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"It's Not Like a Movie. It's Not Hollywood:" Competing Narratives of a Youth Mentoring Organization

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"It's Not Like a Movie. It's Not Hollywood:" Competing Narratives of a Youth Mentoring

Organization

by

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ABSTRACT

Direct social service workers face a variety of difficulties including low pay, limited upward mobility, role ambiguity, and emotional exhaustion. This study adds to the understanding of the complexities of front-line service work with an analysis of the storytelling of case managers working with Big Brothers Big Sisters. Interview participants describe a problem of "volunteer expectations," which they define as related to the organizational storytelling of the program: the images that entice people to volunteer do not match actual volunteer experiences. I argue that glamorized storytelling through marketing and recruitment tactics creates unintended, negative consequences for volunteers and case managers. This project contributes to the understanding of social services, emotion work, and the American "helping" culture.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Direct social service work is difficult work that is underappreciated by society in general

and is largely ignored in the scholarly dialogue. While organizations tend to focus on the

satisfaction of clients (Anda 2001; Ribner and Knei-Paz 2002; Karcher et al. 2005; Barnetz and

Feigin 2012) and child outcomes (Riessman and Quinney 2015), there has not been much

interest in the experiences of case managers. There is a large body of research on the problem of

employee burnout (Regehr et al. 2004) but there is a lack of literature on the ways case managers

understand the challenges of social service work, particularly in youth mentoring organizations

which pair "at risk" youth with adult role models who provide guidance and support. By

understanding the narratives of case managers, this project examines the following research

question: What are the characteristics of stories about organizational (1) clients; (2) volunteers;

and (3) marketing and how do these influence workers' experiences?

The challenges faced by direct social service workers, such as high caseloads, low pay,

role ambiguities, and limited opportunities for upward mobility (Thomas et al. 2014) are

contributing factors to the persistent problem of turnover that plagues social services. This

project contributes to the understanding of case manager experiences by exploring the challenge

of managing volunteers. Many organizations such as Big Brothers Big Sisters rely on volunteer

help to successfully operate. In this type of program, case managers can be successful only to

the extent that volunteers are successful.

This project is a case study of a Big Brothers Big Sisters program. Volunteers are a critical component in the success of mentoring programs such as Big Brothers Big Sisters. Volunteer mentors with Big Brothers Big Sisters work one-to-one with children who are in need of adult role models. The organization's impact is presented on the website: "Each time Big Brothers Big Sisters pairs a child with a role model, we start something incredible: a one-to-one relationship built on trust and friendship that can blossom into a future of unlimited potential" (Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, "Big impact-proven results" 2015). Children in the program have been found as 46% less likely to begin using illegal drugs, 27% less likely to begin using alcohol, 52% less likely to skip school, 37% less likely to skip a class and 33% less likely to hit someone (Tierney et al. 1995). The website states, "our one-to-one matches are the driving force behind making an impact on children" (2015).

Case managers work for little extrinsic benefits, and depend on receiving "moral wages" (Kolb 2014) to feel good about their work and construct a moral identity. I extend the concept of moral wages to unpaid volunteers who, as described by participants, have signed up to "pay it forward" and help a child in need. As case managers with Big Brothers Big Sisters rely on volunteers to make a positive impact on the lives of children, workers' moral wages are directly influenced by volunteers.

As we live in a "culture of storytelling" (Weeks 1998: 46) and narratives create identity at all levels of social life (Loseke 2007), examining stories case managers tell about their work is important to understanding the complexities of social service. In this project, research participants have discussed a problem they define as relating to the storytelling of the program: the images the organization uses to entice people to volunteer do not match the actual experiences of volunteers. This, of course, leads to unhappy volunteers who eventually leave the

organization. Workers describe three types of expectations not being met through lived experience: (1) The depiction of children is not how they are, (2) the "heroic" role of volunteers is not as glamorous as it seems, (3) mentoring is not always easy and fun.

I argue that glamorized storytelling tactics of the organization's marketing and recruitment creates volunteer expectations that carry unintended, negative consequences. Organizations that rely on volunteers, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, must attract volunteers and *keep* them. While glamorized stories might well be effective in attracting new volunteers, these stories might actually discourage volunteers from staying. The melodramatic stories that encourage interest set unrealistic expectations for volunteers leading to retention struggles, which has the potential to jeopardize positive outcomes of the children served. Additionally, I argue this problem adds to the emotion work of case managers. The management of volunteer expectations adds to the challenges of this type of work.

I proceed by first locating this project in the existing literature of moral identities and emotions in service work. Then, I present three interrelated types of volunteer expectations as described by case managers. After discussing how volunteer expectations create problems for workers, I conclude by exploring the potential usefulness of empirically examining competing narratives in social service organizations.

Emotions, Service Work, and Moral Identities

Social constructionists perspective on emotions challenge the traditional conceptualizations that emotion is natural, universal or the result of evolution (Loseke and Kusenbach 2007). This challenge to naturalist views is based on the idea that emotion is a social

phenomena based on beliefs, shaped by language, and derived from culture (Armon-Jones 1998).

It is culture, not biology, that "shapes the occasion, meaning and expression of affective

experience" (Gordon 1981:562). There have been a variety of studies on aspects of how emotion

is socially constructed including attention to emotion as language, emotion cultures, socialization

into emotion cultures, and emotion work (Loseke and Kusenbach 2007).

Hochschild's (1983; 1979) research of airline attendants ignited the study of emotion

work in sociology. Her focus is on the concept of "emotional labor," which she defines as work

that "requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that

produces the proper state of mind in others- in this case, the sense of being cared for in a

convivial and safe place" (1983:7). Hoschild's study emphasizes how workers are encouraged to

do "deep acting" rather than "surface acting," which can result in emotional problems and

commodified emotion. While Hoschild directed attention to the negative consequences of

emotion work, others have argued there are positive effects. Detachment of authentic emotion

and alienation are concepts easily understood in routinized service jobs such as order-takers at

fast food restaurants, but cannot necessarily be generalized to the entire range of service work.

