Gardner, Pearl, Plefferbaum, Stickney, 1979). They are in accord with Maslach's (1976) findings that the problems are not rooted in the permanent traits of people but in specific social and situational factors that can be changed. While stating that such stress is causally related to the task, these authors have, in reality, encouraged a deflection away from the analysis of the complexities of the social work task and concentrated solely on the stress symptoms of the workers. 'Burnout' is perceived by these authors as an illness which requires treatment. The perspective is essentially psychotherapeutic with its focus on the individual sufferer. The aim is, in almost all instances, to provide suggestions for symptomatic relief. Written from a psychological perspective, very little structural analysis is undertaken by these writers.

Where these authors do comment on the nature of the work (that is, the task itself) they seem to consider that there is little hope for success since, in reality, it is difficult to help people and there are many ungrateful

2. While the symptoms described as 'burnout' may appear to be very similar to those usually used to describe depression, the significant change appears to be that 'burnout' is seen as job related and most authors point to society as being at fault. Depression, on the other hand has always been treated as a personal illness.

clients. This results in a "mismatch" between efforts and results".³ Task accomplishment appears in this body of literature as an area replete with hopelessness, defying any form of constructive analysis:

"Clients and the organisation will go on being what they are.... it is up to the individual to do what he or she can within those parameters" (4)

Empirical Studies on 'Burnout'

Studies of a more empirical nature (Kadushim, 1974; Pines & Kafry, 1978; Wasserman, 1970), point to the need for social support systems to serve as a buffer against work pressures and thereby reduce the extent of 'burnout' experienced by workers. In taking this focus, they avoid the area of 'primary' job satisfaction related to task accomplishment and focus on 'secondary' job satisfaction variables.⁵ Wasserman's (1970) study identifies the benefits for morale and productivity where the development of small groups has created a source of social support for social workers within bureaucratic organisations. Pines & Kafry's study on occupational tedium in the social services showed that 'external' job characteristics (namely,

3. Chance 1981

4. Edelwich & Brodsky 1980 page 40

5. 'Primary' job satisfaction variables (Ewen's term, 1966) or motivators" (Herzberg's term, 1957) relate to achievement, recognition, advancement, responsibility and the work, or task itself. The 'secondary' job satisfaction variables (Ewen) or the 'hygiene' factors (Herzberg) relate to working conditions, relationships with peers, etc.

work sharing, support, time out and social feedback from colleagues), has a stronger negative correlation with 'tedium' or 'burnout' than 'internal' characteristics, these being defined as the intrinsic work conditions of variety, autonomy, significance, success and feedback from Clients. Such studies avoid the area of primary job satisfaction related to task accomplishment and, as with the authors discussing the 'burnout' syndrome, they do not focus on issues directly related to the work itself.

1.2 The Profession Versus The Bureaucracy:

Both Wasserman (1970) and Kadushin (1974), who identified the earliest symptoms of 'burnout' in their studies of the public child welfare system, seemed to imply that these symptoms were particularly prevalent where social work was practiced in large bureaucratic institutions. Karger (1981), in critiquing the emphasis on the psychotherapeutic approach towards job stress, also

6. The authors explain the fact that 'feedback from clients' which was negatively correlated at the .05 level of significance was due to the fact that social workers are particularly sensitive to people as sources of both stress and support, thus implying that it could be considered an 'external' characteristic. However, positive 'feedback from clients can also be perceived as the most effective criterion for success in the social services field.

7. These studies seem to be in keeping with Herzberg's (1957) 'Two Factor Theory of Job Satisfaction', in which he considers that factors helping to create job satisfaction need to be differentiated from factors which cause job dissatisfaction. However, Ewen's (1966) research found primary satisfaction variables to be more strongly related to both overall satisfaction and dissatisfaction than the secondary satisfaction variables.

points to the conflicts inherent between the social work professionals and the bureaucracy. In redefining 'burnout' as 'alienation', he states that when the term 'burnout' is used, the problem is perceived on a subjective and interpersonal level, whereas from the viewpoint of 'alienation', the objective conditions of work life are examined.

He cites Marx as follows:

"...the work he performs is extraneous to the worker, that is it is not personal to him, is not part of his nature...(he) feels miserable rather than content, cannot freely develop his physical and mental powers, but instead becomes physically exhausted and mentally deposed... the relationship of the worker to his own activity is something alien and not belonging to him.... is an activity turned against himself." (8)

Karger points to the striking similarities between definitions of 'burnout' used by current authors and Marx's description of 'alienation'. He considers that the subjective aspects of 'burnout' fit within this form of 'alienation' and lack of control described by Marx. He, therefore, considers it important to focus on objective conditions, i.e. the increase in bureaucracy, rather than the subjective aspects of 'burnout'. He perceives the public social welfare system as developing an industrial corporate structure as a result of financial accountability taking precedence over client need. The logical adjunct to financial accountability, as he sees it, is bureaucratic rationality. Karger perceives the outcome as an hierarchical

administrative management structure which controls the the 'technicians', i.e. the social work practitioners. They are like other industrial workers, the only difference being that they produce services rather than tangible goods. Thus, Karger perceives the problem as a loss of professional autonomy with increasing subservience to a growing bureaucracy.

In this respect, Karger also appears to be in agreement with the functional analysis of Kornhauser (1962) and Carr Saunders (1966), who see professionals and the bureaucracy as entirely separate entities with differing goals. For Karger, the bureaucratic system is seen as having the goal of fiscal efficiency, while the professional social workers' interests are in meeting clients' needs.

This particular viewpoint has been critiqued from a number of perspectives. Some (Johnson, 1972 and Freidson 1970) have questioned the benefits to clients of professional autonomy and control. They consider that professional interests are not always synonymous with clients' interests. It can also be argued that both the Castonguay Report (1970; Quebec government sponsored), and the Lalonde Report (1975; Federal government sponsored), do not focus solely on fiscal efficiency when they point out that prevailing professional approaches have failed to meet some specific clients' needs, such as those of the elderly and children 'at risk'.

Scott (1969) questions whether the social workers' professional independence from bureaucratic control was ever a reality. He considers that they have always been dependent on such organisations as government welfare bureaucracies, medical bureaucracies and voluntary agencies. He believes that goals and norms have always been set by persons other than professional members. He sees the issue as being one of whether the value systems of the workers are congruent with the value system of the prevailing control system, rather than one of professional autonomy. Others have attested to the inevitability of professional integration within some form of bureaucracy.⁹ Montagna (1968) sees professionalisation as merely a developmental stage in the gradual trend towards bureaucratization in society.¹⁰

The structural analysis evident in the 'professional versus bureaucracy' controversy essentially focuses on the dysfunctional relationship between the professional workers

9. Mok (1973) for example, identifies the very basic issue of increasing financial dependency on government bureaucracy, a service society being an increasingly costly one.

10. Montagna portrays occupations developing on a continuum from a point of least organisation to one of most organisation. Professionalisation is the intermediate phase and bureaucratisation is the extreme case. There is the least organisation where traditional and charismatic knowledge is the base. The creative professions are more organised with their own rules and codes (professionalisation). As society demands increasingly that such scientific knowledge is used for society's benefit, this results in an increase of rationalised control.

and the bureaucratic organisation. The essence of it is seen as the conflict between a form of technical rationality and a form of bureaucratic rationality (Blau 1962.) However such an analysis does not link this conflict with the task itself, but rather, it overly concentrates on the conflicting approaches (or strategies) of those working within the system without relating these conflicts to the task issues.¹¹

1.3 Professional Socialisation:

Rein and White (1981) in their identification of stressful factors chose to focus on the technical rationality used by social workers. They consider that it is the social workers' adherence to a specific theoretical framework that has been the major stress factor for social workers. They claim that casework training, with its strong identification with psychoanalytic theory based on a medical model, led to the tendency of social workers to claim that all their decisions are based on this specialised knowledge base. Rein and White perceived this as having two significant effects:

a) It led to a concentration on those clients whose needs were seemingly most effectively met by this psychoanalytic approach.

11. Functional analysts tend to focus on the portrayal of professionals as persons trained in professional schools, possessing complex skills and special knowledge and equipped with internalized control mechanisms. In contrast, bureaucracies are considered as relatively specialized in function and as operating in a hierarchical structure under a system of formal rules.

b) Social workers tended to rationalize that what were, in fact decisions based on value judgements were judgements emanating from a clear body of theory.

Rein and White believe that the reality is that many social work decisions (e.g. whether an elderly person or a child 'at risk' should be taken into care,) are ultimately value decisions, riddled with conflict. They point out that social workers in the past handled this conflict by either avoiding this type of issue wherever possible, or, when decisions had to be made in this sphere, by claiming that they were based on professional judgement emanating from casework training.

Thus Rein & White's perspective may be compared to that of Merton's (1957) Reference Group Theory, in stating that the individual relies on a social reference group to provide the means for setting and maintaining standards. Festinger's (1950) research also supports this viewpoint in pointing out that when empirical confirmation is lacking, group pressure then exerts considerable influence. Rein and White take the argument one step further by showing that the worker not only validates decisions by using the reference group, but also believes that this confers a rational basis

12. Halmos, 1970 has pointed out that because social workers worked in close alliance with psychiatrists, they shared their ideology which did not necessarily follow from the theoretical basis of their practice but was one which had gained broad community acceptance. It played an important role in determining the moral orientation of our times and was therefore given community sanction.

for the decision.

Although they identified the 'myth' that casework decisions emanated from a sound empirical knowledge base, Rein and White have failed to identify that it is the current structural changes that have forced social workers to openly confront this dilemma (one which had previously been masked). The fact that state mediation is now directly involved in the assessment, decision-making and evaluative processes related to social services has brought conflicts in social work practice into the open, which social workers had been able to avoid in the past. They are now required to focus on areas of service which had previously been neglected, and they are required to evaluate their interventions. The social workers' emphasis had been on the development of a particular type of technical 'rationality'. However, overconcentration on specific techniques or means can distort goals. They can become ends in themselves. The government's emphasis on administrative rationality, emphasising certain target areas and stressing results and efficiency has brought this conflict into the open. As Eaton's 1962 study showed, evaluative research also forces social workers to confront the 'uncertain validity' of social casework. He found social workers to be antagonistic towards evaluative research. Their preference was for research where criteria for evaluation focused on such things as testimonials by clients and their families concerning the value of 'casework interventions'.

1.4 The Gap In Existing Approaches:

What has not been identified in the literature to date is the significance of the fact that clients' needs are the *raison d'etre* for the existence of both the helping professionals and the social service organisation. Both the professionals and the organisation would agree that what they have in common is the primary goal of meeting clients' needs. If this is the case, i.e. that they do have this common goal, then their conflicting approaches, identified in the literature, need to be analysed in relation to this goal, or rather, in relation to the task itself. The emphasis has been on the conflicts between differing 'rational' strategies, namely between a particular form of professional expertise or knowledge base versus administrative organizational rationality or theories, rather than the complexities of the task itself and the utility of prevailing approaches to it.

Studies on 'burnout' seem to consider that the complexities of the social work task defy any kind of rational analysis. From their assessment of the problem, it would be reasonable to question the rationality of having any professional training in order to work in the human services. This, however, they do not question but merely identify the overwhelming complexity of the task as the source of stress for the 'professionally' trained workers.

In the 'professions versus hureaucracy' debate, the

focus is on the effectiveness of 'technical' versus 'administrative' rationality for the social service task. However, no task analysis is evident, and no evaluation is made as to what the needs are and how they can best be met. What is identified is a conflict as to task strategy. The effectiveness/ineffectiveness of both approaches, technical and administrative, in relation to the task is not discussed and analysed.

Rein and White identify the ineffectiveness of casework skills in decision-making situations which are ultimately based on value judgements. In pointing to the irrationality of the use of a form of technical rationality for certain parts of the task, they thus allude to the fact that the task has differing facets and cannot be effectively handled with only one type of strategy or approach. However, they do not focus on the implications of the task complexity, but rather choose to focus on the ineffectiveness of a particular form of task strategy.

Thus, the task itself is not the central focus in any of these studies to date. When the focus of attention is moved to the task, certain questions are clearly raised. How do you decide what are clients' needs? What are the most effective ways of meeting them? These questions are particularly pertinent where there has been an expansion of human services under a public system. The concept of equitable distribution of resources in the most economically efficient way is the basis of the prevailing

value system and is an external constraint with which the social service organisations have to cope. How the administration and the workers within the organisation cope with these questions, given these external constraints, can be a major factor contributing to job stress.

Chapter 2: The Relevance Of Organisation Theory For Social

Service Organisations:

This chapter discusses the relevance of organisation theory for social service organisations. The task of an industrial bureaucracy differs from that of a human service organisation; however, the processes of assessment and decision-making in relation to the certainties and uncertainties of the task are equally significant for both.