Some employees' experiences working with customers can be encouraging, leading to feelings

of pride and having control over their work (Tolich 1993; Abiala 1999).

Kolb's (2014) research of victim advocates and counselors in *Moral Wages* depicts a

version of emotion work that is not based on the demands of employers, but the morals of

workers. In contrast to airline attendants, servers, and other frontline service workers, social

service providers choose to work in emotionally exhausting roles to help people in need, for little

extrinsic benefits or incentives. Kolb describes "moral wages" as symbolic rewards that provide

a sense of "living up to the demands of their moral identity code and the positive feelings that

come with it" (2014:22). These workers are doing more than "just a job" (Kolb 2014:30); they are working to create moral identities. By preserving their moral identities, workers receive satisfaction that goes beyond money or prestige.

Based on the decision to take a social service job, direct service workers can be morally evaluated as good, caring people. In such instances, it is not employers who are forcing workers to act in ways that make clients feel comfortable; it is workers themselves who find enjoyment and moral fulfillment though this work. It is assumed workers are "genuinely" looking to help others and will provide care to clients autonomously.

Creating Moral Identities for Workers and Volunteers

Within symbolic interactionist theoretical frameworks (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969) individual identities are interpreted and constructed through ongoing social interaction. People are continuously evaluating how others perceive them, creating interpretations of their own identities. "The looking glass self," (Cooley 1902:164) describes the process of seeing ourselves through the eyes of others, which initiates self-assessment of one's identity. Mead (1934) argues that group membership creates shared meanings. Morality can be a label acquired from a certain group membership. Kleinman (1996:5) defines "moral identity" as:

> An identity that people invest with moral significance; our belief in ourselves as
> good people depends on whether we think our actions and reactions are consistent
> with that identity. By this definition, any identity that testifies to a person's good
> character can be a moral identity, such as a mother, Christian, breadwinner, or
> feminist.

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Allahyari (2000) explored how people develop "moral selves" through serving people in need and how an organization's "vision of charity" impacts perceptions of the work being done. As Kolb describes in *Moral Wages* (2014), workers perform moral work to receive satisfaction, relying on the belief that they are helping others in need. Workers who choose to take jobs with little extrinsic value to instead "do good" are evaluated as moral.

Past research on sexual assault and domestic violence shelter advocates also found that workers are "not motivated by money, but passion or love of the job" (Bemiller and Williams 2011:97). Likewise, Joffe (1978: 113) found most abortion clinic workers entered this type of work because of their "sympathetic pose" toward clients. Despite the challenges with these types of moral work, these workers have a positive perception of the work they do and hold onto that belief to get through tough aspects of the job (Kolb 2014). The driving force of helping professions rests on the assertion that social service workers have the opportunity to help clients in a variety of ways (Loseke and Cahill 1986).

People who work in caring professions are perceived as possessing certain positive, moral traits. Loseke and Cahill's (1986: 252) social work student participants described veteran social workers as emotionally controlled, hard-working, "nice persons," "extremely personable," having an "incredible respect for the people who come in there," and "caring – there's a real warmth. Students demonstrated a belief that defining characteristics of a social worker were not learned but developed "naturally" and the ideal-typical social worker simply evolved (Loseke and Cahill 1986). The social construction of caring work professionals relies on the general consensus that workers must demonstrate a moral identity, rather than simply an understanding of the expectations and skills of the job. The construction of the moral profession of social service attracts people seeking to construct a moral identity.

The social service workers in this current study come from a mentoring organization that relies on volunteer involvement. In a mentoring organization, volunteers are credited with the power to help children, not the workers directly. This project extends Kolb's work in that case managers' moral wages are influenced by volunteer efforts in this type of social service.

Challenges to Moral Work

There has been a significant amount of research on burnout in human service workers (Poulin and Walter 1993; Anderson 2000; Cahalane and Sites 2008; Kim and Stoner 2008; Schwartz et al. 2007). However, there is no exploration of the influence volunteer expectations have on workers' moral identities. In this type of caring work, case managers rely on volunteers to mentor children and "make a difference." The successful matches and child outcomes depend on the volunteer, which contributes to the moral payoff for workers.

The purpose of this current research is to explore the problem of volunteer expectations from the workers' perspectives. Understanding organizational contributions to employee burnout and turnover is an opportunity to strengthen social service programs. My research examines how case managers tell stories about program participants and volunteer expectations, how case managers tell stories about the presentation of the program versus the reality they see, and how this storytelling influences their work.

Narratives in social life provide an opportunity for social researchers to unpack cultural, symbolic, and emotional codes (Loseke 2012). As storytelling is a powerful tool that constructs meaning at every level of social interaction, the stories told by case managers reveal important insight into how they understand their work and what makes their work more difficult.

Humans are "story telling animals" (McIntyre 1984: 216) and because storytelling "may

be *the* way through which human beings make sense of their own lives and the lives of others"

(McAdams 1995: 207, emphasis in original), I have chosen to analyze stories from my interview

data through a narrative lens. I rely on Ewick and Silbey's (1995) three main features of

narrative: (1) "a narrative relies on some form of selective appropriation of past events and

characters," (2) "within a narrative the events must be temporally ordered with a beginning,

middle and end," (3) "the events and characters must be related to one another and to some

overarching structure, often in the context of opposition or struggle" (p. 200).

Stories people tell describe the world as it is lived and understood by the storyteller

(Ewick and Silbey 1995) and rely on unspoken cultural meanings (Quinn 2005). Formula stories

(Berger 1997) "obtain their recognizability and predictability by deploying symbolic codes and

emotion codes in ways that reflect how audience members understand the world" (Loseke 2012:

253). Symbolic codes are "systems of ideas about how the world does work, how the world

should work, and about the rights and responsibilities among people in this world" (2012: 253).

They are cultural ways of thinking (Loseke 2009). Emotion codes are "systems of ideas about

when and where and toward whom or what emotions should be inwardly experienced, outwardly

displayed, and morally evaluated" (Loseke 2012: 253; 2009, for an empirical example; Loseke

and Kusenbach 2008, for a theoretical elaboration). Simply put, they are cultural ways of feeling

(Loseke 2009).

Narratives construct identity at all levels of human interaction. At the macro-level, cultural identities are created as imagined characteristics of disembodied, simplified types of people (DiMaggio 1997).   At the meso-level, the political system produces narratives of institutional identities to justify policy decisions (Schneider and Ingram 1993) while groups and organizations produce organizational narratives of identity to justify program services (Loseke 2007). Lastly, at the micro-level are narratives of personal identities, which are the "self-understandings of unique, embodied selves about their selves" (2007: 662).

Organizational narratives of identity are created by organizers and workers in ongoing organizations, programs, and groups designed for people who evaluate themselves, or who have been evaluated by others, as having troubled identities in need for repair (Loseke 2007: 670). Social service organizations "*must* have images of their 'typical' client as these images justify organizational procedures and services" (2007: 671, emphasis in original). An organization cannot be "all things to all people" (Loseke 1992: 92). On the Big Brothers Big Sisters website, the organization clearly defines the victim in the story: "at-risk youth" or "children facing adversity" are those "living in single parent homes, growing up in poverty and coping with parental incarceration" (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Something for everyone" 2015). Attached to "at-risk youth" is the symbolic code of victim (a child in need), which is tied to the emotion code of sympathy, while the symbolic code of hero (a volunteer to help a child in need) is linked to responsibility and morality.

While the organizational narrative entices people to volunteer, workers involved in this study demonstrate that personal narratives do not necessarily coincide. Disjunctures between the organizational and personal narratives can be problematic, as volunteers enticed with a specific

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image of the program and the youth experience different realities. The narrative told by the organization persuades volunteers to sign-up, but it does not get them to stay.

There is a vast literature on narratives. While there is a body of research focusing on narratives in social services, including education (Stein 2001; Downey 2015), domestic violence shelters (Loseke 1992; 2001), and the criminal justice system (Dunn 2001; Fox 1999), there is no research on narratives of case managers working in mentoring programs. This project fills a gap in the existing literature by examining how case managers tell stories about participants in the program, how case managers tell stories about volunteer expectations, how case managers tell stories about the presentation of the program versus the realities they see and how case managers talk about the organization's storytelling as an influence on their own work.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS AND PARTICIPANTS

Big Brothers Big Sisters is America's oldest and largest mentoring organization (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Fact Sheet" 2015). The organization "provides children facing adversity with strong and enduring, professionally supported one-to-one mentoring relationships that change their lives for the better, forever" (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "About Big Brothers Big Sisters" 2015). The organization's programs serve over 200,000 at-risk youth, 200,000 families, and 200,000 volunteer mentors through 340 affiliates across the country (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Fact Sheet" 2015). Measureable positive outcomes of children served include improvements in academics, behavior, and attitude (2015), which help them succeed throughout their lives.

Before starting my graduate studies, I worked for this organization as a case manager and quickly discovered that direct social service work is hard. My time as a case manager involved juggling various duties that seemed to grow each week. The major component of the job is calling match participants to conduct "match support" to monitor child safety, child development, and match activities. The bulk of the work is making calls and entering notes to document progress. Of course, that is only the beginning. Additional regular work activities require driving to schools and homes to conduct interviews and in-person support contacts, conducting scheduled surveys with youth and volunteers, reporting for grant requirements, filing paperwork, and attending program events, to name a few.

Like many others realize, it was not for me. I was exhausted. I found myself calling

clients on holidays (when I knew they would be home) and crying during nights out after child

safety trainings. It consumed my life because I deeply cared about "my" kids. After a year,

when I was seriously considering other options outside of nonprofit, I was fortunate to move into

a quality improvement position with the agency where I worked behind-the-scenes as a program

evaluator and grant reporter. My personal work experiences led me to conduct this research. As

this was my first (and only) job with a nonprofit organization, I was surprised and overwhelmed

by the perpetual instability I experienced while doing case management. The work done in these

positions is complex and challenging, and deserves the attention of social researchers.

The initial concentration of this project revolved around a problem I identified as

"caseload turnover:" the shuffling of caseload assignments due to grant acquisition and turnover.

In interviews, workers did talk about this when I asked direct questions, but they spontaneously

emphasized problems with another type of turnover—that of volunteers. Workers themselves

brought up what they saw as problems with how the stories the organization uses to attract

volunteers are counterproductive and encourage volunteer turnover. This became the focus of

this project.

My data come from ten in-depth, semi-structured interviews with case managers, called

"match support specialists," working at a Big Brothers Big Sisters organization located in a

Southern metropolitan area. As described by the organization, these workers are the

"professional support" assigned to help matches between volunteers and child clients succeed.

Case managers are assigned upwards of 90 matches between "Bigs" and "Littles" to monitor

regularly and provide ongoing support as their main point of contact with the agency. Worker

performance is monitored by monthly reports that include measures of match closure rate, match

retention rate, average match length, and volunteer rematch rate. As research has shown that longer matches produce better child outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes 2002), match support specialists work to keep matches together as long as possible.

To recruit participants, I introduced myself at program staff meetings. As my focus is on the understanding of case managers, I restricted recruitment to this specific job role. This sample contains ten match support specialists from two office locations. My sample consists of all women, as there were no men in match support roles during the time of recruitment. Participants all hold Bachelor's degrees in social work and various fields. Participants self-reported a range of racial and ethnic categories, and vary from minimal to considerable tenure with the organization. Given the small sample size of this project, I will not demographically identify participants in order to protect confidentiality. All participants were assigned pseudonyms, which will be used throughout this paper.