The literature reviewed in the previous chapter focuses on conflicts in undertaking the social service task, without undertaking any analysis of the task itself. Recently, considerable emphasis has been placed on a task-oriented approach in social work practice (Epstein et al, 1977). However, this approach focuses on a particular form of rational casework strategy towards the task; it does not analyse the task complexities. When the focus of attention moves to task analysis, it is necessary to turn to organisation theory for evidence of studies and research in this area. Organisation theory, focusing on task analysis, has been perceived by many within the social service centres as having relevance only for industrial bureaucratic complexes and as not being applicable to their own task and procedural problems.

There is a great reluctance on the part of many social workers to see any commonality between their task as human service professionals and the tasks of large scale indust-

rial organisations. From their point of view, the task of producing commodities is considered to be entirely different from the task of providing social services. Since human services do not produce tangible products, it is considered that totally different approaches and strategies are required to undertake the task. In addition, a 'human' or 'understanding' approach to social services is contrasted with what is considered to be 'inhuman' bureaucratic rationality. What seems to be implied is¹ that traditional forms of organisational rationality cannot and should not be applied in the field of human services.

However, in any organisation which undertakes a task, questions concerning means and ends in relation to accomplishing the task are relevant. How effective are the prevailing technologies and skills and approaches for undertaking the task? What is the precise outcome desired? When these questions are asked, areas of uncertainty are revealed which pose a challenge to both 'technical' and 'administrative' rationality in any task-oriented organisation.

When organisations are primarily purposive, that is having a task focus, then as Simon & March (1958) point out,

1. Karger typifies this point of view where he expresses the fear that social service professionals will merely be seen as the producers of tangible goods, with all the implications that such a reification process implies.

the way actions are taken, or in effect, decisions made, becomes a central issue. Regardless of the type of task, the processes of assessment and decision-making are as much issues for a social service task organisation as they are for a commodity producing organisation. Thus, the organisational theorists who focus on the processes of assessment and decisionmaking perhaps have insights to offer those working within social services, in aiding them to cope with their task.

Social workers in Quebec, particularly those who are mandated to care for the elderly and children 'at risk', are constantly facing conflict and uncertainty in their decision-making. From the technical or theoretical point of view, there are limits in the existing knowledge to assist the social workers in understanding their clients' situations. Options for solving the problem may also be limited, or once again, there may be uncertainty as to the best option to take. What strategies are used to handle this uncertainty? I consider that the way social workers and administrators handle this uncertainty, constitutes a large factor behind job stress.

2.1 Thompson's Typology:

A framework of the type outlined by James B. Thompson, which focuses on the processes of assessment and decision-making in relation to the certainties

and uncertainties of the task, provides clarity in outlining the problem. It is a framework which is broad enough to encompass issues with which all large scale organisations have to deal, both industrial ones and those with a service orientation. Thompson developed a typology which encourages a clarification and breakdown of the task processes into areas of certainty and uncertainty in relation to both understanding of causation, and preferences regarding possible outcomes or options.

Thompson claims that the processes of decision-making involves these two basic variables: beliefs about cause/effect relations, and preferences regarding possible outcomes. He presents a simplified dichotomised model, presenting four types of decision-making situations with respect to the certainty/uncertainty factors, and shows each as requiring a different strategy.

(See figure 1 on page 18)

Figure I

Beliefs About Cause/Effect Relations

	Certain	Uncertain
<u>Certainty</u> <u>Preferences Regarding</u> <u>Possible Outcomes</u>	Computational Strategy (Programmed Decisions)	Judgmental Strategy
<u>Uncertainty</u>	Compromise Strategy	Inspirational Strategy

Thus, Thompson's typology shows rational, programmed strategies as working effectively in situations where one has a clear understanding of the situation and a clear preference for the outcome desired. However, in situations where there is a lack of clarity, both in relation to cause/effect analysis and for choice of outcomes, creative strategies need to be developed.

As can be seen from Thompson's typology, the greater the degree of uncertainty involved in the decision-making process, the greater the degree of flexibility and creativity required in the choice of strategy.

However, the conflict and uncertainty in decision-making for social workers also poses a major dilemma for management. In seeking to control, management must try to

reduce uncertainty to a relative degree of certainty. Uncertainties pose major challenges to rationality. However, to cope with situations that are indeterminate, there is a need to be most creative. Therefore, administration must also allow for creativity and flexibility in strategies used in order to encourage, or facilitate effective problem-solving. As Thompson states, this involves a dilemma for administration, namely the dual search for both certainty and flexibility.

In addition, the government's emphasis on the need for social service centres to develop evaluative processes is a further source of stress, since certainty and uncertainty in the tasks social workers undertake also have implications for any evaluative process undertaken by the organisation. Prior to the implementation of the Castonguay Report and the passing of Bill 65 related to health and social services, there had been limited emphasis in Quebec on the evaluation of results. Funding had been allocated to the professionals in the human services and it was left to the professionals to decide how the task would be carried out. State mediation has now stepped in with direct economic controls and a demand is made for evaluation of the results of the approaches chosen and interventions taken. However the 'uncertainties' of the social work task also have implications for any evaluative process undertaken by the organisation. Eaton's study (1962) pointed to social workers' resistance

towards evaluative research, since it forced social workers to confront the 'uncertain' validity of social case-work. As Thompson's typology demonstrates, evaluative processes are problematic in situations of uncertainty from the perspective of both 'administrative' and 'technical' rationality.

As Thompson states, assessment inevitably involves some 'standard of desirability' against which actions or conceivable effects of causal actions can be evaluated. 'Understanding of cause/effect relationships' can vary from complete to incomplete, and 'standards of desirability' from clear to ambiguous. Thompson identifies four types of assessment situations and points out the evaluative strategies possible for each.

Figure 2

Beliefs About Cause/Effect Knowledge

	Complete	Incomplete
Crystallized	Efficiency	Effectiveness
<u>Standards</u> <u>Of</u> <u>Desirability</u>	Value Judgments Based on Social Referents	Value Judgments Based on Social Referents
Ambiguous		

In looking at the assessment process, Thompson claims that such assessments are based on prevailing social values. When the standards are explicit, then a 'rational'

process of evaluation can take place. When they are unclear, then standards have to be established prior to any assessment process taking place.

As can be seen from this typology of the evaluative process, the greater the degree of ambiguity, particularly in the standards of desirability, the greater will be the dependency on value judgements based on social referents.

The question then arises: who are to be the social referents? Who sets the standards and why? Where there is conflict and ambiguity regarding the desirability of the options chosen, rational assessments based on efficiency or effectiveness are simply not feasible. Social judgements have to be explicitly spelled out and established before any rational processes can become possible. Thus, where standards of desirability are ambiguous (e.g. What type of alternative living arrangements are best for a 'child at risk' ?), the evaluation as to the best course of action is ultimately of a socio-political nature.

Thus, Thompson has presented a framework for analysing the problematics of the task. It is a means to identify in a more focused way the potentially stressful task areas and to point out to both administration and workers alike the implications for task strategies.

2.2 Theoretical Implications Inherent In Thompson's Typology:

Thompson's model brings about an assimilation of earlier organisational decision theory which had tended to view decision-making from a static "either/or" perspective. Either the focus was on the search for certainty and concentrated on rationally-structured decision-making within a closed system (Taylor, 1911; Gulick & Urwick, 1937) ² or, for those adhering to an open natural systems approach in studying organisations, the focus was on the existence of uncertainty. Uncertainties were either due to the subjective, socially constructed behaviour of the decision-makers (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939), or were due to the uncertainties of the environment ³ (Barnard 1938).

Thompson's preference is for a dynamic perspective in which the process of decision-making becomes the central focus. ⁴ Thompson's typology structures this process and, by

2. Both focus on economic efficiency, Taylor, by planning task procedures according to technical logic, Gulick & Irwick by organisational structuring so that tasks were specialised and grouped according to principles such as span of control and controlling actions to plans.

3. Roethlisberger & Dickson showed informal social controls via social cliques, etc., to be an essential component of any complex organisation. Barnard identified the influence of outside social factors for the complex organisation, which therefore cannot be considered autonomous units.

4. Thompson's typology builds upon the studies of Simon, 1957; March & Simon, 1958; Cyert & March, 1963; they pointed to the significance of search behaviour in problem-solving, problem-facing organisations which cuts through the closed-versus-open system, either/or dilemma.

viewing it as an end in itself, identifies the results as "strategies for action that emerge as the process continues"⁵. At different points in the process, depending on the clarity of the situation, both rationally structured decision-making and intuitive inspirational response behaviour are required. His typology thus identifies the need for both 'rational' and 'irrational' responses at one and the same time in relation to a complex task. Studies have identified the significance of differing styles or approaches in relation to the nature of the task (Mason & Mitroff, 1973). Studies such as Sheppard's (1982) and that of Keen & Scott-Morton (1978) demonstrated that intuitive decision-making is seen as an effective method for handling decisions that are often unclear, qualitative and interpersonal. Such findings are in keeping with Thompson's typology. However, Thompson's typology clarifies where, in the decision-making process, 'rational' and 'irrational' strategies and styles may be more effectively used.

In developing a rational model allowing for 'irrationality' and at the same time focusing on dynamic process, Thompson's model is a potentially useful tool for evaluating organisational and worker effectiveness in relation to the task. It is a flexible

5. This description is used by Wise, 1979, in describing the value of decision structuring and the emergent nature of complex decisions.

model which allows for analysis within varying contexts and thus takes into account the fact that situations constantly change. By focusing on the fact that decision-making is "embedded in the process of translating data into action", his typology demonstrates the significance of a rational process taking place whereby data is accessed, arranged and verified. It is a model which provides a basis for asking such questions as: what is the understanding of the situation? (i.e. the creation, evaluation and refinement of hypotheses); and what can be done about it? What are the options?

Thompson's typology fosters a distinction between those situations which are dependent on technical skill and those areas of problem-solving which are heavily laden with socio-political judgements. Depending on what is understood concerning the situation and what are the options available, a specific breakdown can be made into areas where there may be potential gaps in the use of available technical knowledge; where creative action is required; and where socio-political judgements have to be made.

Thus, Thompson's typology provides a clear basis for understanding the fact that selection of the type of

strategies to be used and the evaluation of their effectiveness are dependent on the extent to which the task issues are 'uncertain' or 'certain'.

What is important in viewing the task from this theoretical perspective is the search or information process which is used in order to clarify the certainty/uncertainty components of the task, prior to decision-making taking place. Thompson emphasises that a 'rational' search process is required, even if the strategies to be used are, of necessity, 'irrational'. The question then which is raised in relation to the social service task is this: is the clarification of the certainty/uncertainty issues undertaken in a systematic way? Without this clarification, it is very difficult to decide what type of strategy or approach should be used or to evaluate its effectiveness. Most contemporary researchers on decision-making concur with Thompson's perspective and regard 'information processing' as a crucial task for effective decision-making (Simon 1979; Wright, 1974).

Thus, if Rein & White's perspective of the myths related to professional expertise were looked at from a task related viewpoint, it is the masking of the certainty/uncertainty factors of the task, which is a factor

strongly related to job stress. Stress is thus related to decisional conflict.

Thompson's typology indicates that where patterns of approach on the part of workers do not incorporate search and appraisal they are non-adaptive. Without an understanding and clarification of the certainties and uncertainties of the task issues, they would be unable to approach the task with adaptive task strategies. These are the strategies which would most likely reduce the chance of 'burnout'.

2.3 Stress Theory Related To Decisional Conflict:

Significantly, in relation to coping with stress, behavioural researchers focusing on stress related to conflict in decision-making provide further corroboration for emphasis on the search process. Decision-making, particularly where significant consequences are likely to follow from decisions, is considered to be often characterised by intense emotion, stress and conflict (Sage 1981). Janis & Mann's (1977) research demonstrated that decisionmakers who engage in vigilant search and appraisal before taking action are much more likely to display adaptive behaviour when making a difficult decision, rather than where the pattern of response is defensive avoidance or hypervigilance, unconflicted adherence, or

7
unconflicted change.

Thus the need to pay attention to some of the peculiarly human factors affecting the quality of human decision-making is well established in the literature (March & Simon, 1958; Janis & Mann 1977). In what they describe as the 'garbage can' approach to decision-making, Cohen, March, & Olsen (1972), point to the fact that, particularly in human service organisations, frequently the goals are problematic, the technologies unclear and the participation fluid. As a result, criteria for relevance in relation to decision-making are frequently ambiguous. They consider that rather than a rational process taking place, it is a 'somewhat fortuitous confluence' of problems, solutions, participants and choice opportunities.⁸ Thus, the effectiveness of traditional forms of rationality has come under question. The growing awareness of the impact of non-rational, unpredictable behaviour on decision-making suggests, as

7. These descriptive terms are defined as follows:
'unconflicted adherence': - Continuation of what he/she is doing, ignoring information about risks.
'Unconflicted change': - Uncritical adoption of a new course of action.
'Defensive avoidance': - Remains inattentive to warning information, shifting responsibility to someone else, or construction of wishful rationalisations.
'Hypervigilance': - Frantic search, seizing hastily contrived solutions without looking to long term consequences.
'Vigilance' on the other hand, :- Careful search and appraisal of all alternatives.