Interviewing is an obvious method to "elicit very striking and interesting narratives from people whose voices would not be heard if collection methods were restricted to 'socially occurring' discourse" (Hill 2005: 183). Narrative analysis as a method provides an opportunity to access and reveal hidden aspects of the social world (Polkinghorne 1988). I conducted all interviews in person, which I recorded and transcribed. Interviews ranged from one to two hours in length and took place at restaurants and coffee shops. After the interviews, participants completed a short survey (appendix 2) about their background information. While I did have general questions guiding the project (see appendix 1), I practiced grounded theory interview techniques (Charmaz 2002) and allowed participants to talk freely about what they thought was important. As a result, interviews ended up more conversational, ultimately leading me to a completely different, and more interesting, project than what I began with.

CHAPTER THREE: THE PROBLEM OF VOLUNTEER EXPECTATIONS

Interview results show that workers see a problem they understand as relating to the organization's storytelling of the program: The image that volunteers are enticed with does not match the volunteers' actual experience. Marketing and recruitment strategies emphasize "Real Life Stories," which can be found on the organization's website (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Changing lives- one story at a time" 2015). These selected personal narratives construct who "at-risk youth" are, who mentors are, what the experience is like, and the image of success from mentoring. The collective representations (Durkheim 1961) of "at-risk youth" and volunteers provide an understanding of the program to potential volunteers and donors, as well as the community at large.

Case managers identified volunteer expectations as a problem in social service work. Nine out of ten participants discussed what they called "unrealistic volunteer expectations," which they understood as unequivocally linked to the presentation and understanding of the program. The problem of volunteer expectations not matching volunteer experience is described by workers in three main ways: (1) The depiction of children is not how they are, (2) The "heroic" role of volunteers is not as glamorous as it seems, (3) Mentoring is not always easy and fun. The following demonstrates how workers felt about each of these and about how these three types of expectations are not mutually exclusive but are very interrelated.

Workers emphasized that managing volunteer expectations is something that adds to the difficulties of their work. One case manager, Cindy, speaks generally about volunteer

expectations: "The volunteers create their own problems at times when they have expectations that aren't met." Jennifer suggests, "A lot of people don't realize they have it, but I think a lot of them have expectations. Maybe even unrealistic expectations. Probably so. And when those don't get met, then they just want to give up. Sad but true." The data demonstrate that volunteers enter the program with expectations, and when they aren't met they encounter problems or "just want to give up." This disjuncture adds to the emotion work of case managers.

Needy Kids: Do They Really Need Help?

The organizational narrative of Big Brothers Big Sisters deploys symbolic codes and emotion codes to entice volunteers. The "typical" client of the organization is a "child facing adversity" or "at risk youth," which is a collective representation of the children served. The children in these narratives are pure victims who are unquestionably deserving of help.

The problem, as defined by case managers, is that this collective representation leads volunteers to understand children in the program as a specific type of person. When volunteers experience another reality, for example are matched with a child coming from a two parent home with a slight learning disability, there is doubt of the child's deservingness for services as there is no dire need. For example, one case manager, Maria, describes how children served by the organization are portrayed by recruitment and marketing and the effect on volunteer outlook:

> I have, um, said that I think our agency um doesn't need to portray these children as, how I would call it, you know how you see commercials, the kids drinking water from, you know, the ditch and stuff like that? Like, not to that extent, but I feel like, sometimes it is portrayed that way. You know, where you got an

incarcerated parent, mom was on drugs, Grandma's supporting four other kids, you know, they don't have enough clothes, you know…I think its great like as a marketing tool because you get, you beat on people's heartstrings, but when they come in, some of these volunteers think that if I take them to the park, that's gonna be the greatest time of their lives. And when they don't get that, 'Ohhh my god!! I'm so happy!!' They get pissed off. You know, you gotta understand that sometimes these kids have a great mom, are involved in football, is involved in tutoring. But does have a history of you know, a dad being incarcerated, or witnessed domestic violence, or was physically abused. And you know, why not be that extra support system to make sure that they don't fall in that path? But I think, you know, presenting that, people are gonna be like, 'Pssh! I don't want to be matched to that person, because he doesn't really need me!'

Audiences are excited by stories that utilize "vividness, drama, and splash" (Schudson 1989), which I refer to as "glamorization." In the above excerpt, Maria provides a story about how the organization creates volunteer expectations with marketing and recruitment strategies. She compares the organization's glamorized storytelling about child clients to commercials featuring completely destitute children "drinking water from the ditch." This "marketing tool" is a technique specifically intended to generate an emotional response from the audience. The emotion code of sympathy is embedded in the personal stories told by the organization, which engages possible donors and potential volunteers. By constructing children as pure victims, good people greatly harmed through no fault of their own (Loseke 2012), the organization casts volunteers as their heroes. When a volunteer is matched with a child that is not "as needy" as

they are presented to be by the organization, the volunteer doubts why they are helping a child who does not need to be saved.

Another participant, Anna, talks about the type of child a volunteer expects to help:

And it's also like, a lot of people nowadays have that, like, "pay it forward."
Let's do something to help someone…I know they think this is gonna be like
really where kids have nothing. I don't know what their expectation is like. Do
you think its gonna be like a kid from a foreign country that like lives in nothing?
No, I mean, it's not like that. I mean of course they have bad situations but we
have pretty good kids that are, they're stable but they just, so many things go on
in their lives that they don't even share with anyone.

This case manager's story describes the volunteers' understanding of the program as "paying it forward." This cultural understanding relies on a character in need of help and a person to fulfill a moral obligation to help them. For a volunteer to feel good about helping a child in this organization, the child must be evaluated as more-or-less fitting the public image appearing in the program's representation put out by the organization. Workers present an alternative depiction of a child in need that strays from the organization's collective representation. In this data, Anna describes how "it's not like that." While she acknowledges that most of the children in the program *do* experience difficulties, they don't necessarily fit the organizational construct of "needy" as expected by volunteers. Anna later added that she understands the disappointment volunteers experience when their expectations of the child aren't met: "If you show me a picture of my meal and I get it and it's totally different, I'm gonna send it back." Volunteers are recruited based on a particular image of a child in need. When they get to understand their

mentee as anything different, there is a desire to "send them back," or more realistically, walk away.

Another caseworker, Selene, believes that volunteers' identities as "heroes" rely on understanding children as victims.

> When people hear about Big Brothers Big Sisters they think that, 'Oh those are troubled kids. They are you know, foster kids or very bad behaviors, or very poor, or like that.' Because when they hear about the program, most of them, I think maybe… Ok, so maybe they can present it in a way like, not all of them are like that, you know and stuff like that. But if they do that, then the volunteer might say like, 'Well, I can look for another organization that I'm gonna be a hero in.' You know?

Selene believes volunteers enter the program with an idea of what to expect. They understand what their assigned child will be like, based on the representation of the organization in marketing and recruitment. Thus, stories told by the organization establish yardsticks by which to morally evaluate the self and others (Wood and Rennie 1994; Baker 1996). Volunteers expect to morally evaluate their mentee as "in need," which in turn, creates the justification for a volunteer's time and effort. Selene sees an important paradox: these stories get volunteers to sign up, but don't necessarily get them to stay. Stories told by the organization rely on constructing the volunteer as a hero, which simultaneously creates unrealistic expectations. If the organization is not telling stories to elicit the emotional response of sympathy, volunteers will find another volunteer opportunity that allows them to "be a hero."

As understood by case managers, the stories told by the organization portray a specific representation of the child in-need. The construction of "at-risk youth" demonstrates the type of

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client a volunteer will mentor while volunteering with the program. Workers describe that volunteers have expectations of what their mentees will be like; understandings that reflect the storytelling of recruitment and marketing. When volunteers are matched with children that do not fit the prototype, there is a problem getting volunteers to see value in the work they are doing. If a child is not understood as "needy enough," then the volunteer cannot be the hero they signed up to be.

Heroic Volunteers: What Does Help <u>Really</u> Look Like?

The role of the hero is constructed by the organization's storytelling of the program and its participants. As seen on the Big Brothers Big Sisters' website, "Real Life Stories" (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Changing lives- one story at a time" 2015) depict volunteers as the catalyst for positive change in a child's life. The collective representation of the needy child is directly tied to the image of the heroic volunteer, who has a moral obligation and responsibility to save the child. According to workers, this image is very attractive and encourages people to become volunteers.

Patricia describes how marketing and recruitment techniques of the organization construct volunteers as heroes:

We sell them a certain image, we do. That's not always the reality, but we won't

get a sale unless we say, 'fluffy bunnies and rainbows.' You get to be a hero.

Patricia describes the "selling" of the hero role to potential volunteers. She argues that the organization's storytelling promotes an image of what it is like to be a volunteer, which does not match the "reality" they actually experience. Patricia stresses that the image of the organization

is presented as misleadingly positive, or "fluffy bunnies and rainbows." This demonstrates the aforementioned paradox: volunteers are "sold" on these stories, but ultimately these stories do not get them to stay. When volunteer experiences differ from the image they are enticed with, there are challenges that lead volunteers to question their involvement.

The public image and cultural understanding of volunteering is moral, selfless and heroic. This image is what sells volunteers and entices them to enlist in the program, which is demonstrated by the organizational narrative relying on cultural codes to entice people to help. Workers describe that this image encourages volunteering for moral payoffs; for good people who want to "pay it forward."

There is a cultural understanding that volunteers are selfless, putting "needy children" before themselves. Case managers work to explain the role of the "hero," which differs from the image they are sold on. Bethany explains, "I try to explain their role. They are not parents, they are not saviors; they're a mentor." Anna also describes the role expectation of volunteers: "It's not like bad, bad, OK I'm gonna help you and, 'Ohhh! I love you! You helped me!' No, it's like not a movie. It's not Hollywood… They want to feel like, you're doing something awesome, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me, you know?"

Bethany and Anna are countering the organization's construction of the volunteer as hero. It was common for workers to understand the storytelling of the organization by marketing and development as a glamorized representation of a mentoring experience. Anna relates the storytelling tactics to a movie, not reality. In the movies, the pure victim is in need, and the hero comes in on a white horse to save the day. It's a pervasive master narrative that is embedded in American culture. It makes sense that this type of story draws support in to social service organizations. However, there are unintended negative consequences of this storytelling tactic.

As one would might expect, the "Real Life Stories" told on the organization's website (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Changing lives- one story at a time" 2015) do not stress that this is a *preventative* program for youth. Rather, it is typical to find stories that highlight "remarkable" or "positive" changes in the children. These changes are explicitly linked to their mentoring relationship. For example, it is common to find statements like, "Her mom has seen positive changes in Dae'Asia's attitude since meeting Big Sister Lanitra. 'She is more positive and helpful at home, too,' observed Monique, 'I love it!'" And, "According to Margaret, she has seen a remarkable change in Andrew since his first meeting with John. 'I understand that at age 11 Andrew is still finding himself. However, he is communicating much better and is more confident when speaking.'"

The stories told by the organization that circulate in the public sphere construct program mentors as heroes and that it is typical for heroes to bring about positive change to their mentee's life. Understandably, workers find that volunteers expect to see change, at times rapidly, in their assigned mentee. When I asked Tanya what the hardest part about managing relationships is she responded, "Um, I think just managing expectations. Some 'Bigs' come in like wanting to change everything and you have to remind them it's a slow process and some kids will change faster than others." Sarah said it is common for volunteers to wonder, "Well, how am I making a difference in their life? And I always tell them, you just never know."