8. Cohen, March & Olsen 1972 Page 27

Sheppard and Keen & Scott-Morton ~~have~~ pointed out, the need to examine the perception and awareness held by individuals in organisations of the decision process. There is a need to understand human decision-making both as it is as well as how it might be. In Thompson's terms, it is important to establish whether or not a rational search process takes place.

2.4 The Process Of Decisionmaking And Its Relationship To Job Stress For Social Workers:

From the perspective of this theoretical discussion, in order to gain further insight into job stress for social workers, it is necessary to focus on the process of decision-making, particularly from the viewpoint of identification of the certainties/uncertainties related to decisions being made, thereby identifying potential decisional conflicts. It is particularly important in this respect to focus on the way that information is processed prior to action being taken. This combines Thompson's emphasis on the need for a rational information process, in order to identify the appropriate strategies for accomplishing the task, with Janis & Mann's emphasis on the significance of careful search behaviour in order to reduce job stress. In this way, task or organisational analysis and behavioural theory are linked.

The proposition that emerges from linking Thompson's theoretical framework with that of Janis & Mann's stress

theory related to decisional conflict is:

'The more' there is evidence of a careful search or processing of information identifying the certainties/uncertainties of the task, the more effectively decisional conflict or job stress will be handled.

Thus, it follows that to the extent to which rational information processing precedes decisions we would expect that the problem of job stress would be less. The intent of this thesis is; (1) to identify the actual information processing procedures prior to actions or decisions being taken in a specific area of Social Services; and (2) to explore whether or not, in Thompson's terms, a 'rational process' of decision-making took place. It was considered that such a study, breaking down the information processing issues according to Thompson's typology, could provide specific pointers to the task and organisational problems in the Social Services and thereby identify job stress. The information obtained could then be used as a basis for further hypotheses generation and wider study relating to decisional conflicts and job stress.

2.5 Utility of Thompson's Framework As An Analytical Tool:

Thompson emphasises the significance of the search process for assessment and decision-making and the need to identify the certainty/uncertainty aspects of the task. This has been given further corroboration by stress theory

related to decision-making where the value of vigilant search in relation to adaptive coping mechanisms has been demonstrated (Janis & Mann). In addition to providing a theoretical orientation, Thompson's framework also has a practical utility as a typological tool for applied research. As outlined diagrammatically and defined by Thompson,⁹ it is a form of analytical theory construction allowing for a 'contextual appraisal' (Gross, 1961), where the focus is on dissecting and comparing elements of experience that can be identified as 'rational' or 'irrational'. Gross sees such a form of enquiry as "managing the emotional" or, in organisational terms, it takes into consideration subjectively induced or intuitive behaviour. It accepts the necessity of such elements when rational analysis condones their occurrence.¹⁰

Thompson encourages clarification as to how clear and precise it is possible to be concerning cause/effect relations and choice of outcomes in each decision-making situation. He thereby demonstrates that the use of 'rational' or 'irrational' strategies for the task is dependent on the clarity of these factors. Irrational, judgemental or intuitive behaviour may be required where cause/effect relations are unclear and the effect of the choice of a specific action uncertain. Both

9. see Figures 1 and 2 pages 18,20

10. Gross describes such a form of enquiry as 'neodialectical'

decision-making, and the type of evaluation possible with respect to the decisions made are dependent on the extent of the clarity achieved in relation to these factors. Using Thompson's typology for such a 'contextual appraisal' can thus help identify whether the appropriate strategies, either 'rational' or 'irrational', are being used.

However, as a typology, it needs to be clearly identified for what it is, in order to appreciate both its utility and perhaps its limitations. As a tool for applied research typologies are typically products of the scientist's imagination (Sjoberg & Nett, 1968). Generally, they have been widely accepted as tools for conceptualisation however, they have also been subject to criticism. The controversy has usually tended to focus on the theoretical basis of the typologies rather than on their pragmatic utility as tools. The theoretical basis of Thompson's typology has been discussed earlier in this chapter. Its pragmatic utility will depend on its "goodness of fit" (McKinney, 1966), with empirical data. In undertaking a study, the pragmatic utility of the typology is subject to evaluation, and as a result, its theoretical adequacy is also put to the test. Thompson's typology, allowing for a contextual appraisal, seemed to be ideally suited for application to a content analysis of data related to information processing and decision-making, and thereby providing a means of examining the decision-making



process in the field of the social services.

Chapter 3 The Exploratory Study:

The Research Design and Method:

This chapter describes the focus of the study and the research design and method used. Four case records from children's services in an area service centre were selected to undertake a content analysis using Thompson's typology as the framework for analysis. Procedures for operationalising the study are described.

3.1 Source of Data for the Study:

Thompson's typology, in stressing the significance of the process of decision-making, emphasises the search aspect of the task which is now frequently identified as information processing¹. In seeking to carry out an applied study in the field of social service related to this aspect of the task, the question arose: what means and data were available in order to study this process?

Research requirements could be met either through interviews, direct observation or use of records, if records were available. Direct observation was simply out of the question. Interviews could have been carried out but it was considered necessary to form an adequate conception of the processes of decision-making prior to proceeding with any interviews. This left the possibility of records as the

1. Current researchers into decision-making use the term 'information processing' in lieu of Simon's term 'search process'.

more desirable data source for undertaking an initial exploratory study.

Since social workers are required by law to keep a record of contact with all clients, these records were considered to be a potentially useful source of data relating to information processing and decision-making. What these records contain, their explication of events and decisions made, can take many forms. They may vary according to the administrative requirements enforced by an organisation and to the peculiarly human factors unique to the individual completing the record. How each social worker writes these records, however, can shed light on the assessment and decision-making process that takes place in handling a particular client's situation. The fact that there might have been verbal rationales discussed at the time of events, but not recorded in the chart, cannot be assessed and evaluated. However, it is my belief that how information is processed in the written records will reflect the worker's approach to and understanding of the task they are undertaking. Professional documents are written for a purpose; therefore what is included or left out is of great significance. As Paisley states: "If we say encoding rather than writing, we may remember that we are looking at a process of selection and that what was available to be selected, potentially and probabilistically, is of great

interest"² Therefore, it was decided to look at the characteristics of the content of the records in order to seek evidence as to whether a 'rational' or 'irrational' process was described as taking place both in relation to cause/effect analysis and analysis of choice of outcomes.

As previously stated, these reports are written to fulfil legal requirements and administratively may meet a variety of purposes. For instance, the files are available for review and for information when transfer to another professional takes place. The files are also available should there be disputes with respect to work undertaken with clients. They are also used for auditing purposes and supervisory control of the workers involved. Thus in looking at the characteristics of the content of the records in the light of such potential legal and administrative requirements, the rationality or clarity of understanding and purpose of the total organisation in relation to the task of working with clients comes under review. The uses and potential uses of the case records suggest that they would reflect a combination of official and professional views. Findings from such an exploratory analysis of the case records could then be cross checked with further broader research.

2. Paisley in Gerbner et. al. 1969. Page 135

3.2 Area Of Study:

The specific area selected for exploring the information and decision-making processes in the field of social services was that of services to children 'at risk'. This area was chosen for the following reasons. Firstly, it is one of the two target populations that the government has mandated should be given priority (the other is the elderly). Secondly, the earliest identification of 'burnout' or job stress was in the area of children's services (Kadushin; Wasserman).³

Children's services are mandated to provide service to children and their families where there is evidence of behavioural problems and/ or difficulties within their family environments and thus the children are considered to be 'at risk'. The difficulties encountered may result in the child's removal from the home and placement in some form alternative care. Involvement with the agency is very often over a period of many years and, where long term alternative care has been considered necessary, may last throughout childhood. Such a long term contact would, therefore, be expected to provide ample opportunity to study the assessment and decision-making process undertaken by social workers in relation to these

3. Refer to Chapter 1. 'Empirical Studies on Burnout'.

childrens' needs. This was a further reason, in addition to the two already given, for selecting this task area.

3.3 Case Records Selected for the Study:

Case records of four children identified as 'at risk' and cared for by one of the social service centres in the Montreal region, were used in this preliminary study. All identifying data in relation to the children and the agency involved have been removed for the purposes of confidentiality. This in no way detracts from a study of the assessment and decision-making processes as recounted in the records.

The four cases records were selected on the following basis. The case records selected concern children who have required some form of substitute care other than that of their natural family for at least a brief period during their contact with the agency. Each child has been identified as requiring long term supervision by the agency concerned. The cases were selected to cover a broad age range, from a new born baby to two young children who became known to the agency at ages approximately four and six; to an adolescent aged fourteen. All were identified by the agency as 'at risk'. The work with these children seemed to fall into three main task areas as follows: 1) work with the children themselves, 2) work with the natural family, 3) work with

the alternative family or institution providing substitute care for the child.

Due to the long term nature of the contact, the case records involved a number of different social workers working with these four children. Two records had been open with the agency for a period of eight years and had six and seven caseworkers respectively, who had worked with them over the eight year period. The other two files had been open with the agency for three and three and one half years respectively. Each had two caseworkers involved during the three year time period. This produced a total of seventeen caseworker records. However, it is to be noted that some of the caseworkers were involved with more than one of the children whose records were selected for the study. In all, a total of ten caseworkers were identified as having worked with these four children.

Under these circumstances, the number of cases selected was considered to be sufficient for such an exploratory, preliminary study, since it is the information and decision-making process of the workers that is the focus of the study. (It may be added that it was necessary for research purposes to restructure each record so that the records were re-established into the chronological order in which they were first written. This was a time consuming task and, in addition, it did raise further questions as to the purpose - and hence 'rationality' of

record keeping.)

3.4 Methodology Selected For The Study:

As stated earlier, Thompson's typology was selected both for its theoretical framework and for its potential value as an applied analytical tool in order to carry out a 'contextual appraisal' of the information and decision-making process. For operational purposes, content analysis seemed to be an ideal technique to apply to these selected case records.

As Holsti (1969) has commented, content analysis is a multi-purpose research method, specifically developed for investigating any problem in which the content of communication serves as the basis of inference. Paisley's definition is particularly pertinent to this study, since he considers content analysis is itself a phase of information processing in which communication content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorization rules, to data that can be summarized and compared. It is a method which can test a hypothesis by comparing the messages produced by two or more different sources.

3.5 Assumptions Underlying The Evidence:

The most difficult problem was to determine the way in

4. In Holsti, 1969. Page 3

which the content of the records could be used to identify and illustrate the information processing prior to decision-making especially in relationship to the certainties/uncertainties of the task. Having selected Thompson's typology, both for its theoretical perspective, as well as its pragmatic utility, it was necessary to devise definitions that would enable objective and systematic categorization of the data, in accordance with Thompson's analysis of the task process while at the same time having 'goodness of fit' for the material under study.

Thompson's framework, outlining a structure for assessing the 'understanding of cause/effect relations' and choice of 'desirability of outcomes' (choice of options), can best be described in applied terms as an assessment or evaluation process. His model, in effect, focuses on this particular aspect of the process and how it is carried out. This is then related to the act, or process, of decision-making that takes place.

3.6 Preliminary Analysis Of The Case Records:

In studying the records, the entries seemed to include the following types of statements:-

Descriptive statements: where the record provided information about events taking place in the

life of the child. Descriptive judgements or opinions, not linked to any explicit reasoning, were also in evidence in the record.

Assessment statements: these give an analytic appraisal of the situation, in which there is a striving to link cause and effect and to provide reasons for actions taken or decisions implemented or to be implemented.

Decision statements: which identify actions taken or to be taken, in effect, decisions made or to be made.

In the recorded data, these types of statements appeared in a variety of combinations. For instance, there were descriptions only, with no statements identifying any action or decisions taken by the worker; descriptions linked with assessments, again with no evidence of decisions or actions being taken by the worker; descriptive and decision statements linked without any evidence of assessment statements; and record entries which were inclusive of descriptive, assessment and decision statements.

These combinations of statements seemed to lend themselves to systematic analysis in terms of Thompson's typology. In seeking to demonstrate the 'rationality' or 'irrationality' of the decision-making process, it is necessary to look at both the issues of certainty/uncertainty relating to causative factors and the issues of certainty/uncertainty

related to choice of outcomes. For a 'rational' process to be in evidence, assessments related to both causes and outcomes are required. Where only decision statements, either alone or together with descriptive statements, are in evidence, these, according to Thompson's typology, would be considered as evidence of an 'irrational' process since they lack a rationale for the decision taken.