When volunteers expect to see positive changes in response to their mentoring, case managers believe they experience disappointment and uncertainty in their choice to volunteer with the organization. The types of stories that permeate American culture are not those that depend on "seed theory" (Loseke 1992), a worker belief that, while change might not be visible, change *will* happen long after the service is rendered. Maria adds:

A common theme is that a lot of times when I'm closing a match, or I'm having a

problem with a match. Like, why are we closing? Because I don't feel like I'm

doing anything. And it's like really, you really don't think you're doing

anything? And I get that you do need that gratification where somebody says

thank you or they say thank you for doing this, or they see those improvements. It

does feel good and I get that. But, but, some of like my volunteers that have been

really great, that I ask them like…why do you still stay with us? It's like, he has a

great time, I have a great relationship with them, I see the changes, it may not be

the changes I wanna see, but if you're coming in with expectations, you're

already dooming yourself in the relationship Maria… And when I came in, you

know, I came in with no expectations. I just came in and said, I'm gonna meet

my Little Brother and were gonna have a great time. That's all I came in. And

you know it's been the best part of my life. And a common thing is that you

know most Bigs say you know, you can't come in with expectations. Because if

you do, you're only gonna let yourself down.

In this excerpt, Maria describes the expectation to be a hero as a problem. She believes that

volunteers feel like they are wasting their time and efforts if they do not see positive change in

their mentee, which results in complications or match closure. Volunteers find themselves

devalued in a process that Goffman (1963) defines as constituted by the discrepancy between our

ideas regarding who victims "ought" to be and who they "actually are." The "true" or "worthy"

victim loses some of their deservingness if their presentation falters (Dunn 2001). She describes

volunteers expecting positive change and praise (in the form of "thank you"). It was quite

common for workers to mention the need of volunteers to be acknowledged for their time and

efforts, which often leads to disappointment when that praise is not received. This is understandable, as in American culture heroes must be appreciated.

Another worker, Cindy, talked about volunteers' expectations to help stimulate positive change in their mentee and feel appreciated for it:

> I mean there's the part where like people who are doing the program for the first time, volunteers, don't really know what to expect and you can't give them a straight answer; like this is what's going to happen, and this is going to happen. There's no set progression. So sometimes issues come up or things are not going the way the volunteer expected and they're like, 'This isn't as much fun as I thought it would be,' or, 'My little has no interest in school; I thought I was gonna be able to help them with academics,' and things like that. So, getting people to see, for volunteers I think a lot of times the biggest challenge is to look at how they can help the child, where the child is at. Rather than how they can help the child succeed in the area the volunteer wants them to succeed in.

Cindy tells a story that is not similar to the public image promoted by the organization.   Cindy's story complicates things, as she does not offer a cohesive plot to the story of volunteering with the program. She says, "There's no set progression," and claims it is not possible to inform volunteers of what their experiences will be like. This excerpt stresses that children are getting "help" that is defined not by their needs, but the mentors' expectations of their needs. If a mentee does not respond to the help provided in a specific area, academics in this example, the volunteer does not see the value in their efforts. Volunteer expectations to help with academics is not surprising, as the organization stresses positive academic outcomes as a result of mentoring (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Our impact on education" 2015).

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The Mentoring Experience: What is it <u>Really</u> Like?

        To acquire a volunteer, or "get a sale" as Patricia put it earlier, the organization presents the mentoring experience as both rewarding and fun. Workers describe this as another type of volunteer expectation that is problematic when the experienced reality does not match up. While discussing the differences of life experiences between volunteers and children served by the organization, one participant finds a common tendency in new volunteers. Patricia understands how volunteers make a *true* difference in the life of a child:

> To make a real difference, not a fake difference, not a fake difference. You want
>
> to make a real difference. Be present. Listen, pay attention. That's it. That's
>
> enough. But they swoop in with [theme park] tickets and Disney and laptops and
>
> camping trips and they think that's a difference. No honey, that's a commercial.

Patricia believes that volunteers often enter their role with an idea of what it looks like to mentor a child in need: exposing them to a world of theme parks, electronics, and fun trips. Marketing (including commercials) and recruitment encourage understanding that volunteering is making a positive impact through having fun, which in this case means lavish experiences and gifts. The collective image of "at-risk youth" does not include children who have the means to afford extravagant fun, such as computers and theme park tickets on their own. Therefore, volunteers understand this as deprivation of experiences and a way to make their lives better. The representation of the program as a way to give poor kids new (and expensive) experiences potentially restricts volunteer enrollment to mentors who have money to fund these types of experiences.

Patricia, and other workers, believe that this is not how mentoring "really is." Patricia highlights here that making a *real* difference does not fit the representation constructed by the organization. She claims that simply "being there" for the child, listening, and paying attention to them is how volunteers can make a *real* difference. Of course, such a mundane story doesn't excite an audience of potential volunteers and donors. Patricia describes the paradox that the presentation of the organization draws volunteers in, but ultimately has the potential to leave them with expectations that taint their actual experience.

Anna describes the problem in a similar way, acknowledging that the image presented by the agency isn't what volunteers find when they start mentoring a child:

> It's frustrating…I feel like a lot of them come in, and I was just talking to people about it. The way we put out the program it's like very nicely, like when we do recruitment it's like Bigs are talking about, 'Oh we get to do this, we get to do that.' They don't ever talk about, 'Hey there's gonna be times when you're just hanging out and its not like you're making a difference at that time. Or there's gonna be times when you're gonna be mad at the parent.' And we don't talk about that 'cause of course they're not gonna sign up.

Anna understands the storytelling strategies of the organization as sugarcoated. The stories of "real" volunteer experiences told to potential volunteers leave out some of the common challenges mentors face while participating in the program. The stories told by recruitment and marketing are hand-selected to avoid highlighting difficulties and present the program "very nicely," as Anna describes it. Additionally, in this excerpt Anna demonstrates the common experience of not seeing change in a child, which I discussed earlier as another type of volunteer expectation. Workers understand that mentoring can be boring at times; it can be difficult and

emotionally exhausting. Anna acknowledges the power of the organization's storytelling and the reliance on painting a pretty picture to recruit new involvement.