From this preliminary analysis of the content of the records, these statements were considered to be well suited to be used as the basis for establishing a set of categories to which the assessment and decision-making process of each caseworker in each client's record could appropriately be allocated.

3.7 Operationalising The Study:

The questions that were being asked, therefore, were: how 'rational' or 'irrational' are the assessment and decision-making processes described in the records? Are the areas of certainties and uncertainties in relation to the task clearly identified? Who is involved in the task process?

Unit of analysis

Since the focus of the study is on the information processing of each caseworker, the unit of analysis for the purposes of this study is the

total number of recorded entries per caseworker, as recorded in each child's record or file. The intermediate coding categories, or units of content to be classified are every recorded intervention with the child and/or family, or collateral contacts on behalf of a child. Each separate recorded intervention is identified in the records by the date of entry when the recording was written.

Definitions for coding categories

The statements made in each recorded contact were broken down into the following classifications, in accordance with the findings of the preliminary analysis of the content of the records:

Descriptive Statements: these are defined as:

Any statement which recounts or describes the situation or events relating to the child and/or their environment. Thus, they are the telling of the story as the worker sees it. These can include factual details of events and also descriptive judgements, e.g. "is very happy"; "things going well". An example of a descriptive statement, taken from one of the records is as follows:-

"Telephone call from foster mother. School bag from a locker fell on Simon's foot and he came home limping. Foster mother brought him to the hospital. Simon has a small fracture on his foot and is now wearing a cast"

This is a descriptive statement which does not include any descriptive judgement.

Assessment statements: these are defined as:

Any statement which has a descriptive basis for it expressed in the record and which demonstrates a cause/effect relationship or rationale, identified by the caseworker or other workers working with the child and/or family.

Assessment statements are classified under three sub-categories that identify the three main task areas involved in working with children 'at risk'. These are: a) those relating directly to the client, b) those relating to the natural family, c) those relating to alternative care provided for the child.

Example:

"Arthur has and is going to continue having an impossible time with closeness in relationships. Basic trust is faulty and an inner sense of emptiness is felt. Superficiality on the one hand and close, intense, then necessarily disappointing relationships on the other hand are the rule. Diagnosis: Guarded, unless this boy's life is structured. At the moment he is low risk for suicide."

This was an assessment relating directly to the client made by a psychiatrist. The report from which it was taken included descriptive statements on which this assessment was based.

Decision statements: these are defined as:

Any statement identifying a choice of action either implemented or to be implemented, or clear choice of inaction.

Decision statements are also identified under the

three subcategories relating to the three main task areas, namely: the client, the natural family and alternative care.

Example:

'Refer mother to the caring centre provided by Golden Age so that mother can observe her child interact with other children and to discuss and share her feelings with others'

This, therefore, was a decision made relating to the natural mother concerning her needs in caring for her child.

Coding The Data

None of the coding categories are mutually exclusive. It is possible to have a range of combinations. However, assessment statements are dependent on descriptive statements since an assessment statement has to demonstrate descriptively its rationality. As a result, there can be the following range of combinations: 1) descriptive statements only; 2) descriptive statements and assessment statements; 3) descriptive statements and decision statements; 4) decision statements only; 5) descriptive statements, assessment statements and decision statements.

These categories for coding the information process can then be dichotomized, classifying the coded data into 'rational' and 'non rational' processes. In order to have a 'rational' process, assessments are necessary. Where there

is no evidence of any assessments, the information processing is of a 'non rational' nature. This categorization also showed where there was no evidence of decisions being made, or where actions were taken, that is, decisions made. The following is a model based on this categorization:

	<u>Statements Without A Rationale</u>	<u>Statements Providing A Rationale</u>
<u>No Decisions Made</u>	1) descriptive statements only	2) descriptive and assessment statements
<u>Decisions Made</u>	3) descriptive & decision statements 4) decision statements only	5) descriptive, assessment, & decision statements

Thus, categories 1, 3, and 4, of the model are all forms of information processing not based on any expressed rationale. Categories 2 & 5, are forms of information processing which provide expressed rationales. Categories 1 & 2, are information processes which show no actions being taken by professionals. Categories 3,4, & 5, show actions taken, or decisions made by professionals involved with the client.

Such a systematic categorization of the data clarifying whether rational or irrational information processing occurred, is in accordance with Thompson's theoretical framework. He identified that without rational information processing it is not possible to clarify the certainties and uncertainties of the task, either with respect to cause/effect relations or with

respect to possible outcomes when decisions are made. Thompson considers that only after such a process is undertaken, is it possible to effectively select task strategies and analyze their effectiveness.⁵

Procedures

The total recorded entries of each caseworker in each case record were classified according to the defined statement categories as outlined earlier. It is to be noted that indirect administrative actions and descriptions not directly related to the child were categorized as 'administrative' descriptions. The coding delineated (1) where there were descriptive and/or administrative statements only, which did not provide a rationale, nor were any decisions made; (2) where there were assessment statements based on descriptive data which therefore provided a rationale, but again showed no decisions being taken; (3) where there was a combination of descriptive statements and decision statements only these being decisions made without evidence of a rationale; and finally (4) where there was a combination of descriptive, assessment and decision statements and therefore decisions based on a rationale.

These coded units were then dichotomized to show whether each recorded entry did or did not provide a

5. See figures 1 and 2 Pages 18 & 20.

rationale' in its information processing and, more specifically, when decisions were made, whether they were based on a rationale or not. Where a 'rational' decision-making process was identified, a further breakdown was undertaken to see in what task area the 'rational' decisions were made; i.e. the child, the natural family and alternative care, and whether these decisions were linked to corresponding assessments made in the relevant task area or areas. The various personnel who had been involved in the description, assessment or decision processes were identified, e.g. teacher, doctor etc. Support from other professionals was considered a potentially significant independent variable to be investigated in relation to the rationality/irrationality of the assessment and decision-making process. Information concerning the education and level of training of each caseworker whose case records were under study, was also obtained from the agency. This information was obtained in order to see whether this factor related to a greater or lesser propensity on the part of the caseworkers for undertaking a rational process of decision-making.

The data are presented in detail in the following chapter and the findings of the content analysis are discussed.

Chapter 4. The Study and its Findings:

The findings of the study are presented in this chapter. A wide discrepancy in the extent of rational processes of decision-making is identified. Information processing in these records is shown to be, for the most part, an overwhelmingly 'non-rational' process.

The empirical study set out to explore the view that the manner in which the records were written would demonstrate the caseworkers' information processing procedures. The questions being asked were: did the caseworkers employ a 'rational' process of decision-making? Did they rationally try to identify and explain the problems and provide rationales for the options they chose when decisions were made? Did they identify the 'certainties' and 'uncertainties' in relation to the task?

Thompson's typology identifies the significance of a rational process of decision-making in order to select the most effective strategies for intervention, depending on the certainty/uncertainty aspects of the task for all task oriented organisations. Since social workers within social service organisations are professionally trained, it is a widely held belief that some form of rationality is to

1. It is to be remembered that Thompson stressed the rational process of decision-making while recognizing that the strategies might of necessity be either 'rational' or 'irrational'.

he expected in their decision-making processes.

4.1 The Findings:

The findings, summarized in Table I, show that by far the greatest percentage of recorded entries for all caseworkers were not based on a rational information process. Information processing based on a rationale (i.e. where there was evidence of assessments without decisions and decisions based on assessment procedures) ranged from a high of 57% in one caseworker's record to a low of zero in two caseworkers' records. The mean for rational information processing for all 17 case records was 26% of all recorded entries.

In addition, it was noted that a large part of the information processing presented in the records, did not culminate in decisions being taken. The mean for decisions made in the seventeen caseworkers' records was found to be 50% of all recorded entries.²

However, it appeared that there was a greater propensity for a rational process to take place when decisions were made. Eleven of the 17 caseworkers' records showed a higher percentage for decisions based on a rationale than for their total rational information processing. However, the range for rationally based decision-making varied widely, ranging from 83% of all

2. See Table 2

TABLE 1

Percentages for Information Processing and Decisionmaking With and Without a Rationale as Shown in Each Caseworker's Recording

Case Record	Caseworker	Total Information processing without A Rationale		Total Information Processing with A Rationale		Decisions Without a Rationale		Decisions With a Rationale	
		No's	%	No's	%	No's	%	No's	%
Simon	C.M.	10	56%	8	44%	4	36%	7	64%
	K.M.	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	S.G.	7	88%	1	12%	2	67%	1	33%
	H.L.	7	100%	0	0%	2	100%	0	0%
	R.E.	11	73%	4	27%	5	56%	4	44%
	K.J.	8	73%	3	27%	1	33%	2	66%
M.A.	16	84%	3	16%	7	70%	3	30%	
Brian	C.M.	10	43%	13	57%	2	17%	10	83%
	K.M.	1	50%	1	50%	1	50%	1	50%
	S.G.	6	67%	3	33%	3	60%	2	40%
	H.L.	31	78%	9	22%	15	79%	4	21%
	K.J.	21	78%	6	22%	8	80%	2	20%
	M.A.	44	81%	10	19%	26	81%	6	19%
Arthur	M.I.	8	80%	2	20%	7	78%	2	22%
	E.R.	91	91%	10	9%	27	82%	6	18%
Mary	K.M.	12	46%	14	54%	6	40%	9	60%
	M.H.	107	73%	40	27%	49	63%	29	37%
	Averages		74%		26%		62%		38%

* Only 16 casework recorded decisions made.

TABLE 2

Total Number of Recorded Entries Per Caseworker Showing Rational and Non Rational Information And Decisionmaking Processes

Case Record	Caseworker	Length Of Time Worked with Client	Average No. of Interventions Monthly	Total No. of entries	No Decisionmaking Without Rationale Admin/Descrip		Decisionmaking With Rationale Assessment		Decisionmaking Decisions without Rationale		Decisionmaking Decisions with Rationale	
					No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Simon	C.M.	2yrs 9 mo	.5	18	6	33%	1	6%	4	22%	7	39%
	K.M.	3 mo	1	3	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	S.G.	6 mo	1.3	8	5	63%	0	0%	2	25%	1	12%
	H.L.	3 mo	2.3	7	5	71%	0	0%	2	29%	0	0%
	R.E.	6 mo	2.1	15	6	40%	0	0%	5	33%	4	27%
	K.J.	11 mo	1	11	7	64%	1	9%	1	9%	2	18%
M.A.	3yrs 1 mo	.5	19	9	47%	0	0%	7	37%	3	16%	
Brian	C.M.	2yrs 9 mo	.7	23	8	35%	3	13%	2	9%	10	43%
	K.M.	3 mo	.6	2	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%
	S.G.	6 mo	1.5	9	3	33.5%	1	11%	3	33.5%	2	22%
	H.L.	12 mo	3.6	40	16	40%	5	12%	15	38%	4	10%
	K.J.	11 mo	2.3	27	13	48%	4	15%	8	30%	2	7%
	M.A.	2yrs 6 mo	1.9	54	18	33%	4	8%	26	48%	6	11%
Arthur	W.I.	4 mo	2.5	10	1	10%	0	0%	7	70%	2	20%
	E.R.	2 mo	2.7	101	64	63%	4	4%	27	27%	6	6%
Mary	K.M.	4 1/2 mo	5.5	26	6	23%	5	19%	6	23%	9	35%
	M.H.	7 mo	5	147	58	40%	11	7%	49	33%	29	20%
Averages		4 mo	2	31	13	44%	2	6%	10	30%	5	20%

decisions made in one caseworker's record, to zero for two other workers. Twelve caseworkers' percentages were under 50% for decisions based on a rationale. The question arises: what was the reason for such a wide variation in the way information was processed?

To gain further understanding of these findings a more detailed review of the content analysis of each caseworker's entries for each child was undertaken.

4.2 "Arthur's" Record

Recorded Entries Reviewed Between November 1979 - May 1983

Two caseworkers W.I and E.R. were involved with this teenager, aged 13 years in Nov. 79, over the 2 1/2 year period described in these entries.

W.I.'s Recorded Entries November, 1979 - March, 1980

The intake worker, a B.S.W. trained social worker, worked with Arthur and his family from Nov. 12, 1979 until March 11, 1980, following his mother's call to the agency for help with her son who had stayed away from home. The caseworker completed a total of 10 recorded entries, which averaged 2.5 per month. Nine out of 10 of these entries showed decisions being taken. The remaining entry was an administrative entry only. Of the nine entries where decisions were made, only two were rationally based. Seven showed no evidence of a rationale. The two decisions based on a

rationale could not be considered wholly rational since one decision related to the child and natural family, whereas the assessment was only an assessment of the family situation and did not reveal any detailed assessment of the child. The second related to the child and alternative care, yet the assessments in this situation were of the child and natural family. No assessment of alternative care was undertaken, yet the decision was made for this teenager to be placed in a foster home.