On the Big Brothers Big Sisters website, volunteers can find an idea of what to expect when mentoring a child. The question, "What are a Big and Little to do?" is answered by the organization: Getting together "just a few hours every month doing things the Little and Big already enjoy. For example: Playing catch, reading books, going to a museum, and providing advice and inspiration" (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Our programs get things started" 2015). The website also explains that a Big and Little are matched "based on location, personalities and preferences" (2015).

During her interview, Selene brought up that volunteers struggle when expectations are not met:

> Maybe it's the fact that they go with expectations. They think they're gonna get
> this amazing kid that will like to do whatever the big wants to do. And maybe
> that's when, you know, when they struggle. And then it makes you wonder,
> 'Why are you doing this?' But that Big in particular, she, you know, the Little
> wasn't very talkative and she had like, she would get very emotional if, for
> something, and she would cry, or, but the big didn't know how to handle it. She
> thought it was gonna be just nice and all love and it wasn't.

At a later point in her interview, Selene described a common expectation of volunteers: "I thought I was just gonna go and hang out and have fun." According to workers, it is common for volunteers to expect common interests with their mentee and a good time together. As Selene and others have found, that is not always the experience. When a volunteer experiences

difficulties or problems in the mentoring relationship, they struggle. Case managers work to keep volunteers engaged with the program.

Bethany adds that volunteers tend to underestimate the time commitment, as well as overall challenges of being a mentor in the program:

> I think a lot of it is they underestimate the time commitment, and they actually,
>
> cause being [a volunteer] I'm sure is hard. I've never been a community-based
>
> Big, but I'm sure it's a lot of work. You've got to figure out what you're doing,
>
> you have to plan, you have to go get them, you know do all of that and so,
>
> especially when its new and it feels a little awkward, I'm sure it's hard.

As described on the website, the time commitment is "*just* a few hours every month, a couple times a month" (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Help a little go a long way" 2015, emphasis added) minimizing the time it takes to volunteer. As described by workers, the most common reason for volunteers to close their match is due to time constraints. In this piece of data, Bethany stresses that volunteers underestimate the time and effort it takes to mentor a child, which is problematic. Bethany also describes her understanding of volunteering as a lot of hard work and even "awkward" at times. Her storytelling of the program is much different than that of the organization. Bethany added at a later point in her interview that, "No ones going to do something they're not comfortable doing." When volunteers don't get the experience they were expecting, there is a serious risk of losing them.

Cindy describes working with a frustrated volunteer that was not having fun, like she expected:

> I think the volunteer is just getting very frustrated and she said, 'This is not fun
>
> like I thought it was gonna be. I don't feel like I'm making a difference. I feel like

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I'm policing this child the whole time that we're together.' So we talked about it

and I try to give her some ideas that she could do differently or just different ways

of looking at it. But it's hard sometimes… She's a teacher and she works with

kids all the time. So, I think she can do it. I think it just feels more like her job

than she was expecting… And she was thinking, 'This is gonna be like, oh ok,

well I can go do my job and then I can hang out with this kid and it will be

different and fun.' And she's matched with a kid who needs another teacher.

The volunteer in Cindy's story expected to have fun while making a difference in a child's life.

Cindy describes this volunteer understanding her mentoring experience as "policing" rather than

"helping" her mentee. This example demonstrates the understanding new volunteers have of the

experience as fun, and not work. The volunteer in Cindy's story was not expecting the

volunteering experience to feel like work, but something that would be "different and fun."

Cindy describes her work in response to this volunteer struggle. With volunteers struggling in

response to expectations not being met, case managers are faced with managing volunteer

frustrations.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Big Brothers Big Sisters is a well-known organization that provides adult mentors for "at risk" youth to put children on a "path to an even brighter, more promising future" (Big Brothers Big Sisters, "Enroll a little" 2015). It is the job of program case managers to closely monitor participant involvement while encouraging a healthy mentoring relationship, which ultimately benefits child development. As longer matches between "Bigs" and "Littles" have been associated with stronger child outcomes (Grossman & Rhodes 2002), case managers work hard to keep matches together. These workers are understood as "moral" based on their occupation (Loseke & Cahill 1986) and work for "moral wages" (Kolb 2014) in addition to minimal extrinsic compensation. The moral payoff of workers in this mentoring organization is ultimately influenced by the involvement of volunteers. As volunteers are credited with directly helping children, workers receive "moral wages" when matches are successful, which is only possible with effective and dedicated volunteers.

Interviews with case managers brought up a variety of difficulties about this type of front-line work, many of which I expected to hear: low-pay, lack of upward mobility, and juggling various tasks, etc. However, this project focuses on a persistent theme emerged that I did not anticipate. All but one person who took part in this study brought up the problem of "volunteer expectations," which participants understand as a problem that adds to the difficulties of their work. This project demonstrates the additional burden of managing volunteer expectations in social service programs that rely on mentors.

Case mangers described a problem related to the organization's storytelling of the program: the images that volunteers are enticed with do not match their lived experiences. Workers described "unrealistic volunteer expectations" in three main, interrelated ways: (1) The depiction of children is not how they are, (2) The "heroic" role of volunteers is not as glamorous as it seems, (3) Mentoring is not always easy and fun. The organization's constructed image of the program and clients attracts volunteers, but ultimately leaves them disappointed when their experience differs.

Volunteers are sold on an enticing story told by the organization that constructs the mentor as a "hero" to save a child, or "victim" in need. When volunteers do not get the moral payoff they were expecting, workers struggle to keep them engaged with the program. Case managers described the difficulties of managing volunteer expectations. Workers commonly described reassuring volunteers that they *are* helping, even if they do not see it right away or if the experience looks different than they anticipated. When volunteers do not see progress they envisioned or are matched with a child that is not "as needy" as expected they doubt whether they should remain involved in the program. As Big Brothers Big Sisters is a mentoring program that relies on *continuous* volunteer engagement to successfully serve children, this is a problem.