All recordings were short, providing a minimal amount of factual data. The caseworker was shown as making all but one of the decisions unilaterally, with the foster parents making only one (non rationally based) decision. There was no evidence of other professionals participating in the information processing or decision-making with respect to Arthur's situation. The findings show that only 20% of the total information processing was rationally based. When decisions only were specifically reviewed, the rational decision-making process increased slightly to 22%. The worker did not discuss any 'uncertainties' or difficulties in regard to understanding the situation (that is cause/effect analysis) or uncertainties with regard to choice of options. Thus information and decision-making processes as revealed in the entries was for the greater part 'irrational' and did not clarify the certainties/uncertainties in relation to this teenager's

situation.

E.R.'s Recorded Entries For Arthur: March 1980 - May 1983:

The second caseworker, whose entries related to working with Arthur over the 3 year period between March 80 until the beginning of May 83, was also a B.S.W. trained social worker. In all, there were a total of 101 entries, which averaged 2.5 per month. Only 33 of these entries showed decisions being taken and out of these only six were based on a rationale. Four of these six were made by other professionals; the caseworker's record showing personal involvement with only two of the rational decisions. Four of these 'rational' decisions related to the task area focusing on the child only and assessments were evident in this area. three of these were school, educational assessments and decisions. The other was a decision by the caseworker related to Arthur. A fifth decision involved alternative care but the assessments focused on the child and natural family only and therefore could not be considered to be rationally consistent in the assessment and decision-making process. The sixth decision was in all three task areas; the child, the family and alternative care, and were based on assessments related to all three areas. These were made by a psychiatrist.

In the entries where there were no decisions made, there were four assessments. All these were made by

professionals other than the caseworker (3 school; 1 psychiatrist). 64 of the 101 recorded entries were administrative or descriptive statements only. Thus in total, this caseworker participated in only 2% of the rational information processing. Little participation by other professionals, other than the school with respect to educational matters, was in evidence until the end of the record. This appeared to be when a crisis occurred in finding suitable care for Arthur when care in a group home had broken down. Psychiatric help was then requested.

Thus the evidence shows an overwhelmingly 'irrational' process on the part of this caseworker with much of the data demonstrating a largely descriptive, passive process, merely recounting events in the life of this teenager. When decisions were made, the caseworker was linked to 23 of the 27 decisions without a rationale, but only to two of the six that were rationally based. Recorded entries were relatively brief, the only detailed data being provided when referral to a psychiatrist was considered necessary (when alternative care for Arthur had broken down). What 'rational' information processing there was, was mostly provided by other professionals. As a result of this lack of rational information processing, there was next to no detailing and analysis of the certainties/uncertainties in working with this teenager.

4.3 "Mary's" Record

Recorded Entries Between March 1980 and Feb. 1983:

Two caseworkers K.M. and M.H. were involved in working with this child and mother during this 3 year time period.

K.M.'s recorded entries March 1980 -August 1980

K.M., an M.S.W. trained social worker, worked with this pregnant mother between March 80 & August 80 when the mother was undecided as to whether she wanted to keep her expected child. There was also some question as to her capacity to mother adequately. There were a total of 26 recorded interventions, which averaged 5.5 per month. Fifteen of the 26 showed decisions being made, and nine of the 15 decisions were based on a rationale. The caseworker was linked with all nine. In the 11 entries which did not identify decisions being taken, five were 'rational' assessments, with six entries being descriptive only.

When decision-making only was reviewed, rationally based decisions accounted for 60% of all decisions made. Of the nine rationally based decisions five related to the mother and were linked to assessments concerning the mother; thus assessments and decisions correlated. The four other decisions did not correlate in the same way. Three of the four decisions related to the mother and expected child, but for two decisions the assessment focused on the mother only and for

The third decision the assessment focused only on the child. The fourth decision focused on the child but the assessment concerned the mother only.

Overall, a rational information process was demonstrated by this caseworker in 54% of the recorded entries, one of the highest percentages of all the caseworkers' records studied. The caseworker was linked to all nine rational decisions made, seven independently and two in conjunction with other professionals.

Most of the rational information processing was related to cause/effect analysis identifying the complexities linked with this mother to her's behaviour. However, the choice of possible outcomes, whether the mother should or should not keep the baby, seemed to be 'uncertain' in view of the ambiguity identified in the cause/effect analysis. These uncertainties in relation to possible outcome were not clearly identified in the case record.

The analysis showed that limited use was made of other professionals by this caseworker. Only four of the 26 entries showed participation of other professionals, two showing involvement in rational decision-making processes, the third was an assessment only and one decision, by a doctor, was of a non rational nature.

M.H.'s Recorded Entries For Mary: August 1980 - February 1983.

The second caseworker was a B.S.W. trained social worker who worked with the mother and daughter for a two and half year period between August 80 and February 83. Out of a total of 147 recorded entries, averaging five per month, 78 showed decisions being taken 29 of which were 'rationally' based. The caseworker was directly linked with 21 of these decisions. Twenty of the 29 'rational' decisions were correlated with assessments related to the task area where decisions were taken. These all related to the mother and child. However, there were no rationally based decisions related to alternative care and yet this was used on a short term basis five times for this child. Sixty-nine of the 147 entries did not identify decisions being taken, 58 being only administrative and descriptive. Eleven 'rational' assessments were identified, five completed by the social worker, six by other trained personnel.

Rationally based information processing thus accounted for 27% of all information processed, with the caseworker directly involved in 18% of these rational procedures. When information processing directly related to decision-making was reviewed, the rationally based processing increased to 37% with the caseworker linked with 27% of these rationally based decisions.

Detailed descriptive entries, not linked with any evaluative process, were in evidence in this caseworker's record. However, detailed assessment processes were also in evidence in the record. This was one caseworker who identified situations of 'uncertainty' following lengthy evaluative case conference reports that revealed a lack of professional consensus as to whether this child should remain with her mother or be placed in long term alternative care. The 'uncertainty' related to the decisions to be taken and the ambivalent feelings of the worker were very apparent in this case record.

4.4 "Simon's" Record

Recorded Entries Reviewed Between November 1974 -
June 1983:

Seven caseworkers were identified as working with Simon, the youngest of two brothers, aged 5 yrs when first referred to the agency for suspected abuse by his parents.

C.M.'s recorded entries for Simon November 1974 - August 1977

The intake worker C. M. , a nurse trained in child psychiatry, worked with Simon between Nov. 74 and Aug. 77. recording a total of 18 entries which averaged about .5 per month. Most of these recordings were detailed and lengthy in comparison to other caseworkers' entries. Eleven of the 18 recorded entries showed decisions

being made of which seven were rationally based. The caseworker was linked with six of the seven rationally processed decisions. Six of the seven entries where no decisions were made showed non rational information processing, five being descriptions by the caseworker and one an administrative entry from the juvenile court judge. There was one assessment only by the caseworker. Of the seven rational decisions, five were made independently by the caseworker, one in conjunction with a child psychiatry team and a psychologist was involved in the other. Of the four non rationally processed decisions, three were made independently by the caseworker and one by the judge. Thus, rationally processed decision-making accounted for 64% of all decisions made, the caseworker being directly linked with 54% of these. However, the percentage of the total information processed which was rationally based was somewhat lower, 46%, with the caseworker directly linked with 39%.

What was also of significance in the 'rational' decisions was that those decisions relating to the child and natural family were all related to assessments in these task areas, whereas decisions about alternative care were not based on assessments in this task area, in spite of the fact that a decision was made for this child to be placed in a long term foster home. Thus, while the

caseworker demonstrated overall a rational process of decision-making above 50%, a rational process was not in evidence in relation to alternative care.

K.M.'s Recorded Entries October -December 1977:

K.M. was identified as an 'interim worker' in this three month period during which time only three entries were made, averaging one per month. The caseworker, an M.S.W. trained social worker, clearly saw her role as a temporary measure until a new worker was assigned to Simon. No decisions were recorded and of the three entries two were administrative only; one by the judge and one by the agency. There was one description by the caseworker. As a result there was no evidence of any 'rational' information processing or active involvement with Simon.

S.G. recorded entries December 1977 - June 1978:

A B.S.W. trained social worker, S. G. assigned to supervise Simon's care recorded eight entries between Dec. 77 and June 78, thus averaging 1.3 entries per month. Three of the eight entries showed decisions made, but only one was a 'rationally' based decision. This was a medical assessment and decision by a doctor. The two decisions without a rationale were made by the social worker. There were no assessments only; two entries were descriptions only and three were administrative entries,

two by the social worker and one by the judge. Thus, once again in this caseworker's record in Simon's file there was no evidence of any rational information processing on the part of the caseworker. 33% for decisions rationally based referred to one medical decision. The recorded entries were brief and provided very limited data. The caseworker seemed to consider that there were no specific problems for this child in his long term foster home, but no assessments were in evidence to form the basis for such an assumption. The certainties and uncertainties of this child's situation were not analyzed.

H.L.'s Recorded Entries June 1978 - October 1978:

H.L., another B.S.W. trained social worker, worked with Simon for three months between June and October 78, completing seven recorded entries, thus averaging two entries per month. Two showed decisions being made, both by the social worker and both without a rationale. There were three administrative entries, two by the social worker and one by the judge, and two descriptions by the caseworker. Once again, none of the information processing was rationally based in this caseworker's recorded entries. The caseworker's judgement (not rationally based) was that Simon was continuing to do well in long term care. Entries were brief and limited in the information they provided. No form of analysis was evident in this record.

R.E's Recorded Entries October 1978 - May 1979:

R.E., who was a 'mature' student completing a special B.S.W. program, was involved with Simon between Oct. 78 and May 79 during a six month practice placement. 15 entries were made, averaging 2.1 entries monthly. Nine entries showed that decisions were made, four of which were based on rationales and made by the caseworker. This was 44% all decisions made. Of the entries where no decisions were evident, two were administrative only one by the caseworker and one by the judge; and four were descriptions only, all recorded by the caseworker. Thus of the total information processed only 27% was rationally based. Three of the four 'rational' decisions related to alternative care and the child, the fourth related to alternative care only. All of these entries showed assessments related to alternative care, but there was no evidence of assessments related to decisions concerning the child. In contrast to the earlier caseworkers involved with Simon, this worker identified problems related to his foster care and focused detailed attention on this aspect of the task, but tended to neglect assessment of the child's response in the process. Thus the rationality of the decision-making process was limited and the information processing did little to clarify to certainties/uncertainties in this child's situation.

K.J.'s Recorded Entries For Simon June 1979 - May 1980:

K.J. was another B.S.W. trained social worker who worked with Simon for an eleven month period June 79 to May 80. There were 11 recorded entries thus averaging one per month. Three of the 11 entries showed decisions made, two of which were based on a rationale. Of the eight recorded entries showing no decision, one was an assessment by the caseworker, six were descriptive, five by the caseworker, one by the foster mother; one was an administrative entry by the caseworker. Since two of the three decisions were rationally based, this represented 66% of the decisions made, both were by the caseworker. Of the two rationally based decisions, one related to the child and natural family and one to the child only. Both were linked to assessments correlating with these task areas. It is to be noted that alternative care was not an area evaluated by this caseworker although Simon continued to live in foster care. Only 27% of the total information processed was based on a rationale and the recorded entries were brief and limited in detail. Thus once again the greatest percentage of the information processing by this caseworker was linked to a non rational process providing very limited analysis of the task issues.

M.A.'s Recorded Entries for Simon May 1980 - June 1983:

In this period of just over three years, M.A.

recorded 19 entries in Simon's record, thus averaging .5 interventions monthly. 10 entries showed decisions were made, three of which were rationally based. The caseworker made one of the three rational decisions, a psychologist and teacher the other two. Of the seven decisions without a rationale, the caseworker made four of the decisions; a teacher one and the foster mother two. Entries without evidence of decisions made showed no assessments. There were two administrative and seven descriptive entries, one by a doctor, another by a teacher and the remainder by the caseworker. Thus while 30% (or three decisions) of the decisions made were rationally processed, the caseworker was only involved in 10% (or one decision). The caseworker's decision related to the child and alternative care, whereas the assessment related to alternative care only. The other two rational decisions focused on the child only and the assessments linked with the decisions made also related to the child.

Of the total information processed, only 16% was rationally based, with the caseworker involved in just over 5%. Most of the entries were brief until Simon's failing grades at school precipitated more detailed assessments of the child. (The psychologist became involved.) While the caseworker expressed dissatisfaction over the alternative care arrangement, no detailed assessment was made. Thus the impression given was of somewhat helpless observation of what the caseworker 'felt' was an unsatisfactory

arrangement, but did not clearly evaluate. Overall, the entries showed only very limited rational processing, in fact very limited information processing altogether in this three year period.

4.5 "Brian's" Record

Recorded Entries Reviewed Between October 1974 - December 1982:

Six of the seven caseworkers who had worked with Simon also worked with his older brother Brian over the eight year period covered in this analysis of their case records. He was 7 yrs at the beginning of contact with the agency.

C.M.'s Recorded Entries October 1974 - June 1977:

In Brian's case record C.M. recorded 23 entries, thus averaging .7 monthly. 12 showed decisions made, 10 of which were based on a rationale. The caseworker was involved with seven of the 10 rational decisions, two made independently and three in conjunction with a hospital child psychiatry team, and two in conjunction with a rehabilitation centre team. Of the three other rational decisions, two were made by the rehabilitation centre, and one by a psychologist. Thus 83% of the decisions made were based on a rationale and the caseworker was involved with 58%. Of the 11 entries where no decisions were made, three were assessments, one by the caseworker, another by a nurse and the third by the psychiatric team. Three descriptions only were recorded, two by the social worker, one by the psychiatric team. There were five administrative entries,

two by the social worker and three by the judge. (It is to be noted that the administrative entries also included administrative data on Brian's brother Simon).

Thus the percentage of total rational information processing was 57% with the caseworker identified with 35%. The information processed, which all related to functioning of the child, was detailed and lengthy. Decisions made were overwhelmingly rationally based at 83%. Other professional personnel were very involved in this assessment and decision-making process since Brian was evaluated as demonstrating severe behavioural disturbance requiring specialised treatment. Of note is that, of the decisions rationally processed, decisions relating to the child and the family were all linked with assessments in these task areas, whereas, of five decisions made relating to alternative care, only one related to an assessment in this task area. Thus analysis in relation to the emotional problems of this child was strongly in evidence, whereas analysis of alternative care issues was much more limited.

K.M.'s Recorded Entries October 1977 - December 1977

K.M., who also worked with Brian's brother, was again clearly identified as an interim worker and in the three month period completed only two entries. Both showed decisions made, one without a rationale by the caseworker and one with a rationale by the

child care worker from the rehabilitation centre. This rational decision relating to Brian and his natural family correlated with assessments made in these two task areas. K.M. was not identified as participating in any rational process. The average number of monthly interventions was .6. The evidence therefore was of minimal information processing altogether during this time period, with very limited involvement and analysis on the part of the caseworker.

S.G.'s Recorded Entries January 1978 - June 1978:

S.G. recorded nine entries in Brian's case record during this six month period, thus averaging 1.5 entries monthly. Of these, five showed decisions made, two rationally based with the caseworker involved in both, one independently and one together with the rehabilitation team. Of the two rational decisions made, one related to the child only and was linked with an assessment in this task area; the other constituted a decision relating to the child and natural family, whereas the assessment only related to the child. While the caseworker's recorded entries were brief, assessments by the rehabilitation team were detailed and lengthy.

Of the entries not showing any decisions, one was an assessment made by the child care worker on the rehabilitation team, the other three were descriptions only by the caseworker. The total information

rationaly processed was 33%, with the caseworker involved in 22% of this rational process. Thus, in this record the greatest percentage of information processing and decision-making was non rationaly based. What detailed analysis there was came for the most part from the rehabilitation team.

H.L.'s Recorded Entries June 1978 - June 1979:

H.L., a B.S.W. trained social worker also working with Simon, worked with Brian for a longer period of time, June 78 - June 79. In this period there were 40 recorded entries, averaging 3.6 entries monthly. 19 entries showed decisions made; but only four were rationaly based and these were all made by the rehabilitation team. The social worker was involved in all 15 non rational decisions, 12 of them made by the worker independently. Of the four rational decisions by the rehabilitation team, 1 involved a decision relating to the child and alternative care but the assessment only related to the child; one related to all three task areas, but the assessment only related to the child and natural family; and one decision, related to alternative care, linked with an assessment in this task area.

21 entries showed no decisions made; 5 were rationaly based assessments, four by the rehabilitation team and one by a psychologist. The caseworker recorded eight administrative entries and seven descriptions.

An additional administrative entry related to the passing of a new law pertaining to juveniles. Thus while 21% of the decisions made and 22% of the total information processed was rationally based, the caseworker was not identified with any, but was very involved with the information processes not based on any rationale. Once again, what rational analysis there was in evidence in the record was provided by the specialised rehabilitation team..

K.J.'s Recorded Entries June 1979 - May 1980:

K.J., who also worked with Brian's brother during this time, recorded 27 entries in Brian's record, thus averaging 2.3 entries monthly. Ten entries showed decisions made, only two rationally based, but both of these were by the caseworker. One decision related to the child only and the assessment focused on the child. The other decision involved all three task areas, but the assessment only related to the natural family. Of the eight non rational decisions, the caseworker was involved in seven; one was made by the child care worker.

17 entries showed no decisions made. Four were rationally based assessments, two by the social worker and two by a school principal. There were eleven descriptions, nine by the caseworker and two by the social worker at the rehabilitation centre. Of the two administrative entries, one was by the caseworker

and one by the social worker at the rehabilitation centre. Once again, in this record, the greatest percentage of information processing and decision-making was non rational, with only 20% of the decisions rationally based and 22% of the total information processing rationally based. Clarification of the certainties and uncertainties in relation to this child and his care was therefore extremely limited.

M.A.'s recorded Entries July 1980 - December 1982

M.A., who also worked with Simon over the same two and one half year period, recorded 54 entries in Brian's record thus averaging 1.9 entries monthly. Thirty-two showed decisions made, of which only six were rationally based and the caseworker was only involved in two of these. Three were school decisions related to Brian and were linked to assessments in this area. A fourth decision by the caseworker was related to the child, but the assessment focused on alternative care. A decision by a psychiatrist related to the child and alternative care, but the assessment only focused on the child. A case conference decision on alternative care was linked to an assessment in this area.

Twenty three entries showed no decisions made. 11 were descriptive, ten by the caseworker and one by foster parents. Seven administrative entries were made by the

caseworker. There were four assessments, only one completed by the caseworker with the school completing two and a psychologist one.

Thus over 80% of the information processing was not based on a rationale. Of the decisions made, only 19% were based on a rationale and the caseworker was only involved in 6% of these. While considerable attention had to be spent on alternative care issues for Brian during this period there was only one rational decision linked to an assessment in this task area. Once again, the information processed by this worker was, for the most part, non rationally based, clarifying little of the certainties/uncertainties of the situation.

4.6 Overall Review of The Findings:

The content analysis of the 17 casework records revealed that, overall, the information processing in these records was for the greater part a non rational process. The mean for all recorded entries in each of the 17 casework records for rational information processing was 26%. This percentage, however, was reduced even further to 16% when rational information processing by the caseworker alone was reviewed. When decision-making only was reviewed, the mean for the total number of rationally based decisions increased to 36%, again being reduced to 20% when decision-making involving the

TABLE 3

Comparison of Decisions Based on a Rationale Processed by the Caseworker alone and Where Other Professionals Were Involved

Case Record	Caseworker Recording	Decisions By Caseworker Independently		Decisions By Caseworker with other professionals		Decisions By Other Professionals only		Total No. of Decisions with Rationale	
		No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Simon	C.M.	5	45%	1	9%	1	9%	7	64%
	K.M.	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	S.G.	0	0%	0	0%	1	33%	1	33%
	H.L.	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	R.E.	4	44%	0	0%	0	0%	4	44%
	K.J.	2	67%	0	0%	0	0%	2	67%
M.A.	1	10%	0	0%	2	20%	3	30%	
Brian	C.M.	2	17%	5	42%	3	25%	10	83%
	K.M.	0	0%	0	0%	1	50%	1	50%
	S.G.	1	20%	1	20%	0	0%	2	40%
	H.L.	0	0%	0	0%	4	21%	4	21%
	K.J.	2	20%	0	0%	0	0%	2	20%
	M.A.	1	3%	1	3%	4	12%	6	19%
Arthur	W.I.	2	22%	0	0%	0	0%	2	22%
	E.R.	2	6%	0	0%	4	12%	6	18%
Mary	K.M.	7	48%	2	12%	0	0%	9	60%
	M.H.	13	17%	8	10%	8	10%	29	37%
Averages %			20%		6%		12%		38%

3

caseworker only was reviewed.

These findings showed that participation of other professionals in the assessment and decision-making process did have an overall positive effect on the extent of rational information processing. However, this involvement appeared to impact equally caseworkers with the highest and lowest percentages of rational information processing and decision-making.

These findings, identifying limited rational information processing by the caseworkers, meant that there was little clarification of the certainties and uncertainties of the task. When reviewed in the light of the theoretical discussion presented earlier, these findings give rise to the expectation that a high degree of job stress would be found among a majority of the caseworkers whose records were under study. Job stress is likely to be the result of decisional conflict which is not handled through 'vigilant search' or, in effect, through careful assessment and clarification of the issues identifying the certainties and uncertainties of the task, and thereby the most effective means to handle them. However, the scope of this study cannot verify this.

The findings, however, did identify a wide variation

3. See Table 3

in the extent of rational information and decision-making processes among the 17 casework records studied. What were the reasons for this wide variation? Could identification of the reasons for these wide variations provide clarification of task issues? Insights gained from such a process of clarification might be used as aids in more effective task management in order to accomplish the task successfully and thereby reduce job stress.

These questions about the findings will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: Analysis of the Findings:

The initial evidence in this study appears to associate the wide variation in rational information processing and decision-making with differences in training and experience, where the task focus is on the child and natural family. However, when the focus is on alternative care, this task area appears to discourage any 'rational' process or task analysis altogether.

The study's findings raised the question: what were the reasons for the wide variation in the percentage of rational information and decision-making processes demonstrated in the caseworkers' records?

5.1 Variables in Evidence in the Study:

The length of time a caseworker was working with a child ranged from three months to just over two and one half years. The number of average recorded interventions monthly ranged from a low of .5 to a high of 5.5 per month. Neither of these two factors appear to relate significantly to a greater or lesser likelihood of a rational process of decision-making taking place. Caseworkers with the highest and lowest percentages of rational decision-making processes were proportionately distributed between those having short term and long term contact with the clients.¹

It was noted that other professionals'

1. See Table 3

involvement in the assessment and decision-making processes did have an overall positive effect on the percentage of rational decision-making processes. The mean for rational decisions increased from 20% for caseworkers only to 38% when the total rational decision-making was reviewed. What was evident was that other professional involvement usually occurred when any of the children showed overt signs of behavioural disturbance. It was then that a psychiatrist, psychologist or psychiatric team were requested to provide consultation.

Significant variations between social workers seemed to emerge relative to the type of education and experience of each caseworker and the particular task areas in which decisions were made. The highest percentage of rational information processing and decision-making appeared to be conducted by caseworkers with the most advanced training and experience and who happened to have a psychoanalytic orientation. In addition, as noted earlier, rational information processing and decision-making were most frequently present when emotional and behavioural disturbance in any of the children was the focus of attention. When decisions were made with respect to alternative care for any of these children very little

2. See Table 3

rational information processing appeared to take place. Child care, or normative nurturing needs, did not appear to be rationally assessed. These two factors will be discussed separately in further detail.

5.2 Professional Training And Socialization In Relation to The Decision-making Process:

According to the findings from the analysis of the case records, a rational process of decision-making in more than 50% of decisions was identified in only five case records. Four of these records were completed by two caseworkers who both worked with two of the children whose files were selected for study. They were C.M., in Brian and Simon's records, with 83% and 64% respectively, and K.M., in Mary and Brian's records, at 60% and 50% respectively. The fifth record was K.J.'s in Simon's file where 66% of the decisions made were identified as being rationally based.

K.M. was a graduate M.S.W. trained social worker with strongly psychoanalytically oriented training and experience. C.M. was an experienced psychiatric nurse whose training and experience had been with psychiatric teams in the past and was therefore also strongly psychoanalytically oriented. The third worker K.J. was a B.S.W. trained social worker with a limited number of years of experience in social work practice.

Of these three workers who showed the highest

percentage of 'rational' decision-making processes, C.M. and K.M. in comparison with K.J. demonstrated a more consistent pattern of rational information processing throughout their records. Total rational information processing for C. M. in Simon and Brian's records was 46% and 57% respectively. These percentages are reduced to 39% and 35% respectively when the caseworker's direct involvement in rational processes are reviewed. Even with this reduction, these percentages for the caseworker alone are still significantly higher than for the majority of other caseworkers' recordings. However, they do point to the significance of the contribution of other professionals. A good example of their contribution is to be seen in Simon and Brian's records, where 'rational' decision-making reached 64% and 83% respectively.