The collective representation of "needy kids" or "at-risk youth" is critical to the organization's existence, as is selling the volunteer as the "hero." Without "deserving" clients (children in need) there is no justification for the program. Although this is a preventive organization, the organizational narrative does not construct this understanding. If the organization sold itself as a preventative organization, potential volunteers would seek another volunteer opportunity where they knew for *certain* they would be able to see positive change in a

truly deserving child in need of their help. Furthermore, with more preventative organizations in existence, there would be fewer children fitting the "desperate" image of a child in need that is so compelling in American culture. This threatens the need for these types of programs.

More research is needed to explore causes and consequences of disjunctures between the organizational marketing of the program and volunteer experiences. A thorough analysis of the organization's recruitment and marketing (including the website) is an obvious next step, as well as interviewing volunteers and monitoring involvement during their time with the organization. Furthermore, examinations of alternative social service programs allows for a larger understanding of how American culture understands "helping" programs and which programs and clients are *deserving* of help. Some practical questions include: How can organizations alter storytelling tactics to acknowledge some of the difficulties of mentoring to lower lofty expectations and increase volunteer retention? Would a loss of volunteer interest upfront be worth more long-term benefits of successful matches? Would this have an influence on worker satisfaction?

This project adds to the understanding of the complexities that exist in social service work and the American culture within which social services exist. More specifically, this project focuses on the storytelling of a mentoring program and the consequences associated with the creation of volunteer expectations. While this project contributes to the understanding of social service work, it has limitations. My sample of ten workers, while meaningful, is small. Interviewing more case managers would strengthen this project, as well as widening the scope to include various roles within the organization, including volunteers. Extending the sample of this project to include multiple branches of Big Brothers Big Sisters would certainly provide richer findings.

I have conducted this research as an advocate of social service organizations and the work they do. I value these services. This project, while based on a theoretical problem, has real life application. Worker (and volunteer) turnover is a problem that organizations recognize daily. This project adds to the demand for continuous research in hopes of improving experiences of front-line workers, volunteers and clients served.

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APPENDIX A:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you tell me about your work? *What do you do? What are your duties?*

2. Is there anything in particular you like about this job? *What else?*

3. Is there anything you dislike about this job? *What else?*

4. Can you tell me about your clients? *What is a "typical" client you work with?*

5. Can you describe the kinds of relationships you have with your clients?

6. Can you tell me about a client you really enjoy(ed) working with? *Can you tell me about a client you didn't enjoy working with?*

7. Can you tell me about a case that needed extra attention? *How did you help them?*

8. How does the agency respond to changes with match support team members? *How does that affect your work?*

9. Can you tell me about a time you had a client that was transferred to another match support specialist? *How did you feel?*

10. Can you tell me about a time you took over an existing case? *How did you feel about it?*

11. How do you handle stress related to your work?

12. Is there anything you believe the organization could do to make your job easier?

13. What is your short-term career plan?

14. What is your long-term career plan?

15. Is there anything you would like to tell me that I haven't asked you about?

16. Is there anything you would like to ask *me*?

POST-INTERVIEW SURVEY QUESTIONS

I am interested in learning about the work you do. The following questions will help me gain a better understanding of your work. From this study, I hope to gain an understanding of what you like about your job and what you find difficult. There are no right or wrong answers. I will ask you a number of questions. You do not need to answer any questions you do not wish to answer. We can end the interview at any time. I will maintain your confidentiality and privacy by using pseudonyms and not sharing any information that can identify you.

1. What is your educational background?

2. What is your work background?

3. How long have you worked in this position?

4. What trainings did you have for this job?

5. What is your gender?

6. What is your race/ethnicity?

APPENDIX C:

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

USF
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA

June 23, 2015

Carley Geiss
Sociology
Tampa, FL 33612

RE: **Expedited Approval for Initial Review**
IRB#: Pro00022270
Title: Breaking Up is Hard to Do: An Examination of Caseload Instability and Moral Identities of Social Service Workers

Study Approval Period: 6/23/2015 to 6/23/2016

Dear Ms. Geiss:

On 6/23/2015, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and **APPROVED** the above application and all documents outlined below.

Approved Item(s):
Protocol Document(s):
"Breaking Up is Hard to Do" Study Protocol V1 6/18/15

Consent/Assent Document(s)*:
"Breaking Up is Hard to Do" Informed Consent Form V1 6/18/15.pdf

*Please use only the official IRB stamped informed consent/assent document(s) found under the "Attachments" tab. Please note, these consent/assent document(s) are only valid during the approval period indicated at the top of the form(s).
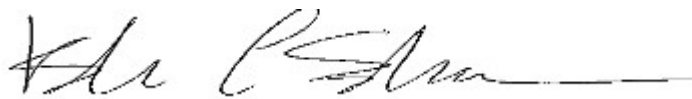
It was the determination of the IRB that your study qualified for expedited review which includes activities that (1) present no more than minimal risk to human subjects, and (2) involve only procedures listed in one or more of the categories outlined below. The IRB may review research through the expedited review procedure authorized by 45CFR46.110 and 21 CFR 56.110. The research proposed in this study is categorized under the following expedited review category:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes. (7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

As the principal investigator of this study, it is your responsibility to conduct this study in accordance with IRB policies and procedures and as approved by the IRB. Any changes to the approved research must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval by an amendment.

We appreciate your dedication to the ethical conduct of human subject research at the University of South Florida and your continued commitment to human research protections. If you have any questions regarding this matter, please call 813-974-5638.

Sincerely,

Kristen Salomon, Ph.D., Vice Chairperson
USF Institutional Review Board