However, when the three task areas were reviewed, C.M.'s rational processes of decision-making related only to the task areas focusing on the child and natural family. While 10 of the rational decisions for Simon and Brian were made with regard to alternative care, only one of these decisions (this was in Brian's record), was related to an assessment in this task area.

While rational decision-making for K.M. in Mary and Brian's records were 60% and 50%, the total rational information processing was 54% and 50% respectively. However, as shown in the findings, K.M. was only an 'interim

worker' for both Brian and Simon and clearly identified as having minimal involvement with these two brothers. Thus 50% in Brian's record by K.M. represented one of two decisions not made by the caseworker. This percentage therefore was not representative. However, the entries recorded by K.M. in Mary's record as an active caseworker demonstrate this caseworker's involvement in 'practically all the rational information processes, 52% compared with the 54% of total rational information processes.

Alternative care was not a task issue at the time of K.M.'s involvement since Mary had not yet been born; so that the task area in this situation was the natural family, in this case the mother. Overall this caseworker showed a strong 'rational' information and decision-making process in this record.

For K.J., the B.S.W. trained social worker, 67% of the decision-making process was identified as 'rational'. This percentage, however, represented only two of three decisions made, and the overall percentage of rational processing was only 27%. Both rational decisions related to the task areas of the child and natural family. No 'rational' decisions were made relating to alternative care. In addition, K.J.'s 'rational' information and decision-making processing in a second record, Brian's, was only 22% and 20% respectively. Thus this worker

demonstrated considerable inconsistency throughout the information and decision-making processes.

The other recordings were all completed by six workers who were undergraduate B.S.W. trained social workers. They showed a lower incidence of a rational process of decision-making ranging from 44% to a low of zero. Two of the caseworkers H.L., in both Brian's and Simon's records, and G.S. in Simon's record, showed no involvement in a rational process of decision-making. These records demonstrated either minimal information processing altogether, or descriptive detail describing events in the life of the child, with no assessment or evaluation process in evidence. Decisions were made with no explanations given for them.

These are tentative, preliminary findings, but the evidence points to a lesser amount of rational analysis in the information and decision-making processes by undergraduate trained social workers.

What is also of significance throughout these records is that where rational processes occurred they virtually all related to areas of 'certainty', that is, where explanations could be provided. Only one worker, M.H. in Mary's record, demonstrated a rational assessment process which clearly described a situation of 'uncertainty'.

5.3 Analysis of the Findings Related to Professional Training

The findings in this study show that two workers, one an M.S.W. and the other a psychiatric nurse, both with strong psychoanalytic backgrounds, demonstrated a much stronger propensity for rational information and decision-making processing in comparison with the B.S.W. trained social workers. However, these rational processes appeared only to relate to the task areas where the focus was on the child and natural family. When the task area concerns alternative care there appears to be a lack of rational processing in all the caseworkers' records. The further factor of note was that the 'uncertainties' of the task were not identified by the caseworkers.

5.4 Alternative Care Issues in Relation to the Decision-making Process

A significant factor to emerge was the lack of rational processes of decision-making in relation to alternative care, i.e. when it was considered necessary to remove children from their natural family. This is particularly noticeable since three of the four children's records showed them to be in some form of alternative care for practically the whole period covered by their records. This represents a period of nearly eight years for Brian and Simon, and nearly three years for Arthur. Mary, the fourth child, while not remaining in alternative care, experienced five different alternative

care settings during the two and one half years described in the record.

In reviewing each child's record from the perspective of decisions made concerning alternative care a common pattern seems to emerge.

Arthur's record shows that W.I., initially involved in assessing this teenager's situation, decided to place him in a foster home. He was then about 14 years of age. No assessment or description is given of the home in which Arthur was placed, and why it would meet Arthur's needs. The record shows two decisions being made in this area, with no assessments related to alternative care.

When E.R. takes over responsibility for Arthur's care, this lack of assessment of the foster home continues. Very few descriptive data are provided concerning the foster home. Recordings covering a two year period provide no assessments though nine decisions are identified related to alternative care. The three assessments made relating to alternative care were all made at the end of the two and one half year period recorded, when foster placements and a return home had all broken down. In the crisis situation, a psychiatric evaluation was requested and a referral to a specialised group home was processed. Throughout the record, the caseworker relates the events in the life of this teenager, but there is very little evidence of any analysis and

assessment of the type of care Arthur requires.

In the case of Mary, during the time that M.H. was involved with this client and her mother, the child was placed five times; once in a rehabilitation centre with her mother; a second time in a convalescent hospital, and finally for short term stays, at three different foster homes. The record identifies 11 decisions relating to alternative care, but no assessments about this issue. The only descriptive detail concerning any of the three foster homes came from a diary of events written by one of the foster mothers. The caseworker did not comment on any of these details.

With respect to Simon, C.M., the first caseworker to work with Simon, placed him in an emergency foster home and after a brief period transferred him to a long term foster home. Six decisions were identified in C.M.'s recording related to alternative care, but once again no assessments were made in this area. In C.M.'s descriptive statements, the difficulty of finding an emergency home setting was mentioned. This apparently resulted in Simon and his brother remaining in their natural family for two months when the caseworker and the agency had already decided that the children should be removed on account of severe child battering. It is interesting to note that the caseworker's description of this lack of resources was neutral in tone and gave no evidence of

feelings concerning this lack.

When a home was found, C.M. merely stated that 'others' had judged it a "good" emergency home. The transfer from the emergency home to a long term foster home simply identified the date when this occurred. In addition, a description of Simon's response to it, in terms of his behavioural functioning, was also recorded. However, there was no description concerning the foster home other than that the foster mother was coping well with Simon's behaviour.

K.M, as an interim worker, provided no further information or made any assessments or decisions in relation to Simon or the foster home. In S.G.'s six month contact with Simon, there was also no recorded evidence of assessments or decisions in relation to foster care. Descriptive statements merely provided opinions such as: "Proven to be an excellent placement for Simon"; "has done very well - is part of the family"; "Gets along well with other children in the home". This was the first evidence in the record that there were other children in the home.

In H.L.'s three month contact with Simon starting in June 1978, again there are no recorded assessments related to alternative care, and only one decision made in this area. However, for the first time, the record does provide some very limited descriptive data concerning other children in the

home. The caseworker reports that there is a child with borderline functioning, another 'who steals', and an adopted multiracial child. The foster father was also described as having a serious health problem. In the final report this worker did decide that Simon's relationship within the home, especially with peers, should be investigated.

R.E. continues with this focus of attention during the next six months of involvement with the client and for the first time since the start of the record there are four assessments related to alternative care. Nine decisions were made in this task area. For the first time the other children are identified as foster children and descriptive statements report discord between them and Simon. However, most of the interventions appear to be the result of a crisis situation, a breakdown in the health of the foster mother. The 'rational' process of assessment and decision-making relating to alternative care consisted for the most part of negative evaluations of relatives as prospective alternative foster parents.

For the following year from June 1979, K.J., the caseworker involved, appears to reverse the opinion of the foster home situation. The foster mother's health is stated to have improved, and Simon is described as showing a fear of change. Simon is also once again considered to be relating

well with the siblings. No assessments are evident in this task area and only one decision was made in relation to the foster home.

When M.A. takes over the supervision of Simon's care, the caseworker reveals that Simon wishes to remain in this home. (Simon has lived in the home for five years.) Only one assessment and one decision (not based on a rationale) are made in this task area during M.A.'s two year period of working with Simon. Descriptive statements describe Simon's expressed dislike of the other two children in the home and of his wish that they would leave. However, again there is no description of the home environment, who these other children are and their level of functioning.

Thus, the evidence in these three cases reveals that the caseworkers do not provide a detailed description or analysis of the functioning of the foster family in the same way as they do with the natural family. The difficulties that seem to be present are merely alluded to in the descriptive process. There is no direct statement of the problems or of care issues, and as a result there is no attempt to assess the quality of care provided by the foster family and whether it is meeting the child's nurturing needs.

The Fourth Case Study Related to Alternative Care Needs:

In Brian's record alternative care issues centred

on two different requirements: firstly a residential treatment centre to help Brian overcome a severe behavioural disturbance, and secondly the perceived need for a foster home.

C.M., the first caseworker to work with Brian, assessed the need for him to be removed from his severely traumatizing home environment and placed him in an emergency foster home. The severity of his emotional disturbance resulted in a decision for hospitalization. Following a multidisciplinary assessment, it was decided that rehabilitation was needed for him. Temporary measures were decided on until a place was available for him at the rehabilitation centre. In all, six decisions were made in respect to alternative care, with only one, the decision for rehabilitation, being based on a 'rational' decision-making process. In relation to the crisis and temporary care solutions, the decisions to use temporary foster homes were merely reported without any reasons being given.

During K.M.'s period as an 'interim' worker, the rehabilitation centre decided that Brian was ready for discharge in December 1977 following two years of treatment. This was the only decision; there were no assessments. S.G., the next caseworker involved between January and May 1978, described three actions taken in trying to find a suitable foster home. No assessments related to alternative

care were recorded. Descriptive statements give a picture of difficulty in finding foster homes and of conflict within the organisation as to who would assess potential foster homes. Brian was assessed as requiring special care, but no reason was given as to why the decision was for foster home placement.

From June 1978 to June 1979, H.L. describes the search as proceeding to find a foster home. Four assessments were made relating to alternative care, and a total of fifteen decisions. The assessments focused on what Brian needed from a foster home environment. None focused on the search process for finding alternative care. During this time extra therapeutic interventions are identified as being needed to help Brian emotionally cope with the uncertainty of the situation (i.e. a play therapy program was implemented for him), since Brian had been told eighteen months earlier that he was ready for discharge. Numerous work hours were involved in discussing the problem. Four large case conferences involving groups of staff from the rehabilitation centre and the agency met to discuss this issue. However, all the assessments, decisions and descriptive data are from the perspective of the needs of the child; not on problem solving analysis related to alternative care resources. No reasons were given as to why one foster home found and

stated as suitable was not used. At the end of this worker's case record, the decision was made to use the foster home identified as a possibility a year earlier.

When K.J. became the caseworker in June 1979, the decision to use this foster home was implemented. Six decisions related to alternative care, but no assessments were evident. Descriptions concentrated on Brian's adjustment to the home, but no description of the foster home was provided in any detail. We are told that there were other foster children in the home and Brian's interaction with them is commented on.

When M.A. took over as Brian's caseworker in 1980, alternative care seemed to be a major issue throughout this period. In all, twenty two decisions were made, but only five assessments in this task area (none of which were correlated with decisions concerning alternative care).

When the foster parents moved and decided not to keep Brian, their reasons for this decision were given. However, Brian's placement in a new home was merely recorded as taking place with no recorded explanation as to how this decision was made. Problems related to Brian's functioning in this home were described until a breakdown in this placement occurred three months later. This became a crisis situation and the decision was made to place him in an emergency foster home. In the search for a new long term foster home the

the worker stated that there had been little response to advertisements placed in the newspaper. A foster mother was found and after initial hesitation, agreed to take Brian. The worker's only assessment was that since Brian would be the only child in the home, he would not have to compete for the foster mother's attention.

Once again alternative care decision-making was based on a non rational process. Alternative care issues were not clearly presented or analysed.

5.5 Analysis of the Findings Related to Alternative Care:

Thus, in studying the task area related to alternative care, one not only sees very little evidence of rational processes of decision-making, but in addition there is a great lack of descriptive detail related to this task area. While not directly stated, the problems of lack of options with regard to resources for alternative care are indirectly revealed in the description of events in the record. It is easy to imagine that the inability to find any problem-solving alternatives for alternate care for a child must be a real source of stress for the caseworker. The lack of choice of options also seems to evoke the response in the caseworkers that any evaluation of the resources that are available is not appropriate. What is the point of evaluating a scarce resource where there appear to be no options? The evidence

in this study shows that there is very little information processing with regard to alternative care. What is also known concerning the agency whose records are under study here is that, in comparison with the number of caseworkers involved in 'direct work' with children 'at risk', there is a proportionately very small number of staff involved with alternative care resource options.

It may be argued that the lack of information processing in relation to alternative care in these case records should be considered as very understandable. Is it appropriate to provide detailed information concerning a foster family in a client's record? However, a task analysis of these case records in terms of Thompson's typology shows that the absence of such detail does little to clarify the task issue. In fact, as Simon's record shows, there is a masking of the difficulties that the child is having, due to the lack of descriptive detail and analysis of the alternative care provided. This appears to be a task problem beyond the traditional individual casework approach. A problem oriented casework approach or strategy, which concentrates the caseworker's attention directly upon the child, seems to cause a neglect of the need to ensure an appropriate nurturing environment.

5.6 Results of the Analysis

The lack of rational information processing

revealed in this study suggests a general masking of 'uncertainties'. On the one hand there is a masking of the worker's own uncertainties about their own technical skills and knowledge (as shown in the low percentage of rational information processing by undergraduate workers compared with post graduate trained workers). On the other hand there is also a masking of task uncertainties perhaps especially when prevailing approaches are not sympathetic to the task at hand and where socio/political factors are an inherent part of the task.

What appears to happen is that, where there is the most 'uncertainty', there is the least amount of information processing. In Rein and White's terms, it would be true to say there appears to be a total avoidance of the problematic area. In Janis and Mann's terms this could be described as 'defensive avoidance' which their research has shown to be a stress inducing strategy.

Undertaking a content analysis, which in itself, as Paisley states, is a form of rational information processing, has identified these issues at least in an exploratory manner.

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3. Rein and White (1981), as discussed in Chapter 1 refer to this avoidance by caseworkers wherever possible when their casework approach did not aid them in their task.
 4. Janis & Mann (1967), as discussed in Chapter 2.
 5. See Chapter 3 "Methodology Selected for the study".

Chapter 6: Conclusion:

The results of the study are discussed; in particular, the fact that there is a masking of the 'uncertainties' of the task through a lack of 'rational' information processing. The implications of these findings for job stress and task issues in social work practice are reviewed.

6.1 The Results Emanating from the Application of Thompson's Typology:

This exploratory study has demonstrated that the extent of 'rational' processes of decision-making, as described in the records, varies widely. The extent of rational processes prior to decision-making varied from a high of 83% to a low of zero. Of the 17 caseworker records analyzed, only five demonstrated a rational process preceding decision-making in over 50% of the decisions made. In addition, 50% of the information presented in the recorded entries did not culminate in any decisions being made and when the total information processed was reviewed, the percentage of rational information processing was even lower than for rationally processed decisions.

In looking at the variations in rational processing in these casework recordings, the findings of this exploratory study point to two significant factors:

- 1) That there appears to be a relationship between the educational level and training orientation of the

caseworker, and the extent of rational information processing.

2) that there appears to be a relationship between the nature of the task to be handled and the extent of rational information processing.

Workers with post graduate training and experience with a strong psychoanalytic orientation demonstrated a higher percentage of rational information processing than less experienced undergraduate trained social workers. However this relationship was apparent only where the task focus was the child and natural family, focusing on cause/effect analysis of behavioural problems. When the task focus was alternative care, the level of training does not appear to have been a factor. There was an overall lack of rational information processing in respect to this task area in all the casework records. All the caseworkers seemed to avoid discussion of issues in this task area.

The application of Thompson's typology as an analytical tool to these case records, has therefore produced quantitative data on the extent of information processing and the extent of rational processes of decision-making. For the majority of caseworkers, the information processing in their recordings was a 'non rational' process.

Where rational processes of decision-making were identified, it appeared to be in situations where the

caseworkers were most 'certain' in the task they were undertaking. The highest proportion of rational processes were related to cause/effect analysis of behavioural difficulties on the part of the children. It appears that the more overt the behavioral disturbance of the child, the greater the likelihood of a careful assessment of the problem. This was true in the case records with the highest percentage of rational processing and in those with the lowest. This was usually when further consultation by a psychiatric team or consultant was requested. Cause/effect analysis of the problem was then carefully detailed. However, the post graduate trained workers with a psychoanalytic orientation were more consistent, demonstrating a higher percentage of rational processing in their recorded entries. Thus rational processing appeared to depend both on whether the task issue focused on a behavioral problem and also on the worker's knowledge and skill. The 'certainty' was dependent on both the task area and skill of the worker concerned. The fact that undergraduate trained social workers did not present as high a percentage of rational information processing as the graduate workers, in relation to task analysis focusing on the child and natural family, raised the possibility that part of the uncertainty of the task arose from their own lack of knowledge and skill. They lacked the skill to utilise available technical information to meet the needs of the child.

The situation in which there was a complete lack of rational information processing on the part of all workers was in the area of alternative care. This lack points to an avoidance of the issue. However, decisions still have to be made in this task area. From the perspective of Janis & Mann's studies, this can be seen as a form of defensive avoidance which these theorists perceive as leading to high stress caused by decisional conflict. These findings also raise the question as to the causes of task 'uncertainty': Is insufficient rational information processing in this task area due to insufficient use of technical knowledge on the part of the workers, or is it due to the fact that no technical knowledge is available to facilitate problem solving in this area and as a result, the problem itself is very dependent on socio-political value judgements? It seems that the caseworkers' orientation, regardless of level of training, did not encourage them to carry out any rational information processing in this area. This seems to result in a concentration on the behavioural symptoms of the child at the expense of any adequate analysis of alternative care and nurturing needs when these cannot be provided by the natural family.

Most contemporary researchers regard information processing as a crucial task for effective decision-making. In a purposive organisation, it becomes very difficult to problem solve without any analysis of the task. Task

analysis is therefore an essential process for both management and workers alike. Task analysis is thus directly related to task accomplishment, which as Ewen states,¹ is the source of primary job satisfaction. Janis and Mann (1977) showed vigilant search behaviour to be a necessary component in reducing decisional conflict, hence job stress. This case study, using Thompson's typology, has not only identified gaps in search behaviour or task analysis, but at the same time has identified specific factors relating to the lack of task analysis and, therefore also, factors potentially relating to job stress for caseworkers working with children 'at risk'. These factors were: the significance of education and type of training for the task and the need for detailed task analysis relating to alternative care.

In implementing Thompson's typology, his premise that a rational process is of significance and involves assessments, was followed through in the content analysis of the caseworkers' records. The records were classified showing whether or not assessment processes were in evidence. It is to be noted however, that Thompson also pointed out that assessments are based on prevailing social values and only when these values are explicit is a rational process of assessment or evaluation possible. His typology shows that when causes of problems are unclear and choice of actions

1. Ewen; See discussion in chapter 1.

for dealing with the situation unclear, any form of 'rational' strategy or approach to the task is simply not adaptive. The certainties and uncertainties of the task need to be identified.

Thus a further significant factor of the study's findings was that the analysis of the case records showed an almost total lack of any identification of 'uncertainties' related to the task of helping 'children at risk'. Thus the question arises; is there a clear basis identified for the use of any form of rationality either professional or organisational in relation to the task with these clients?

Where, in reality, the task problematic is unclear or uncertain, are rational processes merely 'rationales' provided in defense of decisions made? (Perhaps for the benefit of meeting some unstated organizational requirement?) Stress or 'burnout', in other words, can arise when situations of uncertainty are approached as if they were certain and treated rationally and in addition, where the rationales established by the organization administratively are in conflict with the rationales of the professionals working directly with the clients. Uncertainties need to be recognised for the uncertainties they are and clear recognition be given to the fact that decisions made in uncertain situations are inevitably based on value judgements.

The fact that social services now have to respond to

increasingly public questioning related to task accomplishment means that certain hypotheses raised in the literature are insufficient with respect to explaining 'burnout'. For example, the observations that the more compatible the demands of the social service organization are with those of the profession and the more professional workers are able to adapt to these demands, the less chance there is of suffering from job stress or 'burnout' need to be examined within the context of the task to be accomplished. Thus Thompson's focus on task analysis, addressing both the problematic of task accomplishment and at the same time dealing with the conflict between the bureaucracy and the professions by relating it directly to task issues, the raison d'être for both the bureaucracy and professionals, integrates and focuses on all of these factors of potential job stress.

Thompson's framework provides clarity in showing the aspects of the task where rational strategies, both administrative and professional can be effectively used and which areas of the task where value judgements have to be explicitly made. The areas of value conflict can thus be clearly identified and questions raised concerning whose value judgements should be the basis for decisions made in situations of uncertainty.

Thompson's typology stresses the importance of a rational process for assessing and evaluating how to achieve successful task accomplishment, but this can only be

undertaken when certainties and uncertainties of the task are clearly identified.

Thus the further dimension that Thompson's typology raises in relation to job stress is how the task is analyzed and how strategies and approaches are agreed upon. His typology clarifies the issues related to job stress which were identified in the review of literature. These included conflicts between the professionals and the bureaucracy. His typology further indicates that these issues have to be analyzed in relation to the certainties and uncertainties of the task itself. It is the failure to clarify the certainties and uncertainties of the task and in the light of such clarification, to respond with appropriate strategies, which creates the basis for conflict leading to job stress or 'burnout' in undertaking the social work task.

Thus job stress in situations of uncertainty is likely to be present at all levels of the organisation. Without careful search and appraisal of the task, adaptability in selection of the most appropriate responses and strategies for accomplishing the task will not be possible throughout the organization. In the light of this thesis the significance of task analysis takes on increasing importance and significance. Careful search and appraisal of task issues is an essential component in facilitating task accomplishment and hence in reduction of job stress.

6.2 Issues Arising From The Findings. Implications For Practice

The lack of rational processes of decision-making and the particular lack in a specific task area, by the caseworkers processing these case records, looked at in the light of Thompson's typology, raises questions about the certainty/uncertainty factors of the task and the approaches to problem solving. Are there for instance, parts of the task where it would be possible to make a rational analysis, although this is not in fact occurring? Are there other parts of the task which have to depend on imprecise, evaluative judgemental decisions? Are these imprecise parts of the task clearly recognized? Thirdly, are there other parts of the task (e.g. in relation to alternative care) that require an inspirational mode of problem solving?

If a rational process of decision-making is emphasised, it is possible to sort out these issues more clearly and, in the process of evaluating the task, identify the different components of the task problems. For example, the study points to the possibility that lesser trained workers are not able to undertake as effectively a cause/effect analysis of the problems or the range of possible outcomes, and in their technical uncertainty they resort to judgemental decisions or inaction. Perhaps recent de-emphasis by the government on educational and technical training requirements for those in

the social services is already having a detrimental effect on social services. Identifying gaps in services, as the government has done, does not mean that technical skills much needed in one part of the task should be neglected.

Secondly, it raises the serious issue of gaps in services. To meet the needs of children 'at risk', very frequently alternative care is required. No amount of cause/effect analysis of the child's functioning is going to solve the problem of alternative care needs (as was demonstrated in the case of Brian), if time and resources are not directly focused on this issue. This component of the task is clearly an area for administration and requires, in Thompson's terms, "opportunistic surveillance". A rational process of identifying this task problem area leads to the realization that new strategies for problem solving are required. They will, by necessity, be of an experimental and creative nature (and therefore might be termed 'irrational') At the present time, the choice of options is limited and we do not possess clear data as to what forms of alternative care are most effective for the range of children 'at risk'.

Thirdly, the area of judgemental decisions raises the issue of the socio/political complexities of certain parts of the decision-making processes. Thompson acknowledges that in some parts of the task judgemental decisions will have to be made since it is not possible to be 'certain' in all

aspects of the task. Complete knowledge and certainty are not available. In these situations one turns to social referents. The issue then becomes: which reference groups should one turn to? Should it just be a professional reference group of those directly involved in the task area, or one with a broader socio-political frame of reference?

The government has already decided that there should be broader socio-political representation on the boards of human service organisations.² Should they also have a more direct say in establishing policy in the areas where social values are the ultimate basis for decisions made?

Thus, Thompson's typology not only raises issues around identifying components of the task and the most effective strategies to be used, but also raises the issue at what level of the organisation should the particular type of decision-making processes take place. When and what type of decision-making processes should occur at the technical, administrative and institutional levels of the organisation? Thus, the organisation, in undertaking a rational process of evaluating the task, needs to consider where 'rational' (i.e. technical expertise) and 'non-rational' (socio-political judgements, or an inspirational approach) are required in the organisational decision-making

2. The Castonguay Report 1970 proposed these changes which were implemented in the passing of Bill 65 relating to Health and Social Services.

process and what levels of the organisation should be involved.

6.3 Task Analysis And Job Stress:

A study such as this points to the complexities of the task. If these complexities are not clearly analysed and acknowledged, in particular the areas of 'uncertainties' in the task, a masking of the problems will continue to occur and deflect from problem solving. Decisions as to the most effective task strategies to utilise are dependent on a thorough analysis of the task issues. Clarification of the certainties and uncertainties of the task are a prerequisite to rational decision-making. Significantly, Janis & Mann have shown job stress to be linked with decisional conflict and how it is handled.

To conclude, job stress is an integral part of the task. It cannot be treated as an isolated issue separate from the task itself. In order to cope with job stress, it is necessary to have an improved understanding of the task itself, which can only come about through vigilant search behaviour, or in Thompson's terms a 'rational' process of task analysis clarifying the 'certainties' and 'uncertainties' of the task. Such a process has significance for management and workers alike in their analysis of the task and selection of ways to ways to approach it.

I consider that this exploratory study has demonstrated the potential value of Thompson's typology for the study of information processing and decision-making in the social services and suggest that more extensive research along these lines would be profitable.

